

The "find five errors" game

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Brazil's economic weight is a problem for the country's diplomats. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems to be uneasy with the size and international relevance of the Brazilian economy. When a dispute arises (as is completely normal in international relations) between Brazil and a neighboring country, the reaction of the diplomats is to take a step backward, as though any more assertive reactions would be seen as a wish to exert imperialist hegemony. Resolution in negotiations, without ever neglecting the defense of national interests, has become, for the Foreign Relations Office, synonymous with coercion, dominance, and imposition. Nothing could be more untrue.

For instance, Argentina has systematically violated the Mercosur trade agreements. The Brazilian diplomatic response has been timid, seeking to avoid confrontation. This attitude boosts the Argentine policy of putting the interests of its own producers and market first, at the expense of the Mercosur agreements. Although this has been evident for years, it has intensified since 2003. A recent example is Argentina's economic rapprochement to China, which causes heavy losses to Brazilian industries, such as shoes, but did not provoke any action by the Foreign Ministry. It is as if the neighboring country were a sort of younger sibling, still not fully responsible for its actions; it is up to Brazil to forgive provocations because what is important is the preservation and expansion of Mercosur. This policy has turned out to be a failure. It has generated serious problems for sectors of the Brazilian economy that export to Argentina. What is worse is that it incites neighboring countries to make trade demands on Brazil without offering anything in return.

Misconceptions —The most serious case is that of Paraguay. Not only did the Foreign Office support all of President Lugo's demands, it also adopted Paraguay's policy toward Brazil as its own. In other words, rather than understanding that the problems with Paraguay were the result of its own domestic processes, the Foreign

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Office adopted the rhetoric of resentment typical of that country, as though Paraguay's economic backwardness were a consequence of Brazilian exploitation, a mere continuation of the imperial expansionist policy that led to the 1864 war. A double mistake: Paraguay's severe social problems are the outcome of actions by the Paraguayan political elite, and the 1864-1870 war was essentially the result of the aggression of Solano Lopez, who invaded Brazil and also took a series of clearly provocative measures. Accepting President Lugo's impositions should be recognized as the harmful consequence of a foreign policy based on unsound historical and political foundations. This in itself is worrying.

Brazilian diplomacy has also adopted an extremely tolerant policy with regard to Venezuela. More concerned about the business of Brazilian companies operating in that country and the exports that are increasing year after year, the Foreign Office has been systematically silent before the constant violations to freedom of the press perpetrated by the Chávez administration. Brazil has also failed to pay due attention to the expressive rise in Venezuela's military spending. Venezuela is today the largest purchaser of weapons in the southern hemisphere, which might well trigger an arms race in the region. It cannot be overemphasized that Venezuela has serious political problems with Colombia and a pending territorial claim with Guyana; in addition, it borders Brazil in the Amazon region.

Expropriation — Bolivia in its turn has imposed new conditions for the sale of its gas. And the Foreign Office has acquiesced. Bolivia occupied and expropriated property belonging to Petrobras, the Brazilian state oil company. The Brazilian government did nothing — a firm reaction would have been regarded as support to Evo Morales's opponents. The Brazilian Foreign Office has replaced defense of the national interest with ideological support for a political current in Bolivia. National assets or bilateral treaties were ignored for political and partisan interests.

Oddly, the only country that has tried to build a friendly relationship with Brazil is Colombia, a country that also shares a long Amazonian border with us — but no signs of friendship or good will came out of the Foreign Office, although it had plenty of opportunities. Instead, during the negotiations for the release of hostages held by the armed revolutionary forces of Colombia, Brasilia criticized the Colombian government on several occasions, showing no deference toward the country. Likewise, it joined President Chávez in denouncing the military cooperation agreement recently signed by Colombia and the United States.

Brazilian foreign policy toward Argentina, Paraguay, Venezuela, and Bolivia has accumulated a number of defeats. The relentless search for agreement at any cost has undermined Brazilian interests in South America. None of the four countries is an ally of Brazil in international forums. The Brazilian Foreign Office has made substantial concessions and received nothing in return. What is worse: it has shown that there is an inverse relation between the weight of the country's economy and its foreign policy.