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The Future of U.S.-Brazil Security Cooperation

Opportunities Presented by Brazil's Major Non-NATO Ally Status

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Introduction

“The U.S.-Brazil relationship is stronger than ever.” With this decisive statement, the U.S. embassy in Brazil introduced a [publicly available fact sheet](#) in 2020 summarizing the key areas of cooperation between the Western Hemisphere’s two most populous countries. The document calls the United States and Brazil “partners for a prosperous hemisphere” and reflects, in part, the unique moment created by the close, personal relationship between former U.S. president Donald Trump and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. The two presidents bonded over their anti-establishment candidacies, creating a close working relationship that promised a breakthrough in U.S.-Brazil ties, which have often suffered from mutual suspicion and hesitancy. A critical milestone in Brazil’s approximation with the United States came in 2019, when Washington [designated Brazil](#) a “major non-NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] ally” (MNNA), a status codified in U.S. law that grants foreign partners significant benefits and privileges in the areas of security cooperation and defense.

Policymakers have long called for an intensification of U.S.-Brazil security ties following a familiar pattern of progress paired with occasional setbacks. Given the progress demonstrated by President Joe Biden’s first in-person meeting with President Bolsonaro on the sidelines of the U.S.-held Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, this pattern heightens the question of how the Biden administration will continue to engage with Brazil and the Bolsonaro government on security and defense. Could enhanced security cooperation through an active use of Brazil’s MNNA status advance mutual security interests in the Western Hemisphere?

To answer this guiding question, this white paper briefly examines the history of U.S.-Brazil security cooperation. The piece then assesses the durability of the MNNA status as a classification. A case study on Argentina’s MNNA status, granted at the apex of interest-area convergence in the late 1990s, highlights that the designation’s utility depends on intentional cooperation between the two administrations in power. Without an intentional leveraging of MNNA status, security cooperation will not be institutionalized and will thus become subject to the whims of individual leaders.

The core of the white paper argues that increasing security cooperation is in both countries’ interests, irrespective of **any differences** Biden may have with Bolsonaro. A deeper strategic partnership with Brazil would also help advance Biden’s foreign policy priorities—including combatting the climate crisis, protecting democracy and human rights, competing globally with China, and promoting regional stability in Latin America. And for Brazil, MNNA status offers a crucial tool to bolster its technological capabilities and catalyze its increased role in managing regional security challenges.

However, MNNA status is not a silver bullet that will resolve tensions in other areas of the complex bilateral relationship. Rather, the designation provides a channel for constructive dialogue between the United States and Brazil on security issues since, until recently, there has been a “**freeze**” in relations. The white paper concludes with the recommendation that Brazil’s MNNA status is crucial to increasing links between the hemisphere’s two largest powers.

U.S.-Brazil Security Cooperation

The **history** of security and defense cooperation between the United States and Brazil has traditionally been characterized by mutual hesitancy between large powers. Attempts to develop a more strategic partnership between the two most populous countries in the Americas had been met with occasional diplomatic setbacks and disagreements. After the United States and Brazil signed their first military-assistance agreement in 1952, their interest in bolstering security ties ebbed and flowed depending on the respective administrations in power. Arguably, **U.S. acquiescence** to the 1964 military coup against the democratically elected Brazilian president João Goulart, suspected of communist sympathies, compounded the mistrust. In line with this pattern, plans for a **long-term partnership** envisaged by **Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and his Brazilian counterpart** in the 1970s ended abruptly when President Jimmy Carter found Brazil’s foreign and domestic policy to be at odds with his administration’s focus on human rights. Between 1978 and 2010, U.S.-Brazil **security cooperation** existed without a firmly institutionalized set of parameters. The rise of Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) in the early 2000s further impeded cooperative advancements due to the PT’s decades-long skepticism of the United States and its foreign policy. Furthermore, after a Defense Cooperation Agreement was signed in 2010, the public disclosure of U.S. efforts to spy on President Dilma Rousseff and her advisers marked another **unfortunate setback**. Bilateral relations reached their nadir when Rousseff canceled a planned state visit to Washington and demanded a formal **apology** from President Barack Obama.

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Several scholars have tried to explain the traditional hesitancy and periodic setbacks as a “**natural rivalry**” between the two giants of the Americas. In particular, Brazil’s behavior has been explained as associated with its fear—as a former colony in the Portuguese Empire—of again being dominated by or tethered to a

larger power with global reach. Indeed, Brazil has a long history of foreign policy actions aimed at guarding (and even increasing) what it perceives as its strategic autonomy. Conversely, [other scholars](#) interpret the hesitancy as the fault of the United States growing wary of its increasingly powerful neighbor.

While there may be some truth to the “natural-rivalry” theory, both countries have taken important steps since 2014 to overcome their reticence, paving the way for more effective cooperation in the security and defense realm. When Rousseff finally visited Washington in June 2014, Obama declared Brazil a growing regional and global player as well as an “[indispensable partner](#)” in U.S. efforts to promote peace and security in Latin America. Simultaneously, the United States was already extensively engaged in providing Brazil with security assistance in the leadup to its hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, for which the United States contributed to training 50,000 members of the [Brazilian police](#) and 25,000 private security agents. Counterterrorism, border security, and counternarcotics cooperation eventually developed into cornerstones of U.S. security assistance to Brazil. In 2015, Brazil’s congress [approved](#) the 2010 Defense Cooperation Agreement and the General Security of Military Information Agreement. The former aims to enhance collaboration on defense research and development, logistics, and the acquisition of defense products and services, while the latter intends to facilitate the sharing of classified defense and military information. In this context, the growing convergence of U.S. and Brazilian security interests led to calls for even stronger U.S. support for Brazil’s ambitions to [modernize its armed forces](#) and grow its industrial defense base, thereby consolidating Brazil’s role in maintaining the regional security order.

In contrast to the common misperception that the Trump-Bolsonaro alignment alone permitted more advanced cooperative agreements, the mutual desire to foster security and defense collaboration clearly pre-dated this period in U.S.-Brazil relations. In other words, an understanding of the mutual benefits that would result from enhanced technological, intelligence, research, and defense-product exchanges existed well before the Trump-Bolsonaro moment and led to Brazil’s MNNA designation. However, it remains the case that the [Trump administration’s designation](#) of Brazil as an MNNA has provided the best set of tools to date for catalyzing some of these areas of potential cooperation.

[MNNA Status](#)

Along with 18 other foreign partners granted this [special status under U.S. law](#), Brazil has enjoyed privileged access since 2019 to the U.S. defense industry as well as enhanced opportunities for joint military exchanges, exercises, and training. MNNA status carries with it considerable practical benefits (see Figure 1). In 2020, for instance, Brazil received more than \$100 million worth of [U.S. military equipment and services](#). Given the countries on this list of foreign partners, MNNA status can be interpreted as a [powerful symbol](#) of a close (and increasingly strategic) relationship with the United States. Countries considered the United States’ closest non-European allies—including Australia, Israel, Japan, and New Zealand—are MNNA designees. Furthermore, MNNA status in itself represents another level of formalized partnership with the United States.

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Figure 1: Benefits and Privileges of MNNA Status

Privileges resulting from **MNNA designation** under 22 U.S.C. §2321k:

- Eligible for loans of material, supplies, or equipment for cooperative research, development, testing, or evaluation purposes.
- Eligible as a location for U.S.-owned War Reserve Stockpiles to be placed on its territory outside of U.S. military facilities.
- Can enter into agreements with the United States for the cooperative furnishing of training on a bilateral or multilateral basis, if the financial arrangements are reciprocal and provide for reimbursement of all U.S. direct costs.
- Eligible, to the maximum extent feasible, for priority delivery of Excess Defense Articles transferred under section 516 of the Foreign Assistance Act (if located on the southern or south-eastern flank of NATO).
- Eligible for consideration to purchase depleted uranium ammunition.

Privileges resulting from MNNA designation under 10 U.S.C. §2350a:

- Eligible to enter into an MOU [memorandum of understanding] or other formal agreement with the U.S. Department of Defense for the purpose of conducting cooperative research and development projects on defense equipment and munitions.
- Allows firms of an MNNA, as with NATO countries, to bid on contracts for maintenance, repair, or overhaul of U.S. Department of Defense equipment outside the United States.
- Allows funding to procure explosives detection devices and other counter-terrorism research and development projects under the auspices of the Department of State's Technical Support Working Group.

Source: "Major Non-NATO Ally Status Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>.

MNNA status allows designated states greater access to military, economic, and technological equipment from the United States. For instance, these countries can conduct joint research and development on military-oriented projects, in turn driving innovation and developing their militaries. Therefore, MNNA designation provides Brazil with more opportunities to upgrade its military as well as civilian capacity. It also supports Brazil's interest in tackling its **traditional security threats**. For example, Brazil can deploy higher-tech border security equipment through hardware purchased from the United States under the purview of its MNNA status.

Case Study: Argentina

Before Brazil (and, more recently, Colombia), Argentina was the only South American country to have been granted MNNA status. Given Brazil and Argentina have similar security and defense challenges, analyzing **Argentina's experience as an MNNA** can demonstrate how this status is implemented in a Latin American context and shed light on some of the pitfalls to avoid in Brazil's case.

In October 1997, President Bill Clinton conferred MNNA status on Argentina due to its increasing role in international peacekeeping and its demonstration of "**shared values**" with the United States under the administration of Carlos Menem. In doing so, Washington hoped that Argentina's neighbors would be encouraged to follow its "example in working toward **cooperation and international responsibility**."

Argentine security challenges included preventing domestic terrorism, securing borders and disputed territorial claims with Chile and the United Kingdom, and confronting drug trafficking.

The partnership's achievements ranged from several defense-related agreements and improved military-to-military contacts to enhanced "integration of multinational forces through **combined exercises**." For Argentina, however, MNNA status ended up being largely symbolic rather than truly strategic. Unlike more traditional MNNAAs such as Japan and Israel, Argentina did not become a significant geopolitical and strategic interest for Washington, and the return to power of Peronist presidents in the 2000s made it even less so.

While the United States and Argentina made some initial advances using the MNNA designation, the decisive political shift in Argentina under Néstor Kirchner's administration marked a turning point in the potential benefits of Argentina's MNNA status. Kirchner came to power following a period of political and economic turbulence in the early 2000s—including three **brief presidencies** from 1999 to 2003. His foreign policy departed markedly from that of Menem's nascent internationalism, **forging ideological alliances** with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and other populist leaders then ascendant throughout Latin America. A tough U.S. approach to Argentina during its political and financial crisis of 2001–02, including ceasing U.S. support for the country at the International Monetary Fund, generated further friction, and Argentina defaulted on nearly \$100 billion in private debt in December 2001. The "special relationship" that existed between Clinton and Menem has never been fully replicated in U.S.-Argentina relations—even in more auspicious times, such as when President Trump and President Mauricio Macri appeared to make steps toward a deep realignment.

Argentina's experience demonstrates that the utility and durability of MNNA status are contingent upon strategic considerations and the international context, which are filtered through the perceptions of individual leaders. While Clinton and Menem forged an effective working relationship, other presidents, such as George W. Bush and Kirchner, did not; the momentum of the Clinton-Menem years did not carry over into the Bush-Kirchner years. With respect to Brazil, the Trump-Bolsonaro chemistry, which is clearly lacking in the Biden-Bolsonaro relationship, may deter effective cooperation through Brazil's MNNA status if further efforts are not made to institutionalize cooperation and move past differences.

Improved Security Cooperation: A Mutual Interest

During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, **experts wondered** whether strengthened bilateral relations with Brazil, extending far beyond security matters, could be maintained under a Biden administration. Biden made clear he was neither willing nor able to engage in a close, personal relationship with Bolsonaro as Trump had. Indeed, despite the paucity of foreign policy debate on the campaign trail, Brazil and Bolsonaro became a topic of discussion. (Vladimir Putin was the only other world leader mentioned by name in an official debate.) During one presidential debate, Biden said that Brazil should face "**significant economic consequences**," referring to U.S. sanctions, if deforestation in the Amazon continued under Bolsonaro's watch.

Despite a **relative slowdown** in U.S.-Brazil ties since the start of the Biden administration, constructive relations based on mature diplomacy should remain possible, as indicated by the **June 2022 bilateral meeting** between the two presidents on the sidelines of the Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles.

Brazil's 2019 designation as an MNNA represents an important conduit for issue-area convergence and reducing tensions. Amid the many conflicting policy priorities for Biden and Bolsonaro, enhanced security and defense cooperation constitutes one of the countries' key "shared interests."

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In particular, the Biden administration could leverage Brazil's MNNA status to advance the following policy goals, among many others:

- **Compete with China.** In an emerging era of great-power competition, China's influence in Brazil has raised alarm bells. For myriad reasons, Brazil is one of the lynchpins for U.S. success in pursuing [strategic rivalry](#) in South America. Through growing economic ties, [increasing technology cooperation](#), and [intense vaccine diplomacy](#), China's burgeoning influence in Brazil presents a serious challenge to the United States. Brazil's economy relies on Chinese investments for infrastructure projects, and in 2020, the country became a [founding member](#) of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, created by China to play a major role as a development financing alternative to the U.S.-led World Bank. The (still distant) possibility that Brazil could eventually become a signatory to the Belt and Road Initiative, bringing it even closer to China's state-owned enterprises and thereby the Chinese Communist Party, should be another wake-up call. In this overall context, enhanced security cooperation that leverages Brazil's MNNA status should be welcomed as an opportunity to keep Brazil close to the United States, mitigate China's influence, and restore the balance of power in Latin America.
- **Combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.** IUU fishing is an [excellent example](#) of an issue area where enhanced security cooperation could help maintain close ties. Although multiple countries participate in IUU fishing, [China is the principal offender](#) in South America. Massive state subsidies have propelled China's deep-water fleet, which now comprises over 17,000 vessels, to engage in a broad range of problematic behaviors, including illegal fishing, the deliberate catching of protected and endangered species, and the use of trawling nets that can accelerate the collapse of delicate marine environments. While Brazil has been less impacted by China's IUU fishing than Latin America's Pacific countries, China does send its fleet to the South Atlantic at important times throughout the fishing season, and Brazil has complained of China's increasingly problematic behavior in its territorial waters. In September 2020, the U.S. Coast Guard released its own [IUU Strategic Outlook](#), inviting countries to partner with it to counter predatory Chinese behavior. Operationalizing more of this strategic outlook would be a worthy use of Brazil's MNNA status.
- **Maintain regional stability and counter transnational criminal organizations.** Brazil's MNNA status points to its critical role in maintaining regional stability, with its borders touching nearly every country in South America. Deteriorating security conditions in Latin America have led to [increased narcotics trafficking](#), illegal gold mining, human trafficking, and deforestation. Boosting Brazil's capacity in counternarcotics, border security, and counterterrorism could help the United States increase its own national security since a significant portion of Brazil's violence is driven by its [sophisticated criminal organizations](#), such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Capital Command) and the Comando Vermelho (Red Command).
- **Manage the fallout from Nicolás Maduro's dictatorship.** The precipitous economic and political collapse in neighboring Venezuela at the hands of a [criminal regime](#) has significantly contributed to the destabilization

of Latin America. Many Venezuelans have fled the country to escape the insecurity, intimidation, and violence—as well as lack of medicine, food, and essential services. This massive [migration crisis](#) stemming from Maduro’s regime has included the departure of more than 6 million Venezuelans, most of whom have remained in Latin America and the Caribbean. Host countries throughout South America, including Brazil, have welcomed Venezuelan refugees but are “increasingly overstretched” and are rapidly approaching a [“saturation point.”](#) Furthermore, the Venezuelan regime’s deep links to criminal organizations in [Colombia](#) and [Brazil](#) give the United States and Brazil yet another reason to work together to contain the metastasizing regional security challenges presented by Maduro’s attempt to hold onto power.

- **Modernize and further professionalize Brazil’s military.** MNNA status offers the two countries an opportunity to accelerate Brazil’s military modernization program. Upgrading its military and technology—particularly by investing in its armed forces, equipment, and space capabilities—could provide Brazil a critical edge in facing its traditional regional and domestic security challenges. Brazil has long possessed some of the region’s most capable armed services, which happen to be South America’s largest aggregate armed forces. The country is an [important and frequent contributor](#) to international peacekeeping operations in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America.

Brasília has accelerated its military modernization, especially with U.S. support. The two countries’ armed forces have increased [joint interactions](#) in recent years. In February 2021, senior military leaders agreed to a [five-year plan](#) to develop partnerships and ramp up training interactions. Brazil has also [purchased](#) \$75 million in lightweight torpedoes from the United States. Regularizing interactions between the U.S. and Brazilian armed forces may also ameliorate some of the [concerns](#) regarding Bolsonaro’s commitment to democracy, given strict rules regarding civil-military relations in both countries and their strong, respective traditions of civilian control over the armed forces.

- **Share critical technology.** Brazilian modernization efforts are also evident in the technology sector, specifically regarding its space program. The elevation of Marcos Pontes, Brazil’s only astronaut to have gone to space, to the position of minister of science, technology, and innovation early in Bolsonaro’s term underscores the importance Brazil has placed on this sector. In 2020, the United States and Brazil signed a joint statement of intent on cooperation in the [Artemis Program](#), which aims to establish a longer-term presence on the moon by 2024, as well as send the first woman to the moon. As part of these joint efforts, Brasília will [contribute](#) to the development of a robotic lunar rover and conduct lunar science experiments. Moreover, on a highly productive [state visit](#) to the United States, Bolsonaro signed the Technology Safeguard Agreement, which authorizes joint commercial space-technology deployment, leveraging the important launch site of Alcântara in Brazil’s northeastern region (located near the equator, which, owing to the earth’s faster rotation, requires less fuel expenditure). During the same visit, the two countries signed an agreement to jointly develop a satellite. On the city level, Rio de Janeiro [renewed ties](#) with NASA through 2026 to share data and scientific knowledge on combating extreme weather events and issue air quality alerts.
- **Focus on greater geopolitical alignment and hard power concerns.** Brazil also has hard-power interests in the technology opportunities presented by its MNNA status. While the emergence of the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) trilateral forum and Australia’s push for nuclear-powered submarines have received more attention, Brazil has also been working for years to [develop the technology](#) to launch a nuclear-powered submarine. Although work on the project has been halting, the United States and United Kingdom’s hitherto monopoly on this technology has led Brazil to reach out to countries that pose a clear regional security threat, such as Russia, for potential technology transfer. An open door for Russia to cooperate with Brazil on cutting-edge nuclear-submarine technology is

neither in the U.S. interest nor conducive to greater regional security. Furthermore, it is allegedly one of several reasons why Bolsonaro visited Putin in Moscow just days before Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. Brazil's push for this technology has also led to several embarrassing moments in the bilateral relationship, such as a recent [scandal in which U.S. spies](#) allegedly tried to sell Brazil top-secret information. Lastly, if Brazil were able to develop a fleet of submarines capable of ranging over a broader swath of the Atlantic, this could not only fend off the leverage of a strategic rival in Russia but lead to a strategic shift in Brazil's posture and further its identity as an Atlantic power aligned with the NATO mindset. Such a mindset may well be critical to counterbalancing Brazil's institutional links with China and Russia, through the BRICS grouping and robust bilateral relations.

Satiating an Aspirational Power

Brazil possesses many of the same characteristics central to powerful actors in the international system. Geographically, it encompasses 8.5 million square kilometers (3.3 million square miles), which makes it the largest country in Latin America. It is the fifth-largest country in the world, after Russia, Canada, the United States, and China, all of which are major players in the international system. With over 214 million people, Brazil is the most populous country in Latin America and the sixth-largest in the world. It has the largest economy in Latin America and eighth-largest in the world, as measured by purchasing power parity. Furthermore, Brazil has the continent's [largest aggregate armed forces](#), including the largest army and air force and second-largest navy. In fact, in the 1980s, Brazil's size and force posture contributed to a competition with Argentina over the pursuit of nuclear weapons until the two signed a quadripartite agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency and established the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials in 1991, ensuring the continent remained [denuclearized](#). Despite this tense period under military regimes, the continent has not seen a major war in over 100 years; diplomatically, Brasília has long enjoyed stable and peaceful relations with its neighbors, which generally regard Brazil as the preeminent power on the continent.

Based on geographic, demographic, economic, and diplomatic prowess, therefore, Brazil has always exhibited potential to emerge as a [major player on the global stage](#). However, many factors continue to preclude it from entering the "great powers' club." This reality presents a dissonance in any understanding of Brazil. On the one hand, Brazil possesses latent capabilities that signal the ability to be a major player in international affairs. On the other, demonstrated challenges in political and economic affairs have held it back during most of its recent administrations. In various ways, Brazil's foreign policy has been marked by attempts to shore up its inadequacies and improve its prestige so it can bridge this gap between the latent and the actual.

MNNA status should also be viewed through this lens. First, it satiates Brazil's drive for internationally recognized markers of success. Like any large power, Brazil aspires to join global alliances of import and [organizations of economic heft](#) such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, as well as to serve as a reference point for handling major global issues such as food security. Second, MNNA status channels Brazil's aspirations into directions that can be beneficial for U.S. and regional security and stability. In addition to helping modernize Brazil's military, MNNA status can also increase the country's interoperability with the United States and boost its armed forces' familiarity with U.S. military doctrine and command through joint trainings, high-level interactions, and equipment transfers and purchases. With NASA, Brazil's space agency will participate in the next generation of space expeditions. Because sending objects or people into space is technologically demanding and expensive, few countries are space-capable, making the ability another [mark of prestige](#).

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Leveraging Brazil's MNNA Status

Both the United States and Brazil can use the country's MNNA designation to cooperate on security issues that affect their shared national interests. The Biden administration will need to navigate a complex web of mutual interests and vast ideological differences to leverage Brazil's MNNA status as a foreign policy tool, but ultimately this status can be used to benefit the Western Hemisphere as a whole. Both Brazil and the United States have many reasons to cooperate on security matters. The two countries have already conducted numerous high-level military training sessions, deepened space technology cooperation, and engaged in military equipment sales. This suggests that Brasília is interested in furthering ties with Washington within the MNNA framework. A post-Bolsonaro Brazil may be equally receptive to continuing close security cooperation with the United States.

The Biden administration should partner with Brazil to increase regional stability. Without strong regional leadership, transnational challenges are difficult if not impossible to solve. Historically, the United States has stepped in to coordinate complex security matters. However, the current lack of regional leadership, combined with Washington's waning influence in Latin America, limits the extent to which the Biden administration can feasibly address transnational challenges in the Western Hemisphere. For instance, support from Brazil is crucial if Biden hopes to seriously improve the humanitarian and economic crisis in Venezuela. Stabilizing the region would also have beneficial second- and third-order effects on the United States' domestic policy priorities, such as reducing the flow of illicit narcotics. Nonetheless, if Brazil and the United States can put aside their political differences, deeper security cooperation between these two giants would benefit the entire region.

MNNA status, although just one piece of the puzzle, is an important tool for bringing Brazil closer to the United States and shoring up joint priorities—under both a Bolsonaro administration and a potential future Lula administration. The special privileges and prestige afforded to countries with MNNA status have the potential to make cooperation against common threats attractive enough to forge lasting security relationships. ■

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