

# Pepe ESCOBAR

## Insights on the Iran Deal, BRICS and Handling a Crisis in Venezuela

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**An exclusive interview with former Brazilian foreign minister Celso Amorim on how BRICS came into being, how the nuclear deal was done with Tehran and how the South dealt with Chavez**

*Pepe ESCOBAR*

Brazil is once again in the eye of a political hurricane, after President Jair Bolsonaro's appearance at Davos and explosive revelations directly linking his clan to a criminal organization in Rio de Janeiro.

With his administration barely a month old, Bolsonaro is already being seen as expendable to the elites that propelled him to power – from the powerful agribusiness lobby to the financial system and the military.

The new game among the elites of a major actor in the Global South, BRICS member and eighth biggest economy in the world consists of shaping a scenario capable of rescuing one the great frontiers where global capitalism is expanding from total irrelevancy.

Under these circumstances, a conversation with former Brazilian foreign minister Celso Amorim is more than sobering. Amorim is universally recognized as one of the top diplomats of the young 21st century, a symbol of the recent past, under President Lula, when Brazil was at the top of its game as a resource-rich continental nation actively projecting power as a BRICS leader.

I had the pleasure of meeting Ambassador Amorim, who is also the author of '[Acting Globally: Memoirs of Brazil's Assertive Foreign Policy](#)' in Sao Paulo. Here are some highlights of our conversation – from the birth of BRICS to the current Venezuela crisis.

**BRICS – the most important group in the drive towards a multipolar world – is a very dirty word in Washington. How did it all start?**

I had met [British economist] Jim O'Neill a few times, who first talked about BRIC, which was not yet a group and nobody saw as a group. This may sound pretentious, but it's a curious story. I told him, 'It is you that invented the BRICS, right?' He said, 'Yes, of course, I'm very proud of it'. Then I replied, 'Yes, but I'm the one who made it happen'. Well, it was not exactly me – under the Lula government and all that it entails. The first action in terms of creating the BRIC group – still without an "S" – came from Sergey Lavrov, in a meeting we had in New York in 2006. They had the RIC [Russia, India, China], but they did not hold many summits. And we had IBAS [India, Brazil, South Africa]. Both China and Russia were always trying to get into IBAS. There was the idea that these were three great democracies, each one in a continent and in a major developing country – so the Russians and Chinese might have thought, 'we also want to get in, why not, because we are not democracies?' IBAS was also present in the commercial G-20 at the WTO, and IBAS had similar ideas about reform of the UN Security Council; so the geopolitical interests were not the same.

Then Lavrov proposed BRIC as a forum, I think maybe to find some more equilibrium inside the RIC. I always talked in terms of BRICS, so one day he asked me 'Why do you say BRICS?' and I replied, "because it's plural, in Portuguese", so in a sense, we were already anticipating the entry of South Africa.

We first agreed we would have a meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Lavrov and I already had something more substantial, the Indians and the Chinese just read a speech, so it looked like there would not be a consequential follow-up. Next year we met at the Brazilian UN mission, outside of the UN, and decided to do it later out of New York. Lavrov then offered Yekaterinburg, where we had the first ministerial meeting in 2008, and then next year the first presidential summit, also in Yekaterinburg, and in Brazil in 2010. It was here that the idea of BRIC was expanded into BRICS – through a dinner that concluded IBAS and inaugurated BRICS.

**At the time, did you think about expanding to other top emerging economies, such as Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, Iran?**

IBAS was born on the second day of President Lula's government [in January 2003], out of an idea to create a group of developing countries, around seven or eight. I thought a larger group would be very complicated, based on my experience – how to coordinate positions and engage in concrete projects. For instance, Egypt would have to be a member.

**When did you start to seriously discuss practical steps towards the emergence of a multipolar world – such as trade in members' currencies? Was it in 2010?**

In 2010 certainly, we had the idea of trade using each member's currency, not yet the idea – that happened under the Dilma government – of the BRICS bank. But we were already talking about the coordination of our development banks. The concept of multipolarity, the Russians may have been the first to outline it. What I do remember about the use of the concept was by the French, especially when there were serious divergences about the attack on Iraq.

**Former French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin insisted on it.**

Villepin, yes, but even Hubert Vedrine [foreign minister under Jacques Chirac from 1997-2002] before him, who came up with the concept of 'hyperpower'. So the ones who spread the concept were the French, and we adhered to it, among developing countries. The French, when they talked about the expansion of the UN Security Council, they said they were in favor regarding Germany and Japan, but also 'three great nations of the South', Brazil included.

**The Lula government started in January 2003. Geopolitics at the time was conditioned by the war on terror. We were already expecting the invasion of Iraq. How did you, in the first days of January 2003, knowing that Dick Cheney and the neocons were about to turn the Middle East upside down, with direct and indirect repercussions on the Global South, how did you start conceiving a multi-vector Brazilian foreign policy? Which were the priorities?**

I think neither President Lula nor myself used the term "multipolar" – even though the concept was already on the table. We wanted to have good relations with the US but also with the largest developing countries. When we started the greatest problems were the Free Trade Area of the Americas [FTAA], so we had to look for other partners; the WTO and negotiations in the Doha round; and Iraq. The combination of all these led Brazil to get closer to India and South Africa, to a great extent via the WTO, and because of Iraq, we got closer to Russia, Germany and France. When President Lula went to Davos...

**That was Lula's first Davos, right?**

Yes, but first he went to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre [in Brazil], then he went to Davos. The message was the search for an equilibrium; to do business, of course, but based on the idea of democratic social change.

**Were you discussing Iraq in detail with Russia, Germany and France?**

Yes, we were, with Schroeder in Germany and Chirac, as well as Villepin at the Security Council. And there was a fourth problem: Venezuela. Lula had already talked about it with Chavez. During the inauguration of President Gutierrez of Ecuador, Lula's first foreign trip, on January 15, Lula proposed, in a meeting in a room full of presidents, the creation of the Friends of Venezuela Group, at a moment when the crisis was acute, even though the country was not as debilitated as today.

**Already in January 2003 was there neocon pressure on Brazil in relation to Venezuela?**

I think they did not know how to deal with Lula and the new government. But they were very strong on Venezuela – especially [US diplomat] Roger Noriega. And yet they saw Brazil was proposing something and accepted it. Fidel was against it, but Chavez, in the end, was convinced by Lula. And this is also relevant for today. Lula said it in so many words; this is not a Friends of Chavez group, it's a Friends of Venezuela group. So this must also include the United States, Spain and Portugal – under conservative administrations. That was a way to

escape from the OAS [Organisation of American States] and its penchant for the Monroe doctrine [the US policy of opposing European colonialism in the Americas].

I used to talk to Colin Powell quite frequently – and not to receive instructions. There were many issues he wanted to know about, and he trusted Brazil. He had a notion of the importance of Brazil, our capacity for dialogue.

**Switching to the Obama era, tell us about the role of Brazil, alongside Turkey, in the Iran nuclear negotiation, when you clinched a deal in Tehran in less than 24 hours, only for it to be smashed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the next day.**

It was a long process, followed by 19 hours of negotiations, the Iranians tried to reopen one of the issues, both Lula and Erdogan refused. What facilitated our role as mediators was that the US had its hands full in the Middle East. I already had contacts with Javier Solana, then a sort of Foreign Affairs Minister of the EU, and also [Egyptian diplomat] ElBaradei, from my time at the UN. Obama, in a meeting of the G-8 + 5 in Italy, during a bilateral with us, he said three things: ‘I extended my hand and they did not answer’; ‘We need to solve the nuclear dossier’; ‘And I need friends to say what I cannot say’. What we did in the end, because we thought it was the right thing to do, with a lot of work and facing hardships, was exactly what the Americans wanted. One month before the deal I thought it would not happen. But then we received a letter from Obama, and to my greatest surprise, that was a reiteration of the same initial three points.

Hillary always had a different position. I foresaw her reaction as a possibility. We talked on the phone, in Madrid, when I was coming back from Iran, and I said, ‘Look, in Brazil we have this expression, ‘I didn’t read it, and I didn’t like it’. She did not want a deal. In a phone call before my trip, she was adding some other points of discussion and I said, ‘Hillary, this is a trust-building agreement. And these points that you mention were not in the letter delivered by your own President’. I’m not exaggerating, what followed was a silence lasting half a minute. So I thought; did she read the letter? Or she read it, and because they are a great power they can do what they want, and we have to take it, and adapt to it?

**So what about China and Russia accepting the American line – no deal, more sanctions?**

I know the sweeteners that made them accept it – concessions on the sanctions front. But geopolitically...

**What’s your informed hypothesis?**

There are two. This was a problem they did not solve. Who’s part of the global directory? The five permanent members of the Security Council. Now we have two developing countries, who are not even part of the Security Council, and they solve it? By coincidence, both were non-permanent members of the Security Council at the time. The other thing is whenever we are discussing a nuclear issue, the five get closer, because they are all nuclear powers.

**What’s your insider view, as a statesman, of Vladimir Putin, demonized 24/7 in the US as a major existential threat to the West?**

The first time I saw Putin face to face was when he received three nations from the Group of Rio, and the main topic of discussion was Iraq. That was before the invasion in March 2003. What most impressed me was his great knowledge of the dossiers – something you usually don’t expect from presidents. He’s extremely sharp, very intelligent, obviously cares for Russian interests but at the same time pays attention to the balance of power. A very realist

politician. I don't see him as a great idealist. He's like a 19th-century politician, very conscious geopolitically.

**Now, in the South American chessboard, regarding the Venezuelan crisis, we are seeing a direct confrontation between the four major poles of Eurasia – Russia, China, Iran, Turkey – against the US. And with another BRICS member, Brazil, siding against Russia and China.**

In a multipolar world, we now have a huge test, because Brazil presides over the BRICS in 2019. How is Brazil going to be seen inside BRICS? There used to be an atmosphere of trust inside BRICS.

I've got to say that based on my experience at the Security Council, when I was ambassador, during the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso [from 1995 to 2003], the Russians and the Chinese gave immense weight to respect for national sovereignty. In terms of international law, they always stress non-intervention. I hope we won't have a confrontation like Vietnam in our region. But when President Trump says that all options are on the table, he's obviously accepting a military solution. This is very dangerous. I see a very sound Brazilian position coming from General Mourao [the Brazilian vice-president]. And yet the Foreign Ministry says Brazil will support politically and economically a government that does not exist – so that already means intervention.

**On a personal level, in the drive towards multipolarity, what is the most important story in the world for the next 10 or 20 years? What is the issue that drives you the most?**

I think that the fundamental theme is psychological – and also civilizational. It's respect for The Other – and the acceptance of alterity. And this also concerns international relations. We need to understand that the common good is part of our well-being. This reflects on individual attitudes, in internal attitudes in politics, and in international relations. Look at the current, violent attack on multilateralism. We should see that it's better to work multilaterally than capitulate to the law of the jungle.

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