

The repercussions of Brazil's increasing diplomatic assertiveness

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On December 1st, the Brazilian government recognized the Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, i.e. before the Six Day War.¹ Brazil was the last BRIC and IBSA country – Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa – to recognize the Palestinian state. Indeed, more than 100 countries have already recognized the Palestinian state. However, this decision goes against the position of the US and most EU governments, which so far have held back from recognizing a Palestinian state, arguing that it should be brought about through a negotiated peace agreement with Israel.

The decision of the Brazilian government – made in the last month of Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva's presidency – was not a last minute response to unforeseen events, or compelled by new developments in the Middle East. Moreover, it was not a last wish or a whim from President Lula da Silva. With or without Lula da Silva, it seems that the decision would have been made anyway, probably later on. Therefore, the timing is explained by the fact that Lula da Silva did so to protect President-elect Dilma Rousseff from the diplomatic heat, bearing in mind that Israel and the US would certainly criticize the Brazilian government for doing so. In other words, Brazilian diplomacy skillfully used this window of opportunity provided by the presidential transition to limit the inevitable costs of a controversial decision.

In the last decade, it has become quite obvious that the

Brazilian government wished to play a greater role in world affairs. Indeed, if you are in the BRIC league, then – like everybody else – your diplomatic agenda must be truly global. Rather than being only a regional power, the country vied for an increasingly relevant role not only in Latin America, but also globally.

The African continent was the first target of Brazilian diplomacy. Indeed, "during the first Lula term, Brazil not only reopened six shuttered embassies, but also opened thirteen new embassies and a consulate general so that the country now has a network of thirty-two embassies and two consulates general across the African continent".²

Following a successful African diplomatic experience, it seems that the Middle East will be the next target. In order to prepare for closer relations with Arab countries, the Brazilian government had to adjust its approach towards the Palestinian state. Consequently, diplomatic contacts were intensified: the President of the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmud Abbas, visited Brazil in 2009, and Lula da Silva made the first ever visit by a Brazilian President to Israel and the Palestinian territories in March 2010. Thus, recognizing the Palestinian state at the end of Lula's presidency was the only logical step to take.

Moreover, in the last few years, the efforts of Brazilian diplomacy were felt elsewhere in the Middle East. In May 2010, together with Turkey, the Brazilian government was

¹ Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Syria fought the Six Day War between the 5th and 10th of June, 1967. In the end, Israel controlled the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights.

² See J. Peter Pham, "Brazil's Expanding Links in Africa: Lula's Positive Legacy" (*World Defense Review*, 12 October 2010).



quite busy brokering a nuclear fuel swap agreement with Iran. In the end, the deal did not prevent a new round of sanctions against Iran, but provided Brazil with a unique diplomatic opportunity.

The diplomatic recognition of the Palestinian state and the nuclear fuel swap agreement with Iran had one thing in common: both were faced with US opposition and show that Brazilian diplomacy is prepared to tread a different path from the US to safeguard its national interests.

Examples of diplomatic tension and competition between the governments of Brazil and the US are not uncommon. In the last few years, to name but a few, "Brazil denounced the renewal and expansion of the US presence at military bases in Colombia, opposed the coup in Honduras and the US decision not to back the ousted President's return to power, and pushed Washington to lift the embargo against Cuba".³ The examples above were all related with Latin American affairs. In other words, diplomatic tension between Brazil and the US was mainly and circumscribed to Latin America. Apparently this cycle is over, and the greater role that Brazil wishes to play in world affairs will increase the chances of conflict with the US, not only in Latin America, but worldwide.

It goes without saying that this possible change in the relationship between Brazil and the US matters to Portugal, since it might have a diplomatic spillover effect on Portuguese diplomacy. Obviously, despite the increasing levels of competition and diplomatic friction between them, cooperation between Brazil and the US will continue to be the rule rather than the exception in the short and medium term. Yet, if everything else remains unchanged, it is likely that the chances of low and medium level conflict will increase.

³ See Julia E. Sweig, "A New Global Player: Brazil's Far-Flung Agenda" (*Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 6, November/December 2010): 182.

Therefore, it seems that in the forthcoming years Portugal will be confronted with a new reality, and despite the historic ties that bind Brazil and Portugal, it is likely that sometimes the two countries will be unable to converge on some diplomatic issues. It seems likely that in some multilateral forums, the Portuguese government will be confronted with troubling options. Unable to square the circle, it will have to choose between aligning with Brazil, or with the EU and US. The main challenge to Portuguese diplomacy is learning to contain the potentially negative effects of those divergences and the determining, what is the best way to protect the bilateral relationship from unwanted diplomatic spillover effects.

Maintaining a pragmatic approach is certainly a good starting point, as well as keeping regular channels of diplomatic communication open. Moreover, the two governments must be aware of each other's interests and constraints in order to minimize disagreements, while at the same time enhancing bilateral cooperation.⁴

James Reston, a prominent American journalist and twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, once wrote that "in foreign policy you have to wait 25 years to see how it comes out". Unfortunately, time is an expensive luxury and Portugal cannot wait indefinitely to assess the impact of the changing relationship between Brazil and the US. In 2011, Brazil and Portugal will both be on the UN Security Council as non-permanent members. This will provide a unique opportunity to test their capacity – and political and diplomatic will – not only to coordinate diplomatic agendas, but also to circumscribe the potential consequences of their disagreements.

⁴ Last month, the role of NATO in the South Atlantic was a source of misunderstanding between Brazil and Portugal. See Pedro Seabra, "South Atlantic crossfire: Portugal in-between Brazil and NATO" (*IPRIS Viewpoints*, No. 26, November 2010).

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