The Challenge For Itamaraty: An answer to to Ambassador Gonçalo Mello Mourão’s “Seria a política externa um problema para a Itamaraty?”
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In his rebuttal of my January 2013 analysis of Itamaraty and the formation and implementation of Brazilian foreign policy (Seria o Itamaraty um problema para a política externa brasileira?), Ambassador Gonçalo Mello Mourão ends with a telling metaphor which nicely supports the larger point I originally made. Comparing the role of Brazilian diplomats with that of cardiac surgeon, Ambassador Mourão writes: “… todos devem poder contribuir para a formulação da política externa. O cirurgião cardíaco deve ouvir o pneumólogo, o anestesista, o hematólogo e outros especialistas com muito cuidado, antes de operar; mas quem opera o coração com bisturi certeiro com algum sucesso, é ele, não o dentista.”

My original article reflected complaints about Itamaraty attitudes and procedures voiced to me repeatedly in over a decade of conversations with Brazilian diplomats, government officials in other ministries on the Esplanada, academic colleagues in Brazil, representatives of Brazilian business and industry, and similar individuals and organizations in Europe, North America, Africa and the Antipodes. To draw on Ambassador Mourão’s parting metaphor, the critique I repeatedly heard was not about

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the innate capability of Itamaraty diplomats or their ability to implement and deliver the policies outcomes mandated by Brazil’s political leadership, but rather the persistence of something similar to the God-complex frequently attributed to surgeons by others in the medical profession. A widely held perception appears to be that Itamaraty is reluctant to listen to outside expertise and accept a ‘democratic’ opening of foreign affairs in the sense that it would throw open the doors to more actors and organizations as foreign policy formulating and implementing bodies. Instead, in an approach that almost echoes the gradual opening of politics during Brazil’s democratic transition in the 1980s, ‘democracy’ in foreign affairs appears as something for Itamaraty to carefully manage, keeping this area of public policy apart from most commonly accepted understandings of democratic discourse and practice. Foreign policy, in short, is quietly positioned as the exclusive preserve of the ‘professionals’, creating a reality that Itamaraty has been allowed to perpetuate.

The comparison with a cardiac surgeon is thus particularly apt. The cardiac surgeon is a highly skilled craftsman with an expertise that takes many years to develop. But, the critical point is that the surgeon is operating because other medical professionals have deemed it a necessary risk and thus recommended the procedure. Tellingly for Ambassador Mourão’s metaphor, there is a clear recognition in the medical literature that oral disease may be the first indicator of severe underlying cardiac conditions, meaning that the presence of severe heart ailments are often first identified by the attending dentist (Humphrey et al, 2008). Thus, while it certainly makes no sense to have the dentist undertake the surgery, there is a good chance that it is the dentist who will identify the
potential need for an operation long before the surgeon realizes that there might be a problem.

In part the questions I raised relate to what role the diplomat/surgeon should play in the ‘diagnosis’ and prescription of ‘treatment’ to address Brazilian foreign policy challenges, particularly through democratic political processes, which in an ideal world involves active discussion amongst political, economic, social and civil society actors with and independent from the foreign ministry and government. The argument I made in my article is not that there is a deficiency in Itamaraty’s ability to quickly and effectively implement foreign policies decided by political leadership. Indeed, Ambassador Mourão admirably sets out Itamaraty successes in areas such as expansion of South American regional plans, increased diplomatic representation in Africa, and the launch of a Brazilian South-South Cooperation program.

Rather, I asked questions about how Itamaraty is responding to major and fast changes in how foreign relations take place at a formal and informal level and what this means for Brazil’s foreign policy and future position regionally and globally. The proposition I raise is that the international context has, as Ambassador Antonio Patriota (2013) observes in the same issue carrying Ambassador Mourão’s opinion, changed markedly over the last decade. Building on this I suggest that it might be worth at least re-examining and possibly rethinking some of the key understandings at the heart of Brazilian foreign policy even if the exercise results in no substantive changes.
For example, the suggestion that regional integration approaches be re-examined, particularly Mercosul, is not new in Brazil. Indeed, this question was directly addressed by Ambassador Botafogo Gonçalves (2013) just pages from my own paper. More telling is Ambassador Mourão’s rebuttal of my treatment of Brazil’s Responsabilidade ao Proteger. While the Ambassador is correct that the Responsibility to Protect doctrine has a serious weakness when it comes to justifying why it applies in one case and not another (never mind the thorny question of who will provide the troops for intervention), it also points directly to why there is grounds for revisiting understandings of non-intervention and sovereignty even if the end result is no change in the policy position. The underlying principle in question is that of self-determination, which implies that the people within a country determine their own future. With Libya and Syria in mind, what if the country is autocratically, not democratically governed? More to the point, what if the government of the country in question is perpetrating atrocities against substantial segments of its population? Does this mean there should be a modification or moderation in the Brazilian position? How do these lamentably common possibilities sit with the foreign policy of a strong democratic state such as Brazil?

In many respects what I was asking is if there should be a repeat of the sort of core “concept review” undertaken in 1992 and 1993, leading to the document Reflexões Sobre a Política Externa Brasileira (IPRI, 1993). Perhaps the sharpest critique of my suggestion has come from Professor Dawisson Belém Lopes, who points out that Itamaraty remains subservient to the presidency and as such we should have very limited expectations for and desire to see diplomatic creativity from the foreign ministry. On a
strictly constitutionalist basis this critique is sharp and on the mark. Indeed the Reflexões exercise happened at the direction of a politically appointed minister, not a career diplomat. Significantly for some of Ambassador Mourão’s arguments, the Reflexões report also reaffirmed some of the core propositions guiding Brazil’s foreign policy. Nevertheless, the exercise in auto-critica was still directed by and through Itamaraty. Although representatives from universities and the business community were invited to participate in some of the seminars, interpretations of these contributions were still geared towards reaffirming Itamaraty hegemony on the formulation of foreign policy, not just its implementation.

With this in mind, the issue is not really one of legal interpretation and appropriate levels of institutional entrepreneurship, but rather one of understanding the intellectual and policy space Itamaraty occupies in the formulation and understanding of the underlying concepts and the practice of foreign policy in Brazil. The conundrum is captured by Professor Belém Lopes in his excellent book Política Externa e Democracia no Brasil. In a democratic country foreign policy is but one of a number of areas of public policy, each of which brings a particular set of restraints, traditions, and varying levels of political interest. Democratization brings pressure from different actors for wider participation in the policy-making process, which in the Itamaraty case represents a challenge to its authority: “Embora não disponhamos de elementos objetivos para afirmar que a democratização da PEB seja tendência indesejável para o Ministério de Relações Exteriores do Brasil e seus membros, cumpre reconhecer que essa burocracia tem sabido absorver muito do impacto proveniente das pressões por mais democracia, convertendo-
as, frequentemente, em insumo de legitimidade para uma condução (ainda) aristocrática da política exterior do Estado brasileiro” (Belem Lopes, 2013b: 268). In other words, there is a sense that the effort has been to ensure that foreign policy remains something best left to the professionals while simultaneously embracing the democratization of public policy.

The tensions on this front have led to a gathering wave of criticism of Itamaraty. Setting aside media stories that complain about diplomatic salaries and adherence to transparency legislation, we find a rapidly growing body of Brazilian scholarly and policy literature examining Itamaraty shortcomings and the extent to which non-traditional actors are engaging directly in foreign relations (Tavares, 2013; Pinheiro and Milani, 2012; 2013; Pinheiro, 2009: Faria, Belem Lopes, Casaroes, 2013). Glimpses of why this tide of complaints exist can be found in the publications by Brazil’s highest ranking diplomats, as quietly demonstrated by Ambassador Celso Amorim (2013: 81-82), who recently hinted at coordinated efforts to ensure that a diplomat remained the key WTO negotiator, not an official from the Ministério de Desenvolvimento, Indústria e Comércio Exterior.

As Ambassador Mourão points out, Itamaraty has undertaken substantial activities to increase public, political and bureaucratic engagement with foreign policy. The books published by the Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão are an important contribution to policy and scholarly debate. Seminars coordinated by the Instituto de Pesquisa de Relações Internacionais result in stimulating discussions and publications that often reaffirm existing policy trajectories. Itamaraty officials also frequently appear before the Senate’s
Comissão de Relações Exteriores e Defesa Nacional, although it should be remembered that many of these appearances are a legal requirement and part of the system of democratic checks and balances, not a concession to democratization offered by the foreign ministry. Further developments took place in 2013 with Minister Antonio Patriota’s proposal of a regular civil society dialogue and a revamping of Itamaraty’s Facebook, Twitter and Youtube presence.

On one level Itamaraty thus appears to be engaged in a real and positive process of inciting debate and engaging with the Brazilian people and interest groups. But a central problem here is that this also means that Itamaraty is leading and thus controlling the democratization of this area of public policy. This in turn raises the question of how deep Itamaraty consultation is and what actual impact it has on policy content. On this front Professor Oliver Stuenkel (2013) has raised some important questions about the efficacy of Itamaraty’s social media use. His colleague at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas in Rio de Janeiro, Professor Matias Spektor (2013a), has pushed the point further by lauding Itamaraty’s renewed engagement with civil society, but also warning that “existe o risco de o novo foro ser esvaziado. O ministro será tentado a usar sua criatura para informar e convencer a sociedade, não para consultá-la e ajustar o que precisa ser ajustado.” Indeed, such a strategy is a well-established favourite in bureaucracies the world over. Early suggestions were that the current foreign minister, Ambassador Luiz Alberto Figueiredo, has cancelled the process (Paraguassu, 2014), although further clarification came in his 6 February 2014 testimony before the Comissão de Relações Exteriores e Defesa Nacional
do Senado Federal where he explained that consultation was important and would happen once procedural terms could be agreed with the interested parties.

As Professor Leticia Pinheiro (2007: 7) notes, there is a major issue with the place that diplomats hold in Brazil’s foreign policy debate. The intellectual production from Itamaraty has had a tendency to focus on either explaining why a decision was sound or searching out the most efficient method of implementing a decision that has already been made, not innovating or formulating major new policy directions or understandings. To emphasize this point, she turns to Gelson Fonseca (1998: 263), quoting: “tanto Itamaraty como as Forças Armadas ‘pensam’ em função de interesses, de uma determinada visão de seu papel como burocracias permanentes … faltando, por isso mesmo, ao seu pensamento as condições de originalidade e de sentido critico que normalmente devem trazer as interpretações intelectuais ou acadêmicos da realidade.” For Professor Pinheiro (2007: 15) the tendency in Brazil to accept the writings of diplomats as scientific production and not primary documents reflecting the internal logic and priorities of Itamaraty creates a situation that carries “serious political as well as academic consequences for the teaching and learning of Brazilian Foreign Policy and International Relations.” The contention I am reinforcing here simply extends Professor Pinheiro’s concerns out from the academy and into a wider political and policy space.

My argument is not that the publications and public activities of Brazilian diplomats lack scholarly merit – one of the delights of researching Brazilian foreign policy is conversing with the brilliant minds at Itamaraty – but that the intellectual firepower of Itamaraty is
deployed in a very specific manner which brings its own sets of limitations, a point that the current IPRI Director has himself recently acknowledged (Lima, 2014). A widespread failure to acknowledge this and to intellectually distinguish the policy-supporting writings of diplomats from scholars and policy pundits has created a situation that perpetuates the traditional position of Itamaraty as a sort of final arbiter on foreign affairs, creating an environment that does not so much prevent innovation and new policy directions as cow into submission the potential protagonists of these new ideas. Itamaraty is thus left as an island apart, master of a policy space into which others tread only with trepidation and reticence for fear of swift and forceful castigation.

One consequence is a perception amongst academics, citizens and legislators that Congress has very little influence on foreign affairs (Anastasia, Mendonça, e Almeida, 2012). The extent to which Itamaraty has successfully walled off foreign affairs as a unique area of expertise in the minds of Brazilian politicians was bluntly highlighted by Senator José Jorge during a 2005 Commission debate on President Lula’s South American policies: “na realidade, com exceção da Comissão de Relações Exteriores e Defesa Nacional, o Plenário nunca discutiu política externa brasileira porque o Congresso sempre confiou no Itamaraty. Sempre se confiou no Ministério das Relações Exteriores porque é uma instituição extremamente profissionalizada, os embaixadores são escolhidos por critérios técnicos e são pessoas experientes em quem confiamos” (Senado 2005: 277). The rest of the Committee debate reinforces the point that the quasi-intellectual status of Itamaraty publications and a tradition of not pressing the professionals effectively curtails a more probing discussion of Brazilian foreign policy.
While bemoaning the lack of a real grappling with Brazilian foreign policy, members of the Committee made it clear that they had utter faith in the ability of the diplomats to successfully fulfill their mission. The issue, as outlined above, is that in the realm of foreign policy the distinction between the operational and the conceptual are blurred, closing down a serious and detailed congressional examination of the latter.

Thus, in answer to Ambassador Mourão’s revised question “Seria a política externa brasileira um problema para o Itamaraty,” the answer clearly has to be a strong ‘no’ because to argue otherwise would fly in the face of the professionalism that is the hallmark of o Casa do Rio Branco. The question I was seeking to raise is, as I hope I have further outlined here, significantly more complicated and might be rephrased as one of “has Brazil become overly reliant on Itamaraty for foreign policy thinking and direction?” Reframed this way the critique I offered still has implications for Itamaraty public engagement and implementation processes for the reasons outlined above. But it is the questions the critique raises for Brazil’s political leadership that are more penetrating.

The extent to which things are changing and Itamaraty adopting a more ecumenical and open approach to foreign policy thinking may currently be undergoing a bit of a test if the rumours of writing a ‘Livro Branco de Política Externa’ are true (Spektor, 2013b), although reports suggest that it will have the same Itamaraty domination that marked the 1993 Reflexões report and thus skirt the central issues about democracy and foreign policy that I and, more significantly, many of my Brazilian colleagues are raising. While the ‘aristocracy’ of Brazilian foreign policy may still be housed in the Itamaraty Palace,
there is a rising and increasingly vocal range of scholars, businessmen and civil society
actors in Brazil questioning the daily operation and core precepts of their country’s
foreign policy. The danger which I sought to highlight in my article is that the ‘cardiac
surgeons’ in the Itamaraty Palace might shut out the myriad of highly qualified Brazilian
‘dentists’ from the discussion and thus miss a critical diagnosis or innovative and more
effective treatment plan that carries less trauma than major surgery.

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