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Strategic Insights: Brazil's Election 2014: Continuity or Change for the "Sleeping Giant"?

January 13, 2015 | Dr. Jose de Arimateia da Cruz

On October 26, 2014, Brazilians went to the polls to elect a new president in one of the closest and most highly contested election in Brazil's contemporary history since the military returned to their barracks in the early-1990s. The final results showed President Dilma Rousseff winning re-election with 51.6 percent in a runoff against her opponent, Aécio Neves, who received 48.4 percent. The choice for president could not have been more distinct between two diametrically opposite candidates; Rousseff, running for re-election as the candidate of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Worker's Party or PT), and her opponent, former Governor and current Minas Gerais Senator, Neves, the candidate of the opposition *Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira* (Brazilian Social Democracy Party or PSDB).

Rousseff was born into a middle class family of Bulgarian origins in the State of Minas Gerais, Brazil's second largest state in the federation. At the age of 17, she joined *Política Operaria* (Workers' Politics)—a radical political faction of the Brazilian Socialist party. As a radical political activist during her university years, she was arrested and tortured while in the custody of Brazil's bureaucratic authoritarian regime which was in power from 1964-89. She is an economist by training and one of the founders of the PT. With the presidential election of Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva in 2002, Rousseff rose to power within the ranks in the president's office, and she was hand-picked by President "Lula" to be his successor, which resulted in an easy victory for Rousseff in 2010 against her opponent, José Serra of the PSDB. With Rousseff's re-election in 2014, the PT will hold executive power for an unprecedented fourth consecutive 4-year term.

Neves' political trajectory is dramatically different from that of Rousseff. Aécio Neves da Cunha is a Brazilian economist, politician, and president of the PSDB. He was Governor of Minas Gerais, Brazil's second largest state in the union, from January 1, 2003, to March 31, 2010, and is currently a member of the Brazilian Federal Senate. Neves comes from a wealthy family of long political tradition in the state of Minas Gerais. He is the grandson of PSDB political maverick, Trancredo Neves, who was Brazil's first elected civilian president after 21 years of military dictatorship. While Rousseff pledged to continue the economic policies and social programs of her predecessor, Lula da Silva, Neves is a strong believer in a less regulatory government and neo-liberal economic policies.

Both candidates were polar opposites regarding Brazil's role within the context of Latin American politics and the world. It is important to note that Brazil's presidential election of 2014 was also a geopolitical contest between two political visions regarding Brazil's future and its strategic partners in the 21st century. Now that Rousseff has won the contest, it remains to be seen if Brazil will seek closer ties with the United States or will it continue its South-South ideological alliance with members of the "pink tide." Richard E. Feinberg, in his article entitled "Regionalism and Domestic Politics: U.S.-Latin American Trade Policy in the Bush Era," argues that:

. . . the United States has long resisted what geography would seem to dictate: a special relationship with Latin America. Frequent rhetorical and occasional real concessions to the idea of hemispheric solidarity notwithstanding, U.S. foreign policy has generally preferred to focus on other regions of the world—notably Europe and Asia—or to eschew regional favorites altogether in favor of a global reach.¹

It is within this context of benign neglect that Brazil-U.S. foreign relations have been described as a complex relationship involving dilemmas and challenges of interests to both nations.

In, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy*, Dean of American foreign policy, George Kennan, referred to Brazil as a "monster country,"² placing Brazil in a category of nations with China, Britain, the United States, and Japan. Monster countries are endowed with the following characteristics: continental territorial dimensions and a population of more than 150 million people, a tradition of economic development, and diverse foreign trade partners.³ With 200 million people and a gross domestic product (GDP) of some \$2 trillion, Brazil is Latin America's largest economy and its most populous country. Brazil, however, is a monster country without any hegemonic aspirations in the realm of Latin America. As a monster country, Brazil does have a worldview, but it is one that is nonthreatening to the rest of the international community and its neighbors. Brazil's worldview is based on its foreign policy pillars of

union, peace among nations, and equality between partners. In fact, Brazil has coexisted along with its neighbors for 144 years without any conflict. The last territorial conflict involving Brazil and one of its neighbors, Paraguay, took place between 1864 and 1870. Brazil's foreign policy has as its most fundamental core a great emphasis on the principle of self-determination, and consequently, noninterventionism. Brazil's primary approach to the international system is one based on the principle of peaceful resolution to most diplomatic conflicts, and it adamantly condemns the use of force to solve most external conflicts.⁴

What will be Brazil's foreign policy priorities and objectives during Rousseff's next 4 years? Based on some of her statements and Brazilian foreign policy experts, Brazil's foreign policy is unlikely to change much from her first 4 years. For example, Thiago Aragão, a political consultant with Brazil's Arko Advice, argues that little will change since "Dilma Rousseff will be more dependent on the Workers Party than before" and that Brazil's foreign policy will be even more contentious since she will govern with a divided congress.⁵ We can also expect Brazil's foreign policy to continue to pursue a South-South ideological orientation by seeking closer ties with its neighbors in Latin America as a balance against the United States. As Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner stated following Rousseff's victory, "Dilma's victory [is] one more step towards the consolidation of the Great Homeland."⁶ In her efforts to build this "Great Homeland," Rousseff's foreign policy will continue its ties to the radical left that came to power with the "pink tide" in the 1990s. The rise of the pink tide in Latin America occurred between 1998 and 2009 when leftist leaders, many hostile to the United States, won elections in Venezuela (1998), Chile (2000), Brazil (2002), Argentina (2003), Uruguay (2004), Bolivia (2005), Nicaragua (2006), Peru (2006), Ecuador (2007), Honduras (2007), Paraguay (2008), and El Salvador (2009). Coming to power in the aftermath of the implementation of structural adjustment programs in Latin America by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, leaders of the pink tide revolution formed an ideological bloc critical of the U.S.'s Washington Consensus. This ideological bloc led by Venezuela is also known as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). In fact, J. D. Gordon argues:

Through its auspices, authoritarians bent on expansion and collectivism has carried out a massive propaganda campaign against the U.S. and its regional allies in order to undermine their legitimacy, while promoting socialism and systematic economic redistribution at home.⁷

Rousseff will reinforce Brazil's South-South foreign policy orientation by further strengthening South America's economic and political blocs, especially the MERCOSUR, led by Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela.⁸ The MERCOSUR, within Brazil's Itamaraty (Brazil's Minister of Foreign Affairs), is seen as a counterbalance to U.S. bilateral economic agreements with other Latin American countries, which are perceived to be

attempts to weaken MERCOSUR. During the presidential election, MERCOSUR was highly criticized by opposition candidate Neves due to its rules. Under MERCOSUR, no member country can unilaterally negotiate a free-trade deal with nonmember countries, such as the United States or the European Union.⁹ The opposition and presidential candidate Neves argued that Brazil needed to free itself from MERCOSUR's draconian rules in order to attract foreign direct investment and promote economic growth. During the presidential debates, Neves accused Rousseff of "having given priority to ideology in foreign relations over trade links."¹⁰ According to Neves, Brazil needs to be more pragmatic in its trade relations with other Latin American countries, and he suggested that, if he were elected, he would "review MERCOSUR rules and make them more flexible so that the country [Brazil] can reach bilateral agreements with third parties and not [be] limited by the consensus clause of the trade block."¹¹

Brazil will also continue to utilize international multilateral forums to advance some of its foreign policy objectives. No other foreign policy issue is of greater importance to Brazil for the 21st century than the expansion of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and Brazil's bid for a permanent seat in that international body. Expanding the UNSC, according to Brazil's Itamaraty, will reflect the new political realities of the 21st century with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the fall of communism. The new international system of the 21st century is quite different than that of the Cold War. During the Cold War, the world was ideologically divided between the West, led by the United States and its followers, and the East, led by the Soviet Union and its satellite states. One of the outcomes of the Cold War was the establishment of the UNSC, which is composed of five permanent members each with a veto power. With dramatic changes taking place in the new international system, Brazil is of the position that "the strengthening of the Security Council requires an improvement of its working methods and an equitable expansion of its membership, which essentially means that developing countries should be included in its membership."¹²

Former Brazilian Foreign Minister, Celso Amorim, further argues that an expansion of the UNSC is not merely what one country or another wants; it is what the international system needs. Brazil and perhaps India, some have argued, would be great additions to the Council's permanent members. Why should Brazil be the next country to join the elite members of the UNSC? There are several good reasons. For example, owing to its size, political and economic relevance, and strong identity, Brazil plays an important role on the international stage. Furthermore, since the creation of the UN in 1945, Brazil has been a nonpermanent member of the UNSC eight times. Brazil is also a country highly committed to multilateralism and peace. Given its position as a regional global player and its large global trade, Brazil has positioned itself to be an important Latin American spokesperson. However, there is some opposition to Brazil's bid for a UNSC seat. The main opposition comes from the United States. While the United States refuses to

support Brazil's bid, it has openly supported India's bid. The U.S. support of India and its refusal to support Brazil for permanent member status on of the UNSC has created some diplomatic friction between the United States and Brazil.

In addition to the UN, Brazil will also rely on the Organization of American States (OAS) to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the United States and promote its South-South cooperation during Rousseff's next 4 years. According to U.S. Government officials, there are several reasons to be skeptical of Brazil's attempts to improve relations with the United States in the years to come, given Brazil's actions in the OAS. For example, Brazil has not replaced its ambassador to the OAS for several years. American officials see that as "a sign that Brazil wants to weaken the OAS in order to strengthen UNASUR (Union of South American Nations), CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), and other diplomatic groups that exclude the United States."¹³ However, others see Brazil as making a great contribution to the spread of democracy within the continent. Upon the announcement of Rousseff's re-election, the OAS Secretary General, José Miguel Inzula, congratulated the re-elected president and heralded Brazil's elections as showing "the strength attained by democratic values in our Hemisphere."¹⁴

Despite the other issues affecting U.S.-Brazil diplomatic relations, one of the biggest challenges facing Rousseff's foreign policy during her second term will be how Brazil and the United States can improve relations, especially in the aftermath of the National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance leaks. Diplomatic relations between the two nations hit an all time low and were seriously strained following revelations that former U.S. intelligence contractor Edward Snowden released documents to investigative reporter Glenn Greenwald,¹⁵ reveling that NSA had spied on Rousseff, her closest allies, and on Brazil's national petroleum company, Pétrobras. For example, Rousseff was scheduled for a state visit to the White House and with President Barack Obama in October 2013, which was promptly suspended after spying allegations came to light, alleging time conflict. During the 2014 World Cup soccer tournament held in Brazil, Vice President Joe Biden met privately with Rousseff to mend fences.¹⁶ On Tuesday, October 28, Obama telephoned Rousseff to congratulate her on her re-election victory. According to the White House:

President Obama called President Dilma Rousseff to congratulate her on her re-election. The President emphasized the strategic value of our bilateral partnership and reinforced his commitment to deepening our cooperation in areas such as commerce, energy, and other priority bilateral issues through our existing strategic dialogue. President Rousseff thanked the President and affirmed that strengthening ties with the United States is a priority for Brazil.¹⁷

Whether this commitment to “strengthening ties with the United States” does become a priority remains to be seen. While the Itamaraty continues to be guided by competent career diplomats of high caliber, Brazil’s foreign policy during Presidents Lula da Silva’s and Rousseff’s tenures has been guided by Marco Aurelio Garcia, who is Rousseff’s “powerful point man for relations with Venezuela, Cuba, and other leftist governments.”¹⁸ Under Garcia’s guidance, Brazil’s foreign policy “has been to consolidate Brazil’s influence in South America, and the Caribbean, even if this meant leaving aside other global trade options” and partners.¹⁹ There are speculations that Garcia may retire soon; if that occurs, Brazil’s foreign policy direction in the future remains unclear toward the United States.

In conclusion, Rousseff’s foreign policy will face many challenges as well as opportunities in the next 4 years. Regardless of the situation, Brazil is well-positioned to make a difference where necessary, and it will respond within its foreign policy tradition of peace and cooperation among nations. Perhaps “Lula” da Silva’s inaugural speech to members of Congress and the nation sums it up best:

. . [the] [t]ime has come for us to transform Brazil into the nation we have always thought about it: a sovereign nation, with dignity, conscious of its importance within the international system, and at the same time, capable of fighting, harbor, and treating all with justice.²⁰

Brazil’s presidential election of 2014 was not only one of the closest in the history of the Republic but also one of the nastiest. The result shows a nation bitterly polarized and divided regarding Brazil’s future. It is incumbent upon Rousseff to heal the wounds of the Nation and once again set Brazil in its proper trajectory.

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