SOUTH AMERICA AND THE ISSUE OF POWER ON THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY[1]

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INTRODUCTION

While the two Cold War superpowers decided not to face critical situations as the ones in the 1960s and 1970s, peripheral countries grew a perception they could expand their presences in the political arena since a broader international agenda was being established along with new themes and actors such as environmental issues, human rights, migration flows, multinational entreprises, non-governmental organizations and terrorist groups.

Developing countries began to demand a rearragement of the international order putting "development" as a key issue to collaborate with the major powers. This trend became dominat in the North-South dialogue (SARAIVA, 2007) and made an 'assimetric interdependence' more evident (KEOHANE; NYE, 1977).

Although after more than two decades after the end of the Cold War and several theories and propositions against concepts of power and analysis of power structures, states are still an essential actor in international scene –if not the most important of them. As pointed out by Halliday, even individuals keep thinking this way (HALLIDAY, 1999:28-29). Actually, September 11th events and consequences highlighted how power and security remained as key factors in shaping the world. Impressive financial crises along the first decade of this millenium also emphasized how power and economic issues are still linked.

At a closer look, soft power has always been attached to tangible elements of power to be put in action otherwise it could only be used within an international organization and would not have full efficiency. Therefore, as much as critics of balance of power may try to hide its importance, the fact is that there are many of this kind of pattern working in the developing world and power assessment is fundamental to understand international relations in a more accurate fashion.

South America is a particularly interesting example of a region where balance of power has been a prevailing manner to conduct international relations where 'medium-sized' powers struggle to impose on others and to benefit from the international order from a regional limited perspective. The preponderance of this political style has affected directly integration processes, strategic conflicts and international agenda within the subcontinent, and will continue to shape South American future role in the world for the next decades.

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[1] This is the structure of the paper which has been developed and still needs reviewing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

International relations have displayed evolutions that gave strenght to different perspectives than the realist one. For example, it is possible to identify 'waves' from the 1970s to the 1990s, a period when realism started to lose its prevalent presence to liberalism revealing a harder decline in the 1980s until it regained considerable status in the 1990s, especially in South America (ROCHMAN 2002). Neoliberalism never really suppressed geopolitics and power politics but, on the contrary, as it seemed to be the new dominant view it actually stressed the importance and inevitability of realism in the region.

As South America had to deal with a more multipolar world, struggle for power within it raised and so did the need to assess power. Ray Cline developed the idea of approaching this need in an objective manner and came up with a 'mathematical' formula to express power elements and establish a ranking to improve analysis of international relations (CLINE 1975,1983,1994). Cline's formula to assess Perceived Power is **Pp = (C + E + M) * (S + W)**, where C means 'Critical Mass' (gross demographic quantities), E means Economic power (which is related to self-sufficiency as well as economic projection to the world), M is Military power (ranging from gross quantities of personnel and equipment to strategic reach of arms and mobilization), S means Strategy (how the previous elements –the tangible ones- are managed and its efficacy/efficiency), and W is Will (in what degree tangible elements –especially in terms of people that control/compose them- give support to current Strategy and is willing to go further on).

Intriguing at first sight, the formula has been despised as an absurd, impossible attempt to measure power and define the international arena. It is actually the result of a very long tradition that tries to understand power by its elements and to state them as objective as possible, from Thomas Hobbes to Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron (ROCHMAN 1999). It has not 'power measurement' but 'power assessment' as a goal and it is not a strictly mathematical formula but a whole analysis developed by an expert on international relations which is useful to evaluate power politics and what is based on. More recently, Ikenberry (2001) developed a perspective where 'material structure' and 'ideological structure' are concepts used to retrieve power elements analysis.

Power assessment is fundamental to comprehend South American politics –both motivations and aims. In spite of different current integration processes and a relatively pacific environment, tensions, disputes and suspicious politics are not rare in the region and balance of power schemes have usually been found behind such problematic events from a long time ago.

BALANCE OF POWER IN AN EMERGING POWER PROJECT

There are two current and one incipient regional integration processes in South America: the Andean Community, the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), and the Union of the South American Nations. The first one is a supranational project in progress involving Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia; the second one is a partial common market arrangement with blanks to be filled and a history of several inconsistencies from its members (Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay

and Paraguay); finally, the Union congregates both processes and also includes Suriname, Guyana and Chile –which is an associate member of Mercosur and of the Andean Community.

The first two blocs are result of strategies of projecting or protecting their members from threats from outside South America as well as from their own neighbors. Brazil and Argentina have a long record of tensions, strifes and disputes even after Mercosur was established and upgraded to common market; as the second one has been through a political-economic crisis for several years, its power has been considerably reduced and Brazil has focused in achieving a regional leader position –which has been sought for more than four decades- against Venezuelan ambitions.

Venezuela has tried to polarize South America through a mix of ideology, oil and money. The Union is said to be the formalization of the 'Bolivarian dream' although it really represents Venezuelan attempt to assume leadership in a more than 400 million people and more than US$4 trillion dollars arrangement. Caracas will already host the Union's Central Bank –the Bank of the South. Yet, there are many issues involving the country and its neighbors. Not only Brazil also wants to be the leader –with significant better economic perspectives and huge potential oil reserves-, quarrels involving Venezuela and the Andean Community and particularly Colombia reflect divergencies regarding power politics.

Chile has adopted a mixed strategy, being associate member to both current integration blocs but also a member of external arrangements as APEC and diverse free trade agreements looking forward to enter NAFTA. Bolivia has great hydrocarbons reserves and tries to do a partnership with Venezuela in an 'energy for power' scheme. The more advanced is the analysis of South American politics the more evident is that even though cooperation and institutional development can be found, regional characteristic is individual power-oriented strategies above actual unification in order to have the entire subcontinent as an emerging power.

Assessing power can make more evident and in objective terms how South American countries -especially the more powerful ones- have developed their power strategies and if they have succeded in gathering both tangible (or material) and intangible (or ideological) elements to achieve their goals. This should provide means to evaluate that soft power is just not enough to define countries and the whole region direction towards an improved position compared to others.

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