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Brazilian foreign policy under Lula: the end of the “Brasilia Consensus”?*

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At the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century, the distinctive feature of the Brazilian foreign policy was, especially in the economic sphere, the resilience of the “policy paradigm”. Continuity imposed itself despite the important changes the country had gone through in the 90s: trade and investments regime liberalization, participation in a significant number of ambitious trade negotiations, etc. Despite these changes, the central objective of the Brazilian foreign policy had not been altered – guaranteeing space for autonomous industrial development – and the economic sectors which compete with imports maintained their prominent position in the formulation of trade policy objectives.


In relation to this scenario, the decade that ended introduced some important changes. New domestic conditioning factors developed, relating to the emergence of offensive economic interests in international negotiations and of political objectives in Brazil’s international agenda. While the first conditioning factor is derived from structural transformations in the economy, the second results from political decisions but certainly rests on internal and external developments which make its emergence possible.



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The main modification introduced by the Lula government in the paradigm that dominated the Brazilian foreign strategy throughout the last few decades was the introduction of a political dimension in the strategy and, beyond that, the conditioning of the economic foreign objectives by this political dimension. At the moment, the economic objectives are pursued within a scenario of priorities and restrictions framed by a specific political view.

In some foreign fronts, politics and economy can diverge, as it is shown by criticisms from business sectors regarding the submission of trade negotiations to political objectives. In others, however, politics and economics converge and are mutually reinforcing, in a logic that Luiz Werneck Vianna has called 'late Bismarkism': national champions supported by the State project themselves transnationally and are the business counterpoint to the State's quest for international primacy. Significant private businesses are generated by Brazilian companies in the line of presidential friendships throughout Latin America and these affairs legitimate, within the business sector, Venezuela's entry in Mercosur.

The loss of relative relevance of the economic logic for the benefit of politics is at the origin of the Brazilian distancing, in the last few years, from the pragmatism which prevailed in previous decades. This distancing has caused many criticisms from those who see in the Brazilian initiatives more of a search for (political) prestige than for (economic) results.

Those who criticize Lula's foreign policy for having abandoned the principles of a State policy, substituting it for an 'ideological' policy (a Government policy as opposed to a State policy), they refer to the distance in relation to pragmatism and to economic objectives that is generated by the introduction of politics in the Brazilian foreign strategy.

But this kind of criticism to the substitution of a State policy by an 'ideologized' Government policy also originates in a divergence (many times not made explicit by critics) in relation to the (political) values that supposedly lead current Brazilian foreign policy.

The central value made public by the Lula government's diplomacy is the explicit questioning of the distribution of power in the global scenario. The current international system is considered hostile to the defense of Brazilian interests and fulfillment of its objectives, as well as a factor for perpetuating a global order that benefits developed countries over developing ones.

This would justify, to those who share this view, not only a posture of resistance toward politically unjust and economically intrusive international regimes, but also the approximation with countries whose international emergence strategy is based on "ostensive anti-hegemonism". However, today in the domestic debate, while the questioning of the global power hierarchy is widely considered as legitimate by domestic critics of the current strategy, the approximation to regimes whose international strategy is anti-hegemonism has been increasingly criticized.

The importance of this way of thinking the international order for the strategy of Lula's external policy appears in the trade negotiations sphere, but also in the preferential alliances made by the country, in different fora in the last years. Brazil's preferential trade partners globally – BRICs plus South Africa – organized themselves around different initiatives strongly valued by Lula's government even though they had great difficulty generating some kind of economic return to member states.

Even the emergence of global governance themes in the global foreign policy agenda – a development

that can only be taken as being positive – is perceived by Brasilia essentially through the lenses of the North-South divide. In this view, the central political issue referring to global governance is also the redistribution of power among developed and developing countries in international fora. Measures to deal with the global challenges must be compatible with this objective, which means that they must not only give more voice to developing countries but also make developed countries pay the bill relating to those measures.

In Lula's diplomacy – and especially in his second mandate – these political values acquire a predominant role over others, such as respect to human rights and the defense of representative democracy – seen essentially as domestic problems of national States.

Thus, the 'politicization' of Lula's foreign policy unbinds the pragmatic consensus around the priority to be given by the policy to economic goals, but does not make clear the new political values that guide it.

Brazil's growing presence in the international agendas makes it imperative that the foreign policy effectively faces the issue of the political values that should guide it. But the debate must be promoted and the political vectors that actually drive Brazil's foreign strategy must be made explicit and not eluded by the rhetoric of the authorities.