

Brazil:
An Emerging Power?

by

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Brazil's approach to its emerging role in world politics is very much based on the efficacy of multilateral institutional power. Former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso captured that concept in his autobiography when he commented that, "of all the misguided quests that Brazil has undertaken over the years, few rivaled our efforts to attain our dream of world prominence."¹ Former presidents, both military and civilian, talked of "Grandeza" or Greatness for Brazil—the desire to see Brazil as a major power (MP). That school of thought dominated foreign policy discourse in Brazil from the post–World War II period through the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. The succeeding weak, civilian regimes had little time for foreign policy given domestic crises and near regime breakdowns. But Cardoso redefined that often brash goal by commenting later in his memoir that,

Another long-standing dream of Brazil's is to have a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. I supported this initiative. But I also mused that it would be more useful for Brazil to aspire to a seat

¹ Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *The Accidental President of Brazil: A Memoir* (NY: Public Affairs Books, 2006), p. 255.

in a body: the G7, or Group of Seven, composed of the largest economies in the World. If Brazil succeeded in growing its economy and alleviating poverty, then power and influence would come naturally.²

After Cardoso's election in 1994, the governments of Brazil have followed a two-track foreign policy. The first emphasizes regional integration. The keystone of that effort is MERCOSUR or the Common Market of the South, created in March 1991. It includes the original members, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay (in addition to Brazil) with an assortment of associate members in South America; recently Venezuela has been granted full membership which has raised some concern in more conservative circles in the region.

Brazil was a major proponent of the establishment of CASA—South American Community of Nations—in Cuzco, Peru in December 2004. CASA is an effort to deepen political and economic integration in South America. Brasilia has taken the lead in giving greater attention to the Amazon Basin, a source of security concern. The government has constructed a sophisticated Amazon Monitoring System (SIVAM) that establishes surveillance of 5.2 million sq kilometers with satellites, radar, and micro-monitoring.

In the mid-1990s, Brazil's very professional Foreign Service, Itamarati, led the process of ending the decades-old conflict between Peru and Ecuador. As chief mediator, Brasilia brokered the "Peace Declaration of Itamarati" in February 1995; the other guarantor countries were Argentina, Chile, and the United States. President Cardoso took the lead in organizing the first-ever South American heads of state meeting in Brasilia in

² Cardoso, *Ibid*, p. 267.

the late 1990s. Central America, the Caribbean and Mexico were deliberately excluded. The position of decision makers in Brasilia was that those countries now belong to “North America.”

Energy policy has become a new regional interest of Brasilia. The state oil company, Petrobras, is considered one of the most professional of its kind in the world. The company has taken the lead in gas development in Bolivia and is seeking joint ventures elsewhere in South America. Brazil has been at the lead in regional conversations over new energy resources—Ethanol for example—and new gas and oil pipelines to better integrate South American energy resources.

The second track emphasizes multilateralism. Brazil has taken the lead in creating the so-called G-20. This group emerged from the stalemate at the 5th Ministerial of the Trade Ministers in Cancun, Mexico in 2003. Besides, Brazil the chief proponents of a “Southern” position on trade negotiations at the WTO are China, India, and South Africa. The creation of the G-20 effectively has led to a stalemate in the Doha Round until the EU and the US yield on agricultural subsidies. The formation of the G-20 also led to the demise of the decade-old negotiation over a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), a hallmark of the foreign policy of President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The formation of the G-20 was a logical follow-on to the 2003 G-3 grouping of Brazil, India, and South Africa, created to lobby for seats on the Security Council of the United Nations.

An important new component of Brazil’s foreign policy was the decision by policy makers to pursue an active, strategic relationship with China. President Hu Jintao’s visit in November 2004 to Brasilia resulted in the government recognizing China

as a “market economy.” Trade has increased dramatically although there is increasing criticism of the alliance from the Brazilian business community as low-cost high quality products flood the domestic market; Brazil’s exports to China are commodities and raw materials.

The latest foreign policy alliance to emerge is with India. Like China, India has indicated Brazil as its strategic partner in the region. What distinguishes the New Delhi-Brasilia relationship from that with Beijing is that both India and Brazil are democracies with a vibrant, free press and a commitment to the protection of civil liberties. President Lula visited India in June 2008 and emphasized the growing role that Brazil can play through its production of alternative energy resources that will provide India with energy security.

In the 21st century, Brazilian policy makers are increasingly aware of the need for a new regional security agenda focused on drug trafficking, criminality, migration, the environment and democracy. Brazilian leaders see the country is a natural coordinator of South America’s efforts in these areas. This will require increased consultation and action among the countries bordering the Amazon.

Brazilian leaders have clearly rejected the idea of coercive power in furthering national goals. The country is not yet in a position to exercise global financial leadership. To the degree that Brazil’s ability to bring together its neighbors for common objectives, it is practicing a Brazilian version of soft power. But the thrust of the leadership is clearly on economic and ultimately political leadership in South America and an expanded role in multilateral trade talks, peace keeping missions, and related areas of endeavor.

The continuation of the Cardoso multilateral approach was again emphasized with President Lula's most recent visit to Europe in September 2007. He visited Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Spain. While trade with the four Scandinavian countries is small, Lula's goal was to pursue discussions on a broad range of global issues—climate change for example—as well as investment and business opportunities.

Institutions matter to Brasilia. Thus we will see a dual track of Brazil's guiding regional efforts and taking a stronger role in efforts like the G-20. For better or worse, the political class is almost totally concerned with local and regional political issues. This has left foreign policy in the hands of the executive. There has been an impressive convergence between the "Left" in Brazil, represented by President Lula, and the traditional forces of diplomacy. The course chosen by Brazil in the last fifteen years is unlikely to change substantially with the presidential succession in 2009. Moreover, Brazil's ongoing economic stability, its move towards investment grade, its progress on reducing poverty and other marks of success have given it enhanced status in the hemisphere.

Brazil is no longer reluctant to differ with the United States on a broad range of issues. And other countries—India, China, South Africa—view Brazil as an increasingly sophisticated ally and pragmatic actor in world affairs. While there will remain mutual respect between Washington and Brasilia, the belief in the United States that Brazil will act as a surrogate for the United States has diminished if not disappeared. The prospects for a new administration in January 2009 should open opportunities for a redefinition of relations between the United States and Brazil that will recognize Brazil's new trajectory both within the hemisphere and at the global level.