

Working for Change: Brief Observations by a Brazilian Diplomat



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Twenty-five years ago, in the second half of 1997, I finished a dissertation titled “Globalization: heralds, skeptics and critics”. It was an overview of the then recent, and at times raging, debate on globalization, a very lively and trendy discussion in those days.

As the title indicates, I tried to group the various positions on the issue into three main groups. I described the heralds of globalization as those who were arguing in favor of the phenomenon and saying that it was irreversible, inevitable and positive.

The skeptics were those who questioned the transformational potential of globalization in areas such as international relations and who qualified supposed trends such as the diminishing relevance of nation states. In that group, for example, I placed realist thinkers who continued to maintain that relations and power differentials between states would continue to be the main determinant of the global order.

Finally, the critics were those who, while coming from varied ideological backgrounds, focused on what they saw as the adverse effects of globalization. They adopted a critical view regarding the notion, for instance, that a world primarily organized by markets, rather than by national political decisions, would be a better place.

In those days—and for at least a decade after that—pro-globalization positions and arguments were dominant in most developed countries, a trend that had started in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The fundamental premise was the belief that a smaller government presence in managing the economy was far better than a model in which the public sector played a larger role in deciding the course of and setting up of incentives for economic activity.

It was obvious that behind that notion was a sense that market players were prone to do a better job than elected and non-elected public officials, provided they

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were given greater latitude to make choices and were unencumbered by regulation and restrictions. The concept therefore ultimately involved, to a smaller degree, a negative attitude toward politics and political decision-making.

The idea of globalization was also associated with the emergence of a supposedly borderless world, in which limits between national jurisdictions were not to interfere with the establishment of chains of production, investment and trade. On the contrary, the activities of corporations and banks should be permitted to freely develop across borders, in order to completely fulfill their potential.

This was not, of course, a merely ideological construct. It did, in fact, also correspond to extraordinary and accelerated technological transformations that obviously enabled—and to an extent called for—economic activity to be increasingly global, or globalized.

We also know, however, that certain aspects of economic liberalization and deregulation went too far and ultimately led to the great global financial crisis that began in 2008. It was a crisis caused by excesses resulting from the notion that markets required no adults in the room to establish and enforce minimum requirements of discipline, transparency and responsibility.

Countries caught in that crisis, which ended up affecting the world economy as a whole to varying degrees, paid a high price for those excesses and for the fact that governments, as well as supervisory and regulatory agencies, had seriously failed to live up to their responsibilities.

While pro-globalization policies and narratives were still dominant, there was a growing sentiment, particularly in certain developed nations, that the social costs of globalization were rising. Much was said, for example, about the export of jobs and investment. Increasingly, the idea that insufficient attention was being given to those segments of society that were paying a higher price for this reorganization of the world economy also gained ground.

In some countries, those concerns brought about a backlash against what we could call a supranational element of the globalized economy, frequently tied to the view that national governments were no longer concerned with the plight of their own citizens; that governments prioritized the interests of large companies and economic interests regardless of where the benefits of their activities would finally land.

As we know, that reaction fueled political forces that brought back, with greater strength, arguments in favor of what has been called economic nationalism. Recent trade wars are an expression of that.

Over a period of approximately three decades, therefore, we have moved from an environment in which there was a demand for depoliticizing economic decision-making to a situation of growing politicization—and even geopoliticization—of decisions in areas such as trade, investment and flows of information regarding science and technology.

We are not going to return in technological terms to a pre-digital era and it is highly unlikely that we will return to a pre-globalization world. As it is often said, what we have been calling globalization since the 1990s is not an entirely new phenomenon. In other ways, in other stages of scientific progress, the process of globalization has

been present ever since people began to travel long distances and different societies established contact and began to trade with each other.

In the current environment, however, new expressions that have appeared and gained currency—such as nearshoring, friendshoring and deglobalization—are as relevant a sign of the times as the word *globalization* was when it was on everybody's lips; as can be seen in the very name of the Center for China & Globalization that now supports the book in which this article will be published.

Globalization never was, nor could it have been, the panacea that many proclaimed. But is economic nationalism the solution to all the social and other problems frequently associated with globalization. If the 2008 financial crisis was the crisis of the excesses of liberalization—and of what some have described as market supranationalism—the context we are at present living in is also the result of what we could call a crisis of the excesses of economic nationalism and of the contamination of economic decision-making by reasoning increasingly derived from political, geopolitical and ideological considerations.

The most preoccupying aspect of our present global environment is that the world has become a much more dangerous place. The possibility of a nuclear conflict between major powers, for example, is now mentioned as a considerable scenario, as a clear and present danger. This has not happened for the last sixty years and is not a minor fact.

Those that I referred to as the heralds of globalization of course exaggerated the extent to which it would transform national realities and the conduct of international relations; there was a mixture of naiveté, wishful thinking and intellectual obfuscation in their claims. The same judgment applies, therefore, to the surprise and frustration they professed when their lofty forecasts failed to materialize. They should have known it was simply never going to happen.

What is going on now clearly heads in the opposite direction. Just as in those earlier days when the heralds of globalization painted unrealistic rosy pictures of where the world was supposed to be heading, now it's mostly about doom and gloom. The kumbaya of a globalized paradise has been replaced by the permanent drumming up of supposedly irreconcilable differences and by the adoption of policies that actually reinforce those differences, as well as the potential for conflict.

If in the recent past, there was a clear overestimation of the possibility that differences could be overcome, or ideally even eliminated; today, there is a tendency to underestimate or even deny the possibility that different political, social and economic models can and should coexist in peace.

This not only makes the world a more dangerous place, but also drains resources that could be invested in a manner not related to perceptions of inevitable competition and conflict.

Curiously, therefore, just as globalized liberalization has been linked to growing inequality within and among different countries, the current excesses of economic nationalism and politicization will also probably further delay efforts to overcome inequality, particularly between different nations and regions of the world.

In that regard, if there are words whose coming and going are a representation of the different historical settings we have experienced, the almost complete disappearance of references to development with no adjectives—and also to the very notion of development as an overarching goal—should be a source of great concern.

Yes, we certainly still speak about sustainable development; with an emphasis on the imperative that human development take place in a manner consistent with the preservation of our natural environment and of the very survival of our planet. Fortunately, there is now a hard-won and necessary consensus regarding the need to stop and reverse climate change and global warming.

But we no longer see a similar concern or consensus regarding the imperative of development as a means to eliminate hunger and poverty, and to ensure better education, healthcare, clean water and opportunities. This is happening at a time when, among other plights, food insecurity, in some cases extreme food insecurity, is becoming more serious in many places of the globe. The notion of a moral, political and economic imperative in that regard has sadly faded into the background of international debate, and of multilateral deliberations.

This reality not only hinders the path to the social and economic well-being of humanity as a whole, but also makes the world more unstable and dangerous; even more so in our digitally connected era, when individuals all over the globe can literally see with their own eyes the conditions in which others live and the contrasts, some of them scandalous, between those different realities.

We must bring back to the fore the concept and the cause of development. Prioritizing development is an affirmation of the belief that things can change and must change. It is almost shocking that after the extraordinary transformations, we have gone through in recent years, such as progress in the field of connectivity in this entirely new digital world, many players continue to behave as if wars, poverty, hunger and inequality are somehow inevitable.

It is as if some things can be changed and others cannot. As if the future is condemned, at least to an extent, to reproduce many of the core problems of past and present.

In that regard, I am reminded of an expression coined by the late professor Fred Halliday, who spoke of “megalo-presentism” when referring to the possibility that certain conclusions—such as Fukuyama’s “End of History”—in fact incur an exaggeration of the impact and relevance in the future of contemporary occurrences or trends. In other words, a historical overestimation of facts that we witness and experience in our lifetime.

There was a lot of megalo-presentism in certain analyses and proclamations regarding globalization in the recent past. A quarter of a century ago, for instance, very few people, if anybody, would have imagined that today would be speaking about *deglobalization*.

The worst part of such proclamations, however, is not the fact that they are not confirmed in the medium and long run, but rather that they bring about a notion that current realities and trends cannot and will not be reversed or transformed. Even more regrettable is the fact that there tends to be an incentive for uniformity rather

than dissonance, for passive adherence rather than healthy intellectual and political debate.

Individuals and societies must free themselves from such notions of inevitability. This is essential if we are to move from either joining or remaining passive in the face of negative and dangerous trends and instead adopt an attitude based on the belief in the possibility of change and in the will of people to join the struggle for change.

In my case, I joined the Brazilian Foreign Service more than four decades ago not primarily for the experience of being involved in the diplomatic projection of our interests abroad. In truth, I entered Brazil's Foreign Service as a means to work for the development of my country and even more so for the improvement of the living conditions of my compatriots who did not have the opportunities I had and who legitimately aspire to a much better life.

Development—our national development and that of other nations—has always been at the core of Brazilian foreign policy. It is our main objective. An objective that we permanently seek while, at the same time, preserving our respect for international law and promoting multilateral institutions as the *fora* where international law is negotiated, written and enforced.

Brazil has always defended international law and multilateral institutions, not as instruments for preserving the *status quo*, but rather as the only path for development, for change, for building a world of peace and prosperity accessible to all humanity.

For more than 150 years now, Brazil has had no armed conflict with any of its ten neighbors. Very few countries in the world can claim such a track record. What we preach, therefore, is what we practice.

That is an essential basis of our credibility. It reinforces our credentials—as one of the world's leading countries in terms of territory, population, economy, natural resources and biodiversity—to play an increasingly more relevant and always constructive role on the international stage, particularly in a world that is becoming, as previously stated, more dangerous and even more unequal.

Rather than a statement of official positions, I have chosen to share a few personal thoughts in this book wherein the Center for China and Globalization once again gathers the contributions of numerous ambassadors now serving in Beijing.

I hope that readers, be they many or few, will at least get an idea of how an individual Brazilian diplomat sees the world we live in and of the values upon which my country has traditionally based its objectives and conduct on the international scene.

It is also a statement of the values, spirit and goals that move me—as I believe they moved previous Brazilian ambassadors and their teams—in our work devoted to building broader and deeper relations between Brazil and China. Ours is a partnership that will continue to benefit the development of both our peoples and nations.



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