

U.S. Nuclear Accommodation of Brazil a Model for Iran Policy?

By [Matias Spektor](#), on 03 Jul 2013, [Briefing](#)

Hasan Rouhani's convincing election to the Iranian presidency may finally turn the page on eight contentious years of outgoing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's leadership. The president-elect, who takes office Aug. 3, has expressed his desire to ease tensions with the United States.

In particular, Rouhani has shown interest in a new round of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, but he made clear in his first post-election press conference that he [has no intention of accepting a moratorium](#) on uranium enrichment.

This stance lines up with his historical views: Nine years ago, as chief nuclear negotiator, Rouhani compared the controversy around Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology to that surrounding Brazil's pursuit of the same technology several decades ago. Once the Brazilians completed their nuclear fuel cycle against the wishes of the West, [he said in 2004](#), "the world started to work with them."

Rouhani's statement points to the issue of accommodation in the nuclear sphere. As scores of documents and [oral-history interviews](#) recently released by the Fundacao Getulio Vargas illustrate, in this he was correct: The U.S. accommodated Brazil's quest for nuclear-energy development to good effect.

When State Department officials expressed concern in the early 1970s that Brazil was negotiating a major nuclear technology purchase from West Germany, then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger shrugged them off, saying, "We are not a nonproliferation agency."

But things changed after India tested its first nuclear device in 1974. The Carter administration took a much tougher stance toward Brazil's nuclear ambitions, pushing Brasilia aggressively to relinquish its uranium-enrichment activities.

The Brazilians argued that their program was for peaceful use, including electricity production, medicine, crop engineering and propulsion for submarines. But many in the West thought otherwise. After all, the Brazilian military was seeking technologies to enrich uranium and reprocess plutonium, potentially useful in a weapons program.

Carter's pressure backfired. Brazilians across ideological lines shared the governing military's commitment to a program they saw as a symbol of economic modernization and political emancipation.

It is no wonder, then, that in 1979 the Brazilians drove the program underground, setting up secret facilities and developing enrichment technologies outside international

safeguards. Brazilian scientists worked on a ballistic missile, while diplomats staunchly defended the right to “peaceful nuclear explosions.”

The U.S. did not engage in covert acts or threaten to use force against Brazil because fear of a Brazilian bomb was always marginal. Washington chose to impose trade sanctions instead, but to no avail.

Starting in 1990, however, Brazil put all of its facilities—including military ones—under international safeguards. It brought its nuclear program under civilian control and signed on to global nonproliferation rules.

While the reasons behind these decisions were mostly domestic and largely unrelated to U.S. policy, it is instructive to consider the degree to which Brazilian policymakers moved toward nonproliferation commitments because they thought the U.S. was accommodating their demands.

Indeed, in the mid-1980s the U.S. progressively abandoned coercive diplomacy and ultimatums. Instead, successive American administrations accepted that Brazil was going to enrich uranium as a fact of life. Washington therefore offered positive trade and cooperation incentives in exchange for ever-growing levels of transparency and adherence to international rules.

Brazil, in turn, did not enrich uranium to weapons grade; it did not act on original plans to build a reprocessing reactor that could extract bomb-making material; and it did not build or test a nuclear weapon. It gradually accepted foreign inspections, first bilaterally with Argentina and later multilaterally with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Brazil renounced peaceful nuclear explosions in 1990 and eight years later ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Key to this process was the fact that U.S. officials also encouraged Brazil to cooperate with Argentina, the other South American country bent on developing indigenous nuclear technology. In the 1970s, a U.S. politician secretly put forward proposals for a bilateral system of mutual inspections between the two, and successive U.S. administrations nudged the two sides toward cooperation. When Argentina and Brazil finally built a system for mutual inspections, no U.S. official sought to take credit—ownership remained with the two countries themselves.

Even when they could not agree, Washington and Brasilia kept channels open for communication at all times.

Equally important, they never expected perfection. In fact, low-level tension remains to this day. Brazil has refused to sign the IAEA’s Additional Protocols for tighter inspections, and it has refused to grant visual access to its centrifuges. Many in the U.S. worry because Brazil plans to produce low-enriched uranium industrially and has ordered a nuclear-propelled submarine.

For its part, Brazil remains highly critical of the nonproliferation regime. In Brasilia's view, the U.S. does not behave as a "responsible stakeholder" when it puts pressure on an NPT member like Iran but rewards a nonmember like India, or when it turns a blind eye to Israel's nuclear capabilities.

Brazil defiantly defended its sovereign rights to uranium enrichment while seeking U.S. acceptance of its aspirations. Washington accommodated that expectation, leading to a working relationship that has served both sides well.

The historical analogy is not perfect, of course.

U.S. policy toward Iran is far more constrained by domestic, regional and psychological factors than policy toward Brazil ever was. Deep-seated hostility never featured prominently in U.S.-Brazil relations. Even at the height of Argentine-Brazil nuclear competition, Brazil did not threaten regional stability in South America. And above all, Brazil never seriously considered building a bomb.

Yet the historical parallel highlights the role accommodation can play in difficult nuclear relationships. We should remember that Brazil could have built a nuclear weapon but chose not to take that path. It is the only BRICS country never to have gone that way.

So if the Obama administration is keen to end the atomic stalemate with a proud country from the developing world that is unlikely to relinquish the technologies it owns, it might be worth reflecting on how Washington played a similar situation in the recent past.

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