



A Conversation with **Ambassador Sérgio Amaral**
September 13, 2016

Newly appointed Brazilian ambassador to the United States, Sérgio Amaral, came to the Wilson Center on September 13 to discuss Brazil-U.S. relations within the changing context of Brazil's economic and political spheres. Below is a summary of the Ambassador's presentation, which was his inaugural public address to the Washington policy community.

A retired career diplomat called back to duty by President Michel Temer, Ambassador Sérgio Amaral served twice before in Washington, most recently in the 1990s as deputy chief of mission at the Brazilian Embassy to the United States. He was press secretary and spokesman under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the 1990s, before being named minister of Development, Industry and Commerce. Amaral was also ambassador to the United Kingdom and France, deputy-minister for the Environment and president of the Brazil-China Business Council. Ambassador Amaral is a close adviser to Foreign Minister José Serra, and his appointment signals a clear shift in Brazil's foreign policy focus. His mission in Washington is to foster positive relations with the United States, with particular emphasis on trade and commerce.

Paulo Sotero, director of the Brazil Institute at the Wilson Center, opened the event before welcoming to the podium Ambassador Anthony Harrington. Former U.S. ambassador to Brazil and chair of the Brazil Institute Advisory Council, Ambassador Harrington introduced Ambassador Amaral. A Q&A session followed the Ambassador's address.

SUMMARY

Assigned only a few days after the recent impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff, Ambassador Amaral noted that her removal from office was inherently both a legal and political process, with the case judged by the Senate with the counsel and oversight of the Supreme Court. He stated that there were “clear legal grounds” for the case against the former president. He contended that the process—painful as it has been for Brazil and its people—along with the Lava Jato investigations into the massive corruption scheme at state oil company Petrobras, have paved the way for “a new chapter in Brazilian history.”

On the political front, the impeachment has shifted the balance of power in Brasilia, with President Temer’s PMDB ascendant and the Workers’ Party (PT) of former President Rousseff and former President Lula left weakened. Looking toward the presidential elections in 2018, Ambassador Amaral noted that the Workers’ Party will attempt to shore up support among its traditional base, lower-income voters, which constitute almost 70 percent of the Brazilian population. PSDB—the center-right party of former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso—lacks this type of strong connection to the low income and vulnerable population in Brazil: this is perhaps the main challenge to PSDB’s political aspirations for 2018. At the moment, it is impossible to tell who will benefit in the long term from the ongoing political sea change.

Regardless of the political environment, Ambassador Amaral expressed confidence that the Lava Jato corruption investigation will continue: “there is no alternative, because public opinion will not allow any change, and interference [as it is perceived as] ...a legitimate action by the federal [prosecutors and] police.” He acknowledged, however that the process is sometimes like “an unguided missile”: no one knows who will be the next target.

On the economic front, Ambassador Amaral underscored the centrality of fiscal reform to the new government’s agenda. The administration is working to reduce expenditures, including a cap real growth in expenditures for the next twenty years. The government will also seek a number of reforms, including to taxes, social security, and labor; and is restructuring state companies (notably Petrobras). Ambassador Amaral argued that these changes will generate a number of new opportunities for foreign investment in Brazil. He noted that the government is working hard to prepare a new legal and regulatory framework to improve the tenders process for infrastructure investment, and urged U.S. companies to participate in this process.

On foreign policy, Ambassador Amaral argued that a mature foreign policy reflects the values and interests of the Brazilian people rather than ideological preferences of a single political party. He noted that, for the first time in many years, Argentina and Brazil share many of the same priorities domestically and regionally, creating space for the renewal of the trade bloc Mercosul. Yet, in what Ambassador Amaral termed “an irony of history,” as Brazil now opens toward international markets and new trade agreements—after years of looking inward—some of its largest trade partners are feeling greater domestic pressure to close their borders. Nonetheless, Ambassador Amaral expressed hope that the United States and Brazil will take this opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations, using the areas where the two countries do converge—democracy, human rights, alternative energy, defense industry, trade—to build a robust bond. Acknowledging the sometimes rocky bilateral ties, he maintained that friendship among countries allows for the possibility of disagreement.

Ambassador Amaral closed in saying that his government has a vision of the country it seeks to build, one grounded in democracy, respectful of human rights and the environment, and committed to reducing inequality. He acknowledged that such a task will take time, but affirmed his belief that President Temer and his government are up to the challenge.

Good morning.

I recognize a few old friends in the audience and I'm very happy to see you all. I want to thank Paulo Sotero and Ambassador Anthony Harrington for this invitation. I'm very pleased to be here. This is my first public address and I think it should be here, because the Wilson Center has become the center stage for a plural and very well informed discussion on Brazil. I think the Wilson Center plays a very important role in this debate, which is of utmost importance for us: a debate of ideas, a debate of Brazilian policies and its interactions with the United States and beyond.

I have decided to leave the impeachment question to the second part of this meeting but I cannot resist emphasizing two or three points. And I am of course prepared to discuss the matter further with you. I think that there are two basic issues to take into account when we discuss this very important, although painful, process which took place recently in Brazil.

First is the nature of impeachment. Impeachment is not a legal question alone. It is both a legal and political subject. If it were only a legal question, the place for the judgement would not have been the Senate, but the judiciary, the Supreme Court.

Second, there are clear legal grounds for the impeachment. And these legal grounds lie in two issues: one, the authorization of credit without previous approval by Congress, and two, the fact that financing was provided to the central government by public banks, which is forbidden by the law of fiscal responsibility. A third point is a procedural one. The procedure for

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an impeachment process is described in the Constitution in a very detailed way. Two votes by two-thirds of the House and the Senate after a lengthy public discussion, most of which was streamed live by television and online. Legal procedures were strictly followed under the supervision of the Supreme Court. It



Brazilian Ambassador Sérgio Amaral presents his credentials to U.S. President Barack Obama (White House, September 16, 2016)

was the Supreme Court president who presided over the impeachment trial in the Senate.

Instead of being viewed as a coup, the impeachment should be seen as a lesson of democracy, because of the involvement of society, because of the public debate, because of the fact that the three branches of government scrutinized the process of impeachment in a very detailed way, and they continue to perform their duties normally. The press provided ample and unrestricted coverage of the impeachment. And the military performed their duties. That is why I do not feel very comfortable when people talk about a coup, because this is simply not true. The most important [aspect] for us now is the fact that the impeachment opened up a new chapter in Brazilian history.

First of all, the country is normalizing after a period of political confrontation and radicalization. We now have tranquility. We have a process of negotiation: negotiation with Brazilian society, negotiation with political parties, negotiations with unions, and mainly negotiations with Congress—which is the specialty of President Temer. He was president of the Chamber of Deputies for three terms and knows how to negotiate with Congress, something that President Dilma found very difficult to do. Temer's political ability

is a very important asset to Brazil now, because we are going to face important reforms, some of them constitutional reforms, which require three-fifths of the vote in both houses of Congress: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

As far as the political scene, the impeachment was a game-changer. First of all, it allowed for the continuation of several changes which were already in process or had been recently approved: for instance, the prohibition of private financing of electoral campaigns.

More important is the new configuration of the party system and the emergence of the PMDB as the main political party. The PMDB is in government, the main leaders in Congress—House and Senate—are from PMDB, and the party has proposed a program for the post-impeachment period, which the other parties did not do. Of course, the PMDB has the bonus and the onus of being the main party: a bonus because it will lead a process of change, but also the onus of having to face the political challenges posed by some very difficult proposed reforms, such as social security.

The polarization of PSDB and PT in recent decades opened space for this emergence of PMDB. Both PT and PSDB face challenges—important challenges in the case of PT.

PT was defeated in the impeachment process, and several important PT leaders are in jail, such as the former chief of staff of the president. There is internal division and there is no clear leadership besides [former President] Lula. The number of PT candidates participating in this year's municipal elections is half what it was in the past. The PT has chosen a strategy looking ahead to the 2018 general and presidential elections and centered on three main points. The first is the victimization of former President Lula, because of the so-called coup. The second point is social mobilization. It is interesting to note that during the impeachment process there was already a film crew filming events to support the mobilization of social movements. And the third point is the attempt to restore the support of the traditional basis of PT in the electoral system, that is to say, among lower income people.

PSDB has, as it has always had, well-qualified leaders. It supports the current government, but it has not presented a real, comprehensive program. It has no

connection with common people. I always remember something that Monica de Bolle wrote in an article some years ago. It was a piece of research or poll by IBGE [Brazil's Census Bureau] on the different sectors of society and how they benefited from the country's economic growth. It showed that lower income families (earning between two and five minimum wages) improved their income 50 percent, while the national average was 30 percent. What does that mean in electoral terms? This income bracket represents 70 percent of the Brazilian population, and this illustrates one of the reasons why the Workers' Party was very successful in previous elections. As I mentioned, the PSDB does not have a concrete connection with low-income people. PT and Lula talk the language of the vulnerable population. They have an agenda for the vulnerable population. Lula has governed for the vulnerable population. PSDB does not have this capacity because it was born in government and does not have PT's social base. And this is perhaps the major challenge for PSDB. The real political question is whether the PSDB or the PMDB will benefit most from its participation in government.

Fiscal Reform

Now, let's talk about the post-impeachment period with respect to the economy. There is a new direction for the economy and it is very clear. Finance Minister Henrique Meirelles pointed out in one of his first presentations that "my main task is to restore confidence in the business community, and to restore confidence I will need to promote a fiscal reform because the fiscal situation is the basic reason why we have high interest rates and we do not have investment."

So, fiscal reform is the priority and it is compounded by two main aspects. One is reduction of expenditures, which has already started; the other is the very ambitious proposal of having a freeze on government expenditures in real terms. Supposedly, this

"...these [economic] changes open up new and very important opportunities for new investments in Brazil."

freeze would last for twenty years, with no real increase in expenditures by the government. In addition to cutting expenditures, we will have reforms, some of which have already been indicated by many members of the government, such as fiscal reform.



Ambassador Sérgio Amaral, Ambassador Anthony Harrington, and Brazil Institute Director Paulo Sotero (Wilson Center, September 13, 2016)

is to have unification of ICMS [a state sales tax], which is a very difficult thing to do. The second target of fiscal reform is social security. Social security is responsible for a deficit of \$60 billion in next year's budget. It is huge, unsustainable, and has to be reformed. This reform will probably include a minimum age increase and a change in the indexation of social security expenditures.

Labor reform is another important topic on the government's agenda. Some possible features have already been indicated, namely, the acceptance of collective agreements together with legal rules. This will open a very important alternative for negotiations between the social partner's employees and the employers.

Another important aspect of economic reform, which is already underway (but nobody is paying much attention to), is the restructuring of state companies. The case of Petrobras is a very clear example. The company's new president, Pedro Parente, has been working very hard to quickly change the profile of the company. Parente received a commitment from President Temer that no political appointments will be made to the Executive Board of Petrobras. He is also undertaking a serious financial repositioning of the company, which includes asset sales, renegotiation of the debts and two important changes: the elimination of the mandatory participation of Petrobras in all projects in the oil sector; and, no less important, the reduction of local content rules for equipment to be provided to and built for Petrobras.

Of course these changes open up new and very im-

portant opportunities for new investments in Brazil.

The second area in which we are going to have investment opportunities is infrastructure. Minister Moreira Franco is working hard on this topic. I had two discussions with him and I was very impressed. He is preparing a new legal framework for tenders in the area of infrastructure. It will provide longer deadlines for companies to participate and understand the nature of the projects, and perhaps allow companies to work together with the government to define new regulations governing a competitive bidding process, with the participation of CADE, which is the regulatory authority for competition. The objective here is to stimulate medium-size companies to participate, including through reducing the upfront capital which they have to bring and upfront environment licensing.

This is a revolution, because people who have participated in tenders in Brazil know that you can gain a contract but it is very difficult to implement given the complexity of bureaucratic process involved to obtain environmental licenses, particularly on major projects.

I was president of the Brazil-China Business Council and used to feel very uneasy listening to presentations by Brazilian delegations sent abroad to do the so-called roadshows highlighting investment opportunities in Brazil. They presented the same projects for years. I attended most of them. It was a shame. Speakers always announced that in the next few months the projects being presented would go to tenders. And they never did. And whenever people

asked for details for the projects, such as a feasibility study and the project's rate of return, nobody could answer. We only had the name of the projects and a few general ideas.

This will change. Minister Moreira said that he wants to travel to present projects which are not yet developed but are ready for tender, contract, and execution.

There is a large portfolio of possible projects for foreign investment: airports in Salvador, Fortaleza, Porto Alegre, Florianópolis; highways; and railways, which are extremely important and will substantially reduce the cost of producing in Brazil. People who ship soy beans from the countryside, from the Center-West of the country to ports on the Atlantic pay as much for transportation as they do to produce soybeans. There is no way we can be competitive without removing such obstacles. Other projects include hydroelectric plants, oil and gas, and ports—and these are just a few of the areas that will be open to foreign participation.

Social Concerns

What is the post-impeachment scenario in the social area? The president is concerned about reducing the unemployment rate, which has reached almost 11 percent of the workforce. And at the same time, he is

concerned with preserving social programs. If the social programs under Lula and Dilma were good, why not keep them and make them more efficient in the provision of benefits?

The Lava Jato, an unprecedented investigation of corruption in Brazil, will continue. There is no alternative, because public opinion will not allow political interference in Lava Jato. The investigations are very legitimate action conducted by federal prosecutors and by the federal police under the supervision of the Supreme Court. At the same time, Lava Jato is like an unguided political missile: nobody knows what will be the next action, who this action will affect, and the possible impacts not only on companies but also on the political arena and political leaders.

Foreign Policy

Now, let's talk a little about foreign policy. My intention is not to give a comprehensive overview of possible changes in foreign policy. The main principles of foreign policy have been clearly stated by Minister Serra, including in his inaugural speech, and by the president himself.

Foreign policy has to reflect the values and interests of Brazilian society, rather than the ideological preference of a single political party. This is by itself a sea change in our country's foreign policy.

Brazilian Foreign Minister José Serra and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (Palácio Itamaraty, Brasília, August 5, 2016)



I will focus on just two aspects of the new foreign policy. One is Mercosul. We have in Mercosul a unique opportunity. For the first time in many years there is a convergence between Brazil and Argentina, after almost two decades of moving in opposite directions. When Argentina would go towards opening up the markets, we would go towards closing them. And when we opened up the markets, they closed them. For the first time, there is convergence. We seem headed in the same direction. And this opens new opportunities for the renewal of Mercosul, for the elimination of restrictions and barriers within the agreement, and perhaps to negotiate new trade agreements. This is important. Since 2002, Brazil has concluded only three trade agreements: with Israel, with the Gulf countries, and with Egypt. This took place in a period when most trading nations entered into serious and comprehensive trade negotiations. We lagged behind. The irony is that now that we have decided to open up our economy, the major trading blocs, such as Europe and the United States, are under domestic pressure to move in the opposite direction.

The second aspect I want to emphasize is relations between Brazil and the United States. Here, also, I think we have a unique opportunity for cooperation, especially for overcoming the ups and downs in our bilateral relations which prevailed during the second half of the 20th century. I hope we may be reaching a time of maturity, in which we will decide the actions we will take on the basis of their merits and the synergy of projects, instead of using preconceived approaches.

We share many areas of convergence: democracy, in which Brazil will probably take a more active role; human rights, which is a pet subject for Minister Serra; trade; and environment and sustainability, an area I am personally committed to. I serve on the board of World Wildlife Fund Brazil, and I would like to work with our U.S. partners in this area. And we have agreed upon a considerable number of projects, working groups, and commissions. There is on both sides a joint effort to accelerate these projects and to move ahead.

The guiding principle is that there is no reason to not work together in the areas in which our interests are convergent. And wherever we do not converge, we should also be clear and avoid creating false expectations.

These initiatives—there are around fifty projects, joint commissions, and working groups—are concentrated in a few very important areas. One of them is, of course, the economy. Our agenda for energy encompasses almost all areas of energy, including alternative energy. For trade, there are areas where we can do more on trade facilitation. This includes infrastructure, an area in which we would welcome U.S. investors. And they should hurry up, because there is the opportunity not only to participate in pre-established projects, but also to work with the government to define and prepare projects.

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Minister Moreira Franco’s idea is that this engagement will let us accommodate, to the extent possible, the wishes of potential investors. I think this is very important. It is time for new missions to work on the funding and preparation of projects. We have many partnerships in the aviation industry. This is a big success and a very important development. Boeing and Embraer are working together in promoting the new KC-390 Embraer transport aircraft, which marks an important qualitative change in our cooperation with American companies.

Defense is another promising area, with a large number of projects and important programs. It is not only the exchange of military cooperation. It is the partnership between the defense industries in Brazil and in the United States.

Also contemplated are, obviously, the portfolio projects in many areas of interest for our two societies, such as education, culture, joint scientific research, and health.

Finally, I would like to mention my perception that we are underrepresented in Washington, not only in financial agencies, the Bretton-Woods institutions and the Inter-American Development Bank, where our participation is limited. Perhaps it is our fault, since we never paid attention to this issue. We are a big, large, inward-looking country—we found that

the external world existed only some ten or fifteen years ago. But we are also underrepresented, I think, in the think-tanks in Washington. We are underrepresented in the very important dialogues that take place and in which we would like to be more active. This is one of the priorities of the Embassy: participation in such debates in order to express our views.

The new government has a vision of the country we want to build. This vision is democracy, human rights, environment and, above all, reducing inequality in our society. There are clear guidelines; there is a roadmap. The government has a majority in Congress and, above all, the president is a skillful negotiator who has been president of the House three times and knows how to deal with Congress. This will be extremely important to us as we move to implement the reforms. But this does not mean the task will be easy. Some of the policies may be easier, and some will be uphill battles. But we are determined to face them.

I would like to end with a quote by an Argentine economist who is a good friend, who many of you know: Dante Sica talking about the new Macri government. He said: “this government will have to be politically viable, economically consistent, and socially tolerable.” I think this quote applies to Brazil also.

Thank you very much.

“The government is headed in the right direction, but all of the changes—political, economic, and social—have to go forward together.”

Questions & Answers

There have been many protests since President Temer took office. How will the new government deal with popular disapproval?

Impeachment had the support of society, but in Brazil—as in many other countries at the moment—people are skeptical, even hostile, toward their governments and politicians. Popular approval of impeachment did not translate into support for the Temer government. I think support will grow with time, and with economic results. There are already signs that inflation will come down, that growth will improve, and that unemployment will not worsen. It is also important to note that President Temer said that he is not running for reelection. As a result, he has the political freedom and autonomy to carry out the reforms necessary to restore economic growth.

Will current anti-corruption sentiment turn into permanent change in Brazil?

With respect to the ongoing investigations, we have a number of companies and politicians involved. We are dealing with a very widespread epidemic. But the question remains: how can we ensure real change in society? Brazilian prosecutors have presented a ten-point list, a proposal with new policies against corruption. It is being discussed in Congress and there is certainly popular support to continue this effort, so I believe the fight against corruption will continue.

How fast will the government be able to get Congressional approval for necessary economic reforms? Does the government have a communications strategy for building popular support the reform effort?

The government is headed in the right direction, but all of the changes—political, economic, and social—have to go forward together. We also have to explain to people why these changes are important, which is a difficult task. President Temer has chosen to focus on the issue of employment in his speeches. It is the main concern of the Brazilian people. It is challenging to persuasively link reforms, recovery, and employment and I do not know how strongly this argument will resonate. I suspect the Workers' Party strategy will use the lack of clear short-term results to mobilize its base. This is part of the political game.

However, I believe Congress recognizes the need for reforms despite the short-term hardships that will accompany them.

What is President Temer's diplomatic strategy?

President Temer's inaugural address at the United Nations General Assembly will focus on presenting a new Brazil, in terms of restoring the economy and attracting investments. He will also underscore Brazil's full respect for democracy and human rights, and its commitment to negotiation instead of confrontation.

Will the new government change its relationship with Venezuela, both in the context of Mercosul as well as Venezuela's ongoing economic and democratic challenges?

One of Foreign Minister Serra's first actions—directed toward Venezuela—was a clear statement that human rights are a priority for the Brazilian government. We offered to help Venezuela find a solution [for its internal crisis] and provide humanitarian aid. Our offer was not accepted. That said, the Brazilian government does not intend to intervene in the domestic affairs of Venezuela: the solution lies in the hands of the Venezuelan people alone. The issue of Venezuela and Mercosul, on the other hand, is a legal issue. Generally, a country must negotiate and accept conditions before being accepted into an international organization (e.g., the European Union). In the case of Venezuela and Mercosul, it was the other way around. Venezuela was allowed to join, but after four years it had not complied with the conditions for membership, and the deadline expired on August 12. As a result, it is Brazil's position that Venezuela does not have legal grounds for even a temporary presence at Mercosul.

What results can the Temer administration achieve over the next two years in terms of bilateral relations with the United States?

With respect to our bilateral relations, both sides have taken action in favor of an enduring U.S.-Brazil relationship. On the U.S. side, President Obama has shown his commitment to a multilateral, negotiated approach. The normalization of relations with Cuba, for example, was a very positive signal. On the Brazilian side, relations with the United States have long been a defining aspect of our foreign policy—whether for or against the United States. I think we are reaching a moment where Brazil can pursue a more

mature, confident friendship with the United States, in which we are not for or against any country, but rather collaborate on those areas where we converge (trade, human rights, democracy) and accept that we may sometimes disagree. I am confident that whoever is elected in the United States will find a new atmosphere for U.S.-Brazilian relations.

How would the relationship between Brazil and the United States change if Donald Trump is elected?

As Ambassador, I will not give an opinion on what is exclusively a domestic affair. I will say that the nature of the debate may have a lasting influence regardless of who is elected, given that current rhetoric is at odds with traditional commitment of the United States to free trade. There is a growing feeling in the United States and in Europe that globalization has harmed certain sectors of society, and that politicians have not addressed adequately these concerns.

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Given the importance of economic recovery to Brazil, and the amount of investment U.S. companies could bring to Brazil, do you have any concrete proposals for strengthening economic relations with the United States?

We should focus on projects that will bring results within a reasonable timeframe, because this will help strengthen the bilateral relationship and support the Brazilian economy. A key priority will be mobilizing the private sector, including associations like the CEO Forum and Chambers of Commerce, to help bring workable ideas to the table. We also need to give working groups a very clear mandate and timetable, and routinely assess their progress.

Will there be progress towards a tax treaty?

The issue of double taxation is a long-term priority. Most large companies support such an agreement, but within our two governments there may be less support: both internal revenue services want to preserve the amount they can collect. Minister Meirelles told me he would discuss the matter with Brazil’s

Federal Revenue Service, but the fiscal situation is difficult.

Minister Serra said that one of his priorities will be to reduce nontariff barriers in the US and other markets. How big a priority will it be?

People perhaps do not realize that Brazil already has \$22 billion of investment in the United States. These investments create jobs in the United States and this gives us a very good argument for the importance of bilateral economic exchange. Of course, there are some difficulties. Sometimes we talk about Brazil as a very protectionist country. Perhaps our average tariff is higher than some countries. But we do not have non-tariff barriers, and today, protectionism is more a matter of licensing than of tariffs. So we need to better understand where the protectionism lies and the ways we can reduce it.

How is the new government planning to respond to Brazil’s environmental commitments and global responsibilities, with respect to climate change and the Paris agreement?

Brazil has an overall commitment, including on forest preservation. In the past, Brazil has been hesitant to make commitments perceived as unbalanced, but I think you will find that the new Brazilian administration will be well-disposed to engage with other nations in a constructive in this area. We must take leadership on environmental issues, because Brazil has important assets, including its vast biodiversity, large fresh water reserves and the world’s largest rainforest.

What are President Temer’s plans for education?

Education is a very complex issue in Brazil. Since the 1990s, we have expanded access to education: currently, 95 percent of children between the ages of 8-14 are in school. Now, the challenge is to improve the quality of education. I think the education system is quite disorganized. Leadership of the Ministry of Education has changed frequently, leading to a continuously changing strategy. This is a space where private sector innovation could have a significant impact, and some companies have already taken limited steps. Education is a priority for the administration.

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