How do you analyze the present situation of Brazilian foreign policy?

To answer such a broad question we have to make choices with regards to topics, geographic areas, international organizations, and so on. Brazil’s foreign policy, as much as other global players’ foreign policy, should not be analysed without taking into account the multitude of issues that nowadays constitute its agenda. Besides, et pour cause, we have also to bring to the picture the plurality of actors and therefore, of domestic interests and preferences that form the agenda. For this reason, there are even those who say that nowadays we should talk about foreign policies instead of a singular foreign policy. Besides taking into account the present different nature of foreign issues - being eventually difficult to distinguish them from domestic ones – in the Brazilian case in particular we should also consider the consolidation of the democratic regime which has enlarged the possibility for more actors to take part (directly and indirectly) of the decision making arena bringing more constituencies to the process and, by doing so, bringing different views to the debate. To sum up, because nowadays the foreign policy agenda is much more varied and because the foreign policy issues are greatly spread in the day-to-day political, economic and social life, then it is more likely that the interests and preferences that constitute Brazilian foreign policy come to the agenda by a multitude of ways and groups. In saying so, I don’t necessarily mean that we are dealing with a fragmented and contradictory international behavior by Brazil, although we should take into account the existence of domestic disputes regarding priorities, strategies, worldviews that could indeed produce a certain degree of inconsistency.

Having said that, when thinking about how to analyse the present situation of Brazilian foreign policy, we have to first and foremost look at who is taking part at the decision making process and which are the interests behind the foreign policy that has been carried out. This being so, when searching for who is in charge of Brazilian foreign policy – a prerogative of the Executive power - besides the President and the Foreign Ministry as the ever present agency in charge of assisting the presidency in foreign affairs regardless eventual moments of low prestige (1), we should take into account that the Executive entails many more agencies than the Presidency and the Foreign Ministry alone. We then have to face the following picture: foreign issues have been increasingly spread over other public policies and as a consequence, they have been equally present at several other Executive agencies.
Brazilian presidentialism functions as a coalition presidentialism (2). In so doing the president needs to create a basis of support among the political parties and to form his/her cabinet from this coalition. Having said that we should ask ourselves to what extent foreign policy can be – or it is already – entangled in the political bargain that characterizes the coalition government. If that happens, that is, if the Brazilian foreign policy is already part of the political bargain that characterizes a coalition government and therefore is increasingly becoming a political bargaining chip, then it will be easier to understand why we could not automatically equate the governmental party stance with the contents of the foreign policy actually implemented, doesn’t matter if for the best or for the worse.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

The prospects for a change during 2014 are very unlikely since there is nothing particularly urgent demanding a prompt action from the current government. Besides, the good perspectives of president Rousseff being re-elected in the first run - recent opinion polls give her 43% of the valid votes (3) - will certainly make her to avoid taking chances during the presidential campaign.

As for the future, if the ballots of 2014 elections do confirm president Rousseff re-election, there won’t be surprises to expect. Since she does not have to form new coalitions for running a second round, the next term will be of similar political and ideological profile to the current one (4).

This being so, the only – if any - change we could expect would be of emphasis and not of substance, besides one or two diplomatic moves to improve Brasilia relations with Washington. Changes of emphasis are not of less importance though. They tend to make decisions stronger and long lasting that otherwise could be reversed for low costs. Moreover the direction and intensity of the emphasis illustrate the myriad of domestic interests involved. And it is in this sense that the coalition government makes the political dynamic to reach Brazilian foreign policy.

Following the ninth World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Meeting recently held in Bali, when the so called Bali Package was approved, Brazil will certainly have more latitude for acting towards the adoption of agreements that could enable the expansion of trade and the extension of the free trade benefits to all countries. The way and the direction by which these steps are to be done will certainly reflect the domestic linkages with the familiar agriculture supporters on one side and with the agribusiness sectors on the other, both already present at distinct governmental ministries headed respectively by the Worker’s Party and the more conservative Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), one of the parties to participate at the coalition government.

We could also expect that Brazil takes a more substantial stance on the issue of
espionage by giving continuity and strength to the discussions about the right to privacy in the electronic communications at the United Nations towards global norms and democratic governance of the internet, after having the Resolution *The right to privacy in the digital age* presented together with Germany unanimously approved by the UN Assembly in December. A refusal to give asylum to the former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, however, would probably be a gesture Brasilia could take to soften its relations with Washington after President Roussef cancelled the state visit to the US in last October.

The United Nations will continue to be subject of close attention from the Rousseff government due to the Brazilian quest for its reform, in particular of the Security Council about which the discussions are lasting for several years without much of progress. Having Brazil recently acquired a more active and protagonist performance on global issues, the prospects are of the next government strengthening its campaign for the reform together with other countries. It might also help this quest the fact that the current Foreign Minister, Luis Alberto Figueiredo, known by his good skills in multilateral negotiations was the former Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations and that his substitute was in turn the former Foreign Minister, Antonio Patriota. This swap is a clear demonstration of how important is this issue for Brazil’s foreign policy (5).

South-South Cooperation with African and South American countries, one of the main Brazilian foreign policy initiatives since the government of president Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva (2002-2010), will certainly continue to be an important issue of Rousseff government, though the former has already given it distinct nuances. As a matter of fact, this agenda is likely to be subject of an intense power struggle between different views within and between the political parties that form the coalition government. Moreover the way and most of all the nature of this policy – if more horizontal and prone to the technical cooperation for development or more friendly towards the internationalization of Brazilian capital – has been and it will continue to be subject of dispute.

*What are the structural long-term perspectives?*

If we mean policies that are already in place without any evidences of being substituted as well as tendencies that are likely to be confirmed than we have to go a little further to discuss state and government policies. In the academic world the thesis that Brazilian foreign policy should be seen essentially as a state policy and not as a government policy is very strong and highly widespread.(6) Despite acknowledging that there are indeed positions that have been historically held such as the support for the multilateralism and therefore could be considered as state policies, they have not been originated that way. In other words, as said in another opportunity, “their ontology is not a part of the state but rather grounded in a specific government and its interactions with various institutions that make up the government and with social actors. Such
interactions vary in intensity and frequency depending on the commitment of the polis to democracy. At some point, therefore, state policies were undoubtedly government policies. The variables that explain the possible transformation of a government policy into state policy are numerous, from its actual or alleged efficiency – even through a merely rhetorical and ideological construction – until its transformation. In this sense, the same way that government policies become state policies in a particular time and space, they may also fail to do so”. (7)

So taking into account what has been said above regarding the widespread presence of foreign policy issues over the political world, I would say that Brazilian foreign policy has already been directly or indirectly brought to the realm of politics. Therefore, we have to acknowledge that its formulation and implementation are nowadays part of the dynamics that constitutes the governmental choices which, by its turn, are brought through all kind of bargains, coalitions, disputes, agreements and so on. And notwithstanding acknowledging that together with more actors taking part at the process there is also an increasing need for more coordination to avoid that the particular interests clash and eventually damage the development of negotiations or policy implementation, in my view the long term perspectives suggest that Brazilian foreign policy will be finally removed from a condition associated with supposedly fixed, self-evident or permanent national interests separate from the political life.

For all these reasons I argue that we should look more carefully to the consequences stemming from what a former Brazilian diplomat, ambassador Italo Zappa, once told me and that plays the role of a good advice: “It is easy to make foreign policy abroad; what is really difficult is to make foreign policy at home.”

Notes:


A different story would have to be told if the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) candidate Aecio Neves – in the second place in the opinion polls - won the presidential elections. Despite the fact that the Social Democratic Party does not have a strong stance on international issues, a more liberal view – as opposed to a more nationalist and autonomist one – would define the main guidelines of Brazilian foreign policy if candidate Neves won the elections.


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