

Brazil's selective nuances: the Argentinean example

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With the new Brazilian government still settling in after its recent inauguration, it is only natural that the international community remain expectant regarding Dilma Rousseff and her team's intended governing path. Pinpointing possible changes of course or indications of continuity for Brazil in the coming years has thus become a priority for many world capitals, eager to discover if President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva's successor will bring with her any real political change at the country's helm.

Foreign policy orientations in particular are currently in high demand with the reshuffling of the Itamaraty, now headed by Antônio Patriota, former ambassador to the US and previously Nr. 2 to Foreign Minister Celso Amorim. Legitimate doubts as to whether Brazil would maintain the same posture, course of action and goals in the world stages were thus only bound to surface.

In that order, in one of his first interviews, Patriota was asked about what would change within Brazilian diplomacy under Dilma Rousseff's rule. While acknowledging the different context in which Brazil is in now, his answer proved to be the most valuable sound bite so far: "to continue is not to repeat".¹ The underlined meaning is open to debate but it is safe to assume that it could signal an openness to applying slight corrections in the path Brazil has taken, and perhaps an indirect

self-assumption that not every previous policy went according to plan. Either way, the possibilities that such an official predisposition entail are notorious, but as in everything, one should be careful enough not to jump to conclusions.

Indeed, such words do not indicate, by all means, that a profound reevaluation of Brazil's foreign agenda is just around the corner or even at the table for that matter – especially since the political-ideological links between the former and current government remain vividly strong. The continuance of Marco Aurélio Garcia as the President's influential Special Foreign Policy Adviser gives solid grounds to such suppositions. And as one would expect, South American regional integration, the US, China, 'alternative groupings' like BRIC or IBSA, relations with developing countries,² fairer representation in international organizations or the tackling of world issues such as climate change, for example, have already been announced as remaining vital components in Brazil's foreign agenda.

But still, there was always a certain amount of expectation that slight changes of tone and focus would gradually take place within the Itamaraty. As it so happens, for Patriota, these "new challenges, emphases and

1 Antônio Patriota interviewed by Paulo Celso Pereira, "Continuar não é repetir" (*Veja*, No. 2199, 12 January 2011).

2 Interestingly enough, former ambassador Ruben Barbosa accurately noted that the expression "South-South" had still never been used in any official pronouncements, by either Dilma Rousseff or Antônio Patriota. See Ruben Barbosa, "Mais profissionalismo na política externa" (*Estado de S. Paulo*, 11 January 2011).



nuances” are only natural and should be thus taken into account when conducting and formulating a country’s foreign policy.

The first example of this approach could very well be Argentina. Both parts have long recognized the significance of the existing strategic partnership. The level of bilateral trade – US\$39 billion in 2010 alone – and the propulsion of common regional integrations projects have become indispensable elements in each country’s foreign policy and in that sense, the past two decades have witnessed an outstanding level of cooperation and consultation. However, this was never matched by a direct overlapping of the respective foreign agendas. One good example concerns the case of the Argentinean quarrel with the UK regarding the Falklands/Malvinas Islands. Throughout the years, Brazil has always sought to show sympathy towards its neighbor’s claims and has frequently and publicly called for a final resolution to this aging issue. However, Brazil never went all out in opposing or confronting the UK in this question.

That has apparently changed. According to recent reports, right after Dilma’s inauguration in early January, Brazil, for the first time ever, denied permission to the Royal Navy’s patrol vessel HMS Clyde to dock in Rio de Janeiro, in a clear token of support for Argentina’s constant requests not to facilitate shipping traffic from and to the disputed islands.³ The official surprise is even greater if one recalls the comprehensive defense cooperation treaty signed in September 2010 between Brazilian and British officials. At the time, Minister for International Security Strategy Gerald Howarth was quoted as saying that the UK did “not take Brazil’s support for granted”.⁴ A wise statement some could argue.

But what are the ramifications of this move? Is Brazil really ready to rally behind Argentina and ostensibly stand up to the UK? Such is hardly the case. In fact, this latest incident – albeit significant for its novelty – must be understood as a case of selectively amending certain aspects of Brazil’s foreign policy. In this situation, it is all about reinforcing ties with Argentina.

That much was made clear, after Dilma’s inauguration. Despite the absence of Cristina Fernández Kirchner, Argentinean Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman was present and later met with Patriota, having reportedly been given assurances that the bilateral relationship would take centre stage in the coming years.⁵ As if any

more proof was needed, it was also announced that Dilma’s first trip abroad would be to Argentina later in the month; to that end, Foreign Minister Antônio Patriota travelled to Buenos Aires on January 10th, seeking to lay further ground for fruitful relations between the two leaderships.⁶ For his part, Defense Minister Nelson Jobim is also expected at the Argentinean capital on January 16th.

The refocus in this relationship is visible to the untrained eye. The new Brazilian leadership is probably aware that its best asset in its quest for greater international recognition and insertion is the consensual backing of its ambitions by the countries in the surrounding region. In any given scenario, Argentina is instrumental to both reignite the institutional evolution of Mercosul and mobilize the remaining neighborhood towards a path of greater consultations and cooperation, probably under the auspices of Unasul. Likewise, good political ties between national authorities are also essential to muster an increase in bilateral trade and create further economic integration, understood as mutually beneficial to all. Timely incidents such as the one with the UK will thus be viewed as a necessary cost along the way, although Brazil will surely try its best to minimize them in the name of a greater pragmatism in the country’s foreign relations.

However, this does not constitute an overwhelming change in Brazilian diplomacy. Indeed, throughout Lula’s two terms, ties with South America and with Argentina in particular were constantly high on the agenda. Still, there was always a generalized perception that without further Brazilian willingness and determination, the region would remain at a standstill. Moreover, in light of Brazil’s overwhelming weight on Argentina’s economy, successive trade disputes had also become a constant in bilateral relations, leaving soured political leaderships.⁷ In that sense, the display of a ‘new’ emphasis by Dilma’s team clearly demonstrates the drive to correct such missteps and overcome past obstacles.

For their part, the international community is certainly wary of possible changes regarding other more pressing security issues like Iran, for example.⁸ But if it is clear by now that Brazil under Dilma will not stray too far from its previous path, it is also evident that the country will not shy away from rectifying any policy that it deems too unbalanced or overly loud. Patriota himself has echoed that Brazil now possesses “a natural authority to engage

3 For example, in September 2010, Uruguay prohibited HMS Gloucester destroyer from entering Montevideo for supplies and fuel. Robin Yapp, “Royal Navy’s Falklands ship turned away by Brazil” (*Telegraph*, 10 January 2011).

4 “Defence Minister signs cooperation treaty with Brazil” (*Ministry of Defence/Defence News*, 17 September 2010).

5 “Argentina, primero destino de Rousseff” (*Página 12*, 3 January 2011).

6 Antônio Patriota, “Un ejemplo de audacia” (*La Nación*, 10 January 2011).

7 “Brazil, Argentina: A Trade Dispute Lingers” (*Stratfor*, 9 November 2009).

8 Dilma Rousseff has already hinted at new standards for human rights violations, Iran included. See Lally Weymouth, “An interview with Dilma Rousseff, Brazil’s president-elect” (*Washington Post*, 3 December 2010).



in every major debate and decision-making process in the international agenda – political, economic, commercial, environmental, social, and cultural”.⁹ As such, it is only expectable that Brazil’s voice will continue to be heard in every world stage, this time with a more moderate tone. All in all, a new management does not necessarily come with dramatic policy changes but it surely entails a new style of governing, particularly visible in the customary post-election state of grace. Consequently, it will only be possible to determine if these “nuances” will impact Brazil’s foreign policy in any meaningful and/or permanent way further down the road. Until then, Dilma and her staff will stay on message: Brazil is a world actor and its foreign endeavors will inevitably reflect this status.

⁹ Antônio Patriota, “Discurso do Ministro Antônio de Aguiar Patriota na cerimônia de transmissão do cargo de Ministro de Estado das Relações Exteriores” (*Ministério das Relações Exteriores/Itamaraty*, 2 January 2011).

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