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Brazil's International Rise: an overview of limitations and constraints

Chloe Pieters

By Guy Burton

At a recent presentation to the LSE Ideas Centre, [Roberto Jaguaribe, the Brazilian ambassador to the UK](#), painted a relatively positive picture of Brazil's regional and global role. He noted Brazil's efforts to achieve greater regional integration, from the creation of the [Mercosur common market](#) (including Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and, as an associate member, Venezuela) in 1991 to the establishment of the South America-wide [Unasur](#) in 2008. He reported on Brazil's increasingly diversified trade relations with the world and its current efforts to open up global governance through its participation in various groups of other state actors, along with the G20. Brazil's emergence, along with these other state actors, opens the prospect of change in the nature of international relations more generally.

Yet is it really the case that Brazil's rise at the regional and global levels has been successful? Has it not been more contested and problematic than that? To suggest this goes against much of present public opinion. In large part this may be due to the fact that Brazil is seen as one of the more appealing actors among emerging states, especially when compared to Russia and China in the BRICs group. Given these circumstances, it was perhaps appropriate that a [one-day conference on Brazil and the Americas was held at the LSE earlier this month](#), jointly hosted by the LSE Ideas Centre and the Rio-based Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) institute. While the participants broadly shared the Brazilian ambassador's view that Brazil was on the rise, they believed that such developments had not been without some degree of difficulty. The Latin American editor of the Economist, Michael Reid, the historian Kenneth Maxwell and the FGV's Matias Spektor all noted a number of tensions and constraints regarding Brazil's growing regional and global role, thereby contributing to its neighbours' unease.

Although [Juliana Bertazzo of LSE and Oxford University](#) suggested that Brazil tends not to use 'hard' military power, it has still been prepared to step into the domestic affairs of its neighbours. Over the past decade this has included several notable moments, including against the [attempted coup in Venezuela in 2002](#), its [deployment and leadership of the peacekeeping force in Haiti from 2004](#), support for president Evo Morales in the [Bolivian crisis of 2008](#) and [opposition to the coup against president José Manuel Zelaya in Honduras in 2009 \(including providing sanctuary to Zelaya\)](#).

Such intervention may well be attributed to Brazilian commitment for democracy. But this has not necessarily translated into support for Brazilian foreign policy elsewhere in the region. [Juan Gabriel Tokatlian](#), a professor at the Torcuato di Tella University in Argentina, reported to the conference that few South American states have followed Brazil's lead in a wholehearted fashion. This may well be due in large part to Brazil's unwillingness to cede national sovereignty on various issues, whether it is in relation to Unasur, the international drugs trade or tackling problems in the Amazon. That position may reflect the double-edged nature of Brazil's support for national sovereignty. On the one hand by favouring diplomacy over military intervention (with the exception of Haiti) Brazil offers assurance to other states it will not interfere directly in its domestic affairs. On the other hand, Brazil's regional predominance means that its bilateral relationships with individual states in South America are asymmetrical. The result is the potential (if not the actuality at present) for Brazilian policymakers to divide and rule the region.

Brazilian failure to achieve greater support for its foreign policy may have less to do with its commitment to democracy and national sovereignty. Rather, it may be that Brazil's neighbours and interlocutors may be uncertain as to what Brazil sees as the main role for itself, both in the region and globally. In order to understand Brazil's objectives though, it is important to understand the guiding principles of Brazilian foreign policy. [Over the past half-century](#) these have appeared to be relatively consistent: namely a desire by policymakers for greater autonomy in the international system and independence of action. At the same time, its ability to do so has fluctuated, mainly as a result of its relative economic position.

[Under the military regime and during the Cold War](#), Brazil pursued a state-led form of development which generated high rates of economic growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Along with a perceived decline in leftist subversion in the country and wider region, the leadership shifted towards the non-aligned movement and away from the two superpowers. However, by the 1980s Brazil's economic position was less robust and its rising debt constrained its capacity for independent action. Following the end of the Cold War and the introduction of the 1994 Real Plan (which brought down inflation and contributed to greater macroeconomic stability), Brazil's capacity for independence continued facing limitations. According to the Brazilian academic Amado Cervo, this was largely due to then president Fernando Henrique Cardoso's decision to integrate Brazil into the global economy, without paying sufficient attention to the relative position and asymmetrical relationship between the core developed and peripheral developing countries. This was partly offset by a more robust approach taken by Cardoso's successor, Lula, during his presidency (2003-10). This included the features associated with the current trend in Brazil's foreign policy and international relations more generally, including a more robust stance adopted by developing countries on issues of global

governance, from the defeated WTO talks at Cancun in 2003 to the involvement of the G20 on financial regulation at the 2009 London conference.

But while Brazil has been consistent in its determination to play a greater role in the international system, its policy-makers have arguably been far more ambiguous about what they see as the final objective. Here it is worth noting [Harold Trinkunas'](#) recent study of Venezuelan foreign policy under Hugo Chavez. He suggests that states may be separated into two main types: on one side, the core, developed states which have largely designed the existing global frameworks and dominate the international institutions that maintain it (the order-givers); and on the other side the more peripheral, developing countries who have had to respond. Trinkunas distinguishes between two types of respondents: the order-takers (who broadly accept and follow the established rules) and the order-breakers (who challenge and want to transform the status quo).

At present it is not entirely clear where Brazil sits in relation to the order-takers or order-breakers. On one hand its economic rise may be seen as a challenge to the international system. Also placing it in the order-breaking group would be the more politically overt stance that Lula has taken. This has included challenging the US position in relation to the Iraq war in 2003, building ties with other developing countries through the creation and institutionalisation of groups like BRICs, IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) and the G20 at the global and helping construct Unasur (which excludes the hemispheric power of the US). On the other hand, it is not entirely apparent that Brazil aims to break the prevailing international system. The previously noted emphasis on national sovereignty in an international system that has seen states' capacity decline and other non-state actors emerge is one example of Brazilian foreign policy being rooted in the past. Another notable example in this regard might also be its determination to reform the existing system (rather than its replacement) by realising its longstanding desire for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) – thereby placing it on a par with the dominant core countries.

The absence of a clear Brazilian position in relation to order-taking or order-breaking may therefore make it difficult to attract support. For Brazil to attract support for its international initiatives, its interlocutors at both the regional and global levels, have to be more certain about the direction of Brazilian foreign policy in terms of its ultimate objectives. Does it see itself as an order-taker or an order-breaker? If it sees itself as an order-taker, then there is little incentive for states that want to challenge the system band-waggoning with Brazil. They can just as easily do this by following the lead of the US, which is also in a position to dispense greater levels of largesse in the form of financial assistance and aid.

By contrast, if Brazil sees itself as an order-breaker, then it may well have to adopt a more confrontational approach to the international system than it has hitherto done. Yet even this may not be sufficient. Spektor noted that recently Brazilian policy-makers assumed that US president Barack Obama's support for India's claim for a UNSC seat for may be due to India's status as a state possessing nuclear weapons. Therefore if Brazil wants to gain a UNSC seat then it too must obtain nuclear weapons. But as Spektor pointed out, to make such an assumption would be wrong: American support for India and silence over Brazil's claim may owe more to geopolitical concerns and especially India's potential to act as a counterweight to China. If this is indeed the case, then this reveals a significant weakness in Brazil's influence as an order-breaker. As a region, Latin America is not a primary geopolitical concern. Consequently, it does not figure prominently in the concerns of the dominant core countries' calculations. How Brazil may overcome this will be a key concern of policy-makers, especially as they seek to project their country beyond the region and to global power status.

Guy Burton is a research associate on the Latin America International Affairs programme at the LSE Ideas Centre.

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