Brazil in South America:
Three conflicting ideas

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In the 21st century South American governments see themselves as leftist governments replacing neoliberals. They are concerned with social inclusion, and they speak with respect for elections and democracy. These common perceptions foster a certain degree of solidarity that allows Brazilian diplomats to function as a regional stabilization force.

Dispersion — The left does not articulate conditions for governability throughout the region. The relationship between state and society and social inclusion programs evolve outside integration processes and foreign policies, and are at times removed from the development paradigm.

Social programs are introspective: each nation seeks to apply its own prescriptions to mitigate domestic society’s ills, using its own resources and strategies. The bolder countries, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, have opted to “recreate the nation” by means of constitutional reforms designed to prevent the comeback of conservative leaders, preserve the current leaders in power, and hence complete income redistribution, which has recently been affected by the decline in commodities exports. Others, such as Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, introduce reforms to attain the same social inclusion, without cursing the past. Throughout the continent, the functions of the state are going through a metamorphosis, becoming so diverse that traditional political science cannot explain them.

The fact is that the cohesion and consistency of the neoliberal cycle are not repeating themselves in South America. In general, monetary stability and fiscal balance tend to be seen as positive outcomes that deserve to be preserved, and social inequality is seen as a negative consequence to be deplored. Brazil and Chile seek to raise systemic productivity by opening up their economies. Since Mexico chose to join the American bloc, the Brazilian project to transform South America into a political, economic, and security union has gained renewed force.

South America — Three concepts compete for political intellect and government strategies in South America. The Venezuelan-born Bolivarian concept is equivalent to a socialist project, based on a historical ideal of political union, on the doctrine of 21st century socialism, and on geopolitics for the choice of allies and foreign and domestic enemies. The Argentine-born commercialist concept advocates control of foreign trade as a means for re-industrialization. Finally, the Brazilian development concept envisions South America covered with factories, employment, income, and welfare for the masses — a modernization to be carried out preferably by Brazilian enterprises, which are considered superior structurally to those of neighbors, or by traditional transnational enterprises.

Why has none of the three concepts won general acceptance?
Our research has identified the concept of political conceit as best fitting the regional political culture and explaining, to some extent, the South American dispersion better than the concept of nationalism. Its features are imbalances between domestic means and external objectives, between actual regional or global roles and the planned role, between diplomatic arrogance and national substance. Nationalism opposes the domestic with the foreign; political conceit instead overestimates sovereignty and echoes the arrogance of the caudillo. This is why there are different models of international insertion.

International insertion — The Bolivarian model — introspective and nationalizing, driven by the Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (Alba) — has supporters in Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. The two globalist models of international insertion cause mutual antipathy: the Chilean commercialist model and the Brazilian industrialist model. Based on free trade agreements, the commercialist model perpetuates the structural inequalities between an advanced economy and a primary-export-oriented economy. Chile is the example of this model, which gains supporters where neoliberalism is still admired, as in Peru and Colombia. The Brazilian industrialist model, on the other hand, adopts as a value the industrial vocation, seeking to foster and protect steps toward the country’s structural maturity; it rejects agreements that might jeopardize this vocation. Brazil is the best example of this model, followed by Argentina.

But the project moves forward, nonetheless. It all started in 1993, when the Brazilian President Itamar Franco advanced the idea of the South American Free Trade Area (Alcsa) as an alternative to the American proposal of the America Free Trade Area (Alca). It persisted through the South American summits that began in 2000 and culminated in 2008 with the creation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Following these steps toward institutionalization, Brazilian projects and exports are expanding to the neighboring region — as much as the mishaps of course allow.

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