

Jan 19 2012

## Is Brazil entering a new phase in foreign affairs under Dilma Rousseff?

Swen Liby-Alonso

By Guy Burton.

A year ago Dilma Rousseff took office as Brazil's first female president. The focus of her first year was largely on domestic issues, including the introduction and extension of new and existing social programmes, tight fiscal control of the economy following a brief surge of inflation in the first couple of months of her presidency and the maintenance of a strong majority within Congress. At the same time, she saw seven of her ministers forced to resign as a result of various scandals. However, their falls did not affect her personal reputation, which remained favourable by the end of last year, at over 70%. In large part this reflected her status as the handpicked successor of her predecessor, Lula, who left office on similarly high approval ratings. His eight years (2003-10) were marked by economic growth and increasing social equality through redistributive social programmes.

### Foreign policy under Lula

But to what extent has Dilma followed Lula's path on foreign policy? Lula was an extremely active president, willing to engage in personal diplomacy and reaching out to the global South, particularly through closer ties in Africa and with the Middle East, along with a demand for a more balanced trade relationship between North and South. Brazil became a key participant of the G20 and campaigned globally for a change in the structure of international institutions, including a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC).

For some observers, Lula's activist foreign policy constituted a challenge to the status quo and especially the US. His advocacy of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) as a way of building closer economic and defence cooperation across the continent complemented other regional initiatives taking place during the decade, including the Venezuelan-led Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and the Bank of the South, which were seen as counterweights to Washington's preferred Freed Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) and the Organisation of American States (OAS).

### A new course?

By contrast, Dilma has been perceived as a less confrontational character than Lula, including representatives of the free market establishment like the Wall Street Journal and the Economist. Unlike Lula she did not travel much in her first year as president and is believed to be more pragmatic in her foreign policy. Brazilian commentators like the University of Brasilia's Carlos Pio and Otaciano Nogueira feel that she has not played a particularly visible role at the global level while also allowing the foreign ministry, Itamaraty, to regain its traditional control over foreign affairs. They have noted that she has played down relations with Africa and did not add her voice to other countries denouncing the Gaddafi regime when it turned on its own citizens in the early months of the Arab Spring.

Dilma's quieter approach was also deemed to be evident in the relatively cordial relationship with the US. This was especially apparent in the wake of Barack Obama's visit to Brazil last March, when the US president came with the intention of promoting American business and trade. The visit did not lead to any significant results – indeed, Brazilian desire for Obama's endorsement of a permanent UN SC seat never materialised – although this may be due in part to the changes in the Brazilian economy (where trade with the US has declined to around a quarter and is now split with other markets) and the media, which has less interest in the US-Brazilian relationship.

### No longer business as usual

Despite these nuances between Dilma and Lula, Brazilian foreign policy objectives have been largely constant over several decades. Under dictatorship (1964-85) and democracy (since 1985), Brazilian leaders have pursued great power status and sought economic development to achieve that end, whether under the generals' protectionist and state-led form of capitalism, Fernando Henrique Cardoso's (1995-2002) endorsement of free market globalisation or Lula's more qualified support of it. In this regard Dilma's comments in favour of the newly formed Community of Latin American and Caribbean States which brings together all the hemisphere's member states (and excludes the US and Canada) indicates continuity with the Lula period.

At the same time though, both the conditions and the nature of Dilma's foreign policy approach may well present a change. Certainly under Cardoso and to a lesser extent under Lula, Brazil's global position was perceived in relative terms – most notably in the extent to which its foreign policies would be seen in relation to its position with Washington. Yet there is much to suggest that today Brazil is being judged on its own terms. Increasingly, Brazil is perceived in favourable terms by the media and public opinion, which reflects its growing soft power attributes such as its robust political democracy, vibrant economy, greater social equality and cultural wealth. The result is that arguably Brazil is being judged along the lines of what its leaders have wanted it to be: a great power.

However, with this enhanced status have also emerged challenges. Until now Brazilian leaders have tended to emphasise their commitment to non-interference in other states' affairs. But to what extent will this continue to be possible, especially when Brazil's presence becomes increasingly pervasive? Indeed, the recent revelation that Brazilian-manufactured tear gas was used against protestors and contributed to the death of two children in Bahrain, demonstrates how difficult this is becoming and prompting the government to investigate the company involved. The question that may therefore be asked about Dilma and her foreign policy in the coming period may be less about how it compares to Lula's and more about what type of global influence it wishes to have, given its greater global presence.

Guy Burton is a Latin America International Affairs Programme Associate at LSE IDEAS

---

This entry was posted in [Brazil](#), [Foreign Policy](#), [Latin America](#), [US-Latin American Relations](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).