

Between Political Crisis and COVID-19: Bolsonaro's Foreign Policy

Written by Miriam Gomes Saraiva and Alexandra de Mello e Silva

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MIRIAM GOMES SARAIVA AND ALEXANDRA DE MELLO E SILVA, JUN 2 2020

Jair Bolsonaro's foreign policy program as a presidential candidate proclaimed a shift in Brazil's international position. According to him, the foreign policy strategies of the previous administrations had all failed, thus the need for radical change. Indeed, foreign policy issues played a relevant role during the electoral campaign as the candidate tried to fulfil the demands coming from various support groups. In this sense, his election combined changes in the political trends both at the international and domestic levels. Bolsonaro's governmental coalition (if it may be called that) assembles very different sectors with very different visions, all of them lobbying for influence in specific foreign policy areas and themes: the "ideological" group represented by the Foreign Affairs minister Ernesto Araújo; the conservative Pentecostalism movement; the ultraliberal economists supported by the "market forces"; the supposedly "technical" military; the agribusiness complex with a strong interest in commodity exports; and on top of all these, a predominant leader ruling over very autonomous groups (Hagan, 1994). Speaking in broad terms, it is a coalition based on the association between economic liberalization, hate speech, and a general reactionary mindset.

After being sworn in, the President managed to demobilize the Foreign Affairs Ministry professional bureaucracy by choosing as his minister Ernesto Araújo, a young and inexperienced diplomat strongly attached to one of Bolsonaro's sons and their mentor, the extreme-right "digital influencer" Olavo de Carvalho. The curriculum of Instituto Rio Branco (Brazil's college in charge of providing professional and academic training to aspiring diplomats), as well as the meritocracy rules usually applied to professional promotion within the diplomatic corps, were changed. The number of actors involved in foreign policy making grew exponentially, segregating the process into different interest areas. More than that, the basic policy guidelines announced by the new minister revealed his controversial intellectual preferences, a mixture between a very historicist version of nationalism, religious zeal and his association (by way of Olavo de Carvalho) with transnational extreme-right ideologies.

The crusade against "global cultural marxism" sought to connect votes coming from sectors rejecting an agenda traditionally associated with leftist movements (social justice, feminism, environmentalism, even developmentalism), along with anti-PT, anti-corruption, and vaguely "anti-establishment" movements, to a conservative, religious, and authoritarian ideology. A key feature in this process was the proficient use of social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to communicate and amplify Bolsonaro's message, a method that continued even after the candidate had become president in an apparent disregard for his now institutional role. Nevertheless, and despite the continuous astonishment from mainstream media, academic circles, political opposition, and even his own supporters, this method is part of the game, what Marcos Nobre calls "the strategy of chaos".

Social media networks are being employed to mobilize the "fidelity" and cohesiveness of the otherwise heterogeneous support groups by way of constantly producing "enemies" that must be denounced and fought. Ernesto Araújo himself also makes use of these tools to advance his personal agenda disguised as foreign policy orientations. Another example is how the Alexandre de Gusmão Foundation (FUNAG), an institution belonging to Itamaraty that has traditionally served as a liaison between the Ministry and the Academy, is providing yet another instrument for the very same agenda. Known in the past for its solid intellectual reputation, nowadays the Foundation's activities have become a nest for the promotion of fake news and "fringe" theories disseminated by supposedly "academic" luminaries whose only credentials stem from their digital activism and popularity among

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extreme-right circles.

It's hard for us to call this foreign policy as a *policy*. Even so, its implementation revealed a multiplicity of problems. The close rapprochement to Donald Trump's administration was translated in visits, speeches, and a few agreements but ripped no concrete benefits either in the political or economic fields (as, for example, Brazil's expected admission to the OEDC). The country distanced itself from its neighbors and Latin America in general, and the region is no more a priority. Attention shifted to new allies, the dismantlement of UNASUR (and a new focus on its alleged substitute, PROSUR), and to battling Nicolas Maduro's government. The bilateral relationship with Argentina – a key historical actor in Brazilian Foreign Policy and a strategic partner in the last decades – also experienced a cooling down.

Bolsonaro's comments about domestic politics, as well as his defense of the military dictatorships that left a trail of massive human rights violations in the neighboring countries, only contributed to diplomatic and political embarrassments. The consequence is that neither Brazil wants to have any leading role in the region, nor its neighbors want its leadership. This became more evident in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in South America, where the unwillingness or incapacity of the Bolsonaro administration to provide minimum coordination of sanitary and border measures to contain the virus is provoking criticism even from former conservative allies such as Colombia and Paraguay. Actually, we have just turned into Covid-19 exporters. Brazil is also trying to reduce MERCOSUR tariffs, which prompted Alberto Fernández, the recently elected Argentinian president, to announce that his country will no longer join in free trade agreements negotiations currently conducted by the block. On top of this, Amazon deforestation has always been an obstacle to the MERCOSUR-EU free trade agreement that still depends on a number of technical and political negotiations.

The country has also adopted an anti-multilateralism stance in international organizations, oscillating between conservative votes completely incongruent with the recent record of Brazilian diplomacy (as in the case of the UN Human Rights Council) or an almost blockade of negotiations (as in regards to the climate change regime), and thus generating conflicts with European governments. This behavior speaks against the tradition of a combative performance in multilateral fora based on the efficiency and the normative persuasion of the Brazilian diplomatic corps. A good example was Brazil's refusal to co-sponsor the UN General Assembly resolution establishing global access to medicine, vaccines, and medical equipment for the treatment of the coronavirus pandemic, which represented a reversal of historical multilateral coalitions but also the abandonment of an active "Global Health Diplomacy" implemented both at the regional and international levels.

The pandemics found the country in a scenery of political chaos. Faced with the fast-spreading of the disease, the president insisted on adopting positions contrary to the consensual vision in scientific circles; contrary to the World Health Organization recommendations; contrary to measures implemented by other national and subnational actors such as Congress and state and city governments; and even contrarian to sectors of his own administration. The lack of a cohesive approach brought different autonomous groups to the forefront, but the president lost the capacity to impose his leadership over them. Each segment seeks its own niche in the country's foreign relations and this process often generates internal conflicts. Hence, the current tug of war between Bolsonaro's so-called "hate cabinet" (the president's personal entourage led mainly by members of his family) and the Ministry of Agriculture, where the latter vies to neutralize the negative impact of the political accusations against China, Brazil's number one trading partner and the main market for our commodities.

The paralysis in the external front in face of the sanitary crisis prompted common criticism even between groups who in the past used to compete in terms of foreign policy strategies. Former Foreign Affairs ministers from different administrations going as back as Fernando Collor's government (1990-1992) co-signed a manifest expressing their consternation with the disregard for Brazilian diplomatic traditions as inscribed in the country's Constitution. There is also criticism among senior diplomats, academic scholars and, political representatives. Though coming from different and sometimes divergent political points of view, these critics share the preoccupation with Brazil's international isolation and the deterioration of the country's external image constructed around the guideline principles of its foreign policy and the professionalism of its diplomatic corps.

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The inefficiency of the Presidency has also contributed to decentralization in foreign policy implementation, which Dawisson Belém Lopes (2020) calls the “post-diplomacy”. New actors and segments of Brazilian society are not only influencing but actually exercising external policies. The disconnection between the federal Executive and other governmental levels in the context of the pandemic is stimulating subnational diplomacy implemented directly by state and city administrations.

This behavior has provoked negative consequences for Brazil's present and future international position, the most immediate being the country's current isolation. Ernesto Araújo's foreign policy is continuously destroying bridges built in the past between Brazil and various diplomatic partners. Jair Bolsonaro's choice of strategic partnerships to be cultivated is focused on governments instead of States. There is a clear preference for countries now governed by extreme-right forces. Nonetheless, most of these countries still abide by democratic norms, such as regular elections, and ruling political coalitions may change. Foreign partnerships are forged in the long run, and governments are transitory. This may lead to a loss of reliance in Brazilian diplomacy on the part of external actors.

Another negative consequence is the undermining of the Brazilian aspiration to play a protagonist role in international politics. Our diplomatic discourse has historically presented Brazil as an intermediary between the North and the South, a self-proclaimed “bridge-country” capable of articulating diplomatic and political consensus. By employing various strategies of soft power, the country has been able to act as an “agenda-setter” or even a “norm shaper” concerning different issues and areas of the international agenda. Even though this commitment was already deteriorating during Dilma Rousseff and Michel Temer administrations, it was more like a temporary retraction. Under Bolsonaro, there is an evident refusal to play that role. The “negationist” and minority votes in UN institutions are shaking the past confidence in Brazil. The country's behavior during COP-25, almost blocking a final agreement, will not be easily forgotten.

Whilst the pandemic spreads quickly across Brazilian big and small cities and raises our position in the tragic ranking of countries with most confirmed cases in the world (second only to the US), Bolsonaro's government has been unable to fulfill the need for domestic and external resources to fight the disease. In spite of the obstacles currently experienced by all countries, Brazil can't count on the goodwill of any partner. China won't make any special concessions to the transference (or even selling) of medical equipment. The alleged “special ally”, the US, guided by the fierce defense of its national interests, has actually blocked the shipment of respiratory ventilators bought by the Brazilian government from China. The celebrated “alliance” is a one-way relationship that apparently only works when Brazil puts aside its own interests and necessities. In the midst of the worst sanitary emergency in the last 100 years, the country finds itself without direction, allies, or interlocutors.

Any minister who happens to succeed Ernesto Araújo will have a herculean task of reconstructing our relations with diplomatic partners and multilateral organizations. However, we are just finishing the first half of Bolsonaro's mandate, and the international juncture created by the pandemics and the global crisis, combined with the appalling situation experienced at the domestic level, has opened a new and uncertain future. We wonder if the worst – or best – is yet to come.

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