

Dance of the wheelchairs at the United Nations

The idea of Brazil on the Security Council, seen as a “whim” by analysts, came from the United States

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The star of the meeting, Rui Barbosa, confessed his disappointment with the course of events at the Conference of The Hague in 1907, “but its invisible results went far because they showed the strong nations how necessary the weak were in preparing peoples’ rights.” This concept of dominance in asymmetrical power relations through ideal forms of diplomatic interactions in which the egalitarian statute is essential persists in Brazilian diplomatic discourse. This is especially true in the country’s candidacy for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. For many analysts, this aspiration is a misperception of Brazil’s true international stature, a desire for status that, if achieved, would result in a high financial and military burden. These critics even claim that the Executive’s recent action in this sense is an “obsession.”

History reveals, however, that the pretension of being the “sixth member” of the Council is not the result of a distorted view but has formed part of the agenda of the United Nations Organization (UNO) since its creation. “In the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conference that brought together the allied powers, proposals were approved for the creation of a new international organiza-

tion charged with maintaining future peace, by force if necessary. Brazil, which was absent from the meeting, was the only country considered to hold a sixth permanent chair on the future Security Council,” says diplomat Eugênio Garcia, full professor at the Rio Branco Institute and author of *O sexto membro permanente: o Brasil e a criação da ONU* [The sixth permanent member: Brazil and the creation of the UN] (Contraponto). The suggestion came from President Roosevelt, who instructed his delegation to work for Brazil’s candidacy. Being part of the body that held real power in the UN and was responsible for global security was a consummate dream, a privilege of the so-called four police forces: the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China. France would subsequently join these countries to form the P-5 group.

“I reported to the president that we had raised the question of a permanent place for Brazil on the Security Council, which the Soviet and British groups opposed, and that to press for it at this juncture would not be advisable. The president finally agreed not to include Brazil in the initial draft, but that a general clause should be included in the proposal in such a way as to leave a door open so that working with Stalin and the

British prime minister, he might touch on the subject again in the future, before the organization started functioning,” wrote the American Under-Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, in his personal diary in August 1944. Days later, he added, “I delivered to the president the memorandum about Brazil, which recommended that we do not press for a permanent place for Brazil. In principle, he did not like it, but later agreed. The president declared that this was important because in the future he might want to propose a place for an Islamic country and Brazil was a hidden trump card for subsequent use.”

The mission of the group, which was placed above a general assembly of “smaller” countries, was to share the “security” role between various regions, thus relieving the United States of the burden of having to intervene militarily worldwide. “The Brazilian government was not consulted and only found out about the proposal in October 1944, when the draft of the Charter that had been approved in the secret meeting was disclosed. The initiative had not come to maturity in American decision-making circles, but, just as he included China in the group despite the resistance of other allies, Roosevelt thought that the suggestion would succeed,” observes Garcia. An



Bertha Lutz
signs on behalf
of Brazil in
San Francisco
Conference

internal memorandum from September 1944 reported to the Department of State a conversation with the Brazilian representative in Washington: “The ambassador explained the difficulties arising from the complete ignorance in which they were being kept with regard to the Dumbarton Oaks negotiations. He said that President Vargas was very embarrassed to have to admit that they only knew what had come out in the press and that even the Argentinean government was as well informed as they were.”

RIO BRANCO

The immediate resistance of Great Britain and the Soviet Union was linked to Brazilian pro-Americanism, which had been explicit since the time of Rio Branco. The members of the Council used to say that Brazil would be a “double vote” for the United States. Even the American delegation advised Roosevelt against Brazil’s admission to the Council because the United States would be “responsible” for Brazil’s performance. It was therefore agreed that Washington’s support would be limited to the candidacy of Brazil to a temporary place on the body, which occurred in 1946. “However, the arguments were very selective. It was said that military power was a condition for a seat, but at the time, China only controlled a fraction of its own territory. The American imposition was strategic, to strengthen the Asian ally in the struggle against Japan,”

The United States changed its mind and was only prepared to defend Brazil’s position as a non-permanent member

according to Eugênio Garcia. Great Britain, which opposed Brazil, set aside its restrictions on new members to give a seat to Gaullist France. In Catete, Roosevelt’s attempt was greeted with enthusiasm and was seen as a reward for being the only South American country to send troops to Europe.

It was also a chance to settle accounts with the great powers after the disastrous episode of the League of Nations in 1926, when the administration of Arthur Bernardes bet everything on the “natural candidacy” of Brazil to be a permanent member of that body. Passed over for Germany, the country withdrew from the in-

stitution. A seat would lead to a return of Brazilian multilateralism with a universal scope. Vargas, who personally directed Brazil’s foreign policy (to the detriment of the Foreign Office of his friend, Oswaldo Aranha), had faith in his personal friendship with Roosevelt and bet on a bilateral conversation to bargain for his place on the Council. Later, resigned to a provisional seat, Vargas’ diplomacy remained focused on the Council. “Brazil chose this option because it saw that the main game would be played out there. That Vargas made this decision is noteworthy. Despite his focus on economic development, he had given up going after a role for Brazil in the international security sphere,” says Garcia.

The “special” relationship with Washington meant that Brazil maintained its weak ties with its neighbors, who reacted by “turning their backs” in mistrust, especially Argentina. “Vargas, however, wavered between being aligned with the United States and guarding against the deterioration in relations with the Argentineans,” says Garcia. After all, between 1944 and 1945, with the end of the conflict, Brazil was no longer a strategic partner, and the United States began to distance itself slowly from its “loyal friend.” Roosevelt’s death in 1945 finally buried the era of “special” bilateral relations. The São Francisco Conference was convened in that year to formalize the proposal of Dumbarton Oaks with the “45 smaller countries.”

The UN with a Brazilian rhythm



1944

In Dumbarton Oaks, the idea of a security organization is created, the future UN. Roosevelt advocates for the entry of Brazil as a member of the Security Council



1945

At the São Francisco Conference, the Brazilian delegation accepts the terms but attempts to include a review of the document five years later in its search for a permanent seat



1946

Brazil manages to obtain a temporary place and participates in the Council’s first meeting



1994

Brazil, with foreign minister Amorim, launches its official candidacy for the Security Council and asks that the Council be reformed



2003

President Lula, in his first speech at the UN, again takes up the cause of Brazilian candidacy



2011

President Dilma opens the UN Assembly by speaking of the need for equality between countries and says that Brazil still wants a seat



1 Dumbarton Oaks conference, in 1944, where the UN was “invented”

2 Dutra (center) looks at the UN building project, in 1947

PRESSURE

Several countries were pressured to establish relations with the Soviet Union as a condition for participating in the conference and in response to complaints from Stalin. Brazil was the first to be “worked on” by the Americans. Since 1917, the country had not had diplomatic ties with the Russians. Vargas reluctantly found himself constrained into reaching an agreement with Moscow. The friendship lasted a very short time; in 1947, President Dutra, caught in the crossfire of the Cold War, broke off relations with the USSR. However, the pressure of 1945 had already set the tone for the encounter, which was merely to ratify the decisions of the “Police Forces,” including the veto power of the Security Council. The conference served to maintain the essence of the Charter “by force”; either they maintained the prerogatives of the permanent members, or, it warned, there would be no organization at all.

Faced with the threat of the conference being a total failure, Brazil, which from the beginning had opposed granting the veto, retreated and accepted the terms. Before giving in, the Brazilian delegation proposed a review of the Charter in five years with the “Velloso amendment,” named after the foreign minister who had substituted for Aranha. The five-year review mechanism would be the responsibility of the General Assembly, which would have constituent powers to change the Charter by a two-thirds majority vote without a veto. That was also defeated. The only notable outcome was the participation of Bertha Lutz, the least conservative choice by Vargas for the delegation, who strongly argued for the rights of women.

“Brazil bet on American intercession as a shortcut to its objective, but the strategy failed because the United States no longer saw the country as strategically vital. When the Brazilian government was extremely anxious to gain recognition for its loyalty to harvest the fruits of

the special relationship it believed it had with the United States, the latter abandoned the country. It was the beginning of the disenchantment,” observes Garcia. If the country had gained a seat in 1945, it would have been through American intervention, as in the case with China, or, going back further, in the same way that Brazil had entered the Council of the League of Nations in 1919 on the suggestion of President Wilson. What was left were concessions, such as a temporary seat (already occupied approximately a dozen times), the participation of Oscar Niemeyer in the team that designed the UN headquarters building in New York, and Aranha’s invitation to preside over the prickly 1947 session of the General Assembly that ratified the partitioning of Palestine. The strong still did not recognize the necessary role of the weak in preparing the rights of the people.

In 1989, then-President José Sarney gave a speech in front of the General Assembly that once again touched on the subject of the Council seat. In 1994, during the Itamar Franco administration, Brazil officially re-launched its candidacy for a permanent place and acted in favor of reform of the Council. During the Lula administration, reform and the Council seat became the main topics of his foreign policy, and in 2003, in his first speech at the UN, the president openly defended the project. This was the same attitude adopted in 2011 by President Dilma Rousseff, who insisted on arguing for Brazilian candidacy.

For Eugênio Garcia, Brazil’s chances today are greater. He warns, however, “The permanent chair does not mean that Brazil has been transformed into a ‘world power’ from one day to the next but that the Council has opened up to developing countries by accepting them as permanent members via election in the General Assembly.” According to Garcia, the body, which is extremely important, does not reflect reality in its composition. “It needs to be more representative to be more legitimate and effective,” he observes. Garcia believes that the country is prepared for this function. “If in 1945 President Roosevelt thought Brazil could be a council member, when the country was very much less than it is currently, why can’t Brazil today be the sixth permanent member? This needs to be thought about,” he says. ■