

Introduction

The 'graduation dilemma' in foreign policy: Brazil at a watershed

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Brazil attracted international attention in the early 2000s as a promising emerging market, a rising power with increasing international leverage, and a key player (potentially, a leader) in international organizations and blocs. High expectations were set in the largest Latin American country, partly encouraged by the popularity of the then president, 'Lula' da Silva, who fostered international activism and longstanding regional and global ambitions. At the same time, as Soares de Lima and Hirst argue,¹ efforts both to acquire greater international influence and to improve the country's record on poverty, inequality and political participation became facets of the same process. International expectations remained very high at the beginning of the current decade. However, the global economic crisis, shortcomings in the multilateral system, the falling of global commodity prices, slow national economic growth, corruption scandals, and social protests during Dilma Rousseff's interrupted administration (2011–2016) have cast serious doubts on those initial very positive forecasts.² To date, it is not clear whether Brazil has been able to reconcile domestic practice and international foreign policy discourse and ambitions in difficult times; or, more concretely, whether and how, despite domestic instability and contestation, Brazil is currently able to effectively influence international negotiations and global governance mechanisms.

Brazil's foreign policy record over the past few decades makes these questions particularly relevant now. As the country has attempted to rise in global affairs, its foreign policy agenda and policy-making process have become more diversified and complex, blurring the distinctions between old and new, soft and hard, and primary and secondary issues. There have also been variations in the foreign policy discourse not necessarily linked to changes in administration,³ and intense disagreements within Brazilian elites about foreign policy goals. Moreover, in a context of difficulty in meeting high expectations at home and abroad, modest economic growth (indeed, negative growth in 2015 and 2016), political crises

¹ Maria Regina Soares de Lima and Mônica Hirst, 'Brazil as an intermediate state and regional power: action, choice and responsibilities', *International Affairs* 82: 1, Jan. 2006, pp. 21–40.

² See e.g. Riordan Roett, *The new Brazil* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010); David R. Mares and Harold A. Trinkunas, *Aspirational power: Brazil on the long road to global influence* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016); Sean Burgess, *Brazil in the world* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2017).

³ e.g. Carola M. Lustig, 'Soft or hard power? Discourse patterns in Brazil's foreign policy toward South America', *Latin American Politics and Society* 58: 4, 2016, pp. 103–25, DOI: 10.1111/laps12004.

(including the interruption of an elected mandate by a controversial presidential impeachment in 2016) and social unrest, the country's prospects for international projection and, more broadly, Brazil's presumed leadership capacity are now in question.

The contributions to this special section in *International Affairs* aim at capturing the ways in which global and regional aspirations and actual engagements are being shaped by this highly unstable context. Departing from the foreign policy literature's primary focus on superpowers and systemic variables, we take note of specific and long-term features and processes that have shaped foreign policy-making in this aspiring power, especially since democratization. These include (a) the intricate link between the domestic and the international dimensions of the process of national development, and the associated shift from a largely inward-focused to an outward-orientated and global strategy of development; (b) the increasing (albeit temporary) recognition of Brazil's global ambitions by other key players in the international system in the past decade, as well as the ensuing scenario of unmet expectations; and (c) the volatility of courses of foreign policy action—a factor exacerbated now not only by the 2016 political and institutional crisis, which has intensified uncertainty, but also by the fact that foreign policy-making has to be negotiated with a number of actors outside the foreign ministry on a regular basis.

Building upon the International Relations literature on power transition, our collaboration led to the coinage of the term 'graduation dilemma'.⁴ This has helped us to create a thread linking selected areas of foreign policy and to distinguish our contribution from existing work by emphasizing both Brazil's longstanding search for higher status in the international arena and the contested nature of its current ambitions and strategies. It also allows us to conceptualize gaining global leverage as a process rather than an outcome, and to observe it in its fluidity and changing nature across various policy areas and facets of power.

While the power transition literature focuses on distribution of power among nations, hegemonic transitions, and systemic changes in world orders,⁵ we call attention to the transformation of status, roles and capacities of an individual nation-state with potential to attain a dominant position, and we underline the domestic factors that shape its agency. At the same time, in contrast to the assumption in some of the literature on rising powers that takes for granted a set goal, a relatively linear path to a higher status and the capacity to achieve the desired goal, we support cautious arguments about a non-automatic translation of growth into capabilities and greater global influence.⁶ We also emphasize the tensions

⁴ The term 'graduation dilemma' was first suggested by Carlos Milani at an authors' workshop held in London, 6 May 2016. The concept is further developed in his co-authored article included in this issue: Carlos R. S. Milani, Leticia Pinheiro and Maria Regina Soares de Lima, 'Brazil's foreign policy and the 'graduation dilemma'', *International Affairs* 93: 3, May 2017, pp. 585–605 below. We are grateful to him for his consent on making this a corner-stone of our contributions and part of the title to this special section in *International Affairs*.

⁵ See, among others, Joseph S. Nye, 'The changing nature of world power', *Political Science Quarterly* 105: 2, Summer 1990, pp. 177–92; Richard N. Lebow and Benjamin Valentino, 'Lost in transition: a critical analysis of power transition theory', *International Relations* 23: 3, Sept. 2009, pp. 389–410.

⁶ e.g. Miles Kahler, 'Rising powers and global governance: negotiating change in a resilient status quo', *International Affairs* 89: 3, May 2013, pp. 711–29.

surrounding the definition of the foreign policy agenda and actions in the case of Brazil. Thus, we acknowledge the unpredictable path(s) that a watershed moment such as the present juncture might generate, and we explore in detail the domestic-level variables that might shape foreign policy choices. The emerging picture is likely to be one in which the use of material and rhetorical resources combine in diverse bargaining strategies over time and across policy areas, thus leading to degrees of leverage rather than absolutes.

A distinctive feature of our project is that our research opens the black box of the state to investigate the sources of foreign policy formulation and the vicissitudes of implementation, and explores the interplay of domestic and international variables. We aim at making a specific contribution to the understanding of how state bureaucratic politics, and domestic politics more broadly, mediate Brazil's international ambitions and opportunities and, at the same time, condition its agency (that is, its chances of 'graduating'). Although the interplay between the two arenas, domestic and international, has been extensively explored,⁷ in most studies domestic factors tend to be incorporated as secondary or intervening variables, the analysis of domestic political systems that do not conform to the pluralist model has been neglected, the role of formal institutions is overestimated, and the impact of instability and critical junctures in democratic settings is missing. Therefore, mainstream foreign policy analysis can hardly account for the case of Brazil and other countries in the Latin American Southern Cone.⁸ In the conceptualization we offer here, in contrast, these points are at the core of the analysis, and we pay due attention to both formal and informal institutions shaping the politics of selected foreign policy areas, thus going beyond existing studies which emphasize systemic and relative material power and/or take note of only a few formal institutional aspects of the policy-making process.⁹

Our work also highlights the lack of consensus about the path to graduation. In other words, there is a plurality of expectations about, and contestation of, the definition of the national interest and how to pursue it. There is also a gap between stated policy goals and implementation. We argue that this needs to be examined in order to assess global capacities. Hence, our contribution is both analytical and practical. At the analytical level, we propose a refinement of foreign policy analysis regarding the interplay of domestic and international variables in highly unstable contexts. At the policy level, we provide practitioners with novel insights that will enable them to cope better with the uncertainty that instability brings to foreign policy strategies and negotiations.

Following this brief introduction, this collection of articles presents a detailed elaboration of the concept of graduation dilemma that explains its main features and potential applicability, serving as an analytical framework for further

⁷ For an overview, see Peter Gourevitch, 'Domestic politics and International Relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons, eds, *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), pp. 309–28.

⁸ See e.g. Ana Margheritis, *Argentina's foreign policy: domestic politics and democracy promotion in the Americas* (Boulder, CO: FirstForum Press/Lynne Rienner, 2010).

⁹ e.g. Octavio Amorim Neto and Andrés Malamud, 'What determines foreign policy in Latin America? Systemic versus domestic factors in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, 1946–2008', *Latin American Politics and Society* 57: 4, 2015, DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-2456.2015.00286.x.

studies—both for the ones included in this issue and for others that will follow. To further ground and advance the discussion, we examine Brazil's increasing activism around selected issues in foreign policy, in which there is still more room for projecting the country's influence in international affairs despite the apparent slowdown of its global rise. Only four policy areas are examined here: international cooperation in education, international migration, trade and government–business relations, and international peacekeeping. Our work on these is part of a broader collaborative research project of scholars in the UK, Brazil and Europe. This small sample does not allow for generalizations, but does illustrate the recent adaptation of foreign policy techniques to new realities and the search for leverage based on soft power, norm diffusion, and better integration of the domestic and international agendas. The four empirical articles included here also show tensions between discourses and actions, and suggest the need to examine the correlation between foreign policy ambitions and capacities to effectively implement policy goals and, therefore, to avoid futile generalizations about foreign policy as if it were an indivisible whole. For the same reason, we deliberately avoid including a final, concluding piece. Instead, these contributions represent the initial steps of a work in progress. We hope readers will engage with the invitation to investigate these issues further and in doing so expand the debate.

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