

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF DOMESTIC POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: THE EXAMPLE OF QUESTIONING AUTONOMY AND SOVEREIGNTY AS DEFENSIVE CONCEPTS IN BRAZILIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

A Importância do engajamento político doméstico: o exemplo do questionamento autonomia e soberania como conceitos defensivos na política externa brasileira

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## **Introduction**

The July 2014 issue of the Brazilian journal *Política Externa* carried as its cover story interviews with the leading presidential candidates in the October vote. As the editors explain, a set of questions were sent to the then three main candidates, Dilma Rousseff of the PT, Aécio Neves of the PSDB and Eduardo Campos of the PSB. The most revealing aspect of the exercise was not the answers to the questions, but the failure again of a leading candidate to respond to the electoral engagement of Brazil's highest profile foreign policy journal. Unfortunately, far from breaking new ground, Dilma's seeming disinterest in 2014 simply mirrored the 2010 PSDB candidate Jose Serra's non-participation.

Although disappointing for the international relations specialist, the decision by Dilma in 2014 and Serra in 2010 to not engage with the journal is hardly surprising if we pause to consider the domestic political weight foreign policy carries in Brazil. The subject rarely appears as a matter for serious debate in the mainstream news cycle and has made only passing appearances in previous electoral contests, most visibly in 2006 when Lula had to address his reaction to Bolivia's nationalization of Petrobras gas

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assets. Little help comes from the media, with foreign policy being noticeable for its absence in the questions posed during the first televised presidential debate in 2014. Disinterest is similarly evident when it comes time for a newly elected president to form their cabinet. While members of the president's congressional coalition hotly contest portfolios such as finance, agriculture or planning, the foreign ministry is all-but ignored and left as a technocratic post for a seasoned diplomat. Matters are scarcely better in Congress where at least the public portion of Committee hearings with Itamaraty officials is generally formulaic and dominated by ritual statements of respect and admiration for the foreign ministry.

The subtext to this reflexive political indifference to foreign affairs is that things international are not viewed as terribly important policy areas by many Brazilians and thus offer minimal returns and opportunities for career politicians, an attitude often justified through reference to the professionalism and confidence in the diplomats at Itamaraty. At its core the problem is that connections between the external and domestic are rarely direct and the lasting and meaningful returns (and costs) of foreign policy initiatives are seldom immediate. The challenge this creates for the victor in the October ballot is to make foreign policy – particularly high-level conceptual understandings – politically relevant to a wider group of actors and further democratize this often aristocratically-minded policy space (Lopes, 2013). This is not to suggest foreign affairs should be thrown into the cauldron of partisan politics, but rather to point out that events outside Brazil do increasingly matter for the daily lives of Brazilians and that the substance, formulation and implementation of foreign policy have real consequences even if they are often distanced by at least one degree of separation from daily reality in the country.

A key theme that will run through this short article is the tendency for democratic Brazil's foreign policy to follow a path dictated by its own momentum and traditions, usually experiencing major rethinks and revisions only at the direct and enforced instigation of the president. Rather than looking at specific issues, this paper will instead focus on one high-level conceptual theme – sovereignty and autonomy in Brazilian foreign policy – to point out why there is a need for greater political and

societal discussion of core concepts and principals in foreign policy in addition to the more transactional and tactical elements of international affairs. The assumption in the article, and this is certainly contestable, is that the complexity of the global economy and society not only makes widespread political neglect of foreign policy a risky tradition to continue, but also reduces the range and subtlety of options that might be envisioned and pursued to best take advantage of new and existing challenges and opportunities. This assumption is also not held to be unique to Brazil, but applies to any country engaged (willingly or unwillingly) in the international system. It is, however, more pressing for Brazil if the trajectory of expanded and enhanced international interaction built during the Cardoso and Lula presidencies is to continue.

### **South America, Sovereignty and Autonomy**

One possible interpretation of the Brazilian foreign policy priorities of defending the norm of sovereignty and the preservation of national autonomy is that they are grounded in defensive fear. In the early Twentieth Century the patron of Brazilian foreign policy, the Baron of Rio Branco Jose Maria de Silva Paranhos, Junior, built a foreign policy around approximation with the United States in order to deploy the Monroe Doctrine as a defensive shield to ward off potentially predatory European powers thinking of annexing parts of Brazil. In the early 1990s a similar sort of concern was at play, only this time it focused on deflecting US interventionist attention away from Brazil. The comprehensive foreign policy review ordered by Fernando Henrique Cardoso when he was foreign minister makes clear mention of recent US interventions in Panama, Haiti and Peru before turning to highlight the extent to which issues such as human rights, narcotrafficking and the environment were increasingly being seen in Washington as appropriate grounds for external intervention (IPRI, 1993: 52-53). Serious questions were consequently raised about how these external pressures would limit Brazil's domestic policy autonomy and ability to influence continental agendas. For Vigevani and Cepaluni (2009) the chosen policy response can be summarized as a foreign policy of 'autonomy through participation', meaning that active engagement with regional and international instruments was selected as the best way to avoid

precedents that could be used at a later date to restrict the Brazilian government's domestic and foreign policy options.

For much of the 1990s there was little contradiction between the pursuit of autonomy through participation and Brazil's capabilities to lead in a traditional sense. Although Cardoso's presidency did see considerable efforts to construct a South American space and get neighboring countries to buy into his government's vision of a consensual hegemony (Borges, 2008), much of this was done on the 'cheap' and relied heavily on ideas and dialogue, not the sort of concrete resources needed to anchor regionalist projects such as the European Union (Mattli, 1999). In many respects Lula doubled down on Cardoso's South American project and actively sought to expand Brazilian leadership in the region and throughout the global South. Pan-continental summitry took off and infrastructure integration transmogrified first into the Community of South American Nations (CASA) and then the Union of South American Nations (Unasul). More interesting for neighboring countries contemplating Brazilian regional leadership was that domestic economic stability in Brazil towards the end of Lula's first term suggested a deepening of the consensual hegemonic project through expanded economic assistance and a more active continental management position. By the time Lula second term was drawing near clear signals welcoming active Brazilian leadership were starting to emerge, with Peruvian president Alan García noting: "We have no apprehension or fear of positive, constructive hegemony from Brazil, which has an essential role as a promoter of the South American Union" (Ferreiros, 2006).

Although it is often officially disavowed, Brazil has taken a somewhat muscular leadership role in South America, even if it almost always routes these activities through the weak multilateral groupings it has brought into existence or keeps in its back pocket. The South American Defense Council was used to defuse a potential Ecuador/Venezuela-Colombia war after a FARC rebel base in Ecuadorean territory was attacked by the Colombian military in 2008. Attempts by the US to create a pan-American democratic oversight mechanism at the 2005 Organization of American States General Assembly were derailed by a proposal channeled through the nearly defunct Latin American trade grouping ALADI. Impatient Paraguayan political

manipulators who impeached President Lugo with needless speed and indecorum in 2012 were soundly disciplined through their country's political suspension from Mercosul and Unasul. The point of this rapid survey is two-fold. First, Brazilian foreign policy has a definite agenda and forcefully advances it. Second, Brazil goes to great pains to collectivize its position and thus deflect some of the responsibility for it.

It is in the ambiguous acknowledgement of a desire for a leadership role and the collectivization of leadership actions that problems arise for the small community of Brazilian foreign policy makers and implementers. Once the politeness of diplomatic protocol is scraped away, it quickly becomes evident that there is regional disappointment with how Brazil conducts itself in the region – the abstracted muscular leadership noted above – as well as the failure to actually lead the region forward and provide the level of positive leadership goods sought by neighboring countries. Indeed, language often directed at the USA has started to enter into the lexicon of works analyzing and commenting on Brazil's relations with South America, the most direct being suggestions of imperialism and policy suggestions of balancing against Brazil (Flynn, 2007; Charleaux, 2008; Goodman, 2009; Mesa, 2011; Flemes and Wojczewski, 2011; Deo, 2012; Flemes and Whener, 2013; Visentini, 2014: 42).

In short, the problem for the regional ambitions set for Brazil as far back as the Collor presidency is that the expanded leadership some countries were signaling as acceptable around 2006 was not forthcoming. Drawing on this disjuncture Malamud (2011) aptly labeled Brazil “a leader without followers.” While there was some quiet transfer of financial and technical assistance to the region through mechanisms like BNDES export financing, South-South technical cooperation and the Mercosul Structural Convergence Fund, these activities did not reach a level that could be equated with an economic anchoring of a region or sub-region. Matters were further eroded by a two-fold political problem grounded in the applied understanding of defending autonomy that eroded the willingness to follow Brazil's lead. First, was the sense in some sectors of an ideological capriciousness in the contrasting approaches towards political tensions in Cuba and Venezuela and the response to Lugo's deposal in Paraguay. More serious was the second, namely an unwillingness to invest political and

economic capital in the creation of substantive regional governance institutions, which might also at some future date be used to restrain Brazil or limit Brazilian autonomy. Although Brazil has finally succeeded at expanding Mercosul with the entry of Venezuela and the imminent accession of Bolivia and Ecuador, in many important respects the bloc as well as Unasul and CELAC remain paper tigers. Despite nearly two decades of formal operation, the institutions at the heart of Mercosul remain relatively powerless and disputes frequently go straight to the desk of the member-country presidents rather than being addressed in empowered forums such as the bloc's dispute resolution mechanism or parliament (Malamud and Dri, 2013). Emerging efforts to manage transnational criminal networks – perhaps the biggest regional concern – appear to be headed in a bilateral hub-and-spoke direction revolving around Brazil, not a potentially more efficient multilateral venture (Muggah and Diniz, 2013).

### **Why rethink Autonomy?**

The question that arises from this brief survey is the extent to which Brazil's traditional approach to autonomy and sovereignty contradicts or retards the country's ambitions for regional and global positioning and leadership. Make no mistake, South America is tremendously important for Brazil not only in a traditional security sense and as a platform for global political credibility, but also as a critical export market for employment generating manufacturing industries and growing levels of out-bound Brazilian foreign direct investment. Worryingly, Brazil appears to be losing its South American market share (Jenkins, 2014).

With leadership comes responsibility, even if this responsibility is unstated. The lesson from recent history appears to be that concrete actions to take on leadership in the region and gain its acceptance would require Brazil to assume substantial proportions of the costs of providing various collective goods. Even if not resulting in direct economic costs, this would create political commitments and start to impose norms and expectations of behavior that would restrain Brazil's free space for action. In simple realist terms this means autonomy would be restrained and sovereignty comprised.



Active leadership, then, appears to raise questions about autonomy for Brazil, whether it be in terms of how Brazil might intervene/influence other countries or delegate powers to institutions. This in turn directly creates constraints stemming from required and expected action. Absent clear political instruction to pursue such a sovereignty-impinging policy track, Itamaraty has done precisely what a good bureaucracy should do in a democracy: it has stayed within its existing political remit for policy innovation and action. The very fact that there is a vibrant scholarly and policy discussion about disappointments and limitations in Brazilian leadership strongly suggests that Itamaraty has been tremendously successful at fulfilling its brief. Nevertheless, while the regional ambience has remained remarkably civil and the other continental presidents will without fail take the Brazilian president's phone calls, the negative reaction to a stuttering continental leadership project has been unequivocal. Differences in vision and regional expectations contributed to Chile, Peru and Colombia joining with Mexico to form the Pacific Alliance, which Paraguay and Uruguay would both like to join to address their long-standing goals of reducing dependence on Brazil. Although by some interpretations Mercosul is going from success to success as a regional market now encompassing nearly 80% of South America's GDP (for example, see Pereira, 2014) with ambitions for more if Brazil's idea of a Pacific Alliance-Mercosul trade deal comes to pass, some of Mercosul's historically most forceful Brazilian advocates are raising pointed questions and arguing the bloc is riven by bilateral disputes and a lack of generalized confidence in its institutional procedures (for example, see Barbosa, 2014; Gonçalves, 2013).

The tight focus on a defensive approach to autonomy and sovereignty is having wider implications, too. In the international arena other long-standing, globally engaged actors are sometimes left wondering why such a domestically strong proponent of human rights and democracy would resist international efforts to curb the sorts of abuses recently seen in Syria or along the border between Russia and the Ukraine. For those who take the time to look into the theoretical works underpinning Itamaraty decision-making the question becomes even more perplexing when set in the context of writings such as those by Celso Lafer (2001) and Gelson Fonseca (2004) dealing with

identity and foreign policy formation, a theme that was also set in the bedrock of post-Cold War foreign policy thinking in the 1993 foreign policy review (IPRI, 1993: 59-61). While it is still pushing the point to characterize Brazil as a country clinically following what John Odell (2000) would characterize as a ‘distributive’ negotiating strategy by quietly refusing to make concessions that threaten the autonomy principle and might weaken the sovereignty norm, some established international actors and members of the Northern media are getting confused with the Brazilian approach and starting to informally use this language (on the trade file, for example, see Feinberg, 1997; Barbosa, 2011: chapter 1; Amorim, 2011: chapter 19).

The suggestion here is not that Brazil should abandon protection of its autonomy and vouchsafing of the international norm of sovereignty as core foreign policy concepts. All states do this to one degree or another depending on their power resources and capabilities. Nor is the suggestion that Brazil should wantonly break its commitments or violate international law whenever it suits its purposes as some other countries appear to do. Rather, the proposition is that maintaining the current understanding of autonomy and sovereignty guiding Brazilian foreign policy does carry costs, which in turn are creating and perpetuating some of the recurring bilateral and regional policy challenges that preoccupy policy makers, scholars, business, civil society, and commentators. The applied policy question to ask is if the costs generated by the existing approach to autonomy and sovereignty remain acceptable.

### **Conclusion: Enter the Politicians**

The only recommendation this analytical survey offers is that there be a discussion about what the high level concepts of autonomy and sovereignty mean to contemporary Brazil and how this should be reflected in Brazilian foreign policy. This article has taken a devil’s advocate approach in order to provoke, suggesting that perhaps there is a need for a more ‘creative’ or ‘flexible’ approach to autonomy and sovereignty. But equally compelling arguments can be made for maintaining the status quo. No vision of what a possible revised understanding might mean has been set forth



in these pages, only the proposition that there are costs to the current approach, which may also be the best option for Brazil.

What is dangerous is not having the discussion because the international and domestic context under which these guiding principles were set down has changed notably since the start of the PT governments, let alone Cardoso's 1993 foreign policy review or even the time when Rio Branco ran Brazil's foreign relations at the start of the Twentieth Century. While Itamaraty has already taken an important step in this direction with the public consultations it held in March, 2014, and the advancement of internal thinking on foreign policy and democracy (Patriota, 2013; Mourão, 2013), comprehensive treatment of this and other core conceptual issues requires political engagement because the decisions must reflect the interests, ethical and identity understandings Brazilians hold about themselves, their country, and its place in the region and world. In a democracy one of the key functions of elected representatives is to reflect the interests, ethics and identity of a country in its highest decision-making institutions. As apt as Itamaraty has proven at discerning these key foreign policy inputs over the years, which makes diplomats invaluable participants in the discussion, members of the foreign service are not elected officials and arguably not particularly representative of large parts of the wider Brazilian population.

The questions here are not just for the professionals and specialists. Rather, these are highly political questions about the broad outlines of what Brazil wants to be and do – a discussion about whether or not Brazil wants to change its position in the world. There are increasingly large potential risks and consequences for a wide range of interests and actors in Brazil in either change or continuation of the core conceptual understandings driving Itamaraty's actions. The president sets the tone and has to give clear political direction and backing (and respect) to the foreign minister, something that was clearly evident during the Cardoso and Lula years, but seemed to slip inexplicably under Dilma either by intent or lack of interest. Perhaps more significantly, Congress has to do its part by taking foreign affairs seriously and putting pressure on the president for sustained good policy. In part this might involve not only more vigorous interrogation of diplomats and representations before its two standing committees, but

also by increasing transparency by making *in camera* sessions the exception, not the regular rule – a survey of Brazilian Congressional committee transcripts stands in stark contrast to those from countries such as the USA, Canada, or the UK, each a country that parallels aspects of Brazil’s emerging global role. While politics may still remain resoundingly local, the impact of foreign affairs is no longer felt solely abroad and the necessary expertise restricted to the foreign ministry. The challenge for the winner of the October presidential ballot and for Brazil’s elected representatives is to recognize this and engage with the international dimension of their particular policy concerns and their foreign policy implications.

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### **Abstract**

One of the central foreign policy challenges that will confront the victor of October presidential election is how to make this area of public policy relevant and of interest to Brazilian politicians and the wider public. This article addresses this challenge by arguing that it is time for Brazilians to re-examine what is meant by autonomy and sovereignty within the context for their country’s foreign policy. No policy prescriptions or interpretations are offered. Attention is instead focused on arguing that the national, regional and global context has changed, making reflexive adherence to pre-existing conceptual understandings is dangerous and does carry costs. If nothing is to change, the article argues, this should be a conscious choice that comes from politically and publicly engaged debate, which in turn will provide Itamaraty with the direction and support it needs to continue advancing Brazil’s national interest.

### **Keywords**

Itamaraty, Autonomy, Sovereignty, South America, Mercosul, Congress

### **Resumo**

Um dos desafios centrais da política externa que o vitorioso das eleições presidenciais de outubro enfrentará é como tornar esta área da política pública relevante de interesse para os políticos e para o público brasileiro. Este artigo trata deste desafio, argumentando que é o momento dos brasileiros reexaminarem o que é entendido por autonomia e soberania dentro do contexto da política externa do país.

Não são oferecidas prescrições políticas ou interpretações. Ao contrário, a atenção é focada em argumentar que o contexto nacional, regional e global mudou, tornando a adesão a elementos conceituais pré-existentes perigosa potencialmente custosa. Se não houver nada para mudar, o artigo argumenta, isso deve ser uma escolha consciente que vem de debate político e público envolvido, que por sua vez irá proporcionar ao Itamaraty a direção e o apoio de que necessita para continuar avançando no interesse nacional do Brasil.

### **Palavras-Chave**

Itamaraty; autonomia; soberania; América do Sul; Mercosul; Congresso

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