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The US, Brazil and Latin America: The dynamics of asymmetrical regionalism

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The US, Brazil and Latin America: The dynamics of asymmetrical regionalism

Relations between the United States, Brazil, and the rest of Latin America experienced important transformations during the post-Cold War era, at times leading to a more pronounced Brazilian leadership role. This was not entirely new to Brazil; US claims to the Western Hemisphere as its sphere of influence never precluded a significant Brazilian role, especially in South America where US attention has not been as intense or consistent as in the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico. Far from traditional centres of global great power competition, the Southern Cone rarely impinged on US security interests. Distance dampened US willingness to bear costs, while power disparities made Latin Americans cautious about a tighter US embrace (Valladão, 2015).

These factors created space for substantial autonomy for Brazil within an historical pattern of largely cooperative interaction, though the salience and warmth of the US-Brazil relationship waxed and waned (Teixeira, 2012; Hirst & Hurrell, 2005; Cervo & Bueno, 2011). After two decades of Brazilian ascendancy on the world stage (Burges 2017, Mares & Trinkunas), the current period is marked by doubts about Brazil's rise amidst recession and political crisis, as well as by uncertainty regarding US neo-isolationism and China's increased extra-hemispheric influence. Despite these fluctuations, underlying, asymmetrical relationships are slower to change. This article explores the dynamics and effects of asymmetry. In doing so, it combines International Relations (IR)'s traditional focus on great power relations with attention to how relatively weaker states also shape the dynamics of regionalism. While Brazil and the United States may both be 'major powers' operating in a 'shared neighbourhood', a geographical

space in which both powers identify significant interests and have played historically salient roles, substantial asymmetries remain between the two powers and among states of the Americas more broadly. Over the long term, the two countries' relationships with one another and with the neighbourhood are affected primarily by proximity and asymmetry. Building on work by Womack (2016), this article conceptualises the US-Brazil-South American relationship as an asymmetric triangle ($X > Y > Z$). From roughly 2003-2012, Brazil's contestation of US leadership led some observers to declare South America a 'post-hegemonic' region (Riggiozzi & Tussie, 2012). Brazil capitalised on US 'distraction' to position itself as the pivot in the asymmetric triangle. By 2013 increased US attention to the hemisphere coincided with deteriorating conditions in Brazil, which augmented asymmetries and undermined Brazil's ability to hold the pivotal role.

Building on the themes of the special issue, this article asks, how do recurring dynamics of asymmetry affect the ways in which two major powers, the US and Brazil, relate to one another in a shared space? By "major powers," we mean "regional leaders using their capacities to exert influence in their neighbourhood." These states should have capabilities and willingness, as well as the acceptance of some states in the region (see the introduction to this issue). That does not imply that the two major powers are symmetrical in any power, ambition, or leadership; indeed this article argues that US-Brazil asymmetries of power and attention are crucial for explaining cooperation and competition. Applying the issue's framework, we ask: what conditions have favoured the generally genial relations between the US and Brazil, and what do recent fluctuations tell us about possibilities of cooperation, competition, or conflict? To provide a "map" of the neighbourhood, the article reviews the literature on Western Hemisphere regionalism before considering US and Brazilian objectives and interactions in the region. Next, the article develops an asymmetrical understanding of inter-American relations, employing distinct configurations of asymmetrical

triangles to model possible dynamics of major powers in shared neighbourhoods. We build on Womack by elucidating the sometimes contradictory effects of asymmetry and proximity. The approach is applied to two instances of the US-Brazil-South American triangle: one where cooperation dominates and another where US-Brazil competition grew as a result of Brazil's attempt to play a more pivotal role. For the smaller of two major powers to maintain a pivotal regional role, it must dedicate outsize resources and attention. Countering the inherent dynamics of asymmetrical regionalism requires a nearly Sisyphean effort, to which Brazil never fully committed and could not sustain after 2013.

Western Hemisphere regionalism

Treating the Western Hemisphere as a 'shared neighbourhood' is infrequent in the literature of regionalism in the Americas. More common has been to juxtapose US-led Pan-Americanism with US-excluding Bolivarianism, encapsulated in Cuban hero Jose Martí's phrase 'Nuestra América' or 'Our America' (Fawcett, 2005). This section outlines four perspectives on the Americas as a political space – whether the neighbourhood is shared at all. The first sees regionalism as largely US-led; the second sees a 'post-hegemonic' region; the third sees Brazil as the leader of a *South* American region; the fourth sees a region where the US delegates some leadership to Brazil. Using asymmetry theory, this article synthesizes aspects of these perspectives to highlight the continued significance of US power alongside the space for Brazilian influence.

IR theory often stresses the importance of a leading power in creating and sustaining institutions, whether regional or global. Similarly, much of the literature on regionalism in the Americas focuses on the US role. Spurred in part by Latin American opposition to US unilateral

interventions, a second wave of Pan-Americanism grew during the 1930s, cresting with the Good Neighbour Policy's declarations of non-intervention and non-interference and growing trade (Friedman & Long, 2015; Wood, 1967). Brazil sought a role as an interlocutor for Pan-Americanism from the 1930s until the 1960s (Moura, 2013). It is often noted that US goals – anti-fascism/anti-Peronism and then anti-communism – dominated neighbourhood diplomacy during the Cold War. That was certainly the case, those these paradigms were often embraced by many of the region's leaders and hardly elided Latin American's own agency (Darnton, 2013; Friedman, 2003; Harmer 2014; Long, 2015). Still, US dominance in the formation of post-war regional structures has not been interrogated deeply. Fawcett, while highlighting Latin American ideas in the Organisation of American States (OAS) charter, notes that 'For many Latin Americans, this new version of pan-Americanism was a cloak for "Yankee imperialism"' (Fawcett, 2005, p. 37).

The fall of the Soviet Union spurred regional innovation in the Americas, largely centred on the United States (Mace & Thérien, 1996, pp. 7-12). As Hurrell notes, the initial stages of post-Cold War regionalism emerged 'against the backdrop of continued US hegemony'. This did not mean a coercive 'hegemonic imposition' of regional order, as some realist and dependency accounts imply, but regional socialisation in 'a highly unequal international system' (Hurrell, 2005, pp. 194-195). More critically, regionalism in the Americas constituted a 'device' for the neoliberal project of globalisation (Phillips, 2003). The impetus, whether directly in the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) or indirectly in South American agreements, came from Washington. The same was true of the Summit of the Americas process and OAS initiatives on democratisation (Cooper & Legler, 2001; Feinberg, 1997). The US-centrism of immediate post-

Cold War regionalism made subsequent developments seem revolutionary – even post-hegemonic.

A ‘post-hegemonic’ hemisphere?

Around the turn of the millennium, new Latin American regional initiatives captured scholars’ attention. US power and leadership had seemingly atrophied. Now, Latin Americans could set the boundaries and rules of their own neighbourhood. Post-hegemonic regionalism is presaged on the ‘relative decline of the United States and the fact that Washington is focused on domestic concerns and international crises outside the hemisphere’ (Riggiozzi & Grugel, 2015, p. 782). The difference from earlier Pan-Americanism was conspicuous. New groupings not only excluded Washington but emerged as explicit rejections of US initiatives, namely the FTAA. They coincided with greater scepticism of the OAS and international heavyweights like the International Monetary Fund. This regionalism was seen as explicitly normative: ‘moving beyond American-led patterns of trade integration’ to function as ‘a space for the articulation of shared projects’ free from Washington’s once-hegemonic agenda-setting power (Riggiozzi & Tussie, 2012, pp. 1, 4).

Sceptics questioned the depth and durability of the post-hegemonic regional architecture (Malamud & Gardini, 2012, p. 118), but proponents countered that post-hegemonic regionalism’s objectives eschewed the ‘roadmap’ of previous integration schemes in favour of a ‘deeply political badge of identity’ (Riggiozzi & Grugel, 2015, p. 782). Post-hegemonic regionalism rejects the view of Latin or South America as the sphere of influence for a new, indigenous hegemon. Leadership is polycephalous. However, the projects’ ideational focus and the relative lack of institutionalized state commitments has left the new regional initiatives vulnerable to changes of government and evaporating material backing.

South America as a Brazil-led space

Though post-hegemonic regionalists acknowledge the role of Brazil (and Venezuela) in creating new forums, post-hegemonic regionalism does not replace a northern hegemon with a southern one. This contrasts with a focus on Brazil as the natural leader of a South American neighbourhood, a view that found quiet support from Brazil's centre-left Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) governments. With the notable exception of the Venezuela-led organisations ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, in its Spanish initials) and PetroCaribe, Brazil was the primary driver of emerging South American regionalism in formal institutions like UNASUR (the Union of South American Nations) and through informal developments (Burgess 2008, 2017). Brazilian diplomats emphasised the division between 'South America' and 'Latin America' in hemispheric political architecture (Almeida, 2006). By acknowledging the geographical limits of its own influence, Brazil excluded Mexico from the south and cast the United States as an extra-regional power with no more claim to legitimate authority than extra-hemispheric powers in Asia or Europe (Malamud, 2011, p. 6; Rocha, 2013).

The limits of Brazilian leadership also seemed clear. Despite the popularity of former President Lula, Brazil was often 'a leader without followers' in its neighbourhood. Brazil's signature organisations, Mercosur and UNASUR, fell prey to internal dysfunction, while the latter was 'hijacked by President Hugo Chávez' (Malamud, 2011, p. 8). As Brazil's economy peaked in the first decade of the 2000s, it gave some material backing to its leadership claims through market access and via its national development bank. However, Brazil shied from strong institutions that could constrain its freedom of action. In recent years, 'contestation of Brazil's

vision for regional order has increased' (Burges, 2015, pp. 194). Many deals financed by Brazilian development banks have been ensnared in ever-growing corruption scandals.

In much of the work on Brazil-led regionalism, the United States is conspicuously absent. Burges (2015, p. 194) suggests that Brazil's ability to set the South American agenda while offering few material resources reflected 'benign neglect of the region by the United States'. Often, this is attributed to US distraction by economic problems and far-flung wars; Latin America was not a US priority from 2001-2013. However, mistaking attention for influence can be misleading.

The US-Brazil-South America nexus

Another longstanding interpretation describes the Brazilian role in South America as part of a triangular dynamic with Washington. Teixeira (2012, p. 4) argues that South America constitutes a regional subsystem that 'must be understood not only in terms of South America's distance from the United States, but also in terms of its 'proximity' to Brazil'. The United States concedes Brazil great latitude because Brazil acts as a friendly status quo power. This argument echoes arguments that middle powers replicate positions as privileged interlocutors between global powers and tertiary states in the region (Lobell, Jesse, & Williams, 2015; Nolte, 2010). While this resembles the asymmetrical analysis offered here, it ultimately leads to different conclusions.

Moniz Bandeira (2010) argues that Brazilian coffee exporters' dependence on the US market shaped favourable relations between the two giants. The countries developed a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship, rather than one of subservience. The United States relied on Brazilian defence cooperation, and Brazil carved out its own policy space, especially starting in the late 1950s. As economic complementarity waned and Brazil's markets diversified, Brazil felt

increasingly free to disagree with US initiatives; however, there was no deep conflict. ‘Brazilian aspirations required not the overthrow of the international order but merely the improvement of Brazil’s position in the hierarchy of power’ (Moniz Bandeira, 2006, pp. 17-18). Brazil improved and deepened relationships with South America after the country’s return to democracy, which coincided with US regional priorities.

The scholarly treatment of the ‘shared neighbourhood’ of the Americas long emphasized the dominance of the larger major power; more recently, there has been much focus on the exclusion of the United States or its replacement by Brazil. What has often been missing is an account of how the two major powers relate to one another – and how their relationship affects their neighbours. As the first group of studies suggest, US power remains central and its decline can be overstated (Long, 2016). However, real changes during the past two decades have increased autonomous policy space. A rising regional power could have created conditions for greater competition or conflict with the incumbent. Frictions have existed but have been relatively muted.

US and Brazil: Interests and interactions

Since the Second World War, the United States has rarely counted South America among its core security priorities. US policymakers remained sensitive to perceived Cold War ‘losses’ there and Latin America remained important to US diplomacy, trade, and investment. US and Brazilian interests have prioritised regional stability; however, the two governments often have interpreted this goal in divergent ways and favoured distinct approaches. There have been few threats of large regional conflagrations, but many low-level disputes and high levels of violence involving non-state actors. Both Brazil and the US historically supported peaceful resolution of interstate

territorial disagreements. Greater disagreements existed over instability arising from internal situations. The United States has taken an activist role – though a tamer one since the Cold War ended – of promoting liberal democracy and showing scepticism about leftist variants. Brazil, like many Latin American states, prizes a diplomatic tradition of non-interference. As numerous South American presidents expanded their powers and extended their time in office starting during the mid-2000s, Brazil's PT governments interpreted non-interference to mean support for incumbents. Likeminded leaders used regionalism to bolster the legitimacy of embattled presidents (Riggirozzi & Grugel, 2015). When the United States denounced rights violations in Venezuela and sanctioned a handful of officials in 2015, Brazil led a chorus of denunciations. This served a dual purpose of standing for hard sovereignty while also rallying South America behind the position that the region could solve its problems without US (or OAS) interference.

Though both the US and Brazil have long emphasised their natural roles as regional leaders, this has rarely caused conflict. Brazil welcomed the 1823 pronouncement of the Monroe Doctrine as a check on European powers (Valladão, 2015). In President Theodore Roosevelt's aggressive reinterpretation of Monroe, Roosevelt recognised that US 'police powers' did not apply to 'certain republics to the south of us which have already reached such a point of stability, order, and prosperity that they themselves, though as yet hardly consciously, are among the guarantors of this Doctrine' (Qtd. in Richardson, 1908), essentially enlisting Brazil to ensure stability. Elsewhere, the United States has often encouraged regional powers to play complementary roles and share burdens. For the United States, the impact of Brazil's regional aspirations is a matter of content.

For Brazil, economic development has been a more salient aspect of regional policy than security or power-seeking (Merke, 2015). However, developmentalism has spurred wildly

different regional policies: high tariffs to promote industrialisation with little regard for neighbours, promotion of common market integration, a turn to global free trade, and recently the promotion of Brazilian companies in neighbours' markets. Brazil's average weighted applied tariff plummeted from 31.9 percent in 1989 to a low of 6.7 percent in 2006; it has since rebounded to 8 percent, the highest level in South America except for crisis-bound Venezuela (World Bank, 2016b). Renewed protectionism reflected a more nationalistic approach to development and limited Brazil's regional economic leadership capacity. Brazil has not been a 'surrogate' for US regional economic policy. From the US perspective, Brazilian oscillations in foreign economic policy have weakened cooperation. Most concretely, Brazil stymied US economic aspirations when it led the 2005 rejection of the FTAA. Brazil chafes at protection and subsidisation of Western agricultural markets and seeks reforms of global economic institutions.

Despite the FTAA's failure, the Latin America has become increasingly important for US exports (Figure 1). Mexico dominates US trade relations with Latin America, but the rest of the region caught up somewhat due to increased purchasing power during the commodities boom and US Free Trade Agreements with Central America, Chile, Colombia, and Peru. Despite its rightward turn following the controversial impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, no coherent, regional economic approach survived Brazil's economic downturn. A US turn to protectionism under President Donald Trump could, however, provide a resurgent Brazil with openings for economic leadership.

[Figure 1 near here]

The US regional approach increasingly relies on a web of bilateral relations; there has been no bid to substantially strengthen the OAS in the face of ‘post-hegemonic’ challengers. US diplomatic leverage may be most pronounced in a bilateral setting and bilateralism has allowed Washington to minimise interactions with the new left governments while emphasizing ties with Colombia, Mexico and closer partners. The Summit of the Americas is a seeming exception – Latin American states pressured there *en masse* for changes to US policies on Cuba and (less successfully) on counternarcotics. However, this hemispheric event often produces more in terms of bilateral meetings and ad hoc partnerships than regional institutionalisation, as evidenced by the absence of joint communiqués during the 2012 and 2015 summits. Brazil, on the other hand, tried to build its regional position through a low-profile (and low-budget) leadership style, which Burges (2008) termed ‘consensual hegemony.’ In practice, Brazil has not been very hegemonic and its institutions created few constraints (Malamud & Gardini, 2012).

Neither power has effectively and consistently provided regional public goods that span South America (Estevadeordal and Goodman, 2017). The United States has often conditioned market access on special arrangements linked to drug-trafficking cooperation; Brazil’s openness has been inconsistent. In terms of stability, both have played helpful roles in reducing the likelihood of interstate conflict. However, the incompatibility of US and Brazilian approaches to democracy, citizen security, and organised crime has complicated efforts to advance the hemisphere’s peace and prosperity. As Mares notes, Brazil and the United States share many goals but favour very different strategies.

Asymmetric triangles

Despite IR's traditional focus on great power dynamics, international relations are often asymmetrical relations (Womack, 2016). In the Western Hemisphere, this is a particularly salient starting point (Long, 2015, pp. 12-21, 222-226). Though the United States and Brazil are characterised as the two hemispheric giants, the asymmetry between them remains stark, with US gross domestic product (GDP) exceeding Brazil's by a multiple of ten in 2015 (World Bank, 2016a). The asymmetry between Brazil and South America is also large; the GDPs of all nine of its sovereign neighbours combine for slightly less than Brazil's (World Bank, 2016a). Though he acknowledges the indicator as somewhat arbitrary, Womack (2016) considers relationships with a multiple of ten on GNI to be 'overwhelming' asymmetry.

The basic characteristics of asymmetrical relationships apply for both the US-Brazil relationship and to Brazil's relationships with its neighbours, to varying degrees.¹ The disparities in the material bases of power are wide, but negotiation and not domination is the salient mode of these relationships. In nearly all cases, the weaker state in the pairing is sufficiently strong to resist outright coercion and to impose costs on the stronger power. Asymmetry leads to recurring distortions in perceptions, Womack notes. The larger state pays infrequent attention to the smaller; the smaller has little choice but to devote attention to its relationship with the larger because its 'exposure' to the relationship is greater. Larger states tend to be more domestically focused and have a greater variety of international relationships, especially in the case of a global power like the United States. However, it is also visible in Brazil's balancing act between regional ties and global emergence, and how its regional leadership has been limited by domestic concerns (Malamud, 2011).

If the US-Brazil-South American relationships are asymmetric, are they triangular? The US-Brazil-South America triangle is not formal – as in a defensive patron-client alliance where X protects Z against Y. Nor are its dynamics exclusive. No triangles are perfectly independent, though some triangles are ‘harder’ than others in the sense that their dynamics are more self-contained. Extra-hemispheric relationships, notably with China, are of growing importance (Gallagher, 2016). However, the combination of asymmetry and proximity means that the two most important relationships for most countries in South America are still with Brazil and the United States. In that way, the US-Brazil-South America triad fits Womack’s description of a ‘triple asymmetrical triangle’ ($X>Y>Z$), in which ‘each bilateral relationship is asymmetric’ (Womack, 2016, p. 103-104).

Brazil’s neighbours must tend to the giant on their borders. Meanwhile, Washington remains the primary, extra-South American option given its size, power, proximity, and past involvement. US salience can be seen regarding Brazil’s neighbours, including its core Mercosur partners. As Malamud (2011, pp. 10-15) notes, at multiple points since World War II, Argentina turned to the United States to seek international influence and regional balance – a pattern obvious under former President Carlos Menem and today under Mauricio Macri. Paraguay has close security relations with the United States. Uruguay, Mercosur’s most pro-free-trade member, has often responded to Mercosur’s stagnant integration with rumblings of approximation with the United States. The United States remains a central actor, even in periods of less notable diplomatic activity.

Asymmetry is not the only relevant factor in determining the dynamics of relationships. Proximity matters a great deal. As work on alliances notes, geography can affect decisions about balancing and bandwagoning (Walt, 1987). More broadly, proximity facilitates a greater density

of interactions. When interactions are dense and thematically diverse, this affects the formation of interests, relative costs and benefits, the degree of exposure, and the attention the relationship will receive. In the US-Brazil-South America triangle, proximity makes Brazil more important to its neighbours than aggregate power differentials would suggest.

Types of asymmetrical triangles

Examining different configurations of asymmetrical triangles helps clarify the conditions under which relations between major powers within a region become more cooperative or conflictual. This does not depend solely on their objectives and strategies, but also on the attitudes and actions of neighbours. Womack (2016) builds on Dittmer (1981) to show how asymmetry affects triangular dynamics. In asymmetrical triangles, in short, it matters who occupies which corner. Different configurations of friendly or unfriendly bilateral relations between involved states can produce four different types of triangles (see Figure 2).² These may be entirely positive (what Womack calls a *ménage à trois*), two positive and one negative (romantic), two negative and one positive (marriage), or all negative (unit veto). The dynamics vary further depending on which state acts as the pivot.

Because of the disproportionate costs and benefits caused by asymmetry, ‘the most stable types of triangles are the romantic triangles with X as the pivot, followed by the *ménage à trois* and marriage with Z as the outcast’ (Womack, 2016, p. 104). Here, X will be the United States, Y will be Brazil, and Z another South American state. The pivotal state must guarantee the stability of the triangle, a task the most powerful state could usually accomplish with the greatest ease. However, X may become a ‘bored pivot’ because of the small potential gains, domestic focus, and greater variety of salient international relationships. Though Womack does not dwell

on the matter, these calculations are also affected by proximity and perception. Brazil's proximity enhances its interest in obtaining 'deference' from its neighbours—though it may also make neighbours cautious and enhance their interest in cultivating other partners (Trager, 2015).

[Figure 2 near here]

Triangular strategies of the middle power

While Brazil cannot escape asymmetry with the United States, it has tried to alter the dynamics of triangular relationships among Washington, Brasilia, and the region. Brazil's actions are not determined by the United States; however, the direction of US relations with the region – and US attention to the region – shape Brazil's possibilities for influence. From the US perspective, Brazil's pivotal strategy complicates cooperation, which led some to see Brazil as 'acting on its own and regularly saying no to Washington' (Hakim, 2014, p. 1163). What is more novel is how Brazil has asserted its interests not only to claim greater status but to restructure relations with other South American states.

Neighbourhood dynamics depend in part on whether the third partner in the triangle (Z) maintains positive or negative relations with the US (X) and Brazil (Y). In a romantic triangle in which X and Z have a negative relationship, Y can attempt to act as the pivot. A comparable strategy may be available in an unbalanced *ménage à trois*. The ideal-typical *ménage à trois* is an equidistant triangle; in reality, one side may have a particularly warm bilateral relationship. In this approach, Y does not try to play pivot because that would require souring the Z-Y relationship. Instead Y attempts to 'play favourites' by thickening ties with Z and perhaps 'buffering' its own and Z's relationships with X. This strategy may be facilitated by the dynamics of asymmetrical attention: X is less exposed and gives less relative priority to the

relationship than Y or Z. An example of each type will be examined below. Some of the tactics of playing the pivot and playing favourites may be similar. None changes the basic asymmetrical structure. The distinction is in the value (+,-) of the X-Z relationship. If this is negative, then by playing the pivot, Y is making an implicit offer to shield Z from X. In both, Y may attempt to lock Z into institutional arrangements to provide private or club goods.

The strategies above are based on the simplification of a triangular relationship. However, no triangle is closed from outside influence. 'Latin American countries nevertheless have a broad array of global relationships that the United States cannot control' (Womack, 2016, p. 192). Not only does each point maintain other relationships, but these may influence the dynamics of the triangle to varying degrees. Therefore, an alternative strategy may be to 'soften the triangle'. This strategy could be adopted by X, Y, or Z. X is unlikely to do so because it is either enjoys deference from Y and Z or can use its power to reach new accommodations (though this may be costly). Y may have particular incentives to soften the triangle because the presence of X constrains Y's approach to Z. If a major power external to the triangle (X^1) partly balances X, then Y may gain greater leeway. In South America today, China is the obvious contender for the role of X^1 . In financial relationships, a handful of South American states have adopted this approach. A stunning 95 percent of funding from China's development and export banks went to just three countries: Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela, concentrated in production of raw materials and the construction of infrastructure to bring those materials to the Chinese market (Gallagher & Myers, 2016). China's presence has been too narrowly focused on trade and investment to provide a consistent external option across issue areas, though this may be changing.

Attempts to create a more independent and self-reliant South American space are compatible with a strategy of softening the triangle or trying to play the pivot. The difference lies

in how Brazil combines its relationship with Washington and its South American strategy. If Brazil attempts to lessen its exposure to the United States while also limiting US influence vis-à-vis other South American actors by building extra-regional ties, this would be a strategy of softening the triangle. However, if Brazil seeks to maintain or increase its own influence in the bilateral asymmetrical relationship while limiting US influence in South America, this would be consistent with attempting to play the pivot or play favourites. These following cases are not intended to be representative of Latin America; instead, they illustrate the two possible configurations of triangular relations in which the United States and Brazil maintain positive ties. The first configuration shows how US-Brazil ties evolve in a romantic triangle characterized by negative X—Z relations. The second shows a *ménage à trois* in which the options of Y are constrained by US and Brazilian prioritization of friendly ties. Possibilities for cooperation and competition are shaped by these dynamics.

Playing the pivot: US/Brazil/Venezuela

Negative relations between the United States and Venezuela gave Brazil an opportunity to act as the pivot in a romantic triangle. Womack (2016) argues that a Y-pivoted triangle will be less stable than the likelier configuration in which X is the pivot. In a Y-pivoted triangle, the middle power must ensure stability (if not cordiality) in relations involving a much stronger state. The dynamics of asymmetry militate against that outcome.

Brazil attempted this complicated task using several strategies. It worked to build closer ties with Venezuela, most notably by promoting the oil-rich country's accession to Mercosur. Presidents Lula and Rousseff maintained largely friendly relations with the United States, despite serious disagreements on trade policy and digital snooping. According to Womack (2016, p.

105), 'it is reasonable to expect a positive relation with a strong nation to be worth more than a positive relation with a weak nation'. Given that, it is not surprising that Brazil avoided the directly oppositional strategies vis-à-vis Washington favoured by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his ALBA allies. The 'correct but cool' relations with the US formed part of Brazil's attempt to act as pivot. Exaggerated closeness with Washington would harm Brasilia's efforts to bring Caracas and its ideological allies onside; however, 'alienating X [the US] would be a significant loss' (Womack, 2016, p. 107). Venezuela's wealth, imports, and influence at the height of the oil boom changed Brazil's calculus somewhat. Combined with an historic reluctance to interfere in other states' internal politics, Brazil hesitated to criticise democratic erosion in Venezuela, despite episodic US pressure. As often happens in asymmetrical relations, costs and benefits were not high enough to merit consistent US attention until Venezuela's crisis threatened regional stability.

The pivot role offers certain benefits, and during the 2000s, the benefits were greater for Brazil than for the United States. Playing the pivot helped Brazil cement its claim to regional leadership. In a network of overlapping triangles, this role made Brazil a key node in a distinctive South American neighbourhood. That position was a basis for greater global projection (Amorim Neto, 2012; Moniz Bandeira, 2010; Burges 2017; Cervo, 2003; Flandes, 2009, 2012; Soares de Lima & Hirst, 2006; Malamud, 2011; Santos, 2011). Though the US remained an influential actor, its decreased engagement created de facto deference to Brazilian leadership in the region. However, Brazil's success was partial and temporary. Brazil brought Venezuela into Mercosur over skepticism from some of the bloc's members. The initiative started, in part, to rein in Chávez's influence and re-align Venezuelan interests and imports toward Brazil. Ultimately, the decision pulled a fragmented and weakened Mercosur into

Venezuela's deepening morass. A dispute over Venezuelan participation and *pro tempore* leadership consumed the body in late 2016.

Given its costs and complications, the pivot strategy required a strong Brazilian commitment. Brazil's ideational support was valued by neighbouring presidents in need of validation internationally and at home. That has not been matched by a material commitment, which is less surprising given that Brazil's per capita income is less than many of its neighbours'. The scarce resource commitment shrank further with Brazil's economic and political crisis, as did Brasilia's attention. The Y-pivot strategy collapsed.

The effects for regional dynamics can be seen in the Venezuelan crisis. With Brazil distracted and its leadership capacity diminished, the role of pivot has effectively returned to the United States. While this has happened more by default than via active US pursuit, the consequences could be momentous. For as long as it survives, the Maduro government is unlikely to turn to Washington or international financial institutions; its credit lines with China may soon be exhausted, weakening outside options. Brazil cannot justify major assistance to an oil-rich country at a time of domestic crisis, but a pivotal Brazil may have been able to foster South American collective action for a crisis response. With the United States, asymmetry in capabilities increases expectations that the US will provide resources; however the economies of asymmetrical attention indicate that US attention and resource commitment will be scarce given its comparatively lower exposure and negative relations with Venezuela.

Playing favourites: US/Brazil/Uruguay

Contrasting the romantic triangle above with the trilaterally positive US-Brazil-Uruguay triangle illustrates how different triangular dynamics affect the strategies of all three actors. This type of

triangle is a stable equilibrium because all actors have second best positions, which minimises grievances. Due to even greater asymmetry, Uruguay's exposure to both Brazil and the United States is greater than Venezuela's; thus its incentives to maintain positive relations are magnified. This factor is enhanced by Uruguay's economic structure. As recently as 2008, trade accounted for 65 percent of the small state's GDP, with Brazil and the US as top partners (World Bank, 2016c). Perhaps surprisingly, in this *ménage à trois* it is the smallest state that is most prone to upset the dynamic. Uruguay has more to gain and lose from ties with both larger states, with the US size partly offset by Brazil's proximity.

While Brazil was growing and increasing market access, Uruguay's incentives were to stay close to Brazil. Both factors have diminished since 2012, and as such Uruguay has shifted its stance – albeit with caution. This has included pressuring Mercosur on its openness and making noise about closer economic ties with the United States and the liberally oriented Pacific Alliance. The US has hesitated to reciprocate these gestures, instead prioritising its positive relations with Brazil. For its part, Brazil's situation is second best, but hardly negative. Bad relations between Brazil's smaller neighbours and Washington might allow Brazil to play the influential pivot, but the *ménage à trois* triangle lacks a real pivot. The pivotal position Brazil tried to adopt between the US and ALBA countries granted it influence but also required more attention. As a reformist, emerging power (Stuenkel, 2013), Brazil's de facto positions have often been closer to Washington than to ALBA. The triangular ties are largely based on common interests that override the bilateral Uruguay-Brazil relationship. This makes the friendly ties between Brazil and ALBA countries in a romantic triangle with the United States harder to sustain than in the trilateral relationship with Uruguay, in which interests are mutually

reinforcing. Thus, while Brazil's crisis undermined its pivotal strategy in the Venezuela triangle and exacerbated instability, the balanced Uruguayan *ménage à trois* has remained stable.

Asymmetrical analysis of 'shared neighbourhoods'

Under the PT, Brazil briefly sought to act as a pivot or play favourites in triangular relations with the United States and South America. In the Uruguay triangle, the dominant strategy was cooperation. To some extent, Uruguay buffered, 'reducing proportional exposure to a particular problem or partner by diversifying or strengthening other relationships' (Womack, 2016, p. 118). The pivotal role was tenuous by its very nature. Venezuela's crisis and the change of government in Brazil undermined Brazil's pivotal role. Brazil has responded to its own challenges by increasing cooperation with the United States. The dynamic could again shift if new Brazilian leadership continues to distance itself from the crumbling Maduro government, turning the romantic triangle into a 'marriage' in which the US and Brazil establish closer ties while Venezuela becomes the pariah. While this would be the worst-possible outcome for Venezuela, the current government has little recourse to avoid it. It would then fall on the US-Brazilian 'marriage' to respond to the Venezuelan fallout. Risks associated with proximity might make this appealing to Brazil – given concerns about an immense, sparsely populated border shared with a state implicated in drug-trafficking and beset by smuggling.

The cases illustrate that the dynamics of two major powers in a shared neighbourhood are not only the result of bilateral relations. Major power interactions in and with the neighbourhood will be substantively affected by the third partners in the triangle and the tenor of their relations with the larger powers. When considering the "propensity for followership" (Gstöhl, Van Langenhove & Schunz, this volume; see also Lobell et. al.), in a neighbourhood with multiple

powers, one must also ask, *propensity to follow whom?* In a romantic triangle, the middle power must decide whether to gang up on the smallest state or to try to mediate. Both cases show that in asymmetrical situations, only specific conditions are conducive to that pivotal role – a rising profile, domestic stability, and inattention of the largest power. When those falter, the asymmetric region will tend back to an equilibrium in which the largest state is also the pivot.

Conclusions: US-Brazil interactions in South America

How do asymmetrical dynamics affect US-Brazilian relations in the Americas? Historically, the United States and Brazil have formed a friendly, adjacent side to asymmetrical triangles with other South American states. Though both are major powers in the shared neighbourhood, asymmetry between the US, Brazil, and the rest of South America is fundamental for understanding their broadly cooperative relations. Brazil deferred to the United States' overall position in World War II, the Cold War, and initially in the post-Cold War liberal international order. The United States for the most part respected Brazil's independence and autonomy.³ This follows the broad pattern of a normal asymmetrical relationship. Brazilian leaders increased their global profile during the 2000s, occasionally to Washington's chagrin. In some sense, this was an attempt to renegotiate Brazil's bargain at the regional and global levels, but the fundamental structure of the relationship continued. Brazil's own crises have completed the shift back to the previous pattern, though US attention and resource commitments under the Trump administration are less certain than ever.

The picture becomes more complicated when the triangle's third point, a country from the shared neighbourhood, is included. As Womack (2016, p. 100) notes, strategic interactions are complicated by the 'three body problem'. The second reason, not addressed in depth by

Womack, concerns the interrelation of Brazilian ambitions with those of third countries. Brazil's role as a regional leader does not necessitate negative relations between the US and other South American states, but it does require alterations in the relative importance of relationships. Proximity must outweigh power. That proximity, along with US inattention, allowed Brazil to act as the pivot of a romantic triangle in some configurations and increase its centrality in others.

For the near-term, Brazil is unlikely to muster the resources to cement that position. Proximity alone is not sufficient. In the longer term, however, increased multinodality in the international system will soften the Brazil-United States-South America triangle. Trump's ascension to the US presidency introduces additional uncertainty regarding US global intentions, but given its size, the United States is bound to remain a key node for Brazil and its neighbours – for better or worse. Disparities in capabilities will still be an important factor. However, if the US fails to demonstrate respect for its smaller neighbours' autonomy, it would undermine the foundations of asymmetric cooperation. If Trump undermines the bases of the US role – its network of trade agreements, economic openness, or role as a capital provider – that could provide an opportunity for a recovering Brazil to retake its central place in a world of increasing options. Even short of truly hostile relations, cooling diplomatic ties and US distraction or division will likely soften the US-Brazil-South American triangle even further.

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Notes

¹ Crosscutting asymmetries exist work in South America; while Brazil has the largest economy, population, and landmass, it is far from having the highest per capita income or economic productivity.

² X, at the top of the triangle, represents the most powerful state. Y, at the bottom left, is next most powerful. Z, at bottom right, is least powerful.

³ This was most strongly challenged during the Goulart presidency and ensuing coup and the Carter administration's tense relations with the military dictatorship.