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U.S. Praises Brazil, Offers Technology Transfer for Fighter-Jet Purchase

by Andrés Gaudín

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In just 18 months in office, Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff has replaced 12 ministers from the original Cabinet that took office with her on Jan. 1, 2011. The latest to leave, in mid-March, was Afonso Florence, a deputy whom the president had named to head the Ministerio do Desenvolvimento Agrário. In none of the 12 cases was the dismissal related to poor job performance or to political differences. No, in all cases, the ministers had to resign because of their alleged participation in acts of corruption that were made public through denunciations—often without any proof—by a media almost unanimously lined up against the government.

"Once a suspicion is lodged against a person, it does not matter that the judiciary later finds them innocent. The damage is done, and that is what the opposition media aim for," said Sen. Vital do Rego, elected to head a parliamentary commission that will investigate the latest episode of corruption, this one proven, in which no minister's job is on the line but rather the opposition's credibility.

Perhaps Florence's resignation has much to do with the right's "need" to maintain a climate of distrust of the government, with the hope of undermining governing-party candidates' chances in the October municipal elections in which 136.5 million Brazilians will elect officials for 5,564 municipalities throughout the country.

Amid this media campaign, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in the capital Brasilia and, as soon as she arrived, heaped praise on Rousseff "for her fight against corruption." A week later, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta arrived, and many commentators then believed they saw the reason for Clinton's lavish praise.

High-level delegations to Brazil have mixed motives

A columnist on the Web site Carta Maior wrote, "In September 2011—and in April of this year—[US President] Barack Obama received Dilma in Washington with full honors and even brought up the idea of holding these meetings on 'transparency' in government actions that later brought in Clinton as a participant. It is a cordial escalation. Then Panetta came, he told our military everything they wanted to hear, and we now know that what the US really wants is to sell us the planes made by Boeing."

On April 17 in Brasilia the first annual Open Government Partnership (OGP) Conference was held, a voluntary forum of governments and civil society, with the objective, according to Obama and Rousseff, of promoting mechanisms for citizen participation and combatting corruption in public administration. Clinton represented the US.

The meeting took place just as accusations hit the press regarding the connivance between the biggest capitalist of the underground game Jogo do Bicho (animal game) and several legislators of the rightist Demócratas (DEM) party. Given the scant and insignificant impact that the issue of
"open governance" had globally, the most anyone looked forward to was the secretary of state's participation.

After expressing pride in being a promoter of the initiative and before pointing out that the 21st century will be "an era of openness, transparency, accountability, freedom, democracy, and results for people everywhere," Clinton said, "There is no better partner to have started this effort and to be leading it than Brazil and, in particular, President Rousseff. Her commitment to openness, transparency, her fight against corruption is setting a global standard."

US making up for lost time?
Analysts who tried to maintain a certain impartiality toward both the government and the opposition (specifically, the media) said that the series of meetings that Carta Maior observed followed a precise logic: for many years, the US has neglected its relations with Africa and South America (with Latin America as a whole), two areas where Brazil has influence. In Africa, it has a strong presence in Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and, in general, all the former Portuguese colonies.

Brazil's influence in South America can be seen daily, expressed in bilateral undertakings where its multinational companies are the principal investors or in its power of persuasion in agencies like the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR). Those independent analysts say that the US is particularly concerned about South America, where its economic influence is diminishing, while China is becoming a first-class trading partner. The Asian giant—Brazil's partner in the BRICS group, along with Russia, India, and South Africa—has surpassed the US in trade with Brazil, Chile, and Peru, and is a close second in Argentina and Colombia.

A week after Clinton returned to the US, it was Panetta's turn, and his first announcement on April 25 was that the US was willing to transfer latest-generation military technology to Brazil and thus be able to count on a strategic ally to help it guarantee security on the American and African continents.

During a talk at the Escola Superior de Guerra (ESG) in Rio de Janeiro, the Pentagon chief told the highest-ranking officers of the three branches of the Brazilian military exactly what they wanted to hear: that Brazil is already a global power with the right to fully intervene in security efforts globally.

The report transmitted by all international news agencies said the speech was apparently prepared so that every three minutes Panetta was extolling the officers' nationalist pride. He first said that Brazil is "a country with whom we want to have an innovative partnership," then insisted that "we must" achieve a high level of cooperation in defense matters, and, regarding this, he said, finally, that the White House wants to support a relationship between the two world powers because a stronger and more engaged Brazil in global issues will help improve international security.

US pushes Boeing fighter planes
The announcement regarding the transfer of weapons technology was seen as a response to complaints made two days earlier by Brazil's Defense Minister Celso Amorim, who had said that the US sells military equipment but restricts access to its development. But it was also related to the acquisition of fighter jets, a decision that the South American country has been postponing for various reasons.
"[Brazil is] a good ally, a good friend, a good partner. There oftentimes are requirements in the United States law that require us to adhere to certain requirements with regard to some of these technologies," said Panetta. "But overall, I have to tell you that my goal as secretary of defense is to do all I can to try to improve the defense trade with Brazil."

Before an audience surprised by such praise, Panetta added that the technology transfer would be facilitated by "the strategic alliance that we are building," now that Brazil is considered an "allied nation." It was at the end of his statements that the defense secretary went to the heart of the matter: a multimillion dollar deal in which the US Boeing Company is trying to sell Brazil 36 Super Hornet F/A-18 fighter jets. It was then that Panetta said, without embarrassment or prejudice, that if Boeing receives the contract, there will be "an unprecedented advanced technology sharing that is reserved for only our closest allies and partners."

"We fully understand that Brazil is not looking just to be the purchaser of a fighter aircraft but rather a full-fledged partner in the development of cutting-edge aviation technology," Panetta said. "With the Super Hornet, Brazil's defense and aviation industries would be able to transform their partnerships with US companies, and they would have the best opportunity to plug into worldwide markets."

In the bidding for the sale of the fighter jets—opened in 2009 (NotiSur, Oct. 16, 2009), during the administration of President Luiz Inácio da Silva (2003-2011)—participants included the French company Dassault with its Rafale jets and the Swedish company Saab's Gripen. Without fully explaining the reasons, the military reportedly preferred the latter, but they were left speechless when France's then President Nicolas Sarkozy said, in late 2010, that his country was willing to not only provide technology but also to give Brazil the right to sell the Rafale in the Latin American market.

When he spoke with the military officers, Panetta played his strongest card when he said that the US has decided to share the technology used in manufacturing the F/A-18s. "It is reserved for only our closes allies," he repeated.

Beyond the dispute among the three competitors, it remains to be seen whether Brazil continues thinking about its aviation or whether it is considering putting its disposable resources into re-equipping the Navy. After the call for bids on the fighter jets in 2009, extensive oil reserves were detected off the coast of Rio de Janeiro, which would make it advisable to have a powerful fleet.

It also remains to be seen what resources Brazil can count on, since Rousseff made spending cuts in March 2011 that reduced, among other things, monies earmarked for defense (NotiSur, March 25, 2011).

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