BRAZIL AND TURKEY: TODAY’S PARTNERS, ALLIES FOR THE FUTURE?

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When Turkey and Brazil joined forces to broker a fuel-swap deal with Iran, in May 2010, many analysts promptly understood it as a new partnership in the context of South-South politics, one that would challenge the U.S. led global order. This paper sheds light on the nature of this cooperation and on the reasons that have brought the two countries close to each other in recent times. We discuss two theoretical approaches to Brazil-Turkey relations, one centred on the concept of collective identity, and other which relies on the explanatory power of soft balancing. While it is still too soon to tell whether identities will play a more central role in shaping this partnership, or ties will be built in a less systematic and more instrumental fashion, relations between Brazil and Turkey have gained momentum and may continue to prosper in the coming years.

Palavras-chave: Brazil; Turkey; emerging powers; South-South cooperation; collective identities; soft balancing
Introduction

If the wake of the 21st century represents the ‘age of emerging powers’, then few ‘photo ops’ were as telling as the one that shows Brazilian President Lula da Silva and Turkish Prime-Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan holding hands with President Ahmadinejad of Iran. To many in the West, the nuclear deal brokered by the three countries has ended up frustrating the Security Council-backed sanctions pushed by the United States. It was therefore seen as a provocation against Western attempts – which had finally received Chinese and Russian support – at forcefully halting the Iranian nuclear program. In the view of Turkish and Brazilian administrations, however, the agreement was an unprecedented diplomatic move towards an already feeble and isolated regime, which had been longing for dialogue rather than sanctions.

Besides putting the ‘Iranian conundrum’ again on the spotlight, the episode has also called the attention for a ‘new’ alliance between two emerging countries, Brazil and Turkey. Despite rather similar trajectories in both economic and political terms, their roads had not crossed until the decision to reach out to the regime of the Ayatollahs. When the deal was finally signed, on 17 May 2010, all kinds of reactions ensued. Most understood that move as a ‘growing dissatisfaction with the traditional world order in which the United States is the only superpower’, as Elise Labott of CNN put it (LABOTT, 2010). Nevertheless, whereas she sees the agreement as ‘a rare show of personal, high-stakes diplomacy by a pair of world leaders,’ some other analysts were taken aback, and even disgusted, by the initiative. In his New York Times column, Thomas Friedman asks the question: ‘Is there anything uglier than watching democrats sell out other democrats to a Holocaust-denying, vote-stealing Iranian thug just to tweak the U.S. and show that they, too, can play at the big power table?’ and responds promptly: ‘No, that’s about as ugly as it gets’ (FRIEDMAN, 2010). Even U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed the bilateral efforts by accusing Tehran of buying time at the expense of Brazil and Turkey’s diplomatic goodwill (SOTERO, 2010).

What is the meaning of this new partnership to Brazil’s and Turkey’s foreign policy strategies? This article aims to answer this question through the conceptual lenses of ‘collective identity’ and ‘soft balancing’. We argue that, over the course of the last decade, Brazil and Turkey have ‘met’ in political and strategic terms due to two basic reasons: first, they acknowledge (or identify) one another as key players in shaping a multipolar world order. This has created a positive identity based on similar roles they were expected to undertake in what some have already labelled a ‘post-American’ world (ZAKARIA, 2008). Second, both Brazilian and Turkish foreign policies understand the Middle East as a strategic region, where they would fulfil their goals as (relatively dissatisfied) middle powers, with an eye to challenging U.S. primacy. While Ankara wants to affirm itself as a regional leader,
Brasília shows all signs of becoming a ‘global player’ on its own. The ‘Persian gamble’ (SWEIG, 2010) both countries played has marked the opening of another chapter in South-South cooperation that can change the balance of power in regional affairs.

The political evolution of Brazil and Turkey: democracy, markets, and nationalism

For countries separated by more than six thousand miles and which belong to absolutely different cultural backgrounds, a comparative look at their recent political developments reveals striking intersections. First of all, we are talking about two nations that paved their way into modernity in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is no exaggeration to say that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Getúlio Vargas, the longest-standing presidents of their respective republics, have performed similar roles in transforming relatively backward, rural societies into industrialized and urban ones. They also embodied a truly ambitious project of nation-building. Whereas for Turkey the shaping of a ‘modern’ national identity required strong attempts at secularization, dismantling Islam as the state religion (CIZRE, 2008, p. 303), in the case of Brazil it took a centralized and authoritarian administration to overcome regional differences and an export-led agrarian economy. As a result, both countries entered the second half of the past century as industrializing and growing economies (ZÜRCHER, 2004; PAIVA, 1990).

Secondly, Brazil and Turkey have experienced a combination of political upheavals and economic ebbs and flows between the 1960s and the 1980s. Multiparty democracies that came to life after 1945 were interrupted by military coups d’état in 1960 (in Turkey) and 1964 (in Brazil). While in the latter it has led to a relatively stable authoritarian regime, which has even witnessed an ‘economic miracle’ between 1968 and 1973, the Turkish people did not enjoy the same fate: decades of continuous political turmoil have given way to two more military coups, in 1971 and 1980, with modest economic results after 1969. Moreover, the polarization between left and right in Turkey, especially after the second coup, has inaugurated years of political terror due to civil strife, guerrilla activity and overt government repression (ZÜRCHER, 2004).

The late 1970s were equally critical for both societies, particularly in economic terms. After some decades of a vibrant process of import-substitution industrialization (ISI), which had taken them to the condition of newly-industrialized countries at some point in that decade (SENNES, 1997), fiscal imbalances and inflation struck their economies following the oil shock of 1979 (AHMAD, 2008). In Brazil, the economic downturns and the subsequent collapse of the ISI model have rendered the military regime so unpopular that democracy could be restored, against a surprisingly peaceful backdrop, in early 1985 (SALLUM JR., 1996). After all, Brazilians lived in a relatively homogeneous society (in religious or ethnic
terms) whose most daunting challenge was to overcome inequality and extreme poverty, issues that were addressed by the generals with moderate success. Turkey, on its part, saw the downfall of the second republic and yet another military intervention in September 1980, whose leaders seized power and remained in charge for the next three years. Of course the problems within the Turkish society were much more complex, for they encompassed issues ranging from social chaos to political deadlock, from Kurdish separatism to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism (ZÜRCHER, 2004, p. 268). This may well explain three coups in less than two decades, as well as why the military interventions had grown more radical with time.

Third, political and economic liberalization were undertaken in both countries roughly at the same moment. New multiparty systems were devised from the top, through presidential decrees and under the generals’ careful watch, although in Brazil restrictions imposed by the military were not as heavy as those dictated by the Turkish National Security Council. In a way, the narrow party system established in Turkey after the 1982 Constitution – only three parties were allowed by the generals to take part in the November 1983 elections – resembles the political dynamics of Brazil’s late military period (1979-1985), with the difference that the exclusion was de jure in the former, and de facto in the latter. Although six parties were brought to life in Brazil after fifteen years of an artificial two-party system, only two have become politically viable with all electoral straitjackets imposed by the government in the eve of the 1982 parliamentary and gubernatorial race. Over the course of that decade, however, both countries have witnessed the broadening of the political spectrum as they paved their own roads to democracy. By the early 1990s, Brazil and Turkey had successfully cast away the shadow of authoritarianism and were able to fully integrate into the West – in the context of the so-called ‘new world order’.

Economic liberalization was also a fundamental step taken by the two nations toward modernization. In Turkey, it was made possible by the hands of Turgut Özal, a top civil servant under the military regime in charge of economic affairs who turned Prime Minster. His party, Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi), had won a landslide in the November 1983 elections, securing an absolute majority in the parliament. Not only was he “the man whom Turkey’s foreign creditors trusted” (MANGO, 2004), but also the champion of free enterprise and free markets. In spite of all controversy involving his administration, from corruption charges to the escalating inflation, Özal was elected president in 1989 and remained in the mandate until his death in April 1993. Neither he nor his immediate successors as Prime Ministers were able to tackle the economic challenges properly, and two major financial crises hit the country in a matter of years – first in 1994, then in 2000-2001, after which the banking system was reformed in accordance with the recipe of the IMF. Given that confidence in successive cabinets had been eroded due to the critical economic situation, not even the positive figures that began showing up after the second financial setback could
prevent a significant political turnaround. In the elections held in November 2002, the recently-founded Justice and Development Party won nothing less than 362 out of 550 seats in the parliament. Only then was the government able to fully recover the economy, put inflation down, and control the soaring unemployment rate. The decade of growth and stability has rocketed Turkey into the league of the emerging economies. Together with a new foreign policy outlook, Ankara has undoubtedly become one of the 21st century’s most promising – and prominent – player.

Brazilians have also had their champion of economic liberalism, Fernando Collor de Mello. Although some liberalizing initiatives had already been carried out by his predecessor, José Sarney (who was the first civilian to take office as president after 21 years of military rule), the bulk of economic measures were taken by Collor as he was sworn in, in early 1990. Unlike his Turkish counterparts, who opened up the economy in the span of a decade, the Brazilian president had a sense of urgency that made him unlock the highly protectionist economy in a matter of months. This, of course, has caught most of the business community unprepared, and many went bankrupt as the inflow of foreign products rose to unprecedented levels. The sum of corruption scandals, excessive personalism, and an atrocious economic record – inflation reached 1,158% in 1992 alone, and the country had already unleashed the hyperinflationary spiral\(^1\) – has led to the impeachment of president Collor, after two and a half years in office. It does not mean, however, that the decision to open up the country’s markets was ill-conceived or short-lived: after an almost heroic effort to stabilize the economy conducted by president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and the equally daring measures to reduce poverty and inequality fostered by president Lula da Silva, today’s Brazil enjoys a sound and globally-integrated economy, which has successfully blended regulation, state investments, and private competitiveness.

Fourth, and more broadly, Brazil and Turkey are emerging nations with a foot in the West. However flexible national identities and narratives may be, they have generally converged in situating their countries in the Western bloc, even if some reservations had been voiced at times. From the early days of Barão do Rio Branco in the early twentieth century – when the idea of belonging to the West overlapped with an ambitious pan-American project – to the pro-U.S., anti-communist leanings of the postwar Brazilian foreign policy, most of the country’s diplomatic narrative has been built around the notion that it comes from a traditional European cultural heritage. At least as far as values are concerned, Brazil is undeniably Western, albeit part of a poorer, more enigmatic West (LAFER, 2000) – or, to quote José Guilherme Merquior, “another West” (MERQUIOR, 1990). This has taken

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Brazil closer to the United States for the most part of the past century, if not entirely in cultural terms, at least decisively as long as diplomacy is concerned. America was understood at many times as a role model in politics and as the cornerstone of Brazilian foreign relations. Not even when the government decided to take a more independent stance in global affairs, loosening the alliance with the United States in the early 1960s and reaching out to the newly-independent African and Asian nations, it has ceased to define itself as Western. In the words of President Jânio Quadros,

because of our historical, cultural and Christian background as well as our geographical situation, ours is a predominantly Western nation. Our national effort is directed toward the achievement of a democratic way of life, both politically and socially […]. Common ideals of life and organization draw us close to the major nations of the Western bloc, and on many issues Brazil can, in a leading position, associate itself with this bloc (QUADROS, 1961, p. 21).

Turkey’s ‘westernness’, on its part, has historically involved a more consistent effort in shaping the national narrative, for there are no major geographic, cultural, religious, or linguistic attributes that connect the country to the Western tradition. Although one may point out signs of Westernization in the Ottoman Empire as early as the nineteenth century, Turkey has constructed its own identity attached to Western values and practices after the national independence movement of the 1920s (BOZDAĞLIOĞLU, 2008). Atatürk, having received Prussian training as a soldier in the Ottoman army, believed that Turkey’s destiny was shaped by a constant pull toward the West so that it could “take its rightful place among civilized nations” (quoted in BARAN, 2010). Hence, under his presidency he undertook radical, Westernising reforms aimed to transform not just Turkish cultural practices but also diplomatic relations (FINDLEY, 2010, p. 252). This movement, slow but inexorable, was also carried out by Mustafa Kemal’s successors, and would eventually lead the country into establishing itself as one of the greatest strategic allies of the United States during the Cold War. Not only has it become one of the beneficiaries of the Marshall Plan, being a full member of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), as it has also joined the Council of Europe in 1950 (MANGO, 2004) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation two years later (LALWANI, 2010).

Finally, both countries are seen as emerging powers in this new century. Thanks to relatively stable economies and successful growth-oriented policies in the last couple of decades, Turkey and Brazil currently rank 6th and 18th in terms of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP), respectively. As far as politics is concerned, they present
themselves as full-fledged democracies, with a firm commitment to alleviate their social inequalities and minimize political conflicts. Their global relations have also become more active at both regional and global levels, always willing to boost their diplomatic profile without raising many eyebrows abroad. Nevertheless, some of the two nations’ recent foreign policy episodes have sparked some rumours regarding their ‘true’ geopolitical intentions and if they would not clash with the interests of some Western powers. The nuclear deal brokered with Iran is possibly the greatest illustration of such controversy, and is particularly telling because it involved an unprecedented alliance between both countries. Among analysts and policymakers the recurring question is whether Brazil and Turkey, albeit for slightly different reasons, may be turning their backs on the West. Regardless of what may have led to such change of heart, it seems to bear a close connection with their new status in the global stage. In the next sessions, we will analyse two different takes on the Iranian deal in an attempt to shed light at Ankara and Brasília’s relations and their current behaviour in world affairs.

The nuclear deal as middlepowermanship

The first approach to the nuclear deal is a constructivist one, centred on the concept of collective identity. Identities are the sets of intersubjective meanings states attribute to themselves, and to others, in the context of social structures and interactions. In other words, in any given relationship between two or more countries, each has to define ‘who I am’ and therefore determine its positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations (WENDT, 1994). States act towards others, and in world affairs at large, with these roles in mind. Although the construction of identities by the part of each state may have some domestic roots, as suggested in the previous section, it is primarily driven by structural forces. Actors in international politics behave in consonance with the position they occupy in the system, from both material and ideational perspectives. According to this view, Brazil and Turkey have been developing very specific identities over the last years, and these self-attributed functions have driven their interests and foreign policy decisions.

The conduct that stems from Brazil and Turkey’s newly crafted identities may be neatly called middlepowermanship, a term that refers to the tendency of middle powers “to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, their tendency to embrace compromise positions in international disputes, and their tendency to embrace notions of ‘good international citizenship’ to guide their diplomacy” (COOPER et al., 1993). In another classic account, middle powers – or system-affecting states – are described as the ones that “cannot hope to affect the [international] system acting alone [but] can nevertheless exert significant impact on the system by working through small groups or alliances or through universal or regional international organizations” (KEOHANE, 1969). Even though one could
argue that these countries have acted likewise well before they had become middle powers, the shift from a purely diplomatic discourse to a more consistent set of practices has just taken place in the last decade. After all, only recently have both states freed themselves from the geopolitical shackles inherited from the Cold War and were able to adopt positions globally that differed from that of the United States. This has allowed them to pursue a more active diplomacy in various fields, including in matters of international security, making use of soft power as their primary foreign policy tool (PEREIRA, 2012).

Middle powers, following the constructivist argument, are not defined solely by their material capabilities, but instead (and most importantly) by the perceived role they play in global affairs. Therefore, rather than a straightforward label, middlepowermanship presents itself as a constructed concept, embedded in social structures that exist in practices and processes (WENDT, 1995). That is why one must not just look at what countries say or have (in terms of power resources), but at what they do. It is by doing that states express the nature of their relationships with others – whether cooperative or conflictual, multilateral or bilateral, and so forth. In the case of middle powers, they have historically placed multilateralism and diplomacy at the top of their agendas, and have usually adopted a cooperative stance toward international regimes and institutions. Brazil’s and Turkey’s activism in the realms of the World Trade Organization (PULAT, 2012) and of peacekeeping operations (PKO) (BAGCI, 2011), the two countries’ firm commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, as well as their belief in universal values are good examples of how these identities ultimately shape behaviour in world politics.

The events surrounding the nuclear deal may thus be acknowledged as the logical development of a collective identity shared by Ankara and Brasilia, one characterized by cooperation within multilateral institutions and regimes, but also marked by a struggle against power asymmetries in the international system. On the one hand, such identity explains why both countries decided to join forces and challenge – by means of diplomacy – the status quo regarding Iran’s nuclear programme at that very specific point in time, for their middlepowermanship had finally gained momentum. On the other, it sheds light on the controversial decision to bypass the Security Council – first by taking the nuclear talks to the trilateral level while a new round of sanctions was still being negotiated at the United Nations; second, and most importantly, by voting against Resolution 1929 of 19 June 2010, which imposed additional sanctions on Iran in spite of the deal brokered the month before. This was an unprecedented move, since neither country had ever voted against the majority of the Security Council in their mandates as non-permanent members – or even contradicted the great powers in such a delicate issue, for that matter.

However paradoxical it may seem, pushing the nuclear issue away from the Security Council does not challenge the two middle powers’ love for multilateralism. Much to the
contrary, it reflects their deep-rooted aspiration – using Iran as their ultimate test – to change the global governance system to the benefit of the emerging countries. As soon as January 2003, President Lula’s Foreign Minister, Ambassador Celso Amorim, had already called upon the need to promote the “effective democratization of the international system” with a view to restoring confidence in the United Nations (AMORIM, 2011, p. 13). This would involve not just the reform of the Security Council, but also enlarging the role of developing nations in international institutions and regimes more broadly. That is precisely what has taken place in the last decade. As members and sponsors of the G20 Summits as of 2008, Brazil and Turkey have been able to raise their profile in financial issues, helping break the monopoly of industrialized powers over the global economy (BAGCI, 2011). As long-standing contributors to UN peacekeeping, the two countries have been given an important say in matters of international security around the world, and especially in their own regions.

Nevertheless, what is arguably one of the most sensitive questions of the last forty-five years has remained in the hands of a very select club up to this day. The control of nuclear non-proliferation, although officially exerted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), remains mostly a great-power issue. As a matter of fact, the very existence of a nuclear regime dates back to the late 1960s and rests on a Soviet-American attempt at blocking other initiatives to develop atomic energy for military purposes – under the guise of global security concerns. If it is true that Brazil and Turkey have given up on their nuclear ambitions for quite some time, then it is also true that they have never embraced the overly strict interpretation offered by the United States and other atomic powers to the provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In other words, they advocate for the inalienable right of non-nuclear weapon states to have enrichment and reprocessing technologies as part of a peaceful nuclear programme. This is exactly the crux of the Iranian conundrum, for all suspicion of the international community over the intentions of the regime of the Ayatollahs lies upon its enrichment capacity and stockpiles.

The dispute over the interpretation of NPT’s Article IV suggests that identity is playing a role in shaping state interests, and thus guiding decisions in Ankara and Brasilia. Strictly speaking, such divergences are not new: previous Brazilian administrations, particularly under military rule, have also condemned (sometimes harshly) the very essence of the non-proliferation regime, characterizing it as “an undisguised trend toward the freezing of world power” (ARAUJO CASTRO, 1972, p. 159). Interestingly enough, Brazil has raised its criticism against the allegedly discriminatory character of the Treaty in those moments it had attributed to itself the condition of potência [power]: from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s,

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and then from 2003 onward. Turkey, on its part, has opted for a broad interpretation of the NPT ever since the AKP rose to power, which challenges international efforts to limit nuclear aspirant countries from accessing sensitive technologies (ULGEN, n/d). While these stances are naturally connected to a cooling in their relationship with the United States, what seems to be at stake is, once again, both countries’ ambition towards playing a greater role in world affairs – not by destroying the governance structures that have been built over the past century, but rather by having their voices heard within these institutions.

When the Iranian regime decided to restart its nuclear development programme, it has provided Brazil and Turkey with a most interesting window of opportunity. First, because the eyes of both countries were finally turned to the Middle East as a source of political clout. Second, because the charges against Iran were based upon the interpretation of the NPT both countries disagreed with, so they could finally voice their concerns having a concrete case at hand. Therefore, the decision to broker a deal out of the Security Council – where negotiations on new sanctions were under way – acquires a broader meaning, one that merges the two elements that constitute middlepowermanship, the support for multilateralism and the desire to assume a more relevant role globally, into a major foreign policy action. In this sense, whenever Brazil and Turkey would like their voices to be heard (within the boundaries of their collective identities), and as long as they keep understanding each other as nations with a very similar standing and role in international politics, cooperation will most likely ensue.

The nuclear deal as soft-balancing

The constructivist approach to the nuclear deal is a positive one, in the sense that it understands cooperation as the product of shared worldviews and identities. A realist take on the Turkey-Brazil-Iran axis, on the other hand, portrays the events in Tehran as a shake of hands aimed at downplaying America’s role in the Middle East. In the backdrop lies a deep dissatisfaction with the unipolar structure of the international system. Therefore, one may interpret the relationship between Brazil and Turkey as an attempt at balancing against the United States. Whereas a direct confrontation with the world’s sole superpower may prove “too costly for any individual state and too risky for multiple states operating together” (PAPE, 2005, p. 9), major powers and even regional ones (such as Brazil and Turkey) may resort to what Robert Pape has labelled soft-balancing measures, that is, “actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use non-military tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies” (ibid, p. 10).

Soft-balancing is nonetheless not about states that carelessly knock against America’s policies and presence around the world. Strategies of confronting the United
States are carefully calculated and thought over. Another definition of soft-balancing describes it as “the conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to U.S. preferences – outcomes that could not be gained if the balances did not give each other some degree of mutual support” (WALT, 2005, p. 126). One should notice that this is a broader definition, encompassing not only U.S. military policies but preferences by and large. While it does not seem to matter much when it comes to the Iranian nuclear question, insofar as it would ultimately lead to military action by (or sponsored by) the United States, Walt’s definition is particularly useful to explain further cooperative efforts between Brazil and Turkey in non-military arenas. The idea of soft balancing is precisely what Walter Russell Mead had in mind when sharing his thoughts on the nuclear deal:

These days, there’s an unusual spectacle in world affairs. The United States has relatively good relations with the major powers: China, the EU states, India and even Russia are all more or less working together. But two middle powers, Turkey and Brazil, are not only asserting themselves more effectively than in the past; they have chosen to do this in ways that run counter to US policies (MEAD, 2010).

But what may have led the two countries to soft balance against the United States? According to Stephen Walt, this strategy can have several objectives. States may balance, first of all, so as to increase their ability to stand up to U.S. pressure – in political, economic, or military terms. Second, soft balancing comes at times as a way of improving states’ bargaining position in international negotiations. It may relate either to a discrete issue or to broad institutional arrangements of global governance. Third, balancing may serve as a warning to the United States that it cannot rely upon the compliance of other countries. Finally, it may also function as a means to become less dependent on U.S. protection and aid, allowing for some states to chart their own course in world politics (WALT, 2005, p. 126-129).

When it comes to the Iranian question, the second and third objectives may have come into play. Brazil and Turkey were longing for a debate on the nuclear non-proliferation regime that would help put the allegedly ‘discriminatory’ practices to a halt. Although it had started with a specific case, the discussion which stemmed from the nuclear agreement had ultimately to do with the heart of the regime as it has been functioning ever since its inception. Moreover, the Turkish-Brazilian initiative has shown the world these countries are not willing to yield to American interests in issues of high politics – which had been mostly unchallenged by the two countries up until that day. This is not to say, however, that Brazil and Turkey shared the same agenda or had the same objectives in their soft balancing
strategies. It is natural that incentives differ in each case, due to their respective geopolitical realities.

The Brazilian case is probably easier to grasp, for the relationship with the U.S. has had more downs than ups in the past half century, most notably in the 1970s and 1980s — when the countries clashed over several issues, from nuclear proliferation to human rights to foreign debt. With the political and economic liberalization of the immediate post-Cold War years, Brazil and the United States had come to terms with each other and even joined forces to strengthen hemispheric cooperation, free trade mechanisms, and military ties. But after almost one decade of warm relations with the world’s sole superpower, Brazil started to question its own pro-U.S. foreign policy as it began suffering the perfidious effects of the financial crisis of the late 1990s, which attacked a great share of the developing nations and exposed their vulnerability vis-à-vis the American power.

Even though the two countries were able to maintain friendly contacts for most part ever since, diplomatic friction between them have become commonplace as the 21st century unfolds. Some of President Lula da Silva’s fiercest critics have often charged his administration — and his foreign policy — as “anti-American”, evoking the rifts in the bilateral trade agenda, the recurring Brazilian opposition to U.S. military endeavours in the Middle East, and the wholesale rejection of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), one of post-Cold War America’s dearest projects. The decision to embrace the Iranian cause would simply be one more in the (growing) list of disagreements.

When Obama came to power, he had grand dreams of a strategic alliance with Brazil’s Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. He was happy to let Brazil take the political, cultural and economic leadership of the southern part of the hemisphere. But Lula subsequently used every opportunity — G-20 summits, negotiations for the purchase of fighter jets from France, peacekeeping in Haiti, the Honduran crisis precipitated by a Chavez ally — to antagonize the United States. Lula’s naïve belief that the only way to enhance his country’s status was to embrace Washington’s foes, most notably Iran, cost him leverage in responsible circles (LLOSA, 2011).

To the eyes of many in the West, the Turkish behaviour towards the United States is more of a surprise. A long-standing NATO ally, Turkey has served as the organization’s indispensable southeastern anchor throughout the Cold War. After the wreckage of the Soviet bloc, and the subsequent emergence of new geopolitical dilemmas, many American officials regarded Turkey as a ‘pivotal’ security partner, operating as a crucial bridge between Europe and the Middle East and helping spread its secular influence among the Muslim neighbours. Despite the longevity of the partnership and the rising challenges involving
Middle Eastern politics, disagreements between Turkey and the United States have mounted ever since the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq. This movement has coincided with the rise of the AKP to power, bringing in a whole new foreign policy platform – less aligned with the West, and more willing to engage with the Middle Eastern neighbours. Washington could not count on Turkey’s military or political support for the war against Saddam Hussein from the outset – which ‘embittered’ U.S. military leaders, who kept complaining about the ingratitude of America’s traditional ally (CARPENTER, 2010). Matters have got worse as the Kurdish issue came to surface, and have reached a low in late 2007, when the United States had to mediate a settlement to prevent Ankara to wage a war against some PKK (the Marxist Kurdish Workers’ Party) sanctuaries in northern Iraq. Ted Carpenter summarized the endangered relationship as follows:

From Washington’s standpoint, Turkey has been acting more like an adversary than an ally with regard to policy toward Iraq. At a minimum, Ankara’s behaviour has complicated America’s already troubled mission in Iraq, and US officials are unhappy and resentful. From Ankara’s standpoint, US policy in Iraq is clumsy and obtuse and undermines important Turkish interests. That dispute has clearly been a catalyst, perhaps the principal catalyst, for the chill in US-Turkish relations (CARPENTER, 2010, p. 31).

But there is more to this troubling relationship than the Mesopotamian affairs. Two other questions have arisen in recent years and have contributed to the growing estrangement between Ankara and Washington. The most obvious one is the Turkish-Iranian rapprochement that has taken place lately and has reflected not just in Turkey’s policies toward the Tehran’s nuclear controversy, but also with respect to economic and military issues (as in the case of policy coordination to deal with Iraqi Kurdistan). Furthermore, Ankara has also shifted positions on the Israeli-Arab dispute, giving up on neutrality and vociferating against the Israeli military offensive into Gaza in 2009 and then again one year later, when the Flotilla Crisis broke out. Why was the once ally of Tel Aviv in the Muslim world and the southeastern bulwark of NATO turning its back on its former allies?

The answer to this question may be well beyond the new Ottomanist strategy of the AKP in power. Engaging with Middle Eastern affairs does not necessarily mean distancing from the previous partners in the region. As a matter of fact, some mainstream realist approaches to the current geopolitical setting would predict a traditional alliance between Turkey, the United States, and some regional peers to deter the Iranian threat. It would be Tehran – not Washington – the one attempting decisively to shift the regional balance of power by expanding its capabilities and going nuclear. The soft balancing avenue, on the
other hand, puts the U.S. at the centre of the question and suggests that, rather than understanding Iran as a potential (or at least short-term) threat, Turkey sees in America’s global hegemony the greatest peril to its interests. As Sameer Lalwani has put it, “Turkey’s actions on Iran could be intended to soft balance both the United States and Israel, whose actions over the past decade may be seen as destabilizing forces for Turkish interests, especially if the United States is perceived to provide unfettered support for Israeli actions” (LALWANI, 2010).

If the soft balancing reasoning is proven correct, then Brazil and Turkey will cooperate in a selective fashion, whenever they aspire to reduce America’s global power. Compared to the constructivist line of thought, it unveils the limits of cooperation even among like-minded countries. The two emerging powers would therefore be less willing to engage in bilateral (or, for that matter, ‘minilateral’) initiatives which are not actually aimed at countering U.S. primacy. In the next session we will shed light on the current developments of Turkish-Brazilian relations so as to discuss the explanatory reach of the theoretical approaches presented earlier.

What lies ahead?

Almost three years have passed since the nuclear deal. After the initial response to (and controversy over) the Tehran agreement, however, not much has been said about the future of the Turkish-Brazilian relations. This has to do with at least two recent transformations in both countries’ foreign policies. First and most importantly, Brazil and Turkey have turned inward, although not necessarily for the same reasons. The first two years of President Dilma Rousseff’s term have witnessed a change in priorities when compared to her predecessor’s administration. With but a modest economic growth and facing several challenges in the fields of infrastructure, science and technology, Brazil has given up on a significant share of its previous diplomatic activism for the benefit of the administration’s domestic agenda. In the words of a famous local journalist, “Dilma’s world is Brazil” – meaning that the country’s global interests have been reduced to economic imperatives and political pressures at home (ROSSI, 2011). Turkey has likewise engaged in domestic issues, the most critical being the drafting of the new Constitution as of October 2011 (SEIBERT, 2011). Moreover, boosting productivity and investing in research and development are, according to President Abdullah Gül, the top priority of the Turkish government (GÜL, 2012).

Secondly, the geopolitical setting of the Middle East has undergone dramatic changes since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring. Responses from both governments have differed significantly upon the development of the new regional scenario. Despite holding a
non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council in the year of 2011, Brazil has adopted an excessively careful stance towards the events in Libya and Syria. Not only has Ms. Rousseff’s government fallen short of condemning humanitarian violations in such countries (albeit the president had promoted herself as a human rights champion), as it has also reiterated the traditional Brazilian diplomatic corollaries of non-intervention and the primacy of sovereignty. Such ambiguities have spurred much criticism at home as well as abroad. Some have accused Brasilia of turning a blind eye to what President Assad of Syria and Gaddafi of Libya had been doing to their own citizens so as not to hamper previous economic ties with those governments – or, even worse, because of ideological motivations (MAGNOLI, 2011). After the abstentions of Brazil, India, and South Africa in a UNSC resolution that could impose broad sanctions on Damascus – and which was ultimately vetoed by China and Russia – US newspaper The New York Times called their complicity to the Assad regime ‘shameful’ (THE NEW YORK TIMES, 2011). Not even the unprecedented diplomatic move Brazil has made by launching the ‘responsibility while protecting’ (RWP) doctrine in September that year was able to give the country more leverage in addressing the unfolding of the Arab Spring. Furthermore, away from the Council since the beginning of 2012, the Brazilian diplomacy seems to have completely withdrawn from its previous geopolitical gamble in the Middle East.

Whereas Brazil has shied away from Mideast issues, decision-makers in Ankara have decided to embrace the region as the cornerstone of Turkey’s foreign policy. Largely inspired by the seminal work published by foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu back in 2001, the notion of ‘strategic depth’ has led the country to engage with its Eastern neighbours in both political and economic aspects in recent years. As a matter of fact, AKP’s current diplomacy is often referred to as ‘neo-Ottomanist’, which conveys the image of a nation whose strategic focus lies primarily on the Middle Eastern actors and issues (TAŞPINAR, 2011). This vision is complemented by another foreign policy doctrine, the one of ‘zero problems with neighbours’, which involves eliminating (or at least minimizing) tensions within Turkey’s immediate vicinity (DAVUTOĞLU, 2010) at the Security Council between 2009 and 2010, and may well explain the vote against yet another round of sanctions against Iran a month after the Tehran Declaration, on what has become UNSC Resolution 1929.

This ‘zero problem’ approach, however, found its limits when faced with the Gaza Flotilla crisis of June 2010. The death of nine Turkish citizens in the raid launched by Israel against the Gaza Freedom Flotilla was called a ‘bloody massacre’ by Prime Minister Erdoğan and led to the breakdown of Turkish-Israeli diplomatic relations. While some analysts have understood the severing of political ties between the two countries as the logical development of a new geopolitical setting, one in which Ankara has come closer to Hamas and Iran in the wake of a transformed regional balance of power (BENGIO, 2010), others
have blamed it on party politics – be it on the part of the AKP’s pro-Arab and pro-Muslim stance (ELIGUR, 2012) or on the part of Israel’s move to the far right (BENN, 2011). In any case, the soured relationship has marked a watershed in Turkey’s role in the Middle East, more active and willing to take sides in some of the most urgent issues involving its neighbours. The political upheavals in the Arab world since early 2011, for that matter, have only dragged Erdoğan’s administration deeper into regional problems. In the last couple of years, Turkey has affirmed itself as a key actor in the Syrian question (BARKEY, 2011), as the champion of the Palestinian cause (HOKAYEM, 2010), as well as a special partner of Egypt’s new government (MONSHIPOURI, 2012).

Having gone separate ways in their Middle Eastern policies, Brazil and Turkey have lost much of their bilateral agenda, and therefore some of the incentives to partner up with each other. Nevertheless, both countries have been attempting to find a common ground in broader issues, benefiting from their status of emerging powers. Ever since President Lula’s visit to Ankara in May 2009 (followed by Prime Minister Erdoğan’s visit to Brasilia one year later), the two newcomers in the global stage have crafted a strategic partnership that, in the words of President Rousseff, represents “a new geopolitics of the world” (quoted in PEREIRA, 2012). This alliance encompassed, according to the joint declaration issued during President Rousseff’s official trip to Turkey in October 2011, high-level meetings and consultations, close cooperation in multilateral institutions (such as the United Nations and the G-20 framework), and closer ties in the fields of energy, defence, science and technology, and culture and education (MINISTÉRIO DAS RELAÇÕES EXTERIORES, 2011).

Some aspects of this bilateral development have already drawn some attention. Brazilian Defence Minister Celso Amorim and his Turkish counterpart, İsmet Yılmaz, have met in São Paulo in May 2012 and demonstrated their interest to improve cooperation not just at the governmental level, but also between defence industries in the two countries. This partnership would initially involve the exchange of good practices, given the new challenges in matters of international and regional security (such as the development of unmanned aerial vehicles and responses to cyberattacks), and would eventually encompass joint projects and the transfer of military technology3. In September, in the occasion of the United Nations General Assembly, Foreign Ministers Patriota and Davutoğlu, together with their Swedish counterpart Carl Bildt, have met informally to discuss the possibility to resume joint

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talks on the Iranian issue, thus bringing the Tehran declaration back to life. The three even considered the prospect of working together on a number of issues, from the Middle East to international conflicts more broadly, always emphasising multilateralism and diplomacy (MONOCLE MAGAZINE, 2012/2013).

Trade has also skyrocketed between the two countries. Since 2003, and despite the major economic backlash by the end of the decade, exchange flows have risen steeply. Brazilian exports to Turkey have grown by an average of 27.6% a year, and imports boomed by 36.3% in the same period (see Figure 1), with the expectation that it reaches the amount of USD 10 million in the near future, according to Brazilian Prime Minister Antonio Patriota.

FIGURE 1 – Brazil’s trade relations with Turkey (1989-2012)

While such exports are mainly composed by basic products, such as iron, steel, cotton, soy, and fuels (which, in 2011, corresponded to 68% of the total), imports were almost all manufactured goods (92% in 2011), from machinery to automotives (MINISTÉRIO DAS RELAÇÕES EXTERIORES, 2012). From 2007 to 2012, Brazil has maintained a positive trade balance with Turkey, which attests the relative success of Brasília’s commodity-based strategy of foreign trade, but also its main peril: with the recent slowdown of primary products in global markets, there is a risk that the country will become dependent

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on the imports of industrialised goods, having fallen short, in recent years, to make its own industry more competitive abroad (SHARMA, 2012).

What seems to be most striking in this commercial outlook, however, is that it still represents a minimal share of their respective trade balances (Turkey ranked only 41st among Brazil’s trade partners, while the latter is the Turks’ 36th export destination and 22nd exporter) (MINISTÉRIO DAS RELAÇÕES EXTERIORES, 2012), in spite of their current growth and increasing economic opportunities. Two possible scenarios may be considered: either the two countries are bolstering bilateral exchange at a slow pace after the initial boom – and one would therefore expect a progressive and consistent augmentation of trade in the years to come – or their economies are just less complementary than expected, and ties may reach a stagnation point anytime soon. In any case, one should look at the figures shown above with a grain of salt – not just because an increase in absolute numbers might not mean a growing relative importance of the two countries to one another, but also because they do not necessarily point toward a deeper political relationship.

Final remarks

The rise of Turkey and Brazil is one of the clearest signs that the times are changing in world affairs. Their influence ranges from regional to global, and from economic and financial issues to international security. Together with other emerging countries, such as India, China, and South Africa, they have been working to change the structure of the international system to their benefit, making use of international institutions, bilateral cooperation, and informal minilateral coalitions to advance their agenda and voice their demands. If the idea is to make the world more multipolar, they seem to be on the right track.

Nevertheless, prospects for Brazilian-Turkish cooperation, as optimistic as they might be, are not yet clear. The fuel swap deal with Iran was the height of this partnership – a decade-old one – and there has been no major diplomatic initiative ever since to live up to previous expectations of an ambitious bilateral alliance. One possible explanation is that both countries have turned inward, on the one hand, and have decided to concentrate their efforts on regional issues, on the other. It follows that, in order to have a better picture of what may happen next, one must wait until some of the domestic setbacks have been overcome.

From a theoretical standpoint, the notion that shared identities would bring the two countries together is a bold one, and many steps towards greater bilateral cooperation are an evidence that they are not just acting as middle powers in many of today’s global issues, but also understanding one another as such. What we have seen in the last three years, however, does not suffice to affirm that Brazil and Turkey are building their relationship around the idea of *middlepowermanship* (regardless of their individual international
behaviour), for political and economic ties between them are still unsteady. Soft balancing, on the other hand, while it presents itself as a more pragmatic and instrumental concept, may be a useful tool to understand the apparent selectiveness of the relationship between Ankara and Brasília. In any case, as occasional partners or vigorous allies, Brazilians and Turks may expect a prosperous relationship to develop in the coming years.

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