

# FOLHA DE S.PAULO



OPINIÃO

## Brazils foreign policy on the couch

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**LATINO AMÉRICA 21** In psychoanalysis the couch is a key tool for the subject to think of his/her identity, work on the images s/he wants to project in social relations, and eventually change the roles s/he wants to play in the world. The couch connects the subject's self, perceptions by others and roles with intentions and ambitions that the subject may have. From psychoanalysis to international affairs the couch can be seen as a metaphor for understanding and working on the identity and the roles played by the subject in global political, economic, sociocultural and geostrategic relations. In International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis, scholars have based their analyses on political psychology, cognitive approaches and constructivism to develop a role theory and understand the dialectics between agent and structure.

Mine is not a theoretical article, rather it is an attempt to focus on the

critical juncture lived by a particular subject; however, as a disclaimer I must state that I have premised my main argument on the key theoretical assumption that there is not always and necessarily a consensus among elites over national roles.<sup>1</sup> In this article Brazil is the subject, and its role in regional integration and global cooperation is what I would like to discuss very briefly, thinking particularly of possible scenarios in the aftermath of Jair Bolsonaro's election as Brazil's new president.

What has Brazil's image been in recent years and how has it changed since Dilma Rousseff's controversial impeachment in 2016? Under the governments of the Workers' Party (PT), particularly Lula da Silva's mandates, Brazil led the creation of new regional integration institutions, championed South-South relations, fostered multilateral initiatives and new international coalitions such as the IBSA Forum, the BRICS group, as well as the African-South American and the Arab-South American summits.

Brazil's identity then officially projected by PT's governments was rooted in three pillars: (i) a focus on South America, without neglecting solidarity with other developing countries (particularly in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa); (ii) the country's good economic performance was associated with a political ambition for graduation in global governance structures and mechanisms; and (iii) building a national democracy was connected with social inclusion and the recognition of rights of different kinds of social and cultural minorities, including blacks, women, the indigenous populations and LGTB+ communities. In a nutshell, Brazil's identity was that of a social democracy of the South, enshrined in the principles of the 1988 Constitution.

In addition, foreign policy played a key role in connecting domestic politics with the country's ambition for graduation in a global context wherein Brazil's image benefitted from the recognition of progressive improvements

in the social, political, institutional and economic spheres.

When vice-president Michel Temer took office in May 2016, after a true *coup de theatre* against Dilma Rousseff, the country's identity started shifting. Temer's cabinet was the first ever since re-democratization that was totally white, wealthy and male. Foreign policy priorities concentrated on new bilateral trade agreements, Brazil's realignment with the West (USA and Europe), MERCOSUR's market opening, and the regional isolation of Venezuela. The 8th BRICS summit, held in 2016 in India, ended with no relevant results for Brazil. Within the United Nations, Temer's government ratified the Paris Agreement in 2016 and the Global Migration Compact in 2018; however, it requested Brazil's entry into the OECD, thus demonstrating a departure from South-South solidarity and globalist multilateralism fostered by former governments. Many of Temer's foreign policy decisions were hampered by domestic political instability, corruption scandals which did not stop after Rousseff's ousting, very low economic growth rates, rising unemployment, tensions between the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary, the arrest of former President Lula, as well as a resurgence of violence in the countryside and large cities, among other problems that have marked the country's institutional and political crisis under his term.



US President Donald Trump meets with Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro during a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka - Brendan Smialowski - 28.jun.2019/AFP

In October 2018 the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro won the presidential elections. Paradoxically, Bolsonaro was elected as an anti-system candidate in a clear attempt to separate his image from that of a traditional politician, irrespective of his almost 30 years of political career in the federal parliament. His campaign mobilized social networks (Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp) in very innovative ways, including the massive use of fake news with very little capacity of control by the federal electoral court. The first seven months of his mandate have already shown deep-seated tensions within Bolsonaro's support coalition composed by the military, relevant segments of the judiciary and justice system, the majority of the neo-Pentecostal churches, as well as right-wing extremists in social networks.

These groups have so far defended divergent strategic priorities in the fields of national infrastructure development, economic integration, social security and pension reform, foreign policy, transparency, accountability and policies to fight against corruption. Such groups have promised to implement policies of moral conservatism in the country of Carnival, to recuperate the sense of political authority in spite of salary privileges attributed to few civil servants particularly in the Judiciary, to clean up the public sphere despite continuous scandals involving public and private partnerships, all this within a political narrative that tends to undermine the rights of women, blacks, as well as indigenous and LGTB+ populations. Political adversaries (particularly left-wingers and intellectuals) have been pictured as enemies in a battlefield.

How can one understand such a backlash in substantive democracy with the support of the electorate? How can one interpret such a deep foreign policy transformation? To answer such questions, I argue that nowadays Brazil's international identity and projected roles in international affairs may be suffering from a radical change: departing from the emphasis on a vibrant and participatory democracy whose best practices in public management were exported to the developing world, from social policies stressing the fight against hunger and poverty alleviation, from a continuous improvement in social indicators since President Cardoso, from an emphasis on an autonomous foreign policy, Brazil's current government has so far represented the continuity of the 2016 institutional rupture, and has intensified the return of the military to key governmental positions; the alignment with Washington and other (far) right-wing governments in Colombia, Hungary, Israel or Italy; the abandonment of an autonomous foreign policy in South America; the adoption of religious and mythological narratives to interpret how Brazil should deal with relevant contemporary international issues, such as climate change, migration, military intervention and the role of the United Nations; the announcement that

Brazil gave up hosting the Conference of the Parties to the UN Climate Agreement (COP 25) in 2019 and withdrew from the Global Migration Compact; and the gradual construction of a new apparently democratic regime wherein social inequalities may cease to dwindle and human rights tend to fade away.

In order to understand such a profound change in Brazil's identity and role-playing in international affairs, I bring in the concept of graduation dilemma.<sup>2</sup> To begin with, second-tier and non-nuclear powers (such as Brazil) face a graduation dilemma whenever their key decision-makers may choose between a more autonomous type of development or a more dependent one; in security terms, between band-wagon and balance; when building a multilateral policy, between traditional alliances and innovative, flexible coalitions (such as the IBSA Forum or the BRICS group); in geopolitical terms and in the field of development cooperation, between an emphasis on North-South or an emphasis on South-South relations.

I argue that to investigate the graduation dilemma in foreign policy one needs to take on immaterial variables such perceptions, interpretations and framings of the international by the members of a country's elite, which not necessarily converge on national roles and international ambitions. The more autonomous the interpretative frame of the ruling elite in government, the higher the risks of confrontation with *status quo* powers and conservative domestic audiences. Indeed, cohesion among government members and strategic elites (that is, business groups, trade unions, the mainstream media, academia and civil society networks and movements) is a *sine qua non* condition for a successful graduation process. One of the noteworthiest failures of the PT's governments has exactly been to neglect this immaterial dimension of consensus-building within domestic politics. For instance, should Brazil give emphasis to South-South relations and a multipolar world order in its foreign policy (PT years) or bet on its

rapprochement with the West under the US hegemony (current policy)? There are different costs related to each decision, but the general public opinion and the majority of elite members tend to be most favourable to the second option. Why should Brazil cooperate with Haiti and Guinea-Bissau when there are still so many pressing social needs to be tackled domestically? What are the economic gains of a foreign policy decision rooted in South-South solidarity? Why should Brazil bring Cuban doctors to mitigate the absence of health agents in many rural areas of the country?

Since the inauguration of the republic in 1889, Brazilian domestic audiences have mostly been exposed to an authoritarian tradition and to a foreign policy focused on the preferential cooperation with Western countries. Since the end of the Second World War, Brazil's democracy thrived between 1946 and 1964, when it was interrupted by a military coup. Both in 1964 and 2016 Brazilian elites decided to put democracy at risk to avoid having to deal with structural reforms, social policies and the dramatic levels of domestic economic inequality. Linking domestic variables with regional and global challenges is a key analytical tool to engage with the 'graduation dilemma' as a conceptual contribution to understand what Brazil is going through nowadays.

But let's come back to our title: what is the relationship between the graduation dilemma and the couch? The dilemma Brazil has recently gone through has also a connection with an identity crisis. The couch as a metaphor for deep questioning and self-observation on the subject's images and projections has been avoided. Indeed, it seems that Brazil's elite members are afraid of the potential transformational effects of the couch. One of the most common questions among white Brazilians when they meet abroad is 'what is your origin?', and the expected answer is 'I am of German (or Italian, Japanese, Slavish, Spanish or Portuguese) origin'. Giving more value to what comes from a foreign country, excepted Africa, is part

and parcel of one of Brazil's elitist identity-branding. Even if genetically almost all Brazilians are African and Amerindian, the image perceived in a distorted mirror as though everyone were 'white' is what matters. Another self-image maturely reconstructed through hard work on the couch would imply accepting Brazil as a rainbow nation and therefore giving up power. The current scenario, however, tends to illustrate that the historical, cultural and religious wealth thanks to centuries of national formation must give way to a neoconservative project whose material viability will depend on both domestic and international support.

In view of such a refusal to confront with the challenges of the couch, one possible scenario in the particular field of foreign policy may be Brazil's need to redefine its belonging in the BRICS group. Will Brazil withdraw from the BRICS as it suspended its participation in UNASUR? Brazilian governmental agents have already expressed that the BRICS should stop playing with geopolitics and focus on investment and trade, but how will that move impact the nature of the group itself? How will China and Russia assess such a change of perspective? Another scenario would be an identity change of the BRICS group itself. If Brazil does not fit anymore, will there be candidates to replace it? Is Turkey a potential candidate that could transform BRICS into TRICS in the future world scenario? There are questions to be monitored in the coming months which may reveal powerful geopolitical transformations in international security and the world's political economy.

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1 Cameron G. Thies and Marijke Breuning organized a special issue on *Foreign Policy Analysis* in 2012 (volume 12, issue 1) dealing with role-theory in International Relations. See, in particular, the theoretical contribution by Christian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (2012), 'Contested Roles and Domestic Politics: Reflections on Role-Theory in Foreign Policy Analysis and IR Theory', *Foreign Policy Analysis*,



8(1): 5-24.

2 Carlos R. S. Milani, Leticia Pinheiro and Maria Regina Soares de Lima (2017), 'Brazil's foreign policy and the graduation dilemma', *International Affairs*, 93(3): 585-605.

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<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2019/08/brazils-foreign-policy-on-the-couch.shtml>