

Review - Brazilian Foreign Policy in Changing Times

Written by Kurt Weyland

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KURT WEYLAND, JUL 24 2013

Brazilian Foreign Policy in Changing Times: The Quest for Autonomy from Sarney to Lula

By: Tullo Vigevani and Gabriel Cepaluni

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Tullo Vigevani and Gabriel Cepaluni's *Brazilian Foreign Policy in Changing Times: The Quest for Autonomy from Sarney to Lula* fills a significant gap in the literature by offering a thorough, informative overview of twenty-five years of Brazilian foreign policy. Scholarly analyses of the international relations of Third World countries are rare, as Philippe Schmitter points out in this volume's foreword (p. ix). As the subtitle indicates, the book is systematically organized around the country's consistent efforts to enhance its independence. After a conceptual clarification of this term, which blends elements from Realism and Dependency Theory, Vigevani and Cepaluni distinguish three strategies for increasing autonomy. Taking two notions from the discourse of Brazilian foreign policy-makers, "autonomy through distance" and "autonomy through participation", they add a third – "autonomy through diversification".

The empirical chapters in the book examine the sequential embrace of these three strategies and assess their contributions and limitations, considering the opportunities, constraints, and pressures that Brazil faced during each

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period of time. 'Autonomy through distance' corresponded to the inward-looking, protectionist development model pursued in the state since the 1930s. But, as the authors explain in chapter two, the 1980s debt crisis undermined this model and exposed Brazil to tremendous pressures to liberalize its economy, especially from the United States. From the late 1980s onward, the state therefore transformed its foreign policy strategy and, through the governmental instability and economic turbulence of the early 1990s, settled on "autonomy through participation".

This approach, implemented consistently under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2000), tried to advance Brazil's national interests not through withdrawal from foreign engagements, but by means of an active effort to influence international decision-making and help shape regional and global institutions. The new strategy implied conformity with global trends such as democratization and economic globalization, but it tried to harness these forces to boost Brazilian development by attracting foreign investment and opening up opportunities for trade. "Autonomy through participation" involved diminished conflict with the U.S., but no automatic alignment with the only remaining superpower.

When President George W. Bush moved away from multilateralism, however, this more conciliatory strategy became unpromising. Brazil therefore moved to "autonomy through diversification," trying to strengthen economic and political connections to other emerging powers, most importantly China. With this new shift, President Lula da Silva (2003-10) tried to win bargaining power to counterbalance the U.S., enhance Brazil's leadership in South America, and win more influence and status on the global stage. In some sense, "autonomy through diversification" constituted a happy medium between the more dissociative "autonomy through distance" and the more associative "autonomy through participation."

As Schmitter's insightful foreword highlights (pp. ix-x), Vigevani and Cepaluni's analysis raises the question about the causes driving these strategy shifts. Schmitter points to learning, which after much trial and error arrived at "autonomy through diversification" as the best option for Brazil. This reader, however, was struck by the external pressures and constraints that seem to have brought the turning points in Brazil's foreign policy approach. As Vigevani and Cepaluni show (pp. 17, 30-31, 38-39, 83, 130), the move from "autonomy through distance" to "autonomy through participation," a rather profound switch, was necessitated by the demise of Brazil's protectionist development model; the end of global bipolarity through the collapse of the Soviet Union; and heavy pressures from the U.S. Thus, it was not an autonomous choice, but a strongly constrained decision. In turn, the shift from "autonomy through participation" to "autonomy through diversification" was a response to the blunt unilateralism adopted by George W. Bush (pp. 66, 73, 77-78, 95, 131), who simply abandoned multilateralism. Once again, a decision by the global hegemon drove Brazil's change of foreign policy strategy. The country's limited room for maneuvering is evident: Its strategy shifts do not coincide with the assumption of power by new Brazilian presidents, but with the inauguration of a new U.S. president, especially in the second case!

This observation raises a more fundamental question about the main goal of Brazilian foreign policy. Vigevani and Cepaluni stress autonomy and invoke as evidence the public statements of Brazilian foreign policy makers, especially Gelson Fonseca, who coined two of the three labels applied in this book (pp. xiii, 5-6, 52, 58-59, 88, 129-30). Clearly, the quest for greater independence is a crucial aspect of Brazilian foreign policy. In fact, this desire can account well for Brazil's reluctance to get enveloped in new bonds, especially institutional ties. Vigevani and Cepaluni use this argument in their insightful analysis of the difficulties plaguing the economic integration scheme that Brazil spearheaded, MERCOSUR (chapter six). Thus, there is solid evidence for the importance of autonomy.

The quest for independence, however, does not fully explain a much more central aspect of Brazilian foreign policy: the fundamentally ambivalent posture vis-à-vis the United States. Autonomy characterizes one side of this tension-filled relationship: the interest in some distance. But there is a crucial other side as well, namely the clear need for cooperation with the U.S. In earlier decades, this need comprised security as well as economics; since the end of the Cold War, trade, investment, and technology transfer have taken center stage. The strong interest in cooperating with the U.S. reflects not only Brazil's intention to boost its domestic development, but extends to foreign policy as well. For more than a century, Brazil has sought to gain regional and global influence, prestige and power. The country is eager to rise in the international system and establish its leadership, first and foremost in South America, yet on the global stage as well. For this longstanding goal, which has inspired governments of all shades and

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colors—military and civilian, right-wing and left-wing—economic development is absolutely indispensable. For a “peripheral” country, industrialization, modernization, technological advance, and some measure of social progress are fundamental for gaining higher international status.

This quest for influence, prestige and power—not for autonomy as such—has constituted the guiding principle of Brazilian foreign policy for many decades, since long before the time period investigated by Vigevani and Cepaluni. It provides a constant goal and explains the broadest gamut of foreign policy initiatives, ranging from the efforts at territorial aggrandizement under the Baron of Rio Branco in the early 20th century (pp. 65, 82), to the somewhat quixotic desire for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council in the early 21st century. Why, otherwise, would a country with so many unfulfilled needs and interests invest a good deal of political capital in such a symbolic measure?

The emphasis on the strong continuity in Brazilian foreign policy, which Vigevani and Cepaluni date from the 1930s and which goes even further back, also suggests a broader theoretical interpretation of Brazilian foreign policy, which could have more general applicability to other emerging powers. The longstanding strive for international influence, prestige and power points to a central tenet of realism: the postulation of a permanent national interest, independent of the specific orientation of the government of the day. Of course, this is a version of realism focused on emerging powers; these countries are currently underdeveloped and weak and try to rise in a global system dominated by one or more very powerful developed countries. Given this stark asymmetry and the disadvantageous starting position of the ambitious newcomers, challenging the established hegemon/s directly would be premature and counterproductive.

Instead, emerging powers first need to boost their domestic development and internal strength and cautiously cement their regional leadership, through economic ties with their weaker neighbors, not through military means (which would likely provoke the hegemon/s, namely the U.S.). Most importantly, while the ultimate goal is to rival with the current superpower for leadership, the rising country needs many economic inputs from that global leader for enhancing its own capacity and thus advancing economically. Cooperation is necessary, precisely in order to prepare for a later challenge. This mixture of motives is crucial; it underlies the fundamental ambivalence of the relationship with the U.S. that is not only maintained by Brazil, but also contemporary China and Russia. In the short run, emerging powers need to play by the rules set by the global hegemon, but in this way they try to obtain the economic benefits and inputs that will allow them to outgrow, outcompete, and eventually overtake the U.S. These efforts enlist the economic self-interests of American capitalism in a long-term effort to push back against the national interest of the U.S. These basic points, which emerge from Vigevani and Cepaluni’s analysis, could give rise to a more general theory of realism adapted to the contemporary world.

In conclusion, Vigevani and Cepaluni’s study does not only offer a thorough, well informed, and systematic examination of a major country’s foreign policy, but also suggests interesting broader insights that hold relevance far beyond its subject matter. *Brazilian Foreign Policy in Changing Times: The Quest for Autonomy from Sarney to Lula* is recommended to Latin America specialists as well as to students of international relations.

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