

Why Brazil has not criticised Russia over Crimea

By Oliver Stuenkel

■ Executive summary

Emerging powers frequently stress the importance of sovereignty and the inviolability of international law. As a consequence, many Western observers expected that emerging powers such as Brazil would be quick to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea. Yet Brazil remained neutral and abstained from the UN General Assembly resolution that criticised Russia. Together with the other BRICS countries, it opposed suggestions to exclude Russia from the G-20, thus markedly reducing the effectiveness of Western attempts to isolate President Putin. Brazil's unwillingness to criticise Russia may have less to do with its opinion on Russia's annexation of Crimea per se and more to do with Brasília's scepticism of Western attempts to turn Russia into an international pariah. From Brazil's perspective, pushing countries against the wall is rarely the most constructive approach. In addition, many in Brazil are wary of a global order that privileges the U.S. and allows it to flout many norms that apply to everyone else, arguing that these double standards are far more damaging to international order than any Russian policy. Finally, Russia annexed Crimea at a time when anti-Americanism around the world still runs high as a consequence of the NSA spying scandals, making alignment with U.S. positions politically costly at home.

Emerging powers frequently stress the importance of sovereignty and the inviolability of international law, which is why they have tended to be sceptical of the West's liberal interventionist tendencies over the past decades. Only more recently have actors such as Brazil begun to engage more actively in the debate about humanitarian intervention, firstly by including the concept of "non-indifference" in their official discourse and then by developing the concept of "responsibility while protecting" in the aftermath of the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya. Brazil recognises that the international community has responsibilities when states are unwilling or unable to protect their citizens, yet it is also acutely aware of the dangers of a system in which the same rules do not apply to the weak and strong alike, and where the sovereignty of the weak can be suspended if it is convenient to the great powers – be it in the name of fighting for human rights or against international terrorism.

In this context, many Western observers expected that emerging powers such as China, India and Brazil would be

quick to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea and its continued role in eastern Ukraine – in particular, some reasoned, because several of these emerging powers have provinces that they do not fully control or which have been home to separatist movements, such as Kashmir (India), Tibet and Xinjiang (both part of China).

Yet during a meeting on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague in late March 2014, the BRICS¹ foreign ministers opposed restrictions on the participation of Russian president Vladimir Putin in the G-20 Summit in Australia in November 2014. In their joint declaration, the BRICS countries expressed "concern" over Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop's comment that Putin could be barred from attending the summit. "The custodianship of the G-20 belongs to all member-states equally and no one member-state can unilaterally determine its nature and character", the BRICS countries said in a statement. In the same way, Brazil, along with China and India, abstained from a UN General Assembly resolution

¹ Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

that directly condemned Russia's Ukraine policy, thus markedly reducing the effectiveness of Western attempts to isolate President Putin.

Finally, no Brazilian policymaker has criticised Russia in the aftermath of the intervention in Crimea – Brazil's official response merely called for a peaceful resolution of the situation. The final document of the BRICS meeting stated that "the escalation of hostile language, sanctions and counter-sanctions, and force does not contribute to a sustainable and peaceful solution, according to international law, including the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter".

Brazil's unwillingness to denounce and isolate Russia may have less to do with its opinion on Russia's annexation of Crimea per se and more to do with its scepticism of the West's belief that sanctions are an adequate way to punish those whom it sees as international misfits. Brazil has traditionally been opposed to sanctions and has often spoken out against the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba. What is often forgotten is that the U.S. Congress imposed sanctions on Brazil as recently as the 1980s, when the latter pursued nuclear enrichment and reprocessing technology. From Brasília's perspective, pushing countries against the wall is rarely the most constructive approach.

Furthermore, even though it is unclear whether Western influence contributed to the anti-Yanukovich riots in Kiev prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea, the episode did evoke memories of the West's highly selective support of demonstrations and coup d'états in other countries. Western leaders often criticise Brazil for being soft on dictators, calling the country an irresponsible stakeholder that is unwilling to step up to the plate when democracy or human rights are under threat. Yet despite its principled rhetoric, the West, observers in Brazil remember, was quick to embrace illegitimate post-coup leaders in Venezuela (2002), Honduras (2009) and Egypt (2013), and actively support repressive governments when they used force against protest movements, e.g. in Bahrain. Criticising Russia in this context would have implied support for the West and its possible engagement with Kiev.

When seeking to understand Brasília's position, one must also consider Brazil's more general critiques of the apparent contradictions of the global order. Why, some observers in Brazil ask, did nobody propose excluding the U.S. from the G-8 in 2003 when it knowingly violated international law by invading Iraq, even attempting to deceive its allies with false evidence of the presence of weapons of mass destruction in that country? Why is Iran an international pariah, while Israel's nuclear weapons are quietly tolerated? Why did the U.S. recognise India's nuclear programme, even though Delhi has never signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty? Why are systematic human rights abuses and a lack of democratic legitimacy in countries supportive of the U.S. acceptable, but not in

others? Commentators in Brazil have argued that these inconsistencies and double standards are in their totality far more damaging to international order than any Russian policy. Especially for voices more critical of the U.S., the West's alarm over Crimea is merely proof that established powers still consider themselves to be the ultimate arbiters of international norms, unaware of their own hypocrisy. If asked which country was the greatest threat to international stability, most Brazilian foreign policymakers and observers would not name Russia, Iran and North Korea, but the U.S.

This matters because Russia's annexation of Crimea took place at a time when anti-Americanism around the world still runs high as a consequence of the NSA spying scandals, making aligning with U.S. positions politically costly at home. This was also the case in Brazil, where the U.S. decision to spy on President Rousseff, but even more so on Petrobras, seemed to confirm suspicions that U.S. policymakers claimed to support international rules and norms yet were themselves unwilling to fully adhere to them.

In addition, the Rousseff government's decision not to antagonise Russia must be viewed through the lens of Brazil's current internal discussion. With President Rousseff facing an increasingly difficult re-election campaign, opposition leaders are likely to criticise her for having allowed U.S.-Brazil relations to reach their lowest point in years. Condemning Russia and risking the cancellation of President Putin's participation in the upcoming BRICS Summit in Fortaleza in late July would allow the opposition to attack Rousseff for having simultaneously undone Brazil's ties to both the West and its other major allies. Assuring Putin's participation is thus seen as crucial, while the Sixth BRICS Summit is Rousseff's last opportunity to make a statesman-like impression prior to the election.

More indirectly, Brazil's stance on recent events in Ukraine is part of a hedging strategy by rising powers that are keen to preserve ties to the U.S., but are also acutely aware that the global order is moving towards a more complex type of multipolarity, making it necessary to maintain constructive ties with all poles of power. It is precisely this dynamic that explains Brazil's continued interest in the BRICS grouping, despite its being frequently criticised by Western observers.

Given that neither Brazil, South Africa, India nor China have an interest in expressing a strong opinion on the matter and their unwillingness to risk their ties with the U.S. and Europe, no BRICS member will emerge as a key agenda setter on the Crimea issue – even though the BRICS refusal to join the West in isolating Russia can be seen as a short-term victory for the Kremlin. In the future, Brazil, along with other emerging powers such as India, is likely to abstain from resolutions explicitly aimed at Russia.

Yet Brazil's stance should not be mistaken for support of Russia's position. Privately, policymakers may concede that

Russia's annexation of Crimea did indeed violate international law. Yet they also believe that Brazil's neutral stance is unlikely to negatively affect ties with the U.S. and the European Union. In the same way, Brazil's fence-sitting reaction to the – from a legal point of view – illegal NATO military intervention in Kosovo or its abstention in the vote on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 prior to the Libya campaign against Qaddafi did not undermine ties with anyone significantly.

Given the upcoming elections and the many internal challenges Brazil currently faces – ranging from a slowing economy and the spectre of rising inflation to continued levels of unacceptable violence and a strong awareness of substandard public services – the domestic debate about

Ukraine has been limited to a small subset of academics and civil society members who wield only limited political influence. The small space that the media dedicate to international affairs is largely occupied by Brazil's efforts to mediate between the Venezuelan government and opposition in an attempt to defend human rights and stability in the neighbouring country. Among those who discuss the issue, left-wing and anti-American voices generally believe that NATO is partly to blame for the Crimea crisis by expanding too far eastwards, thus invading Russia's sphere of influence. A few commentators and former policymakers have questioned the government's stance, yet the issue did not resonate sufficiently for any presidential candidate to pick up on it. ■

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