

Brazil's foreign policy: Moving backwards?

After a promising start, with more concern for human rights violations and rapprochement with the United States, President Rousseff seems to have fallen back on Lula's ideology-oriented foreign policy of nonintervention in other countries' affairs and opposing the United States. Rousseff has little flair for or interest in international affairs, and Lula's unmitigated political craving often gives him an informal diplomatic role. Result: more continuity than significant shifts in foreign policy.

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Amid domestic political turmoil and growing economic uncertainties, foreign policy represented a much safer haven for Dilma Rousseff during her first eight months in office. Changes concerning human rights violations, a positive gesture toward the United States, and keeping Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at arm's length were interpreted as positive diplomatic shifts. The general perception both in and outside Brazil was that pragmatism had replaced ideology as the benchmark of Brazilian foreign policy.

A complex world picture

Several recent episodes, however, paint a more complex picture and suggest that, despite some rhetorical inflection, there are significant continuities between the Lula and Rousseff foreign policies. Consider Brazil's posture on two Middle Eastern hotspots, Libya and Syria. As a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Brazil has shown reluctance to endorse resolutions drafted by Western powers. On the airstrike resolution supporting military action against Gaddafi, Brazil

abstained. On the draft resolution condemning violence in Syria, Brazil sought an alternative course, trying to bridge the divide between the Western powers and Russia and China, traditional allies of the Syrian regime.

What Brazil's UNSC role tells us is that the emerging powers coalitions remain a top priority in Brazil's global diplomatic strategy. By abstaining on the Libyan resolution, Brazil joined fellow BRICS in the Council (except South Africa, which voted for the resolution). On Syria, Brazil is working with India and South Africa, which are not only fellow



Former President Lula's preeminence (left) still looms large over Rousseff's foreign policy.

BRICS but also part of the India-Brazil-South Africa initiative (IBSA). Less ideology and more pragmatism thus do not necessarily translate into a more cozy relationship with the West or with U.S. foreign policy goals.

Even if the ideology driving Brazil's foreign policy has dissipated, some deep-rooted difficulties constrain further changes. President Obama's trip to Brazil earlier this year, though generally positive, fell short of Brazil's expectations for a revamped strategic relationship. Receptive gestures aside, it seems that the relative U.S. disregard of Brazil's new global status works against any

significant change in the relationship. In fact, the recent past suggests that for Brazil the shortest path to the center of the U.S. strategic field of vision has been through friction and controversy, as with Brazil's posture on the Iranian nuclear program and on regional issues, such as the Honduras political crisis and American military presence in Colombia.

Relations with the neighbors

Brazil's regional policy has shown signs of inertia since the Rousseff administration began. Upbeat official rhetoric toward the region is still habitual, as is working with the bundle of

relatively ineffective and redundant regional institutions. But a positive force may emerge from a traditionally "distant" neighbor: Colombia, which under President Santos has shown new interest in Mercosur. This

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is good news for Brazil.

It is also noteworthy that the recent lowering of the profile of President Chávez — a perennial inconvenience for Colombian foreign and defense policies — has cleared the landscape of unnecessary controversy. However, the ailing Venezuelan leader will face a crucial battle for political survival next year. His quest for resurrection will most certainly reverberate negatively throughout the region.

Trade is also a regional issue. With no permanent

solution in sight for Brazil's disputes with Argentina, Mercosur will remain as a free trade area incomplete and as a customs union imperfect. As a result, its lack of credibility will most likely retard not only further expansion of the bloc but also trade negotiations with other regions, such as the European Union. Moreover, for a country that claims that its regional leadership role is benevolent, the fact that Brazil has for years sustained trade surpluses with every South American nation except Bolivia may be seen by neighboring leaders as a sign of political insensitivity, if not thoughtless hypocrisy.

Not too late

Of course President Rousseff still has time to pursue an innovative foreign policy agenda — fortunately, because confidence-building and trade negotiations take time. And new political and economic challenges that stem from China's rise as a global power and

its role as Brazil's main economic partner may bring about structural changes for Brazilian diplomacy, demanding fresh approaches and more strategic planning.

Nevertheless, Lula's shadow still looms large over the Rousseff administration and its international agenda. Rousseff seems to have little flair for diplomacy or interest in international affairs; Lula's activity as an informal diplomatic envoy certainly suggests more continuity than significant shifts in Brazil's foreign policy. His influence in the recent appointment of former foreign minister Celso Amorim to the Ministry of Defense was one example of this. In fact, any conscious attempt at brusque alterations could expose Rousseff to unnecessary dispute with her still very powerful predecessor. No doubt this helps explain why business as usual has seemed the most prudent and reasonable plan for Rousseff's own political survival. ■