

# Brazil in South America: from indifference to hegemony

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The Brazilian proposal to create a South American Defence Council (Consejo de Seguridad Sudamericana or CSS), announced following the Colombian military incursion into Ecuadorian territory in March of this year, has been perceived by some as just the latest development in a new landscape of regional integration. Viewed in the context of a continental hegemonic vacuum, there is the potential for a new geo-political space centred around Brazil and further removed from the USA. The need to create a common security and defense organisation would base itself on the negative appraisal of the conflict prevention and resolution capacity of the Organisation of American States (OAS), a forum dominated by Washington which, in the case of the most recent conflict, happens to be an unconditional ally of Colombia. With this analysis as a starting point, we can go on to highlight both the potential and the ramifications an agreement like this would have for the region.<sup>1</sup>

The importance and the political projection of each one of the processes described above merits a thorough analysis.

## Political initiatives and integration in Latin America

The most striking thing about the context is the almost constant bombardment of integration proposals which the region has been subjected to of late, some of which, in their different focuses, have led to confusion regarding the various processes already in place. At first glance, one might think that Latin American Foreign Ministries were trying to outdo each other (some more than others) in seeing who can come up with the greatest number of proposals, while scant attention is paid to those already established, which are in poor shape. Such is the case of MERCOSUR, the main post Cold War regional initiative, which finds itself in a critical state of affairs thanks to the inefficiency of its institutions in maintaining "the common objectives which drove its member states to engage in the process of regional integration and the consequent loss of focus and capacity to prioritise underlying political problems.... a key problem today of MERCOSUR is that it is not an 'incomplete' Customs Union, but instead a precarious free trade area".<sup>2</sup> Similar diagnoses could be made with respect to the Latin American Economic System (Sistema Económico Latinoamericano y del Caribe or SELA), and the Andean Community of Nations (La Comunidad Andina de Naciones or CAN) and other regional organisations.

Added to this loss of dynamism is the torrent of Venezuelan proposals on a wide range of matters, from the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (Alternativa Bolivariana para América Latina y el Caribe or ALBA), the Trade Treaty of the Peoples (Tratado Comercial de los Pueblos

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<sup>1</sup> Gratius, Susanne, "Towards a South American NATO? Brazil and the South American Defense Council", FRIDE Comment, April 2008, available at: <http://www.fride.org/publicacion/401/hacia-una-otan-sudamericana-brasil-y-un-consejo-de-defensa-sudamericano>

<sup>2</sup> Bouzas, Roberto, "Mercosur, ¿Crisis Económica o Crisis de la Integración?", available at [http://cei.mrecic.gov.ar/seminarios/papersem/sem\\_1002/bouzas.pdf](http://cei.mrecic.gov.ar/seminarios/papersem/sem_1002/bouzas.pdf)

or TCP), the Bank of the South (el Banco del Sur) and the South Atlantic Treaty Organisation (la Organización del Tratado del Atlántico Sur or OTAS) to the proposal for a standing army for ALBA, Petrocaribe, Petrosur and TeleSUR. In the case of Brazil, it proposed the Union of South American Nations (Unión de Naciones Suramericanas or UNASUR) as well as its recent initiative for a South American Defense Council. Whilst the UNASUR proposal may have been formulated in a more rigorous way than the other aforementioned initiatives, its failure to contemplate trade integration means there is no adhesive substance to glue member states together beyond that of political will. Finally, in order not to be left out, Ecuador's President Correa has proposed an Organisation of Latin American States to replace the OAS.

An interpretative reading of the integration proposals being proffered in Latin America lately shows they do not have an exclusively inherent value in themselves, but instead should be seen as another means for their exponents to jockey for political power at the regional and global levels, something which means their fruition and long-term viability are highly open to question. In any event, in no case do they resemble the European integration process, nor should they be considered the first, experimental steps towards a common destination, such as the 1952 European Coal & Steel Community Treaty mapped out for Europe.

This is the context in which the Brazilian proposal for a South American Defense Council can be understood.

## Brazilian hegemony in South America

There are various interpretations of the role Brazil plays in the region. One is that even while Brazil has appeared to offer "ambivalent leadership" in South America, "responded to by Hugo Chavez's power aspirations", the perception is that *Palácio do Planalto's* "growing engagement in South America" and its role as the "main partner of the EU in the region" makes it the "natural South American leader".<sup>3</sup> However, Brazil's role in the region can be analysed from a different perspective.

First of all, concepts ought to carry greater precision. An effective Brazilian leadership would imply recognition of its role and acceptance of its tutelage by other countries in the region, something which is far from the reality. One needs to look no further than the conflicting positions held by member states regarding the location of the UNASUR headquarters, which saw Quito rather than Río de Janeiro finally providing a home to the organisation; another example is Mexico and Argentina's rejection of the Brazilian aspiration to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Brazil's current position is instead one of regional hegemony, which it furthers by engaging in a number of activities with a view to achieving clear supremacy over other states and by sidelining competitors such as Mexico, which it has thwarted by limiting integration drives to South America, thus breaking with the idea of a single Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Recently, some authors have characterised this position as "Consensual hegemony - an oblique application of pressure or the advance creation of conditions that would make a future policy appear as a self-interested move by other countries...allowing Itamaraty to mask consistent efforts to structure continental relations and organisations in a manner decidedly in Brazil's interests".<sup>5</sup> This "Gramscian" version of Brazil's regional role might make for a good metaphor, but what appears clearly behind it is the new Brazilian desire for regional hegemony.

<sup>3</sup> Gratius, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Brazil also opposed the inclusion of Mexico as observer in MERCOSUR.

<sup>5</sup> Burges, Sean W., "Consensual Hegemony: Theorizing Brazilian Foreign Policy after the Cold War", *International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 65-84, 2008.

This policy can be seen once again in the case of MERCOSUR. In the same way as has been shown in the definition of a subtle kind of hegemony “Brazilian participation in MERCOSUR has been motivated more by international strategic negotiating considerations than by purely commercial ones of a regional dimension. This in part explains Brazil’s inclination towards a form of “Customs Union” rather than a free trade zone”.<sup>6</sup>

The old Brazilian position of indifference to the North and rivalry with the South has been transformed and organised coherently around two axes during the last two governments. On the one hand, it tries to contain the American presence<sup>7</sup> and, on the other, to play a global role. An example of the former is the proposal for a South American Defense Council, a more diplomatic approach to relations with Washington than the calls for an OAS without US involvement, as was voiced at Quito. An illustration of Brazil’s second strategy is its policy of lobbying to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, its recent strategic Partnership with the European Union,<sup>8</sup> and the South-South alliance it has made with India and South Africa (IBSA).<sup>9</sup> One could add Brazil’s growing role in Africa beyond Portuguese speaking territories, and its involvement in the Middle East as further examples of its global projection.<sup>10</sup>

Brazilian analysts point out that this hegemonic aspiration is far from new, having taken shape over the years, adapting and gathering momentum more recently. As has been indicated “Still in the sphere of diplomatic initiatives which reiterate the commitment to regional integration, the counter-proposal was made to set up the South American Free Trade Area (Área de Libre Comercio Sudamericana or ALCSA) by Itamar Franco’s government, as a way of countering the formation of the Area of Free Trade of the Americas (Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas or ALCA); the launch of the Initiative for the Integration of South American Regional Infrastructure (Integración de la Infraestructura Regional Sudamericana or IIRSA) emanated from Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s government and, finally, in 2004 under the Lula presidency, the constitution of the Community of South American Nations (Comunidad Sudamericana de Naciones or CSN), later called UNASUR, uniting MERCOSUR and the Andean Community”.<sup>11</sup>

In the same way, the widening of MERCOSUR to include Chile and the Andean Community of Nations was the Brazilian counter-proposal to the DR-CAFTA with America and other countries outside the region. Its aim, in large part, was to contain Northern influence. Similarly, Brazil’s reluctance to accept ALCA and its decision to resolve protectionist issues in the framework of the Doha Round reveal its new post-Cold War position in relation to the US. In spite of these considerable tensions, direct foreign investment in Brazil has not suffered in consequence; according to *The Economist*, Brazil is second in that regard only to China.<sup>12</sup> Nor has a successful deal with the USA on bio-fuels been hindered as a result, widening relations between the two countries. Seen in this light, its policy of getting closer to Chavez can be seen from both perspectives; as an element of its hegemonic drive in the South and, simultaneously, as part of its US containment strategy in the region.

<sup>6</sup> Bouzas, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> In the words of the First Vice Chancellor of President Lula Da Silva’s government: “For South America, but especially for Brazil, the current moment is decisive, but the dilemma is always the same one: either to face up to the challenge of developing the potential of Brazilian society, overcoming its extraordinary disparities and vulnerabilities through a difficult and persistent implementation of a consciously national project, in the context of a non-hegemonic (regional) pole in close alliance with Argentina; or else become a subordinate part of the American economic and political system, trusting that the free play of market forces in the heart of ALCA will be capable of overcoming the challenges and so develop the potential of Brazilian and South American society. The first path is extremely tough, but offers the prospect of building a Brazil and a South America worthy of its people. The second is one of political submission, of economic backwardness and social chaos”. See Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, “Prologue by the Vice Chancellor of President Lula Da Silva’s government in the book by Dr. Moniz Bandeira, *Argentina, Brasil y EUA. De la Triple Alianza al MERCOSUR*, April 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Commission of the European Communities, “Towards a Strategic EU-Brazil Partnership”, Brussels, 30th of May 2007, Com (2007) 281, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament.

<sup>9</sup> John de Sousa, Sarah-Lea., “Brasil, India y Sudáfrica: ¿Potencias para un nuevo orden?”, *Política Exterior*, 121, January/February, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> South America-Arab Countries Summit, “Declaration of Brasilia”, 10-11 of May 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Regina Soares de Lima, “Brasil en América Latina. Liderazgo regional en América del Sur”, *Foreign Affairs En Español*, October-December 2007.

<sup>12</sup> *The Economist*, “Brazil. An economic superpower, and now oil too”, 17th of April 2008.

Other related elements which can be added to Planalto's consolidated outlook are the Brazilian shanty towns on the borders of Bolivia and Paraguay, as well as infrastructure projects with neighbouring countries which private industry has studied for a number of years, and which President Lula has resolutely supported.

Completing this picture of economic power, geography, population size, outstanding diplomacy and political nous is a determining factor in terms of power: oil. It has been estimated that "the reserves discovered in the maritime fields of Tupi are equivalent to between five to eight billion barrels of oil and gas. That amounts to 50 percent of the total reserves the country has discovered in the last 50 years. These figures turn the country into a net oil exporter in Venezuela's league". With this new power in its hands, Brazil will be able to control a recalcitrant Chavez much more effectively and the country will become a highly attractive international investment destination and will be able to go on to establish new global strategic alliances.<sup>13</sup>

It could be argued that such factors do not turn a country into a power unless an internal leadership is able to project these resources and convert them into hegemony. In Brazil's case, that leadership is there, it has a wide support base, and it has been long in the making. As one Argentine analyst recognizes: "There is a ruling class in Brazil which is endowed with a culture of strategic thinking....at the heart of which an economic bourgeoisie with a global vocation plays a leading national role. This singular set of circumstances explains why autarchy fails to prosper in the country with the greatest capacity for self-sufficiency in South America, as its ruling class strives to establish the best co-habitation possible between national and global concerns."<sup>14</sup>

It is this internal leadership which has woken the sleeping giant from its slumber, turning it into a hegemonic regional actor and a new player on the international power stage.

## A South American Defense Council

Having considered the aforementioned issues, we can go on to analyse more closely the proposal for a South American Defense Council. This would be a response to the "need to create a common South American defense and security organ", in a region which lacks an effective cooperation mechanism given that the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (el Tratado Interamericano de Asistencia Recíproca or TIAR) is as good as useless and the region is well-known as a "peace zone". The benefits it would bring include those of operating within a broad definition of security; providing Latin America with greater international relevance by having a military structure and capacity to call on; creating confidence building initiatives and joint armies; strengthening the role of regional mediation; and providing greater cross-border security.<sup>15</sup>

A detailed analysis of these assumptions reveals a number of grey areas. On the one hand, TIAR (conve to little effect after 9/11) and the peace zones were initiatives in keeping with the Cold War which have no reason to continue functioning after its end. To expect a contemporary re-working of them would be to decontextualise them. On the other hand, it is far from clear that including a more elastic definition of security contributes to stability and peace in the hemisphere. On the contrary, such a notion is a destabilising factor leading to greater insecurity to the extent that the militarisation which goes with it runs contrary to its original goal. This broadening of the concept of security, justified by the terrorist attacks of 9/11, far from being reinforced, ought to be reversed and a de-militarisation of the relevant areas of civilian cooperation activities carried out.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://comex.infobaeprofesional.com/notas/56780-Se-redefine-el-Mercosur-tras-el-gigantesco-hallazgo-de-petroleo-en-Brasil.html?cookie>

<sup>14</sup> Pérez Llana, Carlos., "Modelos políticos internos y política exterior en América Latina", Foreign Affairs en Español, October-December 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Gratius, op. cit.

In the case of the possible international weight which the CSS would add to the region, seen in the context of current political diffusion and the resistance to Brazilian hegemony, the chances of successfully generating a South American military force from the Council would seem more of a pipe-dream than the majority of the integration proposals previously mentioned. Moreover, the successful application of measures of mutual confidence-building in the South American region has been possible in a bilateral context and is not reliant on or at the behest of a mechanism like the CSS. The creation of the joint Argentinean - Chilean brigade called the "Cruz del Sur" (Southern Cross), is an illustration of just such a successful initiative.<sup>16</sup> Finally, regional mediation proved it can achieve positive concrete results during the recent Colombia-Ecuador crisis, ensuring greater border security.

## The threats according to Washington

The USA is a dysfunctional actor in this space, with a poor record in Latin America. US interventionist, protectionist, unilateralist and coercive policies have not earned it much sympathy in the region. That being said, the chance to penetrate the US domestic market has proved an incentive attractive enough to convince many Latin American countries to sign FTA's with the USA or to begin negotiating them. Those which haven't done so, such as Brazil, aim to resolve market access issues at the Doha Round.

In the sphere of Western Hemisphere security, current US policy - inspired by a "broad" concept of what constitutes security - is probably seen even more negatively. In line with its way of looking at regional issues, the primary threats to security in the Western Hemisphere are organised crime, criminal gangs and illegal drug trafficking.<sup>17</sup> This April, under the orders of US Southern Command, a "Joint Interagency Security Command" has been established in order to deal with these threats, encompassing issues ranging from long-term economic development, to trade, and law and order, coordinating all relevant US agencies, including civilian ones which operate in the region.<sup>18</sup>

This concentration and centralisation of law and order responsibilities in military institutions has the effect of militarising civilian affairs and "deprofessionalising" the armed forces, which are assigned duties which do not correspond to their expertise and for which they have been provided neither the training nor the means to address. This is made even more significant by the fact that immigration, drug trafficking and criminal activities are issues of regional importance, and ought to be dealt with by specialised civilian institutions, particularly the police, which need to be given real support and specialised training to avoid the erosion of their field of operations by the armed forces.

These ideological and unilateral definitions of regional security issues prevent real questions being given immediate answers, which is vital if instability in the regional strategic field is to be prevented. We are referring here to the need to apply a multilateral and regional solution to the internal crisis in Colombia and its spread across the frontiers of neighbouring states such as has recently been seen in the Colombian-Ecuadorian border conflict; the failure of American counter-narcotics policy; the growing market for arms in the region; the trafficking of light arms and the lack of control of these movements from the USA; reform of the police force; as well as new developments in nuclear matters and their possible military use.

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<sup>16</sup> In June 2005 the Argentinean and Chilean Defense Chiefs of Staff agreed to create a Combined Force for peace keeping operations in order to increase integration and cooperation measures; maximize the deployment of manpower, as well as technical and material resources; and adopt common positions in the UN and within the international community in matters of peace keeping operations.

<sup>17</sup> "Testimony of General James T. Hill, United States Army Commander, United States Southern Command, Before The House Armed Services Committee", United States House of Representatives, 24th of March 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Just the Facts Project, "Ready, Aim, Foreign Policy. How the Pentagon's role in foreign policy is growing, and why Congress—and the American public—should be worried", March 2008, available at: <http://justf.org/files/pubs/080306read.pdf>

Even more serious is the evident US logistical and intelligence support provided to Colombia in its violation of Ecuadorian territory, introducing the policy of pre-emptive action into the region for the first time, something which Washington has used in its war on terror around the globe.

The main problem for security in the hemisphere then, is how to contain and prevent the implementation of misguided US policy in the region. Ruling out the possibility of US-Latin American military parity, the only way forward is to “gradually reduce US military influence and presence in South America without openly challenging its hegemony”, a political option which cannot be meaningfully developed without recourse to multilateral institutions. If the USA is difficult to constrain within these frameworks, then the danger it poses outside them is scarcely imaginable, with the current Colombian-style bilateral formula being repeated with other states. Whilst a US presence in the OAS can sometimes be an obstacle in the normal development of relations within the hemisphere, America can be brought around to common positions by a tight-knit Latin American coalition, as was the case in the last election of the Secretary General of the Organisation.

In this setting, the OAS has a central part to play. The regional organisation has carried out a crucial role in the resolution and stabilisation of Colombian-Ecuadorian relations up until now. The OAS resolution thrashed out on March 5 condemned the Colombian incursion and put an end to the conflict. This was later ratified by the Rio Group two days later, during a meeting in Santo Domingo organised prior to the outbreak of the conflict - which was not attended by President Lula -<sup>19</sup> to deal with matters such as energy, natural disasters and development. Subsequently, the Secretary General undertook a mission to inspect in situ the Colombian incursion and to independently gauge the situation, something which shows the value of this institution in resolving conflicts and controlling tensions. Likewise, the permanent structure the organisation affords makes it a natural and extremely good place to deal with such issues, and it ought to be preserved and strengthened. As has been pointed out before now “today the Security Hemisphere Commission which operates in the heart of the OAS is the only continental forum dealing with defense and security”.<sup>20</sup>

For reasons such as the above, the de-institutionalisation of security relations in the Western Hemisphere in the shape of informal talking-shops, such as the meeting of Ministers of Defense (many of whom are members of their respective armed forces), or proposing new formulas such as the South American Defense Council, should not be encouraged if they are going to lead to the erosion or weakening of formal institutions which play a key role in *multilateral management* of security in the hemisphere.

## Brazil and regional security

From this analysis, we can conclude that the Brazilian proposal for a South American Defense Council is part of a multidimensional, global policy the aim of which is to attain a prevailing role in the world and supremacy in the region.

This strategy has been aided by the current evolution of international politics, given that the global system of today, as has been noted, is no longer “multi-polar” or “uni-polar” but instead simply “non-polar” - a system with many centres of power, some of which are not nation states, entities which have lost their monopoly on power and, in some cases, even their preeminence. In short, nowadays “power is now found in many hands and in many places”.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This might be explained by the presence of Mexico in the Rio Group, a structure which emerged from the Contadora Group and the Support Group.

<sup>20</sup> Gratius, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Hass, Richard N., “The Age of Nonpolarity. What will follow U.S. dominance”, *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2008.

In this context, the Brazilian strategy of playing a global role on the international stage has a good chance of being successful, and for that to be the case, it must bring its South American counterparts into line. In that sense, its proposal to create the CSS - which would obviously fall under its hegemony - is consistent with its policy of trying to achieve superiority in matters of security, as it transforms itself into a military power. The recent agreement on developing nuclear submarines with French support illustrates this point.

This policy coincides with the aim of "promoting cooperation in equipment and arms and, in particular, widening the regional market for the Brazilian war industry (which would serve) as a platform and a collective legitimisation of the Brazilian aspiration to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council".<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it is a smart way of blocking the Venezuelan backed initiative to create a standing ALBA army.

Summing up, with its proposal to create a CSS, Brazil is presenting itself as a powerful actor in a non-polar world and has taken another step forward in its project of hegemonic power in South America. The European Union, in flagrant contradiction to its multilateral approach, pragmatically recognised this fact by signing a bilateral agreement of strategic partnership with Brazil in May 2007.

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<sup>22</sup> Gratius, Op.Cit.