



October 2017

Can The Third World Lead the World?

An Interview with Celso Amorim

In an increasingly multipolar world, developing nations like Brazil are playing a larger role in international diplomacy. Celso Amorim, a former Brazilian Foreign Minister, talks about the prospects for such leadership with Allen White, Senior Fellow at the Tellus Institute.

Your impressive career in public service and international affairs spans more than three decades. What drew you to work in this field?

My career began in film in the 1960s, when I served as assistant director for several Cinema Novo films in Brazil. Cinema Novo, a new genre of film known for its social and political consciousness, arose during a period of great unrest in Brazil. In the early 1960s before the military coup d'état, in order to make a more secure living, I decided to pursue another longstanding interest—foreign policy—and attended the Diplomatic Academy. I had never met a diplomat before, and the Diplomatic Academy was the only institution in Brazil that taught international relations at the time.

It was a great moment for diplomacy, as new opportunities were emerging with the stirrings of détente in Soviet-US relations. But the military coup in Brazil suffocated these dreams. For a time, as democracy advanced, I served as both the president of the Brazilian Film Institute and Undersecretary in the Ministry of Science and Technology, blending my professional interests. The combination deepened my understanding of Brazilian society, economy, and culture and, over time, influenced my thinking about Brazil's place in the world.

During your tenure as Foreign Minister under President Lula, Brazil increasingly took a leadership role in international diplomacy. What inspired this development?

In the late 1980s and 90s, Brazil confronted a major democratic deficit by ending military rule and a major economic stability deficit by reining in inflation.

However, the biggest problem facing Brazil when President Lula was elected was the gaping inequality—including wealth, gender, and racial inequality—that plagued the country. Concrete policy initiatives—e.g., instituting a minimum basic income—successfully mitigated these problems and increased our self-confidence. This, in turn, paved the way for our growing engagement with international affairs. Moreover, through my experience with international trade policy, I could see the respect Brazil commanded from our trading partners because of our geographic size, population, and resource endowment. I had a similar experience in matters of peace and security, as I served as Brazil's Permanent Representative at the United Nations. It became clear to me that Brazil could and should play a larger role in world affairs.

President Lula embraced the idea of a more activist Brazil in Africa and the Middle East, as well as in Latin America. Lula's own story of rising from a metal worker to become the president of Brazil gave him a can-do attitude. As a country of 200 million, with the seventh or eighth largest economy in the world and a shared border with ten nations, Brazil possessed the preconditions for greater influence. Further, our 150-year history of conflict-free relations with our neighbors provided us with the soft power and diplomatic leverage to act internationally.

And act we did. A telling example is our work in Middle Eastern diplomacy. President Lula and I made several trips to the region and called for the first summit of the leaders of the Arab world and the leaders of South American nations, a totally novel idea at the time. All parties were astonished, asking if we had secured permission from the US or Israel. I said, "No, this is our policy initiative." When US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asked to observe, I responded, "Just turn on your television because it will be public."

Several Middle Eastern countries plus the Palestinians encouraged Brazil to play a prominent part in peacemaking. We were later invited by Condoleezza Rice and President Bush to join the Annapolis Conference in 2007, which sought to revive the peace process. Only three developing countries from outside the Middle East or the Islamic World were invited: Brazil, India, and South Africa. These three countries had come together in 2003 to form IBSA, a dialogue forum aimed at strengthening their voice on the global stage.

Do you think that nations from the Global South will play an increasing role in peacemaking in the coming years?

Unfortunately, I am not optimistic about the next decade. But certainly, possibilities exist. In many cases, these countries could provide a bridge between countries like Russia and China, on the one hand, and the US and Western Europe, on the other, on issues of democracy and human rights. As democracies and sovereign nations, Brazil, India, and South Africa can bring legitimacy to international negotiations that seek to balance the rights of sovereign nations with international norms of human rights and other global issues. Even if solutions are not forthcoming, dialogue alone is a step in the right direction.

That, in fact, was my experience when I served as Brazil's Ambassador to the United Nations. Brazil played a crucial role in the reforming of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), the entity responsible for ensuring Iraqi compliance with policies governing weapons of mass destruction. Thanks to the recommendations of a panel I chaired on the Iraqi question, UNSCOM was replaced by the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), with less intrusive methods. Progress was significant under the leadership of Hans Blix until it was disrupted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. When Brazil served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (1998–1999), I chaired, three panels, an extraordinary situation for a developing country representative. I even coordinated a meeting of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, at a moment in which they had difficulty talking with one another.

Developing countries are conditioned to feel threatened by possible unilateral action from countries like the US. At the same time, we assign substantial weight to democracy and human rights. The combination of this sense of vulnerability with political values positions a country like Brazil to understand threats to peace and to help adversaries navigate toward conflict resolution. Take, for example, an episode that occurred toward the end of my tenure as Foreign Minister during President Lula's second term. The Egyptian Minister, Ahmed Aboul-Gheit, called me regarding a simmering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians over Israeli settlements. "Please, ask your President to call President Shimon Peres" he said. "Don't underestimate the influence of Brazil." That he made such a request speaks to the soft power Brazil enjoys and the important role it can play in conflict resolution.

With nuclear capabilities in the hands of North Korea, Pakistan, India, and Israel, as well as the US, UK, Russia, and France, what can we do to manage the existential threat posed by nuclear proliferation?

I think the deal Brazil and Turkey crafted with Iran—providing them with the possibility of retaining a small quantity of nuclear material to begin a peaceful application of the technology (but not enough to build a nuclear arsenal)—is one viable option. Such an approach may (who knows?) one day be replicated across the Middle East to help create a nuclear-free region. Brazil has an agreement with Argentina regarding mutual inspections, a key factor in preventing the possibility of military confrontation involving our respective nuclear programs. Such collaboration, of course, presupposes a minimum of trust, which presents a chicken-or-egg problem. If we build trust through nation-to-nation dialogue, perhaps we can do the same region-wide. Israel might not readily agree, but slow, imperfect progress, that only dialogue can begin, is surely preferable to stalemate in the contentious and dangerous situation of nuclear proliferation.

You won't be able to deal with nuclear proliferation unless you deal with nuclear disarmament.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty may have been very useful, but some countries will complain that it is unfair. The countries lecturing others about nuclear weapons, of course, are often the ones who already have nuclear arsenals. Achieving balance has to come not by giving more countries nuclear weapons but by eliminating those that exist. Acquiring nuclear weapons as deterrents is self-defeating for all in the long term. Disarmament will, of course, entail a long, complex process that might take decades. Yet progress in the short-term remains possible, as the recent nuclear deal with Iran attests.

Nuclear weapons are among several global challenges, including climate change, ecosystem destruction, and large-scale transnational migration, which the international system faces. Are our global governance structures, such as the UN, simply incapable of managing such threats?

I don't share such a pessimistic view. The UN has flaws, but I think the main problems are its limitations in matters of peace and security. The UN can claim significant progress in tackling epidemics such as TB and HIV/AIDS. The UN was also instrumental in securing the Paris Climate Agreement, which, despite its weaknesses, is still a major milestone in global cooperation. Since we still live in a world of sovereign states, much of what can be accomplished depends on their cooperation.

Ultimately, progress in addressing these global challenges will turn on political will. I don't believe blame rests with the UN itself, but rather with the determination or lack thereof among member states to make it work better. Can we rekindle the solidarity and principles that gave birth to the UN in the wake of World War II to enable the changes necessary to guarantee stability and prosperity in the twenty-first century?

Beyond the UN, the appearance of the G20—a more inclusive version of the G7—provides reason for guarded optimism. Perhaps its agenda could be expanded to include peace and security, as well as climate, debated in a timely, transparent form. The ultimate decision-making would of course rest with an ideally reformed UN. More boldly, the notion of a World Constitution designed to consolidate, strengthen, and codify disparate agreements covering human rights and other global issues is a longer-term vision worth considering and debating.

Some argue that a supranational parliamentary body is an idea whose time has come because increasing global interdependence has rendered national sovereignty insufficient—indeed, outmoded. What are your views on such a proposal?

I like to discuss bold ideas, and this certainly qualifies. The participation of civil society in existing global bodies such as the Human Rights Council is already growing. While they don't have decision-making power, they are influential. There is plenty of room for expanding their role, although they need to be subject to transparency requirements to ensure that their financial supporters are publicly disclosed.

However, if by a global parliament, you mean an entity embodying the principle of “one person, one vote,” you must be prepared for a parliament in which 40 percent of representatives hail from the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Although they will not necessarily vote as a bloc, there is a strong possibility of such unity, and China alone would wield substantial power. A rigid, “one person, one vote rule” may not be optimal. The European Parliament can offer some useful guidance in designing such a global body.

In the meantime, we should not underestimate the influential power of the UN. When I was Chair of the Board of International Labour Organization, I routinely heard that the ILO “has no teeth.” But even without the power to enforce its decisions, its moral suasion can be substantial. References to ILO norms for decent work are commonplace in government policy in many parts of the world.

Overall, I think a world parliament designed for gradual rather than instant empowerment is a good and feasible idea—starting with initially non-binding decisions taken while the body builds its moral standing. It is certainly imaginable that the arc of history could lead to such an outcome.

Turning to the link between international influence and domestic policy, Brazil continues to wrestle with corruption and inequality. To what extent do those conditions diminish its moral stature and leverage in international affairs?

Let us separate inequality from corruption. One can imagine a society of very “honest” slave owners, but that would not be an admirable society nor one positioned to exert substantial influence in international affairs. Clearly, inequality is a crucial matter, whose reduction remains a work in progress. Even today, existing labor laws benefitting the poor are being abolished by President Michael Temer, who took office after the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff.

No government did as much to rectify inequality as President Lula’s and, to a lesser extent, President Rousseff’s. Progress on this front, as I mentioned, enhanced the country’s self-confidence as an actor on the world stage. Lula’s Bolsa Familia, an innovative social welfare program, provided aid to poor families as long as their children attended school and received proper vaccinations. New admissions quotas for black and poor students in universities were also instituted. These and other policies helped secure Brazil’s moral standing in international circles. Countless foreign officials sought to appear in pictures with President Lula. As I used to say, “The demand for Lula is much bigger than the supply of Lula.”

Corruption, of course, remains a major problem. But corruption in Brazil is not simply a cultural phenomenon; it is equally a result of the nation’s electoral system. In Brazil, presidential and parliamentary elections are extraordinarily expensive, probably second only to those in the US. This situation allows—indeed, invites—the wealthy and big corporations to finance campaigns and, in doing so, influence outcomes and corrupt candidates. This, I am convinced, was not the case with Lula. That said, the general “pork barrel” system of favoritism needs to be fixed

The Great Transition Initiative envisions a future of well-being, solidarity, and ecological resilience. Amid the instability and divisiveness in the contemporary world, how optimistic can we be that such a future is attainable?

Despite today's problems, I believe there is still a basis for optimism. When Brazil languished under a military regime, I used to say that I was pessimistic in the short run but optimistic in the long run. When I see the President of the US saying, "America first," I am concerned that the country is losing sight of a basic truth: that the well-being of the US and any other nation is inseparably linked to that of other nations.

Here in South America, I have often been criticized by both the media and business interests for making too many concessions to Bolivia, Paraguay, and other neighboring countries. From my perspective, I was advancing Brazil's long-term interests by securing a peaceful region in which small nations do not fear a larger neighbor that occupies half the continent. I have always believed that the benefits of integration cannot be measured solely in transactional, economic terms, but must also be evaluated in terms of advancing peace, mutual security, and shared prosperity. This is what motivated European integration. It is, I believe, the kind of solidarity envisioned in the Great Transition framework.

About the Interviewee



Celso Amorim has had a long and distinguished career in international service. He was Brazil's Foreign Minister under Presidents Franco and Lula and Minister of Defense under President Rousseff. He is currently the Chair of Unitaid, a global health initiative working to eradicate tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and malaria. Amorim has received several national and foreign awards, including the Star of Jerusalem by the Palestinian National Authority. *Foreign Policy* magazine referred to him in 2009 as the "world's best foreign minister," and in 2010 placed him sixth in its list of "Top 100 Global Thinkers." His memoir, *Acting Globally: Memoirs of Brazil's Assertive Foreign Policy*, was published in 2017.

About the Publication

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Cite as Celso Amorim, "Can The Third World Lead the World?," interview by Allen White, *Great Transition Initiative* (October 2017), <http://www.greattransition.org/publication/can-the-third-world>.

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