

Interview – Rubens Ricupero

Written by E-International Relations

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Currently Director of the Armando Álvares Penteado Foundation (FAAP), in São Paulo, Brazil, Rubens Ricupero was, between 1995 and 2004, the Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva. Before that, he had been Minister of Finance of Brazil (1994), supervising the preparation and launching of the new currency, the real. In 1993-94, Ricupero was Brazil's Minister of the Environment and Amazonian Affairs. From 1987 to 1991, he was Brazil's Representative to the UN in Geneva and to the GATT where he occupied the posts of Chairman of the GATT Council of Representatives (1990), Chairman of the GATT Contracting Parties (1991), and Coordinator and Spokesperson for the Informal Group of Developing Countries. He was also Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, at Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Relations, Ambassador to the United States of America (1991-1993) and Ambassador to Italy (1995). Rubens Ricupero taught International Relations Theory at the University of Brasilia and History of Brazilian Diplomatic Relations at the Rio Branco Institute, the Brazilian Diplomatic Academy. He has published several books and articles on the history of Brazilian diplomacy, international trade, development issues and international relations. His most recent book is *The Diplomacy in the construction of Brazil 1750-2016* (in Portuguese), a comprehensive history of Brazil's international relations.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The most important subject for research/debate in the international relations field is undoubtedly China's rise and its current and potential impact in the world. No other international development presents a comparable potential for shaping the future international system. It is the first time in our historic experience that a non-Western country with a culture totally different from the Western tradition is about to become the largest economy, with the possibility of becoming the most powerful nation in advanced technology and in the strategic-military field as well. What will an international system where China might be the predominant player look like? What will the values or changes that might arise from Beijing's preeminence be? Those are the vital issues that will dominate research/debate in international relations for a long time to come.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I was born in March 1937, just two and a half years before the outbreak of World War II. During my lifetime, I witnessed the emergence of the post-war world, the creation of the United Nations Organization, the Cold War, decolonization in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, the regional wars in Asia, Africa, the rise of communist China, the birth of the European Union and its expansion, the creation and growth of Israel, the growing conflict in the Middle East, the unexpected end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the unipolar moment of the USA, the threat of radical Islamic terrorism, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Brexit, Trump's election, finally the current deterioration in the Chinese-USA relationship, just to single out some of the momentous events in that period.

Of all those developments, my direct experience of work at the United Nations, as Secretary General of UNCTAD for nine years, and my involvement with the environmental cause have been the two personal experiences that have had the deepest and most lasting impression in my life and thought. If I had to define my position regarding the challenges of our time, I would reply that I firmly and deeply believe that the United Nations is our best hope of preserving peace

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and of promoting progress along the four major axis of improvement in mankind's moral conscience: human rights, the environment and sustainability, equality between women and men and the promotion of "all men and of man as a whole everywhere".

Your book analyses the construction of Brazilian diplomacy between 1750 and 2016. What were the most significant shifts and influences on the conduct of Brazilian diplomacy? How have these shaped Brazilian diplomacy today?

Since Independence, the most decisive events that shaped Brazilian foreign policy were the involvement in the international conflicts in the Plata region, leading to the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), the more than nine years of Baron of Rio Branco as Minister of External Relations of the First Republic (1902-1912), Brazil's participation in WW II (1942-1945), the brief years of the so-called Independent Foreign Policy (1961-1964), and the search for a more assertive role in international affairs of the New Republic (1985-2018). Whereas the Plata conflicts were a legacy of Portuguese-Spanish antagonism in colonial times, the other moments of change represented real advances in the gradual evolution of Brazilian foreign policy as a constructive force at the service of a more peaceful and balanced international system.

During the Cold War, Brazil pursued an independent foreign policy. What impact did this have on Brazilian diplomacy?

Actually, from 1948 to 1961, Brazil was generally closely aligned with the USA and the West in Cold War issues: Brazil broke off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, supported the American side in multilateral and inter-American fora, refused to recognize the People's Republic of China, and did not support liberation movements in Asia and Africa. It was only with President Jânio Quadros and his Independent Foreign Policy (1961) that Brazilian foreign policy dissociated itself from viewing international events through the ideological prism of the Cold War. That independent line was violently interrupted by the military coup (1964) but, after a few years, its spirit reappeared in the pragmatic diplomacy of President Geisel and his Foreign Minister, Azeredo da Silveira. Since then, it became the basic foundation of the different external policies pursued by all governments after re-democratization until it was abandoned by the Bolsonaro Administration.

The essence of Brazil's independent orientation in international matters consisted of refusing to analyze the outside world in ideological terms. Its corollary is that decisions in this field should be exclusively made on the basis of Brazil's values and national interests, rejecting pressures to take sides in conflicts that have nothing to do with Brazilian goals. It could be summed up as the constant search for autonomy in external matters through integration and active participation in multilateral and bilateral initiatives.

What is your assessment of the international and domestic environmental agenda today? How does it differ from your time in the Brazilian Ministry of Environment in the 1990s?

I was Brazil's first Minister of the Environment and the Amazon (1993/1994). Consequently, I had first to deal with the creation and approval in Congress of the administrative structure of the new Ministry on the basis of the former Secretaria Nacional de Meio Ambiente (SEMA) and IBAMA. Because of the central importance of the Amazon region, we set up a National Council for the Amazon, chaired by the President, with the goal of coordinating the work of numerous federal agencies active in the area and to define and adopt a long-term strategy for sustainable development in the Amazon. Both for Brazil and the world, what has changed over the last 26 years was not so much the issues contained in the environmental agenda but the degree of awareness of those issues by the government and civil society, including the business sector and the large corporations. Until recently, there had been steady though insufficient progress in the level of commitment to decisively cope with the existential threat of global warming. Unfortunately, Trump's election in the USA and of Bolsonaro in Brazil marked a serious deterioration in facing environmental challenges in the two countries.

Much of your diplomatic work focused on economic development. What are the key economic challenges developing countries are likely to face over the next decade?

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The most important lesson I learned through many years of development work is that development is above all not only or mainly about economic matters. In reality, in a deep sense, development is to learn how to manage the increasing complexity of modern societies in all fields. To be developed is not merely to be richer but to know how to find solutions for the myriad of human problems in contemporary society. In other terms, development has to do with all aspects of social life. A fully developed country is better at managing everything: schools, universities, museums, prisons, national parks, hospitals, research laboratories, farms, industries, banks, etc. It depends overall on human resources, education, culture, science, technology, the constant improvement in human knowledge.

You were Minister of Finance during the creation of the Real Plan in 1994 in Brazil, which established the new currency. What is your assessment of the currency and the Brazilian economy now?

The Real Plan allowed Brazil to finally come to terms with several decades of chronic high inflation that was threatening to get out of control and become hyperinflation. It gave the country a sound currency that has been able to successfully withstand the test of time, of changes in policies and even the deterioration of other fundamental elements in the economy. In spite of episodes of fiscal irresponsibility, inflation has remained relatively under control. To a large extent this is due to the fact that the Brazilian people has learned through the success of the Real that there can be no tolerance with inflation. At the time I was Finance Minister, our overwhelming priority was to deal with the two “cursed legacies” of the military regime: chronic high inflation and the foreign debt crisis. Both were overcome successfully. It is a pity that later, in following administrations, the economic transformation brought about by the Real Plan did not succeed in a vital aspect: to carry through a similar transformation in the field of public accounts and expenditure, changing in a lasting way the propensity of governments of every level to behave irresponsibly in managing the budget and controlling expenses. The fiscal deterioration caused by growing budgetary deficits and the increase in public debt is now threatening to wipe out many of the conquests of monetary stabilization. If not reverted, fiscal deterioration may bring about an extremely dangerous economic and social crisis.

In August 2019, the Bolsonaro government received international pressure and criticism on the issue of deforestation in the Amazon. Do you think this criticism was justified?

Not only in August 2019 but almost continuously since the beginning of the Bolsonaro government, there has been internally and externally almost uninterrupted condemnation of official omission and encouragement regarding deforestation and fires in the Amazon, the Pantanal and other biomes. The criticism first originated inside Brazil through the monitoring and criticism coming from the authoritative informal group of former Brazilian Ministers of the Environment and spread to other sectors of civil society, including large financial and economic corporations. The current government’s policies represent a huge, perhaps irreversible step backwards in environmental policies. Public institutions and policies hardly conquered through more than three decades of successive administrations, including the military regime, are now being systematically dismantled. The result has been an explosion in fires and destruction in the Amazon and the Pantanal that has reached levels not seen since 2004. The annual rate of deforestation had fallen from more than 27,000 square kilometers in 2004 to 4,000 to 6,000 between 2012 and 2016. Under the current administration deforestation in the Amazon is again hovering around 10,000 square kilometers a year and continues to rise. Criticism, therefore, both in Brazil and abroad will increase as long as we do not see concrete results in reducing the rate of destruction.

One of the priorities of the Bolsonaro government is to strengthen ties with the United States, while pursuing a confrontational approach to relations with China. Do you believe this approach is in the national interest?

Certainly not. Brazil’s national interest consists in maintaining the best possible relations both with the USA and China. Our country is located far from the geographical hot spots of Chinese-American geopolitical rivalry in East Asia and the Middle East. We have no international security or defense problems in the sense of needing the protection of a superpower against threats of other powers, as is the case of South Korea and Japan. Consequently, there is no reason for Brazil to take sides, to choose one of the superpowers against the other. On the contrary, our national interest is to act together with countries in a similar situation to defuse international tensions, to play a constructive role aimed at avoiding an unnecessary and divisive new Cold War. In addition to these political reasons,

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it would make no sense for Brazil, from the perspective of trade and investment, to antagonize its main trading partner and the potential source of investment for the much-needed infrastructure sector. Taking as example the first six months of 2020, for each 1 US\$ that Brazil exported to the USA, it exported 3,4 US\$ to China. Whereas our country recorded a US\$ 3,1 billion deficit in trade with the USA, it accumulated a US\$ 17,65 billion trade surplus with China.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

More and more in the future our possibility of self-fulfillment, of leading a productive and happy life, of overcoming current threats, even of survival itself will depend on understanding and managing the challenges of global governance. Problems like global warming, growing inequality inside and among nations, of dwindling jobs replaced by robots, of nuclear rivalry between powers can only be solved through the strengthening of an international rules-based system and a consensual decision-making process. The worst danger we face is the continuation of the current gradual erosion of international norms and institutions through unilateral violations of international law and the United Nations Charter by nationalist and self-centered autocrats. The duty of young scholars in the field of International Relations is to contribute to the never-ending construction of a more democratic and effective multilateral system for tackling the growing complex challenges brought about by the first real global civilization in mankind's history.