Where in the world are we?

Brazil finds itself today with new visibility in the world, and with a much stronger voice than it has ever had before, as the articles in this issue make abundantly clear. But much must still be done to consolidate and advance from its new position.

The general financial crisis that began in 2008 underlined the necessity of rethinking the international order. Brazil now has influence on such contemporary global issues as climate change, renewable energy, and food production that is driven by its economic power, but as Ambassador Ricupero points out, "What's absolutely new is Brazil's importance in monetary and financial discussions." Former Foreign Minister Amorim sees that change as arising from the 2003 WTO meetings in Cancun. At that time, he says, "The European Union and the United States had already agreed on a result that would be totally protectionist." But Brazil spoke up, and he expects that the WTO Doha Round will result in a much better trade agreement for Brazil and many other countries than would have come out of Cancun if Brazil had not spoken up.

There is also general agreement that Brazil's role in the G-20 and its emergence as a factor in the International Monetary Fund have brought it renewed respect, although the honesty and consistency of its foreign policy have long been recognized. In recent years it has also been working hard to revive Mercosur and take a more decisive stance on regional issues — crucial considering how important our neighbors are to Brazil's international trade. It has also projected its presence abroad through technical cooperation, especially numerous initiatives of the Brazilian Agency for International Cooperation in Africa, Asia, and South America in such areas as low-income housing, agricultural research, and public health. And in the past eight years Brazil has opened or reopened 30 embassies across the world.

But although the foundation has been laid, there is no guarantee that Brazil will find it easy to consolidate its global influence. There are, for instance questions about its relationship generally with the UN and specifically with China. People may talk of a permanent seat for Brazil on the UN Security Council, but because the UN systems "touch at the heart of power, they are highly sensitive," Ambassador Amorim points out. Although there is movement in that direction, it will not happen soon.

Brazil, especially the government, lacks a clear vision of what our national interests are and where we want to be in the next 10 years or so. As a result, in response to the emergence of China, Brazil has to a large extent been simply reactive.

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This is not simply a matter of trade policy, or foreign policy generally. Our own people are not concerned about threats from abroad; they see public health, education, and urban violence as the country's main problems. And the overvaluation of the real, as Ambassador Gonçalves, notes, cannot be blamed on China but results from an imbalance in Brazil. Businesspeople agree that Brazil needs to address such drags on the economy as undisciplined public spending and its effects on interest rates and investment.

The problems are not just financial. Tax, fiscal, labor, and infrastructure reform are long overdue. Sustainable development expert José Eli da Veiga thinks Brazil has been too optimistic about recent strides in reducing poverty considering that, for instance, even now half the population has no access to basic sanitation.

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