

Tale of Two Nations: the Historical Friendship between Brazil and the United States

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I would like to thank the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth for the generous decision of awarding me its honoris causa degree.

I take your gesture as a most welcome token of your friendship with Brazil and its people. It is my pleasure to resume contact with such an outstanding academic institution. Let me take this opportunity to share a few thoughts with you on the historical links between our two nations.

It is only fair to say that the affinities between our countries date back to the years preceding the independence of Brazil from the Portuguese rule. In one of his latest books, the British historian Kenneth Maxwell reminds us of a development that took place in the early nineteenth century, during the short-lived United Kingdom of Brazil, Portugal and Algarve.

The Plenipotentiary of this Kingdom in Washington, a Portuguese priest named José Correia da Serra, was a cultivated man of letters and managed to develop a close relationship with Thomas Jefferson. Among the issues José Serra used to raise with Jefferson was the idea of a defensive strategic alliance between an independent Brazil and the new American Republic.

This would protect the continent against the imperial designs of the Holy Alliance. To Maxwell, Serra's proposal inspired President James Monroe to set the doctrine that bore his name and was promptly endorsed by the Brazilian Court in Rio de Janeiro. A Portuguese Priest was thus at the service of Brazilians plotting with a Founding Father against Europe.

I need not stress that, as time progressed, our qualms about Europe proved groundless. With the exception of some minor incidents, the Brazilian Empire went through its 67-year existence in good terms with the European Monarchies. What did cause us concern were the neighboring Republics.

Ironically enough, they saw Brazil as a sort of fifth column of the Holy Alliance, perhaps due to the fact that our kings were descendants of European Royal Families. The United States never paid heed to such suspicions. You recognized the importance the monarchical option had for the territorial integrity of Brazil and its political stability throughout the nineteenth century.

The inauguration of the Brazilian Republic in 1889 coincided with the renewal of US interest in the Pan-American dialogue. As Brazil solved its borders disputes, paving the way for the peaceful coexistence the country has ever since enjoyed with its neighbors, the United States turned southward in search of markets and political partners.

High-caliber diplomats such as Joaquim Nabuco and Elihu Root, Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of State, took profit of such favorable conditions to produce an unwritten but solid alliance between our two countries. Brazil and the United States committed themselves to favor the enhancement of market rules and liberal values all over the continent. The resulting benefits were manifold.

The United States consolidated its position as Brazil's major trade partner soon became our main source of foreign investment. Our partnership survived the 1929 Recession. We went on to fight side by side in the Second World War, when Brazil did not refrain from giving its contribution to the US-led struggle against totalitarianism. Brazil was among the Founders of the United Nations.

We closed ranks with the US and the other Allies to establish a multilateral forum that could help save future generations from the scourge of war. In the negotiation of the San Francisco Charter, Brazil coincided with the United States in stressing the importance a mechanism of collective security would have for the fulfillment of UN objectives. The Chapter VII of the Charter was seen by all delegations in San Francisco as perhaps the most effective tool the international community could have at its disposal to avoid collapsing again into a hobbesian state.

But the war that loomed in the horizon in 1945 was not the war of all against all. It was the fierce dispute between two ideological blocs against which multilateral mechanisms of peace enforcement proved powerless. The UN apparatus concentrated its attention instead on a couple of emerging issues, such as development and decolonization.

I myself had the chance of bearing witness to the extraordinary contribution given by the United Nations to make Latin Americans aware of what the challenge of development meant at the time. As a researcher at the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, I could see how significant the work of that body was for the mapping out of obstacles to the industrialization of the region.

Among these obstacles was the lack of savings and of adequate infrastructure services. Hence the interest for the region of the support by the United States to the setting-up of the Inter-American Development Bank. The IDB has ever since been a key partner of national governments in the improvement of areas like transport, energy and communication.

But it is worth recalling that the IDB itself was a product of the Cold War. The strategic concerns caused by the Cuban Revolution and its possible spreading throughout the region made room for a longstanding aspiration of Latin Americans to be met. International cooperation was contingent upon strategic interests. This applied to the capitalist side, but was also the rule within the communist bloc.

Suffice it to recall the number of newly independent African states that fell prey to the massive assistance received from Moscow or even from Havana. Whenever a situation of conflict emerged in the developing world, it was considered by the opposing blocs as an opportunity for the expansion of their respective areas of influence, rather than as a case for collective peace enforcement. At times, conflicts were even exacerbated by foreign powers for ideological purposes.

In such a volatile scenario, the prospect that the United Nations could sometime in the future live up to its original mandate sounded all but realistic. But the fact is that the Cold War came to an end, making room for great expectations. The winners of the Cold War were the first to announce that the new era would be built with and not without the United Nations.

The prevailing assumption was that Peoples of the United Nations could finally tread the path towards the full accomplishment of the goals of the San Francisco Charter. It would be time the collective mechanisms designed in 1945 were duly utilized for the settlement of pending and new disputes. And so it was.

The Security Council took up its peace-making role in delicate spots such as Angola and East Timor, to mention two situations where Brazil paid its contribution with personnel and logistical support.

No less important as a consequence of the end of the Cold War was the enlargement of the United Nations' agenda altogether. I would like to stress, in particular, the enhancement in the treatment by the UN, over the nineties, of transnational issues such as the environment and human rights. Brazil was very pleased to host in 1992 the Rio Conference, which opened up new avenues for a balanced improvement of the relationship between development and environmental protection.

The momentum created by the Rio Conference led to the negotiation over the last decade of such key instruments as the Montreal and the Kyoto Protocols, which are designed, as you all know, to control the depletion of the ozone layer and the pace of climate change.

Even more dramatic were the advances in the field of the protection of human rights. May I recall the inauguration of the International Criminal Court. The international community is now provided with a permanent body entitled to inhibit, through mandatory decisions, the resurgence of massive violations of human rights. I am entirely convinced that the significance of such developments goes well beyond their specific objectives, important though these are.

What a development like the ICC means is a great leap towards a world order that is based not on the uncontested will of sovereign states, but on universally agreed principles and norms. In other words, the International Criminal Court might be seen as an embryo of what Immanuel Kant once called, in his essay on perpetual peace, as a cosmopolitan condition.

In such a condition, individuals are subjects not only of national law, but also of cosmopolitan norms, which are enforceable by supranational institutions, entitled, as such, to hold states accountable.

Human rights lie at the very basis of the cosmopolitan ideal because of their universal validity, addressed as they are to individuals in their human condition, and not in their capacity as citizens of a particular nation state. The history of the promotion of human rights is as long as the commitment to them by the North-American society.

The Virginia Bill of Rights preceded in many years the French Declaration of Human Rights and Rights of the Citizen. My generation is indebted to the ground-breaking civil rights movement led by fighters like Martin Luther King.

Non-governmental organizations based in this country are customarily among the first to come forward in defense of political prisoners wherever they are, be it in Asia, Central Europe or in the Americas. I am aware of the reservations raised now and then against the supranational character of the Court authority. But are not human rights the most transnational of all issues and, as such, liable to a transnational enforcement?

May I also add my voice to those – among whom millions of Americans – who would like this country to stand by the role of multilateralism in the maintenance of world peace and security. To speak against the continued relevance of the UN Security Council in questions related to world peace and security is to condemn what was possible to come true out of the Wilsonian dream.

I understand the moral imperatives which inspire policy makers in this country in the Iraq war. But I also understand that, unless moral imperatives are translated into norms of general acceptance, we risk confusing moral with politics and falling into some sort of fundamentalism.

You will excuse me for being so candid about these issues. But I hope you understand that I speak in the name of the image – a true image – Brazil has built over the last centuries of the United States and its role in the world.

Perhaps with the exception of the plot between Correia da Serra and Thomas Jefferson to keep Europe far away, Brazil has always seen the US as a partner in the construction of a more inclusive world order. So it was in the Pan-American enterprise in the early twentieth century. So it was again in the founding of the United Nations.

The inspiration was the same when, in the aftermath of the Cold War, we revalidated together the importance of the UN. I truly believe that our two countries are destined to have a cosmopolitan outlook.

As scholars like Jackson Turner and Buarque de Holanda used to say, we were guided through our history by a spirit of frontier. Our background is European, but we managed to open new grounds, calling in new peoples and cultures. Multiculturalism is our trademark, not to mention social mobility.

We are definitely forward-looking nations. Let us continue to strive together for a more inclusive, democratic and peaceful future for us all. Thank you very much.