

From Euphoria to Inertia: Brazil's International Rise and Decline

Written by Alexandra de Mello e Silva

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ALEXANDRA DE MELLO E SILVA, APR 29 2018

From Lula to Dilma: Continuity and Change in Brazilian Foreign Policy

The prolonged political crisis that led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in August of 2016, putting her vice-president Michel Temer at the head of the Executive, brought important repercussions for the conduction of Brazilian foreign policy. While still being sworn in as the interim minister of Foreign Relations, José Serra – a prominent politician connected to the opposition and former candidate in the presidential elections of 2002 and 2010 – pronounced a speech that seemed to indicate a profound reorientation in the strategies and priorities of Brazil's diplomacy[1]. Yet, attentive analysts observed that a few of Serra's "new" priorities were already emerging during the previous government.

Indeed, since Rousseff's first administration (2011-2015), one could notice a continuous decline in Brazil's international image and projection, which had received a significant impulse during Lula da Silva's two mandates as president (2003-2010). Despite the fact that his successor preserved Lula's conceptual guidelines, foreign policy implementation progressively lost momentum and proactivity in the international front as well as centrality within the domestic political agenda. This can be explained, partially, by the different personalities and political trajectories of the two former presidents, and the role and relevance each one applied to foreign policy. While heading the government, Lula did not hesitate to use his image and political prestige as a left-wing politician coming from humble social origins to promote an intensive presidential diplomacy through bilateral visits and his presence at multilateral fora, in fact associating his own personal international popularity to the Brazilian state. On the other hand, Rousseff had never disputed any elections before having been chosen as a candidate to Lula's succession. As her administration unfolded, some analysts[2], either in the media or in academia, pointed to the fact that the president showed a preference for the domestic agenda and little interest in external themes, especially those which presented diffuse and symbolic gains in the long run. Consequently, short-term economic concerns started to impose themselves over Lula's previous strategy of raising the country's international status by a more active participation in regional and global governance issues and fora. Samples of this activism could be found in Brazil's leading role in the negotiations involving agriculture subsidies within the WTO and in the revitalization of the G-20; in the country's growing participation in UN Peace Operations, including taking the military command of MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti); in its attempt to mediate, along with Turkey, a nuclear deal with Iran; in its support to the creation of inter-regional coalitions such as IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa Dialogue Forum) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa Forum); and, last but not least, in re-launching the country's campaign to get a permanent seat at the UN Security Council. In addition, Brazil and the city of Rio de Janeiro were chosen to host, respectively, the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. A cover of *The Economist* showing the "Cristo Redentor" – an international symbol of both Brazil and Rio – being launched as a rocket towards the stratosphere seemed to represent that moment of collective euphoria experienced by the country.

On the other hand, it is important to stress that Rousseff governed against a much more adverse international and domestic scenario, having to face a harsh political, economic, and fiscal crisis that deeply affected governmental agencies' ability to develop public policies, including the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Between 2003 and 2013 the Ministry's share in the federal budget shrank from 0,5% to 0,28%[3], which obviously limited its capacity of

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implementing an ambitious and universalist foreign policy. This was particularly true regarding South-South Cooperation (SSC), one of the most striking innovations of the previous administration that sought to replicate and export to other countries in the Global South successful domestic policies in fields such as public health, agriculture, food security, biofuels, environment, sports, education, public security, etc. through technical cooperation and humanitarian aid. At its peak, in 2010, Brazil supported 253 development projects in 37 countries in Africa, South America, Central America and the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East. In 2014, the figure had dropped to 161 projects[4].

Nevertheless, and beyond the shortage of budgetary resources, one should notice that, under Rousseff, Brazil's SSC policy has continued to be plagued by contradictions and limits that were already present during Lula's term. First, despite wrapped in a rhetoric of solidarity, horizontality, promotion of local capacities and non-interference, SSC was implemented side by side to a process of internationalization of Brazilian private and state companies seeking external markets for their goods and services, with backing and loans coming from governmental agencies such as BNDES (Brazil's Development Bank). The activity of many of these companies in African and Latin American countries has led to conflicts and resistance by local and national communities regarding human rights violations, environmental destruction, systemic corruption and relationship ethical standards between private and public interests – raising questions about SSC's declared goal of strengthening (as opposed to undermining) local capacities to deal with such problems.

Secondly, as observed by Lima, a favorable international scenario in a context of diffusion of power towards emergent countries, combined with the adoption of a proactive and autonomous diplomacy, stimulated an "optimism" and "voluntarism" in Brazilian political and governmental agents that has not been translated into institutional reforms or the creation of mechanisms to guarantee transparency and accountability in foreign policy formulation and implementation. As a result, SSC continues affected by inter-bureaucratic competition, legislative obstacles and a low level of interaction with civil society[5].

A New Foreign Policy?

In the aforementioned inauguration speech, Serra listed the directions of what he called "the new Brazilian Foreign Policy", which could be summarized as below:

- Foreign Policy should go back to represent the legitimate "national interests" and not an ideology or party line;
- Aggressive promotion of trade and the opening of markets for Brazilian exports, including through bilateral agreements;
- A strategic partnership with Argentina and efforts to revitalize and "correct" Mercosur, emphasizing its initial goal of trade liberalization;
- A renewed relationship with traditional partners such as the US and Europe;
- A focus on "new partners" in Asia, particularly China and India;
- "Modern Africa" does not ask for "compassion" but for commercial, investment, and technology partnerships, which should be the correct "South-South strategy".

One of the most controversial aspects of this "new foreign policy" was its declared goal of promoting a "non-partisan" diplomacy, a not so veiled criticism of the PT's (Workers' Party)[6] administrations, but also a delicate point considering that Serra himself was an incumbent Senator with political ambitions. Indeed, as Temer's foreign minister he dedicated particular attention to issues with high domestic visibility that had been "hot topics" during the 2014 presidential elections – hence confirming the initial assumptions that he would use his tenure at the Ministry to advance his own agenda as a prospective presidential candidate. The most prominent of these issues was the adoption of a harsher tone and action towards the continuous political and humanitarian crisis experienced by Venezuela, which led to the country's suspension as a member of Mercosur in August of 2017.

Other aspects turned out to be frustrating bets in the context of shifting regional and international trends. The attempt to rebuild a "special relationship" with the US was undermined by the unexpected – at least for Serra, who stated

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during an interview that a possible Donald Trump presidency would be “a nightmare” – results of the American presidential elections. Not surprisingly, the new American administration has shown a remarkable disinterest for Brazil: in contrast to other South American presidents, Trump has not yet held any official bilateral meeting with Michel Temer. Vice-president Mike Pence's and former secretary of State Rex Tillerson's recent visits to a few Central and South American countries did not include Brazil.

Finally, in March 2017, Serra announced that he was leaving the Ministry, officially due to health problems – though raising speculations that the fact he had also been hit by the ongoing corruption accusations already dragging down the Temer administration might have weighed in. He was succeeded by Aloysio Nunes Ferreira, another Senator with the same political and party affiliations, who made clear he would continue Serra's work. In fact, since then Brazil's “new foreign policy” seems to have been plugged in a sort of “automatic pilot”, keeping a very low-key, low profile approach.

Brazil has a tradition of being an extremely politically isolated country, and foreign policy is usually not considered a relevant item in the domestic agenda. Yet, in a world deeply connected by international and transnational political, economic, demographic, informational, and cultural flows which affect the Brazilian state and society, maybe it is time to realize we are not “laying down in splendid isolation” – as the lyrics of our national anthem suggest – but are an active part of this very same world. Let's hope the upcoming Congress and presidential elections, in October 2018, can generate a democratic debate about what should be the guiding principles and priorities of our international insertion, thus also producing the foundations of a truly “new foreign policy” legitimated by the popular vote.

Notes

[1] Serra took charge as an interim minister in May 2016, and was later confirmed when the Brazilian Senate finished Rousseff's trial and declared her impeached.

[2] SARAIVA, M. G.; VELASCO JUNIOR, P. A. M. A política externa brasileira e o ‘fim de ciclo’ na América do Sul: para onde vamos? *Pensamiento Proprio (CRIES Buenos Aires)*. Vol. 21, pp. 295-324, 2016.

[3] MARCONDES, D.; MAWDSLEY, E. South-South in retreat? The transitions from Lula to Rousseff to Temer and Brazilian development cooperation. *International Affairs*. Vol. 93, n.3, pp. 681-699, 2017.

[4] MARCONDES and MAWDSLEY, Op. Cit. See also PICKUP, M. Foreign policy of the New Left: explaining Brazil's southern partnerships. *Contexto Internacional*. Rio de Janeiro, January/April 2016.

[5] LIMA, M. R. S. “Autonomia na Dependência”: a Agência da Política Externa. *Boletim OPISA*, n.1, jan/mar de 2015. See also MARCONDES and MAWDSLEY, Op. Cit.

[6] PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) was founded in 1980 as a socialist party with a strong political and electoral basis in the new unionism that had emerged in Brazil during the 1970s. Lula was a founding member and since then has been its paramount leader. Dilma Rousseff joined the party in 2001.

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