**Brazil: South America’s Ambivalent Crisis Manager**

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*In the photo: Suriname's Vice President Arron, President Shankar and Commander Bouterse, six months before the so-called "telephone coup" in 1990. While Caracas, The Hague and Washington led an international effort to restore democracy, Brasília sought to avoid foreign intervention to protect its interests. Bouterse, who had already staged a coup in 1980, won elections in 2010 and remains in power until this day.*

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How should a democratic Brazil react to violations of democracy in its neighborhood? What are the diplomatic and institutional tools and normative frameworks it should use to adequately address deep constitutional and political crises in the region? How do they affect Brazil's strategic interests? In the quarter century since Brazil's democratization in the late 1980s, Brazilian foreign policy makers have almost constantly had to face these questions. How has Brazil's stance evolved over the years? Has it accumulated institutional knowledge about how to manage crises in neighboring countries? Considering its dominance in South America (representing roughly 50% of the continent's GDP, territory and population), why has it often opted for a rather passive and risk-averse approach? Why has there never been a serious attempt to explicitly articulate a *Pax Brasiliana,*as virtually all other regional powers across the world -- such as Germany, China, Japan, Nigeria or the United States before World War I have attempted?

These questions may seem to matter mostly to scholars of diplomatic history, but they are also of great importance to make sense of Brazil's ambiguous behavior in the face of the deep ongoing political crisis in neighboring Venezuela. As Brazil's Foreign Minister José Serra emphatically noted last week, "Venezuela is no longer a democracy." With the exception of a few hardcore chavistas, everyone (including on the left) agrees. Venezuela's President has imprisoned leading opposition politicians, neutered the National Assembly, ended judicial independence, and is now [**unlawfully postponing**](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-idUSKCN0YX0PJ) a recall referendum. Yet why, then, is Serra ambivalent about applying Mercosur's Diplomatic Clause or the OAS's Inter-American Democratic Charter, showing that his stance is not, in this respect, much different from the Rousseff administration? Indeed, some predict Brazil will seek to, along with Argentina, [**avoid open confrontation**](http://www.postwesternworld.com/2016/05/31/venezuela-americas-quarterly/), still hoping for a negotiated solution behind the scenes. Human Rights NGOs have begun to chastise Brazil's government for doing too little too late. Leading diplomats' worries that pressuring Caracas too much may actually worsen repression is indeed somewhat questionable: After all, Maduro dramatically increased repression without any diplomatic pressure.

A brief look at constitutional crises over the past decades in the region shows that Brazil only rarely publicly took the lead, usually opting for a restrained and risk-averse (and some say, overly timid) stance in moments of regional crisis.

An interesting example is one of the region's first constitutional crises during Fernando Collor's Presidency. Almost exactly 25 years ago, on Christmas Eve 1990, the Surinamese army staged a bloodless coup, overthrowing President Ramsewak Shankar, thus formalizing its control over South America's smallest nation, at the time primarily known for being a transit hub for cocaine from Medellin on the way to Amsterdam. The coup occurred after a brief three years of democratic rule, preceded by a seven-year long military government of Commander Desi Bouterse. The military leader, who shaped Suriname's politics like no other over the past decades and who had maintained control of the military under Shankar, had previously begun to openly challenge the President on key decisions, ranging from peace negotiations with leaders of anti-Bouterse guerrilla insurgency to tough austerity measures to rein in inflation and excessive public spending.

Almost immediately, the United States called for the restoration of the civilian government, while Suriname's former colonizer, the Netherlands, suspended all financial aid. Notably, the government of Venezuela not only suspended diplomatic relations and imposed a trade embargo, but also referred the matter to the OAS Council, where Suriname was sharply criticized. In [***In Search of a Path***](https://www.amazon.com/Search-Path-Analysis-Suriname-Caribbean/dp/9067183342?ie=UTF8&*Version*=1&*entries*=0), perhaps the most detailed book on Surinamese foreign policy, Roger Janssen describes how Venezuela took the lead:

*The frustration in the region was clearly illustrated by Venezuela’s reaction. Caracas was not content to just call on the OAS to discuss the coup, it also threatened to lobby the organization to take further measures should the military fail to hold free and fair elections within the designated time. Venezuela deemed the situation so grave that it cancelled all aid programmes. The most drastic step, however, was the decision to recall the Venezuelan Ambassador from Paramaribo. President Pérez, a personal friend of Arron [Surinam's Vice President], denounced the coup as a ‘deep insult to the dignity of the whole of America’ and threatened that Venezuela might take additional actions ‘against this disgraceful military coup which once again opens the chapter of military dictatorships’. (p.242/243).*

Janssen refers to the swift reaction of several European countries, the United States, Venezuela and Caribbean states, but barely mentions Brazil (even though it did support the OAS resolution against the coup on December 28, 1990).

Contrasting The Hague's and Washington's harsh reaction, Brazil opted for a quiet approach. As Sean Burges [**writes**](https://www.academia.edu/1046490/Brazil_How_Realists_Defend_Democracy1),

*Venezuelan suggestions that there be an international intervention to restore democracy were firmly blocked [by Brazil]. Indeed, there was little substantive disruption to bilateral relations, with efforts quickly being returned to reviving work on large infrastructure contracts for Brazilian firms such as the Kabalebo hydroelectric program, narcotrafficking problems, and the potential to draw Suriname into the Brazilian political orbit by acting as a counterweight to US and Dutch pressures.*

When the Dutch government, with US and Venezuelan support, presented the so-called Lubbers Plan in the aftermath of the coup -- which essentially would have recolonized Suriname -- Brazil began to energetically oppose the plan behind the scenes, seeing its strategic interests at risk, which largely consisted of avoiding interference by extraregional powers in South America and creating a counterweight to US and Dutch influence.

After all, ties between Brazil and the Surinamese military were relatively well-established and the product of years of rapprochement. Two key cabinet members during the democratic interregnum, Foreign Minister Robby Ramlakhan (a former student of Brazil's Instituto Rio Branco) and Minister of Defense Rupert Christopher (trained at Brazilian military institutions) were directly connected to Brazilian policy makers. An estimated 60% of Surinamese armed forces had participated in courses in Brazil during the 1980s, at a time when Brazil had sought to pull Suriname into its orbit and away from Havana.

Brazil's stance also caused criticism. *Moiwana 86*, a Surinamese human rights entity, publicly spoke out against the Collor government:

*Brazil's aid to the Surinamese army – the only source of military aid – is counterproductive to international and domestic efforts to subject the army to civil control. [...] The Government of Brazil should terminate its military training and assistance programs to the Surinamese army. By continuing these ties after the December 24, 1991 coup, Brazil is undercutting the constructive efforts of other Governments and the Organization of American States to restore genuine civilian constitutional government in Suriname.*

From a US and Dutch standpoint, democracy was quickly restored because Bouterse sensed that the cost of diplomatic isolation and international pressure, led by Caracas, The Hague and Washington, would be too high to sustain. New elections took place only four months after the coup, in May 1991, under the auspices of observers from the OAS and the European Community (EC) to monitor the election. President George H.W. Bush resumed some of the US nonmilitary aid to the South American country after the elections, won by Ronald Venetiaan. There are several reasons why, despite its influence in Paramaribo, Brazil preferred not to take the lead in the aftermath of the coup in Suriname. Not only is Suriname somewhat of an outlier due to its recent colonial past (turning the Netherlands into a key domestic actor), but Brazil, recently turned democratic, was primarily dealing with internal challenges. The Collor government was also worried that isolating its small neighbor would be counterproductive and even dangerous, considering its porous and hard to protect border with Brazil.

And yet, the crisis in Suriname was no exception. Brasília's reaction to Fujimori's decision to close Peru's Congress in 1992 -- in what was to be called, somewhat euphemistically, "autogolpe" was quite similar to the coup in Suriname. It would take until 1995 for Brazil to [**take the lead**](http://www.postwesternworld.com/2014/04/05/brazilian-regional-leadership/) in the region and end a decades-old rivalry between Peru and Ecuador, followed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso's high-profile diplomatic interventions to address domestic instability in Paraguay.

Why did Brazil take until 1995 to fully embrace its leading role in stabilizing the continent? A combination of factors can explain the change: When taking office, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso had just, as Finance Minister in the previous administration, successfully controlled inflation. The peaceful transfer of power (he was just the second directly and democratically elected President after the end of the military dictatorship) was a further sign that democracy was in the process of consolidation in Brazil, boosting its legitimacy as a democracy supporter. Finally, in comparison to his predecessors, Cardoso possessed considerable informal authority in the region – as a former exile and internationally recognized intellectual.

1995 clearly was the beginning of a trend. In 1996, Brazil exerted pressure on General Oviedo behind the scenes and convinced him not to overthrow Paraguay’s first democratically elected President in more than a century. Brazil’s engagement in the country continued for years, helping democracy consolidate there. In 2002, it played a constructive role in Venezuela, and Cardoso convinced Hugo Chávez to pardon those who had planned his overthrow. In addition to engaging directly in crises, Brazil also helped build a denser institutional network of rules and norms to help enhance democratic stability. In 2004, Brazil started to lead peacekeeping troops in Haiti, marking a further step towards strengthening its role in the region.

And yet, Brasília's profound ambivalence vis-à-vis a more prominent regional role remains a reality until this day. Neither did Brazil play a role during the 5-year long pulp mill dispute between Uruguay and Argentina (2005-2010), nor did it engage in [**Colombia's peace process**](http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/matiasspektor/2016/03/1745739-para-rir-ou-chorar.shtml), for example by providing military support. While it actively promoted the creation of regional rules, norms and institutions (such as Mercosur's Parliament, called Parlasur), it has also taken much care to keep them remarkably weak and superficial. As mentioned above, Brazil's role in the current crisis in Venezuela is that of a bystander: It is telling that, after years of failed mediation efforts, it took Paraguay, one of the region’s smallest countries, to [**request a meeting**](http://en.mercopress.com/2016/05/27/paraguay-requests-meeting-of-mercosur-foreign-ministers-to-address-venezuela-situation) of Mercosur foreign ministers to address the situation in Venezuela.