



Matias Spektor,
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Kissinger and Brazil

Thiago Galvão Gehre

In *Kissinger and Brazil* Matias Spektor addresses an important episode in Brazil and the United States' relations. He tells how Henry Kissinger became a focal point for Brazilian diplomacy in its quest for great power status.

Spektor, one of the new generation of Brazilian historians of international relations, heads the Center for the Study of International Relations of the Getulio Vargas Foundation and is an expert on archival research. The book's main thesis is that Brazil has worked its way into the international system, seeking recognition from other countries for its own national goals. With the U.S., Brazil sought to avoid either submission or rivalry,

establish itself as one of the building blocks of global order, and not follow without serious thought the precepts of the Northern giant.

The book describes the evolution of the rapprochement during the 1970s between U.S. and Brazil under the skillful diplomatic command of Henry Kissinger and Antonio Francisco Azeredo da Silveira, the Brazilian foreign minister. Spektor covers Kissinger's experiment in bringing Brazil to the center of U.S. foreign policy; the efforts of

Thiago Galvão Gehre is professor of the history of international relations in the Department of International Relations at the Federal University of Roraima – UFRR. He holds a Ph.D. in international relations from the University of Brasilia – UnB. thiago.gehre@gmail.com.

Kissinger and da Silveira to build up a partnership; the estrangement with President Jimmy Carter; and the dismantling of the partnership by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Kissinger's experiment was an effort to modify the static landscape of Brazil-US relations. A controlling concept was "delegation" — the transfer of responsibilities to major regional players. Spektor explains that, in seeking to make U.S. foreign policy conceptually and philosophically more consistent, Kissinger opened the way for countries like Brazil, China, Indonesia, and South Africa to carry more weight in their relations with the U.S. The aim was to rid the U.S. of the stigma of imperialism and create a sense of partnership to legitimize U.S. actions around the globe.

The partnership started with the visit of Brazilian President Ernesto Geisel to the U.S. capital on December 7, 1971. Preparation for the trip was turbulent. There was unresolved tension between activism and withdrawal in Brazil's foreign policy because of a rift between the president and the Foreign Ministry. There was also a divergence between how Brazil and the U.S. conceived of the partnership. Spektor points out that "from the American point of view, approaching Brazil would be consciously elusive" (p. 50). In any event, after the first step, both countries benefitted from improved relations based more on the personal relations of policy makers than on any formal institutional framework.

President Geisel and da Silveira developed a new strategic model that advocated searching for new partnerships and revising relations with Argentina and the U.S. Da Silveira's foreign affairs management is regarded as highly activist; during his term "the international ambitions of Brazil grew more than [in] any previous period" (p. 63).

Da Silveira searched for "small spaces of 'autonomy' on the margins of the liberal west" to support Brazil's national development project. He tried to conceptually advance foreign policy

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to address Brazil's economic growth and growing international influence. Spektor points out that the problem was not in the international system: "at home Brazil's strategic concepts had become archaic" (p. 75).

The book celebrates the compatibility between da Silveira and Kissinger and their efforts to build a more constructive engagement between their countries, a "special non-aligned relationship." The world in 1970 was witnessing the rise of peripheral powers and the crisis of traditional powers that according to Spektor would move "the tectonic plates of international politics" (p. 90). The bilateral agenda covered trade issues, the global energy crisis, nuclear proliferation, activity in post-independence Africa, and the Cuban presence in South America. Brazil struggled against distrust, anxiety, and a lack of willingness in the U.S. to recognize it as a great power. But the U.S. kept the dialogue open even as it contained Brazil's ambitions.

The intensity of the Brazil-US partnership contrasts with the brevity of the dialogue between Kissinger and da Silveira. The partnership moved ahead amid the 1970s energy crisis, President Geisel's decision to support the Arabs against Israel, and the involvement of Brazil in Angola's independence movement. These three events tested the resilience of the American relationship with Brazil at a point where the partnership could well be formalized. Consequently, Brazil did not choose sides in the oil issue, assuming a pragmatic detachment; with regard to Israel, Brazil first chose

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to abstain and then condemned the vote on the UN resolution that declared Zionism to be a form of racism. And it flinched when the cultural ties that justified a Brazilian presence in Angola clashed with the U.S. grand strategy to combat communism.


Da Silveira took advantage of small crises to catalyze a more consistent foreign policy. Spektor tells of Kissinger's second trip to Brazil and its implications for Brazil-U.S. relations. The Brazilian challenge was to bring about a flexible partnership that would promote understanding between the two countries but that would not tie Brazil to joint commitments and would guarantee President Geisel control over the process of political opening in Brazil. The Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries was ingeniously "simple and vague," allowing "maximum freedom of maneuver for each side" (p. 140). The resilience of the partnership would later be tested by a diplomatic imbroglio over the independence of East Timor, an alleged Brazilian plan to invade Guyana, and the tense relationship between the U.S. and Chile. In all these situations, the Memorandum guaranteed open channels to treat them in the light of common interests.

Progress was stymied by Brazilian fears of generating and later frustrating U.S. expectations, according to Spektor (p. 148); and the election of Jimmy Carter brought about an upheaval in U.S. and Brazil relations. The discomfort caused by systematic human rights abuses and the fear generated by the nuclear agreement between Brazil and Germany stirred up discussion. The

Memorandum was the only defense available, a shield against Carter administration revisionism.

When Ronald Reagan came to power, Kissinger left the scene and da Silveira moved to the Brazilian Embassy in Washington. The Brazilian strategy then became a conscious distancing from Washington in view of the impossibility of dialogue and the neoliberal advance. Even so, Spektor concludes, Brazil catapulted its position in the international hierarchy from an anti-communist agent to an international power, ensuring the country's autonomy in the context of overwhelming asymmetry with Washington.

Matias Spektor writes in a clear and objective way that makes reading enjoyable even for those who are not specialists in international relations. He uses international relations theory parsimoniously — almost imperceptibly for the general reader. He has uncovered striking events deep within the records and has had access to unpublished national and foreign sources, contributing notably to research on the history of Brazil's international relations.

However, Spektor seems to give too much value to statesmen's capacity to promote change in the world. He is of the view that "international politics is not predestined. With ideas and leaders willing to take risks, existing views may be adjusted or replaced with better ones" (p. 16). This raises questions: Did Kissinger make Brazil his laboratory for experiments with regional powers? Or was it da Silveira who discovered in Kissinger the cure for Brazil's "invisible power" syndrome? In either case, the situation of Brazil and South America at the time must have certainly weighed on the decisions of policy makers. 

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