

Is Contemporary Brazilian Foreign Policy Personalistic?

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Abstract

In 2023, in the first year of his third term as President of Brazil, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva has made several statements that have raised eyebrows in Western capitals, especially in Washington DC. This brings up the question of to what extent Brazilian foreign policy is conducted personally by the President. This paper explores the question, arguing that for several reasons Brazilian foreign policymaking is less personalistic than it might first appear. These reasons include the professionalization of Brazil’s federal bureaucracy, the bureaucratic nature of the Foreign Ministry, and the confederal and consociational characteristics of the Brazilian political system. This paper asserts that Lula’s role in the foreign policy-making process, while prominent, largely stays within the lines of long-established institutional constraints. By examining a few examples of Lula’s statements, I will attempt to demonstrate how institutional constraints operate when President Lula is perceived by other foreign policy actors to have improvised in a way that deviates from official policy.

Introduction

President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, currently in his first year of a third term as President of Brazil, has raised eyebrows in the United States with some of his statements about foreign policy. For example, on the 13th of April of this year, during a visit to China in which he visited the headquarters of the telecommunications firm Huawei and the BRICS’ New Development Bank, he said, “Every night I ask myself why all the countries have to conduct their trade in dollars. Why can’t we trade in our own currency? Why don’t we have the commitment to innovate? Who decided that the dollar had to be the currency after parity with gold disappeared? Why wasn’t it the yen? Why not the real, or the peso?” (Ninio 2023).

To give another example, on 16th of April 2023, during a visit to the United Arab Emirates, he expressed his desire for Brazil to be part of a group of states that spoke with both Russia and Ukraine to try to end the war in Ukraine and said that “the decision to [go to] war was taken by two countries” (Ventura 2023). In a third and final example, during the G20 Summit in India, on the 9th of September 2023, President Lula was asked about the possible participation of Russian President Vladimir Putin in the G20 Summit in Brazil being planned for 2024, as part of Brazil’s presidency of the G20, and said, “I believe that Putin could easily go to Brazil” for the summit.¹

These and other statements like them raise the question of who is controlling Brazilian foreign policy. More specifically, do these statements reflect Lula’s personal control of that policy, in that they are Lula’s opinions but not those of Brazil’s foreign policy establishment? Are these examples of a personalistic administration that is engaged in bad

governance, with a rogue president who is riding roughshod over institutions in a way that is arbitrary, unaccountable, and unrepresentative?

This paper suggests that the answer to both questions is no. It will proceed in three steps. It will first claim that the scope for personalism in the foreign policy realm in contemporary Brazil is quite limited. This is due both to the nature of the federal bureaucracy, including the Foreign Ministry, and the characteristics of the broader political system. Second, the paper will assert that Lula's role in the foreign policy-making process, while prominent, largely stays within the lines of long-established institutional constraints. And third, by examining a few examples, I will attempt to demonstrate how institutional constraints operate when President Lula is perceived by other foreign policy actors to have improvised in a way that deviates from official policy.

The Bureaucratic Machinery of Foreign Policy in Brazil

As I have argued elsewhere (Pereira 2016), Brazil's federal bureaucracy has become considerably more professional and "Weberian" in recent years. (Weberian bureaucracies require a competitive examination for entry, offer job stability and the prospect of long-term career progression, recognize merit and reward good performance, and value technical skills and rational-legal forms of expertise and decision-making.) Whereas as recently as the 1980s Presidents had discretion to appoint thousands of employees to patronage positions, without examinations and qualifications, that avenue into the national civil service has diminished in recent years and *concursos*, or civil service examinations, are required in the vast majority of positions. In 1985 only 125,000 of 1,825,000 federal public employees (or less than 7 percent of the employees) had been hired through public service examinations,

the rest having been chosen according to political criteria (Pereira 2016: 145). In the mid-to late 1990s a major reform of public administration took place. Today, below the level of direct presidential appointments, it is now virtually impossible to enter the federal civil service without a competitive exam, except in the case of consultants hired on a short-term basis. A study conducted in the late 2000s concluded that civil servants hired without an exam (*servidores comissionados*) represented only 14.5 percent of all civilian functionaries registered in the federal government and only 7.6 percent of all 1,011,065 non-military federal employees in 2009 (Pereira 2016: 146). Key federal agencies such as the Treasury, the Central Bank, the Brazilian Development Bank, and the Planning, Development, Industry and Commerce Ministry, whatever else their failings, are widely seen as high on the “Weberianness” scale (Pereira 2016: 145-146).

Itamaraty, as the Foreign Ministry is known, is perhaps the most prestigious and well-known of these “islands of efficiency” in the Brazilian state. There used to be a saying in Brazil that there were only two certain events in any given year: Carnival and the *concurso* (exam) for the Foreign Ministry – the Admission to the Diplomatic Career (CADC, *Concurso de Admissão a Carreira de Diplomata*). This exam is famously difficult because it requires knowledge of Brazilian and world history, geography, economics, law, and international politics as well as mastery of Portuguese and English and a third language (Spanish or French). Those passing the exam have tended to come from traditional upper-class families, especially in Rio de Janeiro, although that is starting to change. Those who are admitted to the foreign service train for three semesters at the Rio Branco Institute in Brasília. Itamaraty is dominated by career diplomats and in only a few positions are political appointments made to ambassadorial positions (such as to Lisbon and the Vatican). Even the Foreign Minister is generally a career diplomat. Itamaraty and the diplomatic profession have

considerable prestige inside Brazil. Internationally, Brazil has the fourth-largest diplomatic corps in the world that is often viewed positively for its professionalism by the officials of other governments.

There have been periods in Brazilian history in which individual leaders exercised tremendous personal power over foreign policy. This is the case of the patron saint of Brazilian diplomacy, the Baron of Rio Branco, who was Foreign Minister from 1902 to 1912 and oversaw a shift in the axis of foreign policy from Great Britain to the United States. Oswaldo Aranha, Getúlio Vargas' Foreign Minister from 1938 to 1944, also wielded considerable personalistic power over the ministry, together with President Vargas, who at that point was an unelected dictator who had come to power in an *auto-golpe*. However, in the post-World War period neither presidents nor foreign ministers have exercised comparable personal control over the foreign policy machinery.

A third factor in constraining presidential prerogatives in foreign policy is the consociational and confederal nature of Brazilian politics. These characteristics endure despite an alleged "presidentialization" of foreign policy under Presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and Lula (2003-2010) (Cason and Power 2009). Consociationalism is a concept developed by the political scientist Arend Lijphart (1969) to distinguish between different types of democracy. Whereas in the UK and the United States small majorities or even pluralities of the vote can result in a strong government of the ruling party, in consociational systems – usually parliamentary regimes – broad power-sharing and coalitional governments are the norm. While the Brazilian political system is presidential, it has proportional representation with the state as the district in the lower house of Congress. This results in a large number of political parties and presidents whose own party does not command a majority in either house of Congress. (There are currently sixteen parties in

Congress, and President Lula's party has only 68 of 513 lower house seats – 13 percent of the total - and eight of 81 seats in the Senate or ten percent of the total.) Presidential-Congressional relations are marked by intricate bargains and coalitions in which Congressional representatives obtain control over ministries and state-owned enterprises, as well as portions of the federal budget, in return for pledging to support the president's legislative agenda. This system has elements of parliamentarism even though it is formally presidential. Overall, the Brazilian political system has many veto players (including the Supreme Court and the federal audit agencies) and presidents, even though they are elected in majoritarian elections, are compelled to engage in a delicate process of coalition management in which their own political party is only one constituency amongst many that must share the spoils of office. This system has been dubbed "coalitional presidentialism" by observers of Brazilian politics (Abranches 2018). In foreign policy this means, amongst other things, that ambassadorial appointments have to be ratified in the Senate and that the foreign minister has to appear before the relevant Congressional committees (Foreign Relations and National Defense in the Senate and the lower house, with the former more powerful) to explain his or her policies on a regular basis. Furthermore, inside the Foreign Ministry, successful diplomatic careers depend on support and patronage from political actors in other parts of the political system, including Congress.

Lula and the Foreign Policy Establishment

Lula returned to the presidency in January 2003 aged 77 (he is now 78) after having served two terms as president in the 2000s. He is an internationally engaged president and, perhaps partly due to his experience, he occasionally improvises in his speeches abroad.

Let's take the three sets of comments mentioned above, which focus on the desirability of moving away from the dollar in foreign trade, the war in Ukraine, and a potential visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Brazil.

The first comment on the dollar reflects the Brazilian foreign policy establishment's long-standing aversion to automatically aligning with any major power. A fundamental precept of Brazilian foreign policy is that the international hierarchy of states is unfair and should be democratized by being made more multipolar (Amorim 2015; Barbosa 2011; Burges 2017; Spektor 2016; Ricupero 2017). Brazilian diplomatic doctrine includes the principle of balancing Brazil's international relations between different major centers of power in order to avoid undue dependence on any one of them (Lafer 2009). This concept of autonomy is pervasive in Brazilian diplomatic discourse. As the Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira said in his 21 November 2023 speech in Brasília, "throughout its history, Brazil has known how to navigate through international politics in a sovereign manner maintaining as its guide its own values, interests and aspirations as well as international law...Brazil will never be the satellite of any country or bloc" (Vieira 2023). Diversifying away from the dollar on the margins, something that the BRICS Summits have expressed as a desirable goal, is supported by Brazil. However, this does not amount to a commitment to fully dethrone the dollar as the world's major currency in international trade. It is merely a mechanism to stimulate intra-BRICS trade. In a western hemisphere in which the economic power of the United States is still preponderant, an aspiration to move fully away from the dollar is unrealistic and counterproductive for Brazil, where the largest stock of direct foreign investment is owned by US investors. And while the United States has slipped from the first to the second largest commercial partner of Brazil, the profile of Brazil's exports to the United States, which includes many different kinds of manufactured goods, make it a desirable commercial

partner, given Brazilian anxieties about the deindustrialization that has taken place in the country since the 1980s.

The second comment on the war in Ukraine reflects Brazil's frequent approach to international conflicts, which is one of neutrality and the encouragement of negotiated solutions. It is useful to point out that a similar approach was adopted by Lula's predecessor, who is very different from Lula ideologically and who in fact poses as Lula's arch political enemy. While President in February 2022, Jair Bolsonaro went to Moscow for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin just days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After the war started, Bolsonaro refused to condemn Russia on the grounds that Brazilian agribusiness was dependent on the importation of Russian fertilizers.

The third comment about the possibility of a visit by Vladimir Putin to Brazil for the G20 meeting in 2024 was retracted. Someone pointed out to President Lula that since Brazil had signed the Rome Treaty establishing the International Criminal Court, and that charges against Putin had been made in the ICC, Brazil would be obligated to arrest Putin were he to visit Brazil. President Lula, while walking back his previous comment, did not lose an opportunity to criticize the international order. Why is it that Brazil has signed up to the ICC while the United States hasn't? he wondered out loud at a press conference.

In summary, Lula's comments in the first two instances did not reflect personalistic deviation from institutional norms. The third comment did, but it was taken back quickly once the contradiction was identified. This analysis avoids a related issue about Lula's approach to foreign policy, which is that it reflects the inordinate influence of his political party, the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT or Workers' Party). Some observers argue that Lula uses foreign policy to signal his leftist credentials to his party base in order to compensate for his centrist domestic policies. In the current administration Lula's former Foreign Minister

Celso Amorim is his foreign policy advisor, working in the Presidential Palace with a team of eighteen people. The tension between the PT and the Foreign Ministry is an important issue in Brazilian foreign policy. However, the PT is an institutionalized party, and this is a separate issue from the topic of personalism, which is why it will not be pursued further here.

Lula's predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro (president from 2019 to 2022), was arguably more personalistic in his comments on foreign policy than Lula. In several areas he signalled his desire to make changes that never actually happened. He campaigned on an anti-China platform but visited China and hosted the BRICS Summit, welcoming President Xi of China, in his first year in office. He expressed admiration for President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement but did not engineer a similar exit for Brazil, because this would have endangered markets for Brazilian agricultural exports, especially to the European Union. President Bolsonaro also said that he would follow the Trump administration and move the Brazilian Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. However, under pressure from the armed forces, who argued against the move on the grounds that it might expose Brazil to terrorist attacks, and agribusiness, anxious that it would jeopardize Brazilian exports of halal meat to the Arab Middle East (Pereira, forthcoming). President Bolsonaro's personalism included his family in that his son Eduardo Bolsonaro, a member of the lower house of Congress, had considerable influence over foreign policy. Bolsonaro even tried to appoint Eduardo to be Ambassador to the United States. This violated Brazil's diplomatic traditions, and the move did not happen because members of Congress made it clear that they would not have voted to ratify Eduardo's nomination for the post.

Conclusion

The question of whether contemporary Brazilian foreign policy is conducted in a personalistic manner by President Lula is a complex one and requires an understanding of the inner workings of the Brazilian foreign policy establishment. Careful process tracing that examines the actors, interests, and institutions involved in particular policy positions and actions would be necessary in order for causal mechanisms to be identified and a satisfactory answer determined. The present paper falls short of such an undertaking.

However, the paper has offered a preliminary and tentative answer to the question by pointing to several contextual factors that may be relevant. These include the recent professionalization of the Brazilian federal civil service, the bureaucratic nature of the Foreign Ministry, and the consociational and confederal nature of the Brazilian political system. The paper also examines three recent remarks made by President Lula that could at first glance be taken as evidence of personalism in the conduct of foreign policy. It argues that the first two remarks were broadly congruent with Brazil's long-standing official policy and therefore not personalistic. The third was subject to the Foreign Ministry's "auto-correct" function, which forced the President to issue a retraction.

It is likely that for the remainder of his time as President, Lula will make remarks that displease the managers of US foreign policy. But that does not mean that these statements will reflect the whims of a despotic, personalistic leader. Brazilian foreign policy has displayed a remarkable consistency over the years, oscillating within a fairly narrow range as governments change, with the biggest deviation from the mean happening not under President Lula but under his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro. From this consistency we can infer that the largely institutional nature of the foreign policy-making process continues in Brazil.

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¹ “Lula diz no G20 que Putin não será preso no Brasil se vier ao país” at CNN Brasil 9 September 2023 at <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/lula-diz-no-g20-que-putin-nao-sera-presno-brasil-se-vier-ao-pais/> accessed on 19 November 2019.