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# A Few Non-Conclusive Thoughts about Foreign Policy and Social Demands\*

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## **Abstract**

In an increasingly interdependent world, not only politics but also societies become ever more intertwined. Therefore, foreign policy-making is progressively influenced by domestic factors, not only in the country in question but also in others. This special issue seeks to shed light on the degree to which Latin American civil societies and social movements are shaping foreign policy. The provisional, though contested, answer is ‘not much.’

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy; Civil Society; Social Movements; Public Opinion; Latin America.

## **Introduction**

Domestic politics and international relations are often somehow entangled, but our theories have not yet sorted out the puzzling tangle. It is fruitless to debate whether domestic politics

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really determine international relations, or the reverse. The answer to that question is clearly, “Both, sometimes”. The more interesting questions are, “When?” and “How?” – Robert Putnam (1988)

**S**O begins Robert Putnam’s famous article of 1988 in which he set out the research agenda for the study of diplomacy (and foreign policy) as a two-level game that links the inside of a state with its outside. The editors of this special issue decided, let credit be given where credit is due, that the time was ripe to address Putnam’s questions in respect of Latin America. When and how have social demands influenced the international relations of the region’s states? By the same token, when and how have international politics affected Latin American civil societies? This special issue provides a welcome boost to an emerging discussion.

There is a widespread perception that foreign policy is elitist, which stems from the belief that issues pertaining to faraway countries are too remote to matter in the daily lives of ordinary people. It is also true that foreign policy is somehow different from other public policies. Domestic legislation on foreign policy is less necessary, and therefore less frequent, than in more conventional policy areas like finance, criminal law, health, or education. Major changes can be effected via speeches delivered by heads of state, or decisions made by them unilaterally. It also means that the translation of presidential preferences into actual policy will depend far more on control over the bureaucratic apparatus than on legislative majorities or popular support. Because of the ensuing reduced accountability, foreign policy is an area prone to words diverging from deeds. Rhetoric, as Latin America insists on proving over and over again, frequently runs parallel to achievements – or even in the opposite direction (Jenne and Schenoni 2015; Malamud 2005; Montesinos 1996). This makes foreign policy difficult to analyse, as relying on official sources is essential as well as misleading.

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Foreign policy actors often exaggerate the power of agency, and their own role in events. This is not necessarily a lie but a cognitive bias: most people are inclined to believe, and want to believe, that their actions matter. Yet, in international affairs, structure is so heavy that it tends to prevail over agency more often than not – especially in normal times, as opposed to Machiavelli's exceptional times. The normal predominance of structure over agency is widely accepted irrespective of paradigmatic approach, and does not deny the co-constitutive nature of both. As for the Latin American experience, Octavio Amorim Neto and I have shown that, over the past 70 years, the foreign policies of Brazil and Mexico were determined more by their relative power vis-à-vis the USA than by the domestic distribution of power or preferences. However, this was not the case for Argentina, in which domestic turbulence had more influence over foreign policy-making than international factors (Amorim Neto and Malamud 2015). This finding does not contradict structural realism, which does not predict that all states will conform to realpolitik principles, but rather that those states which do not will be worse off than those which do (Feaver et al. 2000: 165). Argentina is a good illustration of this tenet.

Foreign policy may express political struggles and organisational traditions (Allison 1971), or even leaders' personal moods rather than rational planning. The international politics of Latin America, far removed from the hot spots of global politics, constitutes a laboratory for analysing the degree to which foreign policy can be subordinated to domestic struggles, since the damage produced by incoherent outcomes are mostly harmless to foreign parties but will take a toll on the domestic losers. Four factors are capable of insulating foreign policy from civil society: the institutional attributions endowed on the executive by the constitution, the degree of professionalisation of the diplomatic corps, the degree of presidentialisation of decision-making (Amorim Neto and Malamud

2016), and the visibility of foreign policy issues in the domestic agenda. The more the attributions, the more the professionalisation, the more the presidentialisation, and the lower the domestic visibility, the less the margin for civil society to influence the policy process.

On the other hand, foreign affairs is the policy area that can most easily be changed with symbolic gestures and official pronouncements. Hence, a Latin America country with highly ideologised political forces is more likely to see the conduct of its foreign policy affected by domestic factors, namely elections. Although conflating the electorate with civil society is a conceptual stretch, the vote manifests social demands at least as legitimately as sectoral lobbying or mass mobilisation. Public opinion, interest groups, and social movements – the key components of civil society – are at the core of this special issue, and their influence over foreign policy is reflected upon below.

### **Types and limits of social demands**

Since ever, the Brazilian diplomatic corps has been regarded as the most prestigious and successful in Latin America. However, a few years ago, Cason and Power (2009) showed that two trends had manifested themselves in Brazilian foreign policy-making since the mid-1990s: the pluralisation of actors, and the rise of presidential diplomacy. These trends gradually eroded the influence of the highly professionalised and traditionally autonomous foreign ministry, known as Itamaraty. Cason and Power argued that there were global, regional, and domestic political factors behind this transformation, but those that matter to us in this issue are domestic. According to their reasoning, ‘it was precisely because a leftist president was elected that bureaucratic power was pluralized’ (Cason and Power 2009: 128-129). Only Lula was capable of articulating the

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progressive South-South agenda advanced by the foreign policy troika of minister Celso Amorim, deputy minister Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, and presidential advisor Marco Aurélio Garcia, with the outward-oriented business interests represented by the heavyweight ministers Henrique Meirelles, Luiz Fernando Furlan and Roberto Rodrigues. Presidentialisation, the argument goes, promoted pluralisation.

The rollback of Itamaraty has allowed both government and non-government agencies to step into foreign policy matters. The former include other ministries and the national congress; the latter, business associations, media outlets and, to a lesser degree, NGOs, research centres, and labour unions. This special issue investigates whether this growing influence is also on display in other Latin American countries. Most of the authors adopt a comparative perspective.

### **Political representation and public opinion**

Ribeiro and Pinheiro wonder what factors determine presidential success in congress in respect of foreign policy. They address this question by analysing legislative support for the foreign policies and initiatives of 22 Latin-American presidents in eight countries from 1994 to 2014. As noted previously, there are fewer laws about foreign policy than other policy areas, and many of them are international treaties requiring legislative ratification. This means that legislatures cannot alter the written texts, but are limited to voting for or against. In bicameral legislatures, this also means that only the upper chamber is required to vote. These caveats notwithstanding, the finding Ribeiro and Pinheiro arrive at is astonishingly counterintuitive: ‘the president’s popularity and the contents of the initiative – [whether] high [or] low politics – do not affect his or her legislative support in international affairs’. We

should infer that, if social demands on foreign policy are represented at all at the institutional level, this should rather be via legislatures rather than presidents, as the former will decide regardless of the president's popular support.

Two articles in this issue focus exclusively on public opinion. Onuki, Mouron and Urdinez explore a large database to establish that Latin American states can be clustered into three categories as regards citizens' perceptions: Brazil, the middle powers, and the rest. Brazilians do not regard themselves as Latin Americans, but rather as citizens of a distinct country surrounded by Latin America. At the same time, they would like their country to lead the region, but are disinclined to bear the costs. Citizens of all the other countries included in the study identify themselves as Latin American, but those of middle powers, like Argentina and Mexico, contest Brazilian leadership of the region. Citizens of smaller countries, on the other hand, more easily accept Brazil as a regional leader. According to the authors, these beliefs are significant for foreign policy because they impose limits on the conditions for regional integration, namely a shared identity, and the presence of an uncontested paymaster. In this issue area, public preferences restrain, rather than enable, the margin of manoeuvre of decision-makers.

Lustig and Olego conduct experimental research to single out the determinants of the attitudes of Argentine citizens towards Brazil. Their findings suggest that public perceptions are mostly positive, and as new information reinforces previous preconceptions, negative or dissonant elements are discarded. They wonder how efficient soft politics can be (I guess they rather mean public diplomacy) in courting another country's public opinion, provided that new information will only reinforce pre-existing attitudes irrespective of their sign. Compared with those of Onuki, Mouron and Urdinez, their findings are simultaneously more favourable to

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Brazil – as it depicts benevolent rather than suspicious Argentinians – and more inconvenient, as it suggests that ‘soft’ politics, or public diplomacy, would be ineffective as foreign policy instruments.

Mesquita and Medeiros analyse media discourse rather than public opinion. They show a gap between Brazil’s official discourse and the media, and within the media itself. Their empirical investigation leads them to claim that, while Brazil reformed its international identity after Lula’s inauguration, national and foreign media continued to judge this in terms of their previous editorial ideology. Rather than questioning the inability of Brazilian foreign policy to change biases in the media, they focus on ‘the refusal [of some newspapers] to validate Brazil’s new identity’. In their narrative, the reason is not that these media outlets are more powerful than the emerging Latin American power, but that they incarnate class or national interests which clash with Brazil’s.

### **Trade policy and social mobilisation**

Four articles deal with international trade issues, which have taken centre stage since transnational political mobilisations in Latin America were faced with the formation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Vinícius Rodrigues compares how civil society organisations and organised social movements have interacted with policy-makers in Brazil and Mexico, as both kinds of social actors have been active in both countries. Rodrigues seeks to show that participation in the policy-making process, which has been allowed, does not equal influence over outcomes, which has been denied. Yet this is a risky conclusion, as the same could be said of any losers in an electoral or similar procedure. The assertion that the contributions made by social actors ‘did not change the positions the government had initially set’ cannot be extended to imply that the outcome lacked democratic legitimacy: losing is also part of the democratic process.

However, the conclusion is useful and provocative, as the author wonders ‘whether left-wing governments [have] really empower[ed] social demands’.

Daniel Castelan raises a challenging puzzle: he posits that Brazilian industrialists and trade unions had the same interests in the FTAA negotiations, but did not join forces, or adopt a unified strategy. The assumption is already puzzling at the outset, as it is usually considered that business associations support the liberalisation of trade. Instead, Castelan claims, industrialists were as protectionist as workers. The differences that prevented them from forming a coalition were situated elsewhere, mainly around the role of the state in an open economy, labour and social rights, social security, and the structure of taxation. This conclusion may shed light on the previous article’s argument: business and labour participated on an equal footing, but as they could not agree on a common position, one of them won, and the other lost. Anyway, the FTAA never saw the light of day.

María Esther Coronado Martínez analyses Mexico’s implementation of the North America Plan for Avian and Pandemic Influence (NAPAPI) during the 2009 H1N1 outbreak. She shows that some Mexican institutions established consultation processes with the private sector and NGOs, although they were not binding. Moreover, the foundation of a trilateral epistemic community for dealing with influenza pandemics was a significant achievement. Yet the article ends by noting that the real actors were ‘federal and local agencies in different sectors’, whose goal was ‘to protect the people and to avoid a major catastrophe’. Therefore, state institutions rather than civil society appear to have defined the policy process for revising the trinational plan.

Gilberto Aranda refers to the mobilisation of an association of rural municipalities, the Aymaras Without Frontiers Strategic Alliance, to



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form a transnational ethnic community together with similar organisations in Bolivia and Peru. This can be regarded as a simultaneous case of para-diplomacy (between subnational units) and transnational diplomacy (between social actors). However, the conclusion about the consequences of this initiative for Chilean foreign policy and its relations with human rights, which is supposed to be at the core of the article, is far from clear.

**Emergent powers and high  
politics**

Does civil society play any role in the emergence of a peripheral country on the global stage? Megan Pickup argues that it does, though a minor one. She analyses whether Brazil's Southern partnerships can be explained by the rise of the left – that is, by the coming to power of the Workers' Party. Unlike Mesquita and Medeiros, she does not conflate South-South relations with universalism, which are contradictory orientations. Rather, she shows that social actors and the political leanings of governments had some influence over foreign partnerships in the Global South, but were too weak to result in a coherent project. Unsurprisingly, she concludes that agribusiness interests have carried the day, and that Brazil's 'benevolent' foreign policy has failed to correct global power asymmetries.

Daniel Cardoso uses the concept of network governance to examine the mechanisms through which domestic politics influenced Brazil's foreign policy towards China. He demonstrates that interactions among social actors were largely informal and, albeit recurrent, did not take place on a regular basis. He shows that NGOs, trade unions and universities were rarely involved in making and implementing Brazilian policy towards China. The most relevant actors were a wide array of state agencies, private companies and business

associations. Therefore, policy networks connected political and economic interests rather than civil society demands.

Anabella Busso's ode to Kirchnerism explains how, in the aftermath of the state collapse of 2001, the new Argentine administration had to address severe domestic constraints on foreign policy-making. Referring to the common good, Busso notes that the Kirchner administrations faced strong opposition from corporations and the media, as well as from some single-cause social movements. She depicts civil society as a protégé rather than a driver of foreign policy. Democratisation, in this view, did not mean social participation, but state protection.

The analysis of Venezuelan foreign policy by Mijares and Romero focuses exclusively on politics rather than society, and foreign policy in particular. In their view, it is the confrontation between Chavism and the opposition that defines the scenarios and outcomes of Venezuela's external behaviour; radicalisation and polarisation leave no room for civil society and social organisations to influence the policy-making process.

### **Foreign policy is public policy, but not like the others**

Apart from its aloofness from the citizenry, and the concentration of competencies in the executive, foreign policy differs from other public policies in that it is far more heavily influenced by international dynamics that are beyond government control. Neoclassical realism focuses on the transmission belt between the systemic distribution of power on the one hand, and foreign policy choices on the other. This means that the perceptions of political leaders and elites matter, but also that they 'do not always have complete freedom to extract and direct national resources as they

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might wish. Power analysis must therefore also examine the strength and structure of states relative to their societies, because these affect the proportion of national resources that can be allocated to foreign policy' (Rose 1998: 146-7). This is where this special issue fits in.

State capacity to extract resources from society has changed in recent times, and not necessarily for the better. Moisés Naim (2013) argues that power is shifting

... from West to East and North to South, from presidential palaces to public squares, from once formidable corporate behemoths to nimble startups and, slowly but surely, from men to women. But power is not merely dispersing; it is also decaying. Those in power today are more constrained in what they can do with it and more at risk of losing it than ever before.

If this is so, the democratisation of foreign policy may in fact weaken governability, policy-making capacity, and even democratic stability. Naim shows how the anti-establishment drive of micro powers can topple tyrants, dislodge monopolies, and open remarkable new opportunities, but can also lead to chaos and paralysis. Today, insurgent forces dismantle power barriers more quickly and easily than ever, only to find that they themselves become vulnerable in the process. Civil society and social actors are not (necessarily) insurgent forces, but Naim's logic can be applied by analogy. In this respect, pessimists can draw some comfort from most of the articles in this special issue: in Latin America, the influence of social demands over foreign policy-making is so weak that it will never lead to political instability. For optimists, even the small advances that have been registered are to be celebrated, and there is no reasons to fear that increased social participation will promote political instability.

Social demands and civil society are relevant for foreign policy-making in the country of origin, but their influence does not end there. If, as Javier Solana (2009) has noted, ‘foreign policy is all about the domestic politics of others’, a shrewd foreign policy advisor should keep an eye on the social movements, civil society organisations, interest associations, and public opinion in states other than their own. For example, Schenoni and Ferrandi Aztiria (2014) have suggested that asymmetric social participation in Argentina and Brazil produce a differential impact on foreign policy stability, bargaining power, and agenda-setting power. As the impact of social participation is far greater in Brazil than in Argentina, the latter country would gain from developing a public diplomacy that courts Brazilian civil society, with a view to instrumentalising it ‘against’ Itamaraty if needs be. Even Merke and Pauselli (2015), who were looking to assert the predominance of systemic over domestic factors in respect of countries’ votes in the UN General Assembly, found that such factors as the party in power in Washington and the ideological leaning of Latin American governments had an impact on the degree of voting convergence. This means that meddling in others’ elections, or at least influencing their public opinion and social demands, may constitute a pertinent foreign policy strategy. This explains not only why the USA behaved as it did in the bad old days, but also why Chávez has contributed money, activists, and know-how to the electoral campaigns and governments of his political allies in several other Latin American countries.

In an increasingly interdependent world, not only politics but also societies become increasingly intertwined. Therefore, foreign policy-making is more and more influenced by domestic factors, not only in the country in question, but also in others. This special issue is a valuable step towards advancing our knowledge of the brave new world ahead.

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