

Opinion: Stephen Harper looks beyond the U.S., to Brazil Trip is part of Ottawa's initiative to develop more diversity in foreign trade partners

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Stephen Harper took his robust foreign-policy agenda to Brazil on Monday, another sign Canada is looking beyond the U.S. to ensure its continued prosperity.

"Brazil is a priority market for Canada," declares the federal government's website, asserting that Brazil and Canada have a great deal in common.

They share "vast, sparsely inhabited territories and the richness that comes from multiculturalism and multi-ethnic diversity, including our indigenous populations," states the website. They are both also major agricultural producers.

Harper took four of his ministers with him on this, his first, visit to Brazil.

The PM initially announced an Americas Strategy for Canada back in 2007, aimed at boosting relations with countries located in the Western Hemisphere.

Canada historically has been disconnected from South America, probably because of the U.S.'s preeminence in the region.

Ottawa didn't join the Organization of American States until 1990.

Certainly Brazil, with a population of 190 million, wasn't always the apple of Ottawa's eye.

Canada complained in 1996 to the World Trade Organization about Brazil unfairly subsidizing its regional jet industry, and in 2001 the two countries had a tiff over beef.

Further, Brazil has sometimes suspected Canada was overly aligned with the U.S. (Brazil-U.S. relations have occasionally been cool), and believed Ottawa fails to properly recognize Brazilian clout.

That it does now demonstrates the determination of the governing Conservatives to diversify Canada's trade relations. At the moment Brazil is Canada's 10th largest trade partner.

The push for more foreign trade is an unassailable policy for Harper.

Politicians from all parties concur that Canada needs to wean itself off its reliance on the U.S., a country that will be buying less as it tries to repair its own fiscal ledgers.

Indeed, the thrust to move beyond the U.S. trade relationship began during the Chrétien era.

Since 1997, Canada has signed free-trade agreements with Panama, Jordan, Colombia, Peru, Costa Rica, Chile and Israel. It's now negotiating with the European Union and India, with a view to signing deals in the next two years.

Harper also has signalled an interest in warmer relations with China.

Again with the objective of courting trade, Conservatives recently revealed their support of a controversial plan to build pipeline and port infrastructure across B.C. to expedite shipment of Alberta's oilsands product to thirsty Asian markets.

On Monday, Harper met with Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff — who, intriguingly, began her political career as a Marxist guerrilla — and signed a series of agreements aimed at furthering the new Canada-Brazil partnership.

The agreements will make it easier and cheaper to fly between the two countries, reduce restrictions on payment of pension benefits to nationals who retire in the other country; and advance cooperation between the two nations on foreign-aid initiatives.

Additionally, Harper and Rousseff agreed to have their foreign ministers meet annually. And they established advisory groups from their respective business communities.

It appears Brazilians already were quite interested in Canada.

This country is the top destination for Brazilians studying abroad; in 2006, nearly 12,000 visas were issued to Brazilians for study in Canada. And Brazil has more than a dozen Canadian Studies centres.

Some 50,000 Brazilians visit Canada every year. Only one-third the number of Canadian tourists head in the other direction.

Harper leaves Brazil today and will stop in Colombia, Costa Rica and Honduras before heading back to Ottawa on Friday.

Meanwhile, former Canadian diplomats Allan Gotlieb and Colin Robertson argued Monday that if Harper wants to step up Canada's foreign engagement, Conservatives are going to have to augment resources for Canada's diplomatic corps.