

# A World without a Project: An Interview with Celso Amorim, Former Brazilian Foreign Minister

Rio de Janeiro, 20 August 2018

Juliano Fiori

Head of Studies (Humanitarian Affairs), Save the Children; [j.fiori@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:j.fiori@savethechildren.org.uk)

## Abstract

In this interview, Celso Amorim, former Brazilian foreign minister, discusses changes in global governance and their likely impact on international cooperation. He critically reflects on his experiences in positioning Brazil on the world stage and democratising human rights. And he considers whether the influence of Brazil and other Southern states is likely to continue expanding.

**Keywords:** Brazil, global disorder, humanitarianism and human rights, international cooperation, non-indifference

Outside, resentment festered in the deep tracks of modernity's march. Inside, Celso Amorim sat back on his sofa, coddling a copy of E. V. Rieu's English translation of *The Iliad*. 'Sometimes I seek asylum in classical antiquity.'

There are surely more tranquil sites of refuge than Homer's Troy. But it is perhaps fitting that Amorim should find comfort in a foundational tale of great power struggle. He has worked in foreign service for most of the last fifty years. He is the most decorated living Brazilian diplomat.

As we began discussing international affairs and strategy, Amorim's speech assumed a calm, professorial cadence. 'Global disorder' undermines international cooperation, he suggested soberly. And there is a need to rescue human rights discourse, despite the hypocrisy and selectivity of its liberal proponents.

Amorim leant forward when I brought up Brazil's recent withdrawal from the world stage. As foreign minister throughout the two presidential terms of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, from 2003 to 2011, he guided Brazil to a position of protagonism in multilateral negotiations. He is convinced that the country will fulfil its potential as a major global power that can influence other states with a democratic and egalitarian vision. But he also recognises challenges ahead.

A framed photo of Amorim and Lula perched on the top shelf of an eclectic bookcase, both men smiling

widely. The following day, Amorim would travel to the southern Brazilian city of Curitiba, where he would visit Lula in prison. And he would receive news of a declaration by the UN Committee on Human Rights that the former president should be allowed to run in the forthcoming election. 'We have conditions to do great things,' he said to me when we met, 'but of course we need a legitimate government.' It is far from clear that the election, only weeks away, can deliver this.

**Juliano Fiori:** You first served as Brazilian foreign minister in the early 1990s. Between then and now, what has been the principal change in the conduct of international relations?

**Celso Amorim:** For me, the most important change to note is that, for the first time in modern history, the major global power – I am of course referring to the US – doesn't have a project for the world. It is evident that the US has always defended its own interests, but it always imagined or at least presented its interests – I'm not casting a value judgement here – as linked to a project for the world.

Following the Second World War, it was the Americans who assumed primary responsibility for the creation of the international system, starting with Roosevelt. Some international institutions were accessible to all states, others, like the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade], were only for the

capitalist world. There was an order, which, in theory, combined Western democracy with a more-or-less regulated capitalism: the so-called liberal order – although perhaps ‘liberal’ isn’t the most precise term, either in political or economic terms. There were of course other characteristics. The promotion of human rights became one, for example, albeit selective. When South Korea was still under dictatorship, we would ask ‘What about South Korea? Shouldn’t it also be expected to respect human rights?’ But regardless of hypocrisy and selectivity, there was a general acceptance that there existed this kind of order, in which the US broadly set the terms. At the ILO [International Labour Organisation], the US refused to sign many of the conventions, but it demanded that other countries sign. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this order expanded.

This was the world I encountered when I was appointed foreign minister for the first time, by [Brazilian President] Itamar Franco, just after the Gulf War. US hegemony was almost incontestable. The US of course still faced certain political challenges, but the concepts guiding international relations at this time, authored by the US, were dominant. We would hear about ‘reaching out’ and, later, Obama’s formulation ‘leading from behind’, but always leading.

Returning to the main change we see today... of course, there are forces that have been working for a long time... Trump arrives and says: ‘No, I don’t want a global order. I prefer global disorder.’ I am referring here only to what is manifest; I have not yet been able to analyse this change deeply. Things were not totally orderly before, but there were certain rules. Brazil could win a case against the US on cotton production – they didn’t completely stick to it but they had to compensate a bit. Today, without doubt, if we tried the same thing, the US would tell us to go to hell.

**JF:** Many liberal commentators, defenders of the liberal order, have struggled to separate Trump’s character from White House strategy...

**CA:** People say, ‘Trump is mad’. I am not sure there is method to his madness, but there are objectives. There is a strategy. Trump seeks to deconstruct the existing order and anything that might limit American power, even institutions created by the US.

This change in strategy happens at a moment when rivals are on the rise. Russia perhaps doesn’t want to be a world leader, but it wants to affirm its regional position. And China, yes, has another plan for the world, which it develops with subtlety, in specific negotiations, always prepared to accept otherness.

**JF:** What are the likely implications of this new US strategy for international cooperation and multilateralism?

**CA:** Well, it is a difficult moment for international cooperation. It is possible to argue that the liberalism of the old order was a veneer that permitted a form of capitalist domination. But, regardless, many people benefited from this veneer. There were opportunities for organisations like UNICEF and Save the Children. And for Brazil, too. When I was foreign minister, I was able to establish triangular cooperation programmes with the US in Africa and in the Caribbean. In my recent book [*Acting Globally*], there is a photo of me with Condoleezza Rice and an ambassador from Guinea-Bissau – it didn’t result in anything, but there were good intentions. Today, I don’t see something like that happening.

Veneer or not, international cooperation is suffering and will suffer much more. Perhaps there is a pendulum effect. Maybe the liberal order had reached its maximum point and Trump is saying that things need to go in the other direction because certain American interests were not being addressed.

But Obama also made many mistakes with respect to multilateralism. A significant one was to give less attention to the WTO [the World Trade Organisation]. He focused much more on the Trans-Pacific Partnership than global agreements. The Republicans also invested in the FTAA [Free Trade Area of the Americas], but, in my opinion, there was more commitment to economic multilateralism under Bush than under Obama.

With another Republican president, the pendulum might have swung back anyway, but it is swinging fast with Trump. Now, I am not sure which sectors of American society or the American establishment this can benefit. For large corporations, finance capital and, principally, information technology companies, multilateralism is more useful, is it not? Sure, these companies faced some rules, but they grew most of all during this period of globalisation with increased multilateral cooperation.

Things are more chaotic now. It is partly a result of the financial crisis. This affected employment in the US and living standards. In a similar way to Mussolini, who was a more sophisticated person, Trump appealed to the blue-collar worker. He perceived that sectors connected to an old-style capitalism were being marginalised by globalisation.

**JF:** So what role will humanitarian ideas and human rights – so prominent in the 1990s in particular – play in international affairs?

**CA:** I think we need to rescue this discourse. Recognising its partiality and inconsistency, I never thought that we

should destroy it but rather strengthen it. The Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council was a Brazilian idea! Even before the government of [President Luiz Inácio] Lula [da Silva], when I was foreign minister, Brazil, recognising partiality in the application of human rights rules, didn't seek to undermine them but rather universalise them, make them truer. So, for the periodic review, we proposed that there should be a global report on the state of human rights in the world, with chapters on each country, rather than separate country reports.

Now, I am not sure who is going to rescue this discourse. Interestingly, in some areas, it might be the BRICS that end up as champions of multilateralism. Brazil played an important role in the BRICS, promoted multilateralism and human rights and challenged protectionism. Unfortunately, today, Brazil isn't exporting a single idea. But when we have a legitimate government once again, Brazil will work on these things and on South-South cooperation.

**JF:** The human rights and humanitarian movements have often been seen as vectors of Western influence – expressions of soft power – not only because of their practices but also because of the cultural origins of their ideals...

**CA:** ... Which is not necessarily a bad thing. I was Brazilian representative to the UN in Geneva twice. Although I gave most attention to trade negotiations, I was very involved with the UN Commission on Human Rights. I used to say that La Rochefoucauld's famous phrase should be inscribed on the door: 'Hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue.' And, sure, there was a lot of hypocrisy, but we could use the commission positively. We went in knowing what lay behind the 'lofty ideals', but we decided to work for them nonetheless.

**JF:** But there seems to have been a tension between the two main agendas through which the Lula government projected Brazilian power: on the one hand, the diffusion of power in the international system, the construction of a more democratic global order; and, on the other, the promotion of an ethical order associated explicitly with human rights, which included the fight against hunger – the product of a policy of 'non-indifference', to use your phrase.

**CA:** Sure, there was. And I was often criticised. But in fact many of the critiques came from outside Brazil and were to do with the way we approached human rights – to do with our good relations with Iran, for example. There was a tension, but I don't think there was an ontological contradiction. I think it is possible to work for a more democratic order – diffusing power, creating a more stable balance of power – while strengthening and democratising certain value systems. Doing so in a

cooperative way, too. People might say it was just Brazil trying to extend its power and join the [UN] Security Council. But, in projecting soft power, I believe we were also promoting positive things: South-South cooperation, for example. At the ILO, it was Brazil that really initiated South-South cooperation, with Lula's attendance. Today, it is China that does most South-South cooperation. Even though China too has its own interests, this is a good thing. You don't rely just on one country.

It was precisely because of the approach we took, that we could talk with and influence countries, that some looked down upon. With Iran, we didn't interfere with its internal affairs. After we negotiated the Tehran Declaration – which is discussed at length in my recent book – we gained proximity to the Iranian government. Then in mid 2010, the case of Sakineh [Mohammadi Ashtiani], who was going to be stoned for adultery, became worldwide news. Lula suggested to the Iranian government that Brazil could offer Sakineh asylum. I then met with Iranian President Ahmadinejad in New York at his request, during the [general debate of the UN] General Assembly. The first thing he did was tell me what was being done about Sakineh's situation. He was extremely concerned about Brazil's opinion on the matter.

So, often what matters is how you deal with threats to human rights, what type of action you take, what is your method. In other words, whether you do things through threats and punishment or through cooperation.

**JF:** You've often referred to a 'dialectic' between national interest and solidarity. The innovation of Brazilian foreign policy during Lula's Workers' Party government is perhaps most notable in the practice of balancing these motivations. Nonetheless, other governments had previously promoted the idea of compatibility between interests and values, most notably the New Labour government in Britain, with its 'ethical foreign policy', articulated by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. What differentiated the Workers' Party approach from the New Labour approach?

**CA:** I am sure it is easier for someone on the outside to judge that than for me to do so. But why did I often talk about 'non-indifference'? It wasn't a qualification. It was a complement to 'non-intervention'. In other words, where are the limits? I never thought to 'bomb them into democracy', first of all because we didn't have the bombs. But I certainly wasn't in favour of that idea, in any case. Nor was I in favour of imposing on other countries through economic power.

At the same time, we always sought to be guided in our politics by values. In our relations with South American countries. When we were in Haiti. Was everything

perfect? I don't know. Sometimes things don't go exactly as you want.

I've often spoken about the role of generosity in foreign policy. It might sound naïve but I don't think it is. Generosity requires a capacity to think about your interests in the long term. Generosity in foreign policy doesn't mean doing everything that other countries want but it means addressing just demands. For example, we had tough negotiations with Bolivia and with Paraguay, which were fiercely criticised in Brazil. But the demands of both governments seemed just. I mean, if I was in their position, I would have made the same demands. They were just from their perspective and tolerable from ours. In the case of Bolivia [following the nationalisation of the country's gas reserves], we were flexible and this helped us maintain good relations. In the end, [the Brazilian oil and gas company] Petrobras remained in Bolivia, despite its initial complaints. In the case of Paraguay, to maintain peaceful relations we made concessions in relation to payment for electricity from the Itaipu Dam.

So it isn't about being nice. It is about seeing where there is mutual interest in the long run. And if something is good for South America in general, it will be good for us.

**JF:** [Brazilian musician and writer] Chico [Buarque] said of Lula that he 'speaks neither fawningly with Washington, nor discourteously with Bolivia and Paraguay'...

**CA:** Chico summed things up marvellously, in a way that everyone could understand. But if we think in strategic terms, this approach is in our interests. It is in our interests that we maintain pacific relations. Sure, there are limits. If we had done everything that Paraguay wanted... we accepted about a four-fold increase in the price of electricity; they wanted a ten-fold increase! That would have created a real problem for Brazil.

**JF:** You mentioned Haiti. In 2004, Brazil took on military leadership of MINUSTAH [the UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti]. What strategic importance did you give to this? And how do you respond to criticisms? There have been reports of rape and violence committed by MINUSTAH soldiers, for example. Didn't Brazil end up acting like any other regional hegemon, projecting power in its sphere of influence through the use of force and justifying this with expressions of humanitarian concern?

**CA:** I'd say that, clearly, it was a moment of affirmation of Brazilian power – a moment to show that Brazil was prepared to use certain types of force. But, first of all, it is necessary to remember that the mission in Haiti was not a Brazilian initiative. It wasn't just an operation authorised by the UN; it was an operation *of* the UN. It was blue helmets who were there – different from Iraq or interventions of that nature.

Much of the criticism has come from the Brazilian Left. I think the more structural critique, about whether it was right to be there, is debatable. Firstly, [Haitian President Jean-Bertrand] Aristide was practising violence, supporting militias. Secondly, the country was heading for chaos, possibly military rule again. The UN operation re-established a certain order. We were reluctant to participate in the operation at first, precisely because it involved military action. But once the UN was already there, we agreed to participate in the re-establishment of order, as part of a democratic project.

There was a crucial moment, when [René] Préal was elected. He wasn't viewed entirely favourably by the US. They might have bet against him, which would have led to chaos. Brazil had no prejudice against Préal and nothing to gain from him either. When this moment arrived, after speaking with Lula and [Chilean President Ricardo] Lagos – because Chile had troops in Haiti and the civilian head of MINUSTAH was Chilean, so it was important that we were aligned – I said to Condoleezza Rice: 'Brazilian troops won't shoot at civilians.' People were on the streets and there was a lot of tension, but the Americans wanted a second round. Despite electoral fraud affecting him negatively, Préal was on 48.5 per cent, the second-placed candidate on 10 or 11 per cent. Rice said to me, 'Let's have a second round and he will win.' But we weren't in Switzerland. Things weren't so simple. People were already protesting, breaking hotels. The Americans became scared and the electoral council made a pronouncement, bringing Préal to power.

The way his successor came to power wasn't positive. But, by then, Lula's government had come to an end, I was no longer foreign minister and, under [Brazilian President Dilma] Rousseff, there were other priorities: problems with Mercosur, etc. I am not trying to excuse myself. I think Brazil should have been more present in Haiti at this moment. It was after the earthquake [of January 2011]. The US played a bigger role, particularly through the Clinton Foundation. Bill Clinton was like a viceroy. Imagine! He was the husband of the US Secretary of State, he was a former president and he had been named as the UN Secretary-General's special envoy to Haiti. He had immense power. This reduced the role of Brazil somewhat, too.

I think we did the right thing in Haiti overall. It isn't possible to resolve Haiti's problems right now. I was appointed by the OAS [Organisation of American States,] as the head of the election-observer mission for Haiti [2015]. I spoke with one of the candidates, a radical, who was against MINUSTAH. There was a lot of violence at the time. I asked him, 'But what do you want? Do you want MINUSTAH to leave?' He said, 'No, not now.' The alternative was that militias took control.

The elections happened. The deeper problems of Haiti continue. It is difficult to say how successful we were there. It certainly wasn't a total success. But we sought to give our presence a more humanitarian character, for it not to be exclusively military. Some people even spoke of it as a different type of peace operation. But, sure, it wasn't perfect. There were errors, too.

**JF:** A last question. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Brazil became a protagonist in multilateral negotiations, pushing for changes at the WTO, reform of the UN Security Council. It was instrumental in the formation of new negotiating blocs: the G20, G3, G4, the BRICS. It didn't just take positions on matters of peace and security, cooperation and human rights: it also proposed changes to international norms and architecture. You mentioned the Universal Periodic Review; later on, it proposed the 'Responsibility while Protecting'. It was a driving force in the movements to strengthen South-South cooperation and South American integration. Brazil's influence seemed to be on an upward trajectory. Western commentators, including liberal conservatives, sang Brazil's praises. In 2009, *Foreign Policy's* David Rothkopf referred to you as the 'world's best foreign minister'. In 2010, Fareed Zakaria wrote in *The Washington Post*: 'Today [Brazil] is a stable democracy with impressive fiscal management, a roaring economy and a wildly popular president. Its foreign policy reflects this confidence and a desire to break free of its older constraints.' Now, less than a decade later, weeks before a general election, Brazilian democracy is not at all stable, the country is experiencing one of its worst ever economic crises, the current presidency has a 3 per cent approval rating and there isn't a foreign policy to speak of.

How does Brazil fit into this new 'global disorder'? Confusion in the inter-state system arguably creates opportunities, especially for Southern states. What role might Brazil play in defining whatever global order is to come next?

**CA:** Right now, Brazil is very badly placed. But I think this moment will pass. I am confident of this. I used to say this during the military dictatorship: 'I am a pessimist in the short-term and an optimist in the long-term.' This phrase is, today, relevant to the way I think about Brazil. The question is how far away is long-term, thinking in existential terms for each one of us. But from a geopolitical perspective, I would say that Brazil does have... I don't speak of destiny... but Brazil does have the conditions to make a positive contribution to the world. It is a big country, with a big economy, a big population and abundant natural resources. It is half of the South American continent and it has borders with almost all South American

countries. It has a historical relationship with Africa, which was more recently recovered. Brazil is well received in Africa. The [late Kenyan] professor Calestous Juma once said that 'For every African problem, there is a Brazilian solution.' This is of course an exaggeration, but Brazil is generally well received in Africa.

So we have potential to make a positive contribution – more than many other countries. We don't face any serious external threats. India, for example, has an ongoing conflict with Pakistan, and it has had confrontations with China. South Africa doesn't have the size, nor is it well located geographically.

There is going to be a seminar on democracy in the coming weeks, motivated by Lula's situation. The seminar was the suggestion of Dominique de Villepin, who was French foreign minister and prime minister during the government of [President Jacques] Chirac. Villepin is a republican in the French sense, a democrat, but he isn't a man of the Left. He recently said to me, 'The world misses Brazil,' because Brazil was bringing a soft power that isn't only for its own benefit. As soon as we put our house in order... sure, it is clear that we need to stop cutting down the Amazon, stop killing indigenous people, which still happens, even if less than twenty years ago... but if we put our house in order, relatively, in social terms primarily, we have conditions to do great things. We don't have atomic weapons, but we have technological capacity that allows for global projection. But of course we need a legitimate government – and, sure, for me, the ideal thing would be for Lula to be voted in as president again. If directed well, Brazil has huge potential. We need to shake off our inferiority complex. Even under military rule, with that problematic way of seeing things, we had good foreign ministers: [Antonio Francisco Azeredo da] Silveira, during the government of [General Ernesto] Geisel, was probably the most notable.

We need to lose that tendency to put ourselves down. When people criticise me, saying Brazil was trying to do more than it could actually do, I tell them, 'Much of the time, it wasn't Brazil offering to do things. We were called upon by other countries.' I'm not a megalomaniac, but there are plenty of 'nanomaniacs' out there. Brazil was called to Annapolis [for the Middle East peace conference, in 2007]; it didn't invite itself. Brazil was called upon by Iran and by Obama [to negotiate a nuclear deal]; Obama then changed his mind, but it was him who asked us originally. We participated in the creation of the BRICS. Why did Chirac and then [his successor, Nicolas] Sarkozy always want to associate themselves with Brazil, whether on issues of climate change or other issues?

We can do important things. Each period of history has its specific characteristics, its advantages and

disadvantages. We also shouldn't be under any illusions that Brazil can impose a new global order, not least because it will never be a dominant power. We don't have the conditions to dominate others politically and economically. And this perhaps allows for a more egalitarian vision of the world.

Celso Amorim was Brazil's foreign minister from 1993 to 1994 and 2003 to 2010. An English translation of his most recent book was published in 2017: *Acting Globally: Memoirs of Brazil's Assertive Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield).