Rising Powers Quarterly Volume 3, Issue 1, 2018, 25-43

Article

Restraint and Regional Leadership after the PT Era: An Empirical and Conceptual Assessment

Alcides Costa Vaz

Institute of International Relations, University of Brasilia
alcides@unb.br

Abstract

The text analyses the prospects of Brazilian regional leadership after the thirteen year cycle of leftist governments led by the Worker´s Party. The analysis relies on conceptual and analytical contributions of Brent J. Steele and Barry Posen on restraint as a defining trait of foreign policy strategy. It is argued that despite the efforts of Michel Temer´s government to reinvigorate Brazilian foreign policy, political developments at the domestic and regional levels make it difficult to envision a rising, enduring Brazilian approach to regional affairs having regional leadership at its core. It is argued, on the contrary, that restraint has become an important feature of Brazilian policy towards South America since the presidency of Dilma Rousseff extending, though with substantive differences, into the government of Michel Temer.

Keywords

Brazil, Foreign Policy, South America, Regional Leadership

Introduction

During the presidencies of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), Brazil rose as a promising emerging actor at the global stage. Under Lula da Silva, an eventual Brazilian regional leadership became an object of mounting expectations abroad and disagreement within domestic political and diplomatic spheres. For Brazil´s most important extra-regional partners, regional leadership was a natural corollary of its economic, territorial, diplomatic and strategic endowments and a necessary endeavor for it to consolidate the intended status of an influent global actor. At the domestic level, the commitment of limited resources in the region, at the expenses of immediate and urgent domestic needs and of a more intense and effective relationship with developed countries, became a controversial issue.

Despite such controversies, Lula da Silva embraced the task of forging a structured South American political ambience as a major foreign policy priority. Initiatives were launched to foster a South American political identity, expand technical cooperation, integrate infrastructure and set up institutions and mechanisms to advance regional integration. Actually, those initiatives were decisive to reshape and reinvigorate the South American political landscape. However, bringing reluctant neighbors together to forge a coherent collective approach to address the challenges the region faced internally and internationally proved to be hard task, one that defied Brazilian willingness and ability to lead.

In the domestic realm, opponents argued that the emphasis on ideological, political and economic ties with neighbors would drive Brazil away from the core shaping trends of world politics and global economy, deepening its peripheral condition and limiting its international insertion. Such criticism towards the prevailing foreign policy orientation and its approach to South American affairs, as pursued by Lula da Silva, and to a lesser extent, by Dilma Rousseff regained strength with the rise of Michel Temer to power in 2016. With the support of a wide right-wing political coalition, the new Brazilian government moved swiftly to deconstruct the major tenets of Brazilian foreign policy pursued by its immediate predecessors. Despite the new emphasis in strengthening relations with major economies, expectations also rose as to a renewed Brazilian regional engagement and active role in fostering liberal political and economic premises and practices, along with newly elected right wing leaderships in the region.

We argue, however, that a rather different trait has emerged in the realm of Brazilian foreign policy, one that reflects both, the limits of Brazil´s external actions derived from its own political and economic domestic crisis and from transformations observed in the regional and global political landscapes. Domestic political stalemates, diminished political, economic and diplomatic resources and powerful external constraints have contributed to the rise of a sense of restraint as a prevailing trait of Brazilian foreign policy at large, and a more visible one in its regional dimension.

It is against this emerging background that the prospects of Brazilian regional leadership after the Workers Party´s rule will be assessed. The following analysis relies on recent studies on restraint as a foreign policy strategy carried out by Barry Posen (2014) and Brent J. Steele (2016). Their work, as most studies on foreign policy restraint do, have American foreign policy as a primary object. However, the conceptual and analytical framework they have developed provides very useful insights to approach the prospects of Brazilian regional leadership from a, so far, untested perspective. It is our goal to apply and test it.

In order to do so, we offer a brief overview of Brent J. Steele´s and Barry Posen´s

recent contributions to the study and to the political debate on restraint as a possible option for a grand US foreign policy strategy. Such overview highlights those aspects of Steele´s contributions that are regarded useful to the analysis of Brazilian foreign policy regional dimension. The second section provides a concise account of how regional leadership raised as a central issue in the debates on Brazilian foreign policy since the Cardoso years to gain wide visibility during Lula da Silva´s administration. This section also relies on the contributions of prominent experts on Brazilian foreign policy to assess the liabilities Brazil faced in pursuing an active policy orientation towards South America, with a specific focus on Lula da Silva´s government (2003-2016). The third section resumes Steele and Posen´s propositions regarding contextual challenges and the instrumental dimensions of restraint to discuss it as an emerging trait of Brazil´s policies towards the region, particularly under the Presidency of Michel Tamer's. The final section discusses the prospects of Brazilian regional leadership in the near future.

Foreign Policy Restraint: The Conceptual and Analytical Framework

The Cambridge Dictionary (2016) defines restraint as "calm and controlled behavior, something that limits the freedom of someone or something or that prevents something from growing or increasing." In such a sense, restraint bears two distinct behavioral referents: the first is one self, referring to the sustained intent of setting limits to one self´s objectives and actions for the sake of individual or shared interests. This conception evolves around the idea of self-restraint as a behavioral pattern through which one chooses to manage relations with his own environment and with others. It implies the acceptance of self-imposed constraints to one´s behavior and to the employment of available material and non-material capabilities that could be, otherwise, fully resorted to.

Alternatively, restraint may have an external referent, an outsider whose intents, capabilities and actions can or shall be purposefully constrained for the sake of one´s own interests or for the promotion of collective objectives. Differently from the previous sense, it implies a purposeful mobilization and the employment of capabilities available as a core feature of either an individual or collective endeavor.

In International Relations literature, restraint has become a recurrent concept and foreign policy approach, usually inspired by and applied to the analysis of the United States foreign policy and of the desired or actual level of U.S. engagement at the world stage (Steele 2016, p.1). It has acquired greater visibility due to the profound changes that U.S foreign policy has experienced, the polarized debate on the fate of the U.S as a global hegemon and on the values, strategies and goals that should drive its international policies at the world stage in the near future.

The US role and proneness towards activism at the world stage has been usually

depicted in binary terms. On the one hand, it is directly associated to greater and active international engagement and interventionism in boosting U.S power and in fostering its global hegemony, an approach that Brent S. Steele (2016) names *vitalism*. At the opposite, there is retrenchment, an orientation that encompasses restraint, but whose original matrix and absolute expression would be isolationism.

Each of these concurring foreign policy paradigms has its own value framework and set of prescriptions. The first is inspired by Woodrow Wilson´s principled universalism and finds its expression in the global pursuit and uphold of global hegemony through an active and strong commitment to the promotion of a liberal international order and the reliance on both, soft and hard power. The second is inspired by a nationalist mood and a conservative bias in favor of the prominence of national interests over universal or cosmopolitan commitments. Isolationism is a recurrent trait of American politics at large, one that has a strong appeal in contemporary times in face of the greater risks and costs deriving from the U.S. unprecedented exposure to the negative externalities of its international presence and commitments in the security and economic realms in particular.

Drawing on these distinct, concurring views, Barry Posen (2014) makes a strong case in favor of restraint as a foundation of a U.S grand strategy. In his view, restraint would result from the merging of selective engagement and isolationism. It represents a viable and necessary approach to U.S foreign policy strategy to counter the major negative outcomes of U.S excessive international exposure resulting from what Steele (2016, p. 9) names *vitalism*. It is also a response to the negative externalities of the liberal world order in the post-Cold War period. According to Posen (2014, pp.5-11, apud Steele, 2016, p. 1) restraint represents the best alternative grand strategy to the one embraced by the recent Administrations, that, according to that author, results from the fusion of primacy and cooperative security. Restraint would be, in this sense, the proper approach to reassert and adapt U.S global hegemony to the post-Cold War era.

As the major driver of a grand strategy, restraint implies the reduction of too costly and unsustainable U.S political commitments and military deployments abroad. It sustains that the U.S must share the burden of international stability and security with its major and minor allies alike (Posen 2014, p. 71; apud Steele, 2016, 2; Preble & Ruger 2014). Critics of such view, like Robert Lieber (2016), John Ikenberry; Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2012) consider it a dangerous strategy of disengagement that will not lead to greater global stability, as such stability still relies largely on American leadership and power resources as well as on the liberal institutions it forged after the Second World War.

Despite these critics, Steele makes a strong case in favor of restraint for the U.S, its

citizens and for global politics at large (Steele, 2016, 4). He argues that restraint - despite of its own liabilities and temporal and contextual aspects that make it difficult to realize - may yet be the "best of all the worst alternatives" available for a U.S foreign policy grand strategy (Steele, 2016, p. 4). He bases this view in three *meta-normative reasons*: (i) restraint would be less subject to manipulation than vitalism; (ii) it has produced more grounded results, and (iii) it not only prevents community fragmentation, but may even promote its revitalization.

His argument in favor of restraint, however, does not preclude the factors that make such a choice and its own implementation difficult at the present historical circumstances. In order to take such difficulty properly into account, Steele embraces a more comprehensive understanding of restraint, one inspired by Nicholas Onuf´s constructivist approach (Onuf, 1989) which he summarizes in three basic precepts:

a. restraint involves agents and structures simultaneously; therefore, in order to understand the challenge of restraint, one must not focus on just either agent or structure, but on both (Steele, 2016, p. 7). While discussing the methodological and prescriptive implications of locating struggles over restraint within agents and structures simultaneously, Steele (2016, p.7) introduces the idea of *identity costs*, those associated to the effort of changing expectations about commitments and habits that comprise an established sense of identity. It is also related to the burden that changing expectations about commitments may bring to public and elites.

b. restraint does not derive from an ontology centered only on ideational elements but from one that recognizes material considerations as well. In his own words, "restraint involves physical as well as ideational and dispositional features. Restraining a polity involves not only a policy of change, but the removal of forces and the withdrawal of force 'postures' that such a policy may have become otherwise used to in its recent or historic past." (Steele 2016, pp. 8-9). In this case, restraint might be resisted by those who were used to benefit from the actions and resources being provided to them. Such reliance entails attitudes that are, thus, hard to change, observes Steele.

c. restraint holds a moral quality, in the sense that it deals with the limits of one´s own power and with arguments for restraining others, as well as with the moral (and often emotional) judgments concerning the acceptance of self-restraint or the condition of being restrained by others. (Steele 2016, p. 9).

Having gone through core conceptual and contextual aspects of restraint and the

reasons that justify its choice as a foreign policy grand strategy, Steele considers the resources mobilized in its implementation. He distinguishes *institutional* (democratic institutions and norms, international institutions) and *normative* resources for restraint (those found in the culture of a democratic society, the prevailing strategic culture at a given time). A striking feature of such analysis is the emphasis on the existence of proper democratic political, institutional and cultural frameworks as a requisite for restraint to operate, since restraint itself is a matter of political decision made by elites, but whose burdens will be felt by a much larger constituency who is expected to support it. It encompasses then the complex issue of foreign policy legitimacy.

In advanced plural societies, foreign policy decisions that mobilize important resources and capabilities usually acquire some level of sensitiveness and public visibility and, therefore, demand a properly framed political and social debate. In societies where the democratic pillars and the very value of democratic institutions are not entirely consolidated, foreign policy issues are usually less permeable to a wider political debate, being yet highly vulnerable to manipulation and corruption. Thus, the legitimacy of foreign policy decisions (or its deficit) - namely those associated to a change of strategic orientation - becomes a forefront issue due to its potential overarching political and normative implications.

Steele´s effort to provide a realistic account of the feasibility of restraint as a core trait of a U.S foreign policy strategy leads him to consider the actual circumstances that challenge such endeavor. Being a matter of a political choice, restraint is influenced by what Steele names *contextual challenges* (2016, p. 15). He identifies three major contextual challenges for a U.S policy of restraint, namely: (i) the importance of globalization and the insecurity and uncertainties it brings about; (ii) the end of U.S primacy and leadership; (iii) an envisioned future which is hard to predict and to be assimilated into a strategic narrative that can provide predictability and, therefore, less insecurity.

Finally, Steele asserts that a consistent strategic narrative of restraint is needed to support and endorse it as a viable and better alternative foreign policy grand strategy than the one centered on greater U.S. international engagement (including the willingness to intervene whenever necessary). Having gone through the basic conceptual tenets of Posen´s and Steele´s approaches to foreign policy restraint, we now discuss the emergence of restraint as a trait and a possible interpretative approach to contemporary Brazilian foreign policy.

The Case for a Restraint Approach to Brazilian Policy Toward South America

What matters in Posen´s and Steele´s approaches for the sake of the present analysis is the conceptual framework the analytical and interpretative possibilities

it provides to the ongoing debate on the (re)definition of foreign policy strategy and on the desired level of international engagement and place and importance of the region in this regard. It is important to remark that such contributions are essentially of a conceptual and methodological nature. They do not comprise a proper and broader theoretical framework for an accurate analysis on Brazilian foreign policy strategies at large. Rather, the major value of their contribution lies in the provision of a simple and insightful set of conceptual tools (normative and institutional resources, identity costs and contextual challenges being the most prominent among them) that allows Brazil`s policy towards South America to be interpreted from a different perspective. The very concept of restraint and a more comprehensive understanding of it, as Steele suggests, are themselves valuable tools to discuss current Brazilian foreign policy trends and approaches to South America and the immediate prospects of Brazil´s regional leadership. Before moving further in this preliminary and tentative scrutiny of the analytical possibilities that restraint provides to identify and analyze current trends in Brazilian foreign policy and in its regional dimension in particular, it is necessary to qualify it. As previously seen, restraint implies the willingness of an agent towards voluntary self-restraint and/or the willingness to restrain someone else. It also implies the renouncement to the full employment of one´s own resources to influence others or, alternatively, the willingness to employ them partially or extensively for that same purpose. In the case of Brazil´s relations to its neighbors, a restraint component is identifiable in both senses. It can be firstly associated to resources endowment. What is at stake in this case is whether or not capabilities and resources available are sufficient to underscore the intent to exert a desired level of influence on regional affairs. In the case of Brazil in the context of the 2.000s, the material and immaterial resources available were certainly limited, but they provided important points of departure to the pursuit of a regional endeavor that was actually taken up. But equally important to the feasibility of that endeavor in the region is the ability to inspire trust and to motivate others to join and support that endeavor. As observed by Malamud (2011), Brazil´s such ability was limited to the point of it being depicted as a "leader without followers". In both cases, Brazil faced important constraints, but these, we argue, were not the fundamental explanations for restraint having become a core trait of its policy towards its region.

Conceptually, a rather different situation emerges when an actor with enough available resources gives up the pursuit of an attainable objective for any reason. In such a case, self-restraint is in course. We argue that this is precisely what has happened to Brazil´s policy to South America under Dilma Rousseff and Michel Temer. Under Dilma Rousseff, there was a strong decrease of the political, diplomatic and economic investment in the pursuit of what still was, at least nominally, a formal foreign policy priority due to a political decision to do so. With Temer, what once was a feasible priority has been given up.

Restraint is also identifiable in Brazil´s stances towards extra-regional actors` interests or presence in South America. Both, Brazil´s foreign and defense policies display a vivid concern with regional stability and, therefore, with regional sources of instability and the eventual display of military power by extra-regional actors in the neighborhood. Under Lula da Silva, a political decision was made to strengthen political, diplomatic and economic ties with its neighbors and to develop military capabilities to reduce the options, to dissuade and, eventually, react effectively to any undesired external intent in the territory under Brazilian jurisdiction, as overtly stated in Brazil´s 2005 National Defense Policy and in the 2008 National Defense Strategy. In such a sense, Brazil would be seeking the ability and the resources to restrain others.

In both senses, restraint emerges an important trait and an appealing, viable approach to interpret recent developments of Brazilian policy towards its neighborhood. In the following section, we will carry out an analysis of the rise and fall of regional leadership as a forefront issue of Brazilian foreign policy as a means to provide empirical ground to the argument of a gradual rise of restraint as a core trait of current Brazilian policy towards South America.

Rise and Descent of Regional Leadership in Brazilian Foreign Policy

Brazilian regional leadership rose as controversial issue in the realm of Brazilian foreign policy in the past two decades as Brazil definitely tried to improve its international status quo. The quest for greater influence at the global level led Brazilian foreign policy observers domestically and abroad to associate it to a necessary corresponding effort to attain and exercise regional leadership (Flemes 2010). The manifested willingness to play active regional roles seemed to endorse the premise that there was a real, genuine but undeclared Brazilian intent either to take up the role of regional leader or, at least, to be recognized as such.

However, denying the intent of regional leadership had been part of a sustained effort of the Brazilian diplomacy to avoid misgivings and misinterpretations by the neighbors regarding Brazil´s regional interests as related to a quest for regional hegemony. Actually, Brazilian foreign policy had been long driven by a quest for autonomy both at the global and regional levels. To such quest, one must add to the asymmetric nature of relations with the neighbors, raising uncertainties as to Brazil´s actual underlying interests and motivations towards them: were they regarded actual partners or were they privileged spaces where Brazilian political, economic and strategic national interests were to be displayed and pursued?

Previous Brazilian initiatives of political dialogue, trade liberalization, infrastructure integration and the ideological proximity observed in the mid-2000´s were important to counter political misgivings of the neighbors and provided

enough confidence for them to support Brazilian stances in the region. However, there was a real concern in avoiding an excessive reliance on their friendly, but self-interested, giant neighbor: Argentina, struck by a deep economic crisis, moved closer to Venezuela in the early 2000s; Bolivia and Ecuador adhered to Venezuela´s bolivarianism while Chile continued to purse an independent path towards its regional and global insertion. Peru moved to strengthen its ties to the Pacific Rim and Colombia, under Alvaro Uribe, insisted in sustaining closer ties with the U.S.

Besides that, Brazil was not the sole, uncontested candidate to the status of regional leader. With Hugo Chavez in power in Venezuela in 1999, an unprecedented condition gradually took form in South America political landscape. For the first time, two important countries led by leftist forces embraced convergent but distinct political projects to address regional challenges collectively and made consistent moves to implement them (Burges, 2007). In other words, regionalism had become, through different means and perspectives, a core feature of both Brazil´s and Venezuela´s respective foreign policy strategies, what posed meaningful political obstacles for the pursuit of regional leadership.

Despite that, the issue became the object of a domestic debate which started yet in 2003, when Brazil led efforts to comprise the Friends of Venezuela Group to provide immediate assistance to that country when workers of PDVSA, the stated owned oil company, went on a strike that severely affected the provision of basic needs of the Venezuelan population. It evolved significantly in the wake of the controversial regime change in Haiti, in February 2004, and with the following UN decision to deploy a peace mission to stabilize the country, with Brazil leading its military component. It gained additional strength with the creation of the South American Community of Nations (CASA) in April 2004, a Brazilian initiative intended to forge a South American institutional framework for political dialogue and cooperation.

In that same context, South America was formally regarded a priority for Brazil´s national defense, being the core dimension of Brazil´s Strategic Environment, a concept embraced by the 2005 National Defense Policy and reasserted in the 2008 National Defense Strategy. The same happened in two other important issue areas: development assistance (Pinheiro & Gaio, 2014) and infrastructure financing (Couto, 2010). The international prestige achieved by Brazil in fighting poverty and promoting economic and social inclusive growth, as well as its engagement in multilateral fora helped elicit its profile of an emerging power. By the end of the 2000´s, several political, economic and academic voices, both in the United States and in Europe, had also linked Brazil´s aspirations to the status of a global actor to the need to take up greater responsibilities in its own region and abroad (Bethell, 2010; Flemes, 2010; Wehner, 2011). Altogether, these factors

nourished perceptions that regional leadership had become an undisputed trait and a major driver of Brazilian foreign policy. However, doubts still existed as to the actual willingness and capabilities of the Brazilian government to accept and take up the costs of regional leadership (Almeida, 2006). Simultaneously, strong criticism emerged domestically as to the way Lula da Silva´s government dealt with asymmetric relations with the neighborhood, namely with Bolivia and Paraguay. While the Brazilian government made important concessions, in both countries demands and decisions regarded as contrary to Brazil´s national interests emerged (Almeida, 2006; Seitenfus, 2008). In that same context, Venezuela´s regional assertiveness and its intent to shape a regional environment based on its Bolivarian ideology – and, therefore, at the expenses of former sub-regional integration mechanisms like MERCOSUR and the Andean Community of Nations - posed important constraints to Brazil´s political and diplomatic regional initiatives.

The extinction of the South America Community of Nations in 2006, and the subsequent creation of the South American Union of Nations - UNASUR in 2008 exemplified the impending need of the two major South American political actors to find common grounds in their often parallel efforts to strengthen political and economic regionalism. Their competing views on regionalism had become apparent enough to be regarded solely as differences of style or emphasis; there was an actual diplomatic struggle over the premises, the contents and the expected outcomes of their respective conceptions of regionalism (Burges 2007). This struggle was exacerbated by their different views regarding the relations with the United States and with other extra regional powers. In such a polarized context, regional leadership, either by Brazil or Venezuela, was an endeavor doomed to failure, as subsequent developments demonstrated.

In January 2011, when Lula da Silva handled power to Dilma Rousseff, South America did not enjoy the political appeal and visibility it had a few years before in the framework of Brazilian foreign policy. More than that, the new Brazilian government did not succeed in sustaining most of its predecessor´s foreign policy accomplishments and Brazil´s international profile receded accordingly.

Actually, there were very few meaningful foreign policy accomplishments during the mandate of Dilma Rousseff, and they were all displayed at the multilateral level. In 2011, in the realm of the United Nations debates on the fate of peace operations and the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), Brazil presented a paper on Responsibility While Protecting (RWP) as an additional normative approach to humanitarian intervention, one that addressed the concerns with the possibility of R2P being misused for the sake of other political and strategic goals other than humanitarian concerns. RWP gained important international attention, even though Brazil refrained from giving it additional support or strength.

In a rather different front, in January 2012, Rio de Janeiro hosted the third United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Widely acknowledged as a forefront player in the multilateral negotiations on environment, Brazil did have a unique opportunity to reassert its influence in that issue area. Despite of succeeding in providing all the necessary conditions for that Conference, the very limited advancements achieved prevented Brazil capitalizing foreign policy gains from it. A third issue area where Brazil managed to act proactively during Rousseff´s presidency was Internet governance. Following Edward Snowden´s revelations of massive U.S surveillance activities abroad, Brazil played an active role in questioning existing multilateral mechanisms for internet governance and hosted another international summit (NETmundial), in April 2014, to discuss the fate of internet governance. The initiative became a landmark in multilateral debate on that issue.

These achievements were, however, obfuscated by setbacks in other fronts. Brazil´s initiatives towards development assistance receded strongly, frustrating expectations as to what had been perceived as a core feature of Brazil´s proposals to reinvigorate South-South relations. Brazil also became a secondary player in the realm of coalitions like the BRICS, as China, backed by Russia, took the lead in crafting the group´s agenda and initiatives. IBSA, the trilateral mechanism set up in 2004 comprising India, Brazil and South Africa to foster political dialogue and cooperation among them in a wide array of issue areas lost visibility and relevance both at the global stage and in Brazilian foreign policy. In its own region, Brazil witnessed the gradual weakening of UNASUR and its Defense Council, stances whose creation it had led successfully, while MERCOSUR, once regarded a core leveling platform for Brazil´s political and economic regional insertion, lost relevance. At the bilateral level, relations with Cristina Kirshner´s Argentina dropped to its lowest level in years. Strong difficulties were also experienced with the U.S in the aftermath of National Security Agency (NSA) spying President Rousseff and the Brazilian oil giant PETROBRAS; with the European Union, no relevant achievements in trade negotiations with MERCOSUR and in fostering Brazil-UE bilateral strategic partnership were observed.

Such external retreat took place as economic slowdown, widespread corruption and social discontentment evolved quickly in the domestic domain, leading to an acute political crisis which culminated in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2017, and a great loss of confidence in political institutions. These issues gained much more visibility and had a far greater impact on Brazil´s external image than the few foreign policy accomplishments.

Therefore, recent literature on Brazil´s foreign policy has placed great emphasis on the causes of the country´s international and regional retreat (Gratius and Saraiva 2013; Wehner, 2015; Malamud 2016). Most authors converge on the basic

explanations for that. Malamud, who had previously asserted that Brazil was a leader without followers (Malamud 2011), argues in a recent work (Malamud, 2016) that a combination of unfavorable conditions at home and abroad determined Brazil's drastic rollback from the international stage, what was exacerbated by insufficient resource endowment and cumulative policy mistakes. He also attributes foreign policy inertia to the absence of Brazilian political leadership in South America. Kai Enno Lehmann endorses the same reasoning by arguing that Brazil ´s inability to lead is a direct consequence of an incoherent pattern of conditions to which the economic crisis contributed but did not start (Lehman 2016). For him, reassuming a leadership position is still a feasible task, as long as the country manages to identify the conditions that form and sustain the pattern of incoherence which characterizes Brazilian foreign policy at the moment. Vaz (2014), in turn, attributes Brazil´s foreign policy retreat to the inability of both Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in crafting a new political and economic strategy to orient Brazil´s international actions in changing global and regional scenarios, with mounting domestic political grievances and the emphasis on economic performance diverting attention from foreign policy.

Therefore, by the end of the Workers Party rule, Brazil was, in fact, deprived of proper conditions to respond assertively to global and regional challenges, thus exhibiting an unprecedented foreign policy low profile which contrasted strongly with the activism it had displayed less than a decade before. It is from this background that a case for restraint becoming a defining trait of Brazilian policy towards South America can be made and the prospects for regional leadership assessed.

Brazilian Foreign Policy at the Present: A Case of Restraint?

The retreat Brazilian foreign policy experimented under Dilma Rousseff provided opportunity for the new government led by Michel Temer to deconstruct several initiatives undertaken by its immediate predecessors. This was a declared intent to correct what the new political leaders rendered as flawed and ideologically biased choices that contributed decisively to keep Brazil isolated from major current political and economic trends to which other emerging powers were successfully adapting to.

Actually, Michel Temer´s first moves in this domain were intended to convey not only a sense of change, but of rupture, particularly with those initiatives that, according to their critics, responded primarily to political and ideological concerns of the Workers Party rather than to Brazilian foreign policy interests.

The basic guidelines of Temer´s proposed foreign policy were elicited in ten directives announced by Minister José Serra in his inauguration speech on May 18,

2016 (SERRA, 2016) comprising the distancing from the ideological perspectives of a single political party, the defense of democracy, civil liberties and human rights, the acceleration of trade negotiations through a greater emphasis on bilateralism and not on the World Trade Organization multilateralism and on the opening of export markets for Brazilian products and a closer interaction with the private sector. Altogether, these directives encompassed a more liberal approach to the country´s immediate needs and concerns, especially in the economic realm. A strong emphasis on foreign trade and a decisive move towards traditional partners in the developed world should then become the core features of Brazilian foreign policy.

However, Michel Temer´s initial foreign policy moves had a much more symbolic impact than a substantial one, as they privileged the ideological deconstruction; foreign policy actually became subject to the logics of a highly polarized political environment rather than to a balanced assessment of the necessities and opportunities to be pursued internationally. The nomination of José Serra - a former presidential candidate and a would-be pre-candidate for the 2018 presidential run – as Minister of Foreign Relations, was an evident signal of the submission of foreign policy to domestic political interests. Due to political injunctions, Mr. Serra left office in March 2017 and Aloysio Nunes, a former President of Senate´s Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee took office, with no major or substantial change in relation to his predecessor.

Under Temer and Aloysio Nunes, foreign policy has been instrumental to convey a sense of change, to broadcast domestic economic accomplishments and gain external support for the agenda of economic reforms. The visions and initiatives towards South America serve the first purpose primarily. The resumption of trade negotiations between MERCOSUR and the European Union, the intent to reinvigorate relations with Argentina, Chile and Colombia, the resumption of infrastructure projects in the framework of UNASUR, the decision to suspend Venezuela from MERCOSUR and the first South American ministerial meeting to deal with drugs and arms were, indeed, important moves of Temer´s diplomacy at the regional level. But, taken altogether, they do not comprise a regional strategy, but a set of parallel initiatives through which the Brazilian government intends to distance itself from those inherited from Lula da Silva.

South America has undergone important political transformations leading most countries to search opportunities and partnerships in other spaces - Asia in particular - while political and economic regionalism fades. An eventual intent of regional leadership will, therefore, face a more heterogeneous, fragmented and outward looking region with individual countries pursuing external objectives either through independent initiatives or through specific arrangements, like the Pacific Alliance. The rise of an increasingly fragmented region contrasts with what had

been envisioned and pursued by Brazilian diplomacy a few years before. In face of that, Brazilian regional policy has evolved through a predominantly double track approach. The first aims at the protection of Brazilian economic and commercial interests in order to help resume economic growth. Bilateralism emerges as a major stance for that purpose. The second track consists in muddling through South American political agenda by taking advantage of eventual convergences with neighbors like Argentina, Peru and Colombia to deal with regional issues (the Venezuelan crisis and borders security at large as prominent ones) and, to a less extent, with political, economic and strategic interests of extra-regional powers as displayed in the region.

The most prominent signs that Brazil has refrained from playing active roles in relevant South American issues derive from its very marginal presence in two decisive processes for the shaping of the political, economic and security regional landscape: Colombia´s peace process and the crisis in Venezuela. Brazil´s little influence in them is a strong sign that it has become less relevant to its neighbors as a desired or necessary referent. Therefore, an immediate political task for Brazil in its region is to restore positive expectations as to its role and regain prestige and influence onto its neighbors.

As to extra regional partners, there has been a deliberate option to prioritize relations with developed countries, thus correcting what was regarded as an excessive reliance on South-South relations. The major assets potentially available for Brazil to exploit opportunities in this respect lie in the mid and long terms positive externalities of economic recovery and of the ongoing reforms. There are, with no doubts, positive external expectations as to the outcomes of economic reforms embraced by Michel Temer, but these expectations have been countered by the government´s own political liabilities, by uncertainties as to legislative willingness to endorse critical and unpopular economic measures by a high level of unpredictability as to the next government compromise with the current economic agenda.

This brief account of the domestic and regional political landscape clearly shows that a sense of restraint has been evolving in Brazil´s policy towards South America, leaving very little grounds for regional leadership to become a relevant issue of Brazilian foreign policy in the near future. Actually, there are very few incentives and conditions either for Brazil to take up the issue or for the region to abide to an eventual Brazilian endeavor towards it. As previously mentioned, a shift towards restraint as an orientation to Brazilian regional policy brings about an identity cost for its elites and population whose self-image and those related to the region have always elicited the differentials of capabilities in favor of Brazil, leading to the flawed perception that Brazil mattered much more to the region than the contrary. Ultimately, each Brazilian neighbor may find viable alternatives to avoid a reliance on Brazil´s potential contribution to its economic and social

development and to its political and social stability. China has emerged quickly as a privileged partner while other Asian countries like Japan and South Korea have tried to make their own way towards South America.

Due to its very position in South America and to the distinct dynamics of the relationship with each of its ten territorial neighbors, Brazil cannot escape the reliance on them to foster his own interests and objectives in the political, economic and security realms. It is, therefore, highly paradoxical that, at the present, Brazil finds in restraint "the best of all the worst alternatives", in Steele´s words, to deal with the consequences of power asymmetries in the relations with the neighborhood and with the growing display of interests of extra regional powers in the region.

In such a scenario, the contextual challenges identified by Steele gain relevance. They forge a complex environment comprised by political, economic and security dynamics whose interfaces are not easily identifiable, but whose consequences in terms of higher unpredictability confirm Steele´s assertion that the difficulty faced by global and regional powers in forging shared views on a jointly envisaged future represents itself a sound contextual challenge for the exercise of a restraint policy. In this regard, it is worth considering the regional impacts of the asymmetric interdependence entailed by economic globalization on Brazil´s relations with and its neighbors.

In previous economic crisis, like those experienced from the early seventies to the mid-eighties, Latin American countries reasserted the importance of regional cooperation and integration. Differently from that, the 2008 economic crisis and the imbalances derived from asymmetric interdependence have fostered an unprecedented sense of vulnerability and a pattern of accentuated fragmentation. This, in turn, has facilitated the display of interests of extra-regional powers in South America. As already mentioned, the growing presence of China and, to a much less extent, of Russia in South America tends to reinforce the sense of relative decline of the US as global hegemon.

The little attention dedicated by the U.S.A to the region since the end of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations in 2003 provided an opportunity for both Brazil and Venezuela to place themselves as referents to the promotion of political and economic regionalism. At the present, however, there is a clear leadership gap in what refers to regional political dialogue and economic relations as well as to the challenges associated to the increasing display of interests of extra-regional actors in South America. Under Temer, Brazil refrained from filling in that leadership gap.

Actually, Brazil continues to face great limits as to its ability to deal with current

political developments and with fragmentation in its own immediate environment as well as with the increasing presence of extra-regional powers in it. Developing capabilities to restrain extra-regional actors in the pursuit of their interests in South America may be advocated both in the diplomatic and defense realms, but such dimension of an eventual restraint policy must remain as an intended, but not an actual one, in the near future. Therefore, Brazil´s evolving profile of foreign policy restraint is, therefore, an unbalanced one associated only to self-restraint.

So far, Brazil´s policy towards South America has not generated a consistent strategic narrative to underscore it, neither is it a part of a grand international strategy that provides guidance and explanatory foundations to policy decisions. According to Steele, the inability of power elites to forge a strategic narrative (and an international grand strategy, we may add) represents one of the three obstacles identified to the effective pursuit of a restraint-oriented foreign policy. In such a context, both the legitimacy gap and identity costs tend to increase, making restraint potentially fruitless as an approach to Brazil´s regional policy.

Concluding Remarks

Restraint holds interesting possibilities as a conceptual and theoretical perspective to describe and interpret current trends of Brazilian foreign policy, particularly in what concerns its regional dimension and the fate of Brazilian regional leadership as an eventual endeavor. However, as a core feature of foreign policy and a strategic orientation it is difficult to materialize and succeed if the array of viability factors previously regarded is not properly taken into account.

Brazilian foreign policy and its regional expression are now subject to the intent of pursuing a daring agenda of economic reforms, having as its major point of departure a strong criticism of priorities and alignments envisaged by Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff for being too ideological, costly and counterproductive in political and economic terms. The same reasoning has been applied to its South American dimension which was, according to such criticism, driven primarily by ideological preferences and a voluntarist and paternalistic bias that led ultimately to Brazil´s dissociation from major contemporary political and economic trends.

Therefore, under present conditions, there are no sound prospects for the resumption of greater Brazilian activism at the regional level, not to say for the pursuit of regional leadership as an eventual core dimension of its foreign policy. Not only the domestic political landscape has been changing in unfavorable terms to that endeavor; the region itself has experienced important transformations that have resulted in more fragmentation than cohesion and integration. The choice for greater freedom has prevailed over collective action in framing current foreign

policies in the region.

There would be important potential incentives for Brazil to resume an active high profile towards South America. But this possibility has been given up in favor of a political decision equally underscored in ideological motivations to concentrate efforts in bringing Brazil closer to developed nations, becoming, consequently, less focused and engaged in South America. Therefore, its policies towards the region will continue to display some level of restraint, either as matter of political choice, as at the present, or as an outcome of unfavorable structural trends and contextual circumstances at the domestic and external levels simultaneously.

Maybe it is too soon to assert that restraint will consolidate itself as a core defining trait of Brazilian foreign policy in the near future. In the course of the past two decades, Brazil has tried to relate its diversified array of natural, political and economic endowments to a proper regional profile and to grasp the benefits of its regional initiatives for the sake of its own development and of its international insertion whenever opportune. We should not expect that Brazil remain passive or reactive in its own region. Restraint is not the same as passiveness or inaction. There will always be room for assertiveness in Brazil´s policy towards South America. The extent and the scope of it, the way it will be framed politically and institutionally and its actual impacts in the neighborhood will define Brazil´s regional profile in the coming years; how enduring the present trait of self-restraint will be a decisive factor in the shaping of South America´s political environment in the future.

Bio

President of the Brazilian Association for Defense Studies. Former Director of the Institute of International Relations, University of Brasilia.

References

Albuquerque, JAG 2013 'El liderazgo de Brasil en América del Sur – 2002/2012.' in B Sorj & F Sergio (eds), Brasil y América Latina: ¿Qué Liderazgo es Posible?, Plataforma Democrática, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, pp. 275-300.

Almeida, P.R 2006, 'A new diplomatic framework in Brazil? - Contrasting interpretations about Lula's foreign policy (2003-2006)', Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional, vol. 49 n. 1, pp. 95-116.

Barbosa, R.A 2017, 'A política externa do governo Temer: uma primeira avaliação registra avanços em relação aos últimos 15 anos nessa área.' O Estado de São Paulo, 14 February, p.2.

Bethel, L 2010, 'Brazil: regional power, global power.' Open Democracy. 8 June, retrieved 10 October 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/leslie-bethell/

brazil-regional-power-global-power>.

Burges, S 2007, 'Building a Global Southern Coalition: the competing approaches of Brazil's Lula and Venezuela's Chávez.', Third World Quartely, vol.28, n.7, pp. 1343-1358.

Couto, L 2010, 'Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South-America – IIRSA', Global Forum on Governance: Modernizing Government: strategies & tools for change. OECD, Paris, 5 October, retrieved 7 October, 2017, <https:www.oecd.org/site/govgfg/39612363.pdf>.

Flemes, D 2010, 'Brazil: Strategic Options in the Changing World Order', in D. Flemes (ed), Regional Leadership in the Global System: Ideas, Interests and Strategies of Regional Powers, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp. 93-112.

Gratius, S & Saraiva, MG 2013, 'Continental Regionalism: Brazil's prominent role in the Americas',. CEPS Working Document, n. 374, February.

Hurrell, A 2006, 'Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?' International Affairs 2006, vol. 82, n.1, pp. 1-19.

Inkenberry, J 1998, 'Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Persistence of American Postwar Order', International Security, vol.23, n.3, pp. 43-78.

Inkenberry, J; Brooks, S.; Wohlforth, W, 2012, 'Don't Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment', International Security, vol.37, n.3, pp. 7-51.

Lehman, KE 2017, 'Can Brazil Lead? The Breakdown of Brazilian Foreign Policy and What it Means for the Region', Rising Power Quartely, vol.2, n.2, pp. 125-147.

Lieber, RJ 2016, 'Diplomacy´s aversion to power: consequences of retreat' World Affairs, vol 179, n. 1, pp.35-45.

Lustig, C 2016, 'Soft or Hard Power? Discourse Patterns in Brazil's Foreign Policy Toward South America', Latin American Politics and Society, vol. 58, n. 4, pp.103-125.

Malamud, A, 2017, 'Foreign Policy Retreat: Domestic and Systemic Causes of Brazil's International Rollback',. Rising Power Quartely, vol. 2, n. 2, pp. 149-168.

_____ 2011, 'A Leader Without Followers? The Growing Divergence Between the Regional and Global Performance of Brazilian Foreign Policy', Latin American Politics and Society, vol. 53, n. 3, pp. 1–24.

Meiser, J 2014, 'Power and restraint: the rise of the United States, 1898-1941', GeorgetownUniversity Press, Georgetown, USA.

Pinheiro, L & Gaio, G 2014, 'Cooperation for Development, Brazilian Regional Leadership and Global Protagonism', Brazilian Political Science Review, vol. 8, n.2, 25 June, retrieved 5 November, <http://www.scielo.br/scielo.

php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1981-38212014000200008>.

Posen, BR 2014, 'Restraint: a new foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy', Cornell University Press, Cornell, USA.

Preble, C; Ruger, W 2014, 'The problem with primacy', in C. Preble; E. Ashford; T. Evans (Eds), Our foreign policy choices: rethinking America´s global role, Cato Institute Press ,Washington D.C, USA, pp. 5-10.

Serra, J 2016, Inauguration speech as Minister of Foreing Affairs. Brasilia, 16 May retrieved 10 September, 2016, <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/pt-BR/discursos-artigos-e-entrevistas-categoria/ministro-das-relacoes-exteriores-discursos/14038-discurso-do-ministro-jose-serra-por-ocasiao-da-cerimonia-de-transmissao-do-cargo-de-ministro-de-estado-das-relacoes-exteriores-brasilia-18-de-maio-de-2016>.

Seitenfus, R 2008, 'Líder solidário ou potência egoísta? Os dilemas do Brasil frente ao novo Paraguai', Interesse Nacional, vol. 1, pp. 47-55.

Steele, BJ 2016, 'Restraint and International Relations: a proposal". Annual Meeting of the ISA-South, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, USA, retrieved 11 November 2017, <http://www.academia.edu/29084496/Restraint_and_International_Relations_a_proposal>.

Trinkunas, H 2015, 'Brazil´s global ambitions', Brookings, 5 Feb, retrieved 11 November 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/brazils-global-ambitions/>

Vaz, AC 2014, 'La política exterior de Brasil en perspectiva: del activismo internacional a la continuidad y pérdida de impulso', in A. Bonilla & G. Jaramilo (eds). La CELAC en el escenario contemporáneo de América Latina y del Caribe. FLACSO, San José; pp. 145-158.

_____ 2013, 'La Acción Regional Brasileña bajo las ópticas de la Diplomacia y la Defensa: Continuidades y Convergencias', in B.Sorj & S.Fausto (eds), Brasil y América Latina: ¿Qué Liderazgo es Posible? Plataforma Democrática, Rio de Janeiro, pp. 241-274.

Wehner, L 2011, 'Roles and actions of leadership: Brazil and the South American others', in N. Godehardt & D. Nabers (eds), Regional Powers and Regional Orders, Routledge/Garnet, London, UK, pp. 137-154.

Wehner. L 2015, 'Role Expectations as Foreign Policy: South American Secondary Powers' Expectations of Brazil as a Regional Power', Foreign Policy Analysis, n. 11, pp. 435-455.