

An Iranian banana skin

Lula has little to show for his Tehran adventure.



We won't bow to pressure

ALTHOUGH Brazil has been a member of the UN Security Council on ten separate occasions since 1946, it had never before voted against a resolution backed by a majority of the council's members. But on June 9th Brazil and Turkey both opposed further sanctions against Iran. In doing so it was out of step not just with its old allies, the United States and the European powers, but also with its new ones, Russia and China, all of which are worried by Iran's nuclear programme. Why has the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva stuck its neck out so far for Iran?

The short answer is that Lula, a former trade-union leader, fancies himself as the man who can talk Iran into obeying the world's nuclear rules, and thinks sanctions will bring that effort to nought. Last month he flew to Tehran for talks with Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Turkey's prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The three countries signed an agreement under which Iran would send to Turkey 1,200kg of its low-enriched (under 5%) uranium stocks; in return it would receive within a year more highly enriched (to 20%) fuel rods for its ageing medical-research reactor. Iran's leaders also agreed to tell the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in writing of this plan. "We thought this was a gesture by them, a first demonstration of trust," says Marco Aurélio Garcia, Lula's foreign-policy adviser.

But to American and European officials, some of whom have negotiated with Iran for years, it looked as if Lula and his advisers had naively walked into Mr Ahmadinejad's time-wasting trap. The terms of the deal were superficially similar to one reached under IAEA auspices last October (which Iran walked away from). But now Iran has nearly twice as much low-enriched uranium. And whereas the October deal would have robbed Iran of the excuse to enrich to 20% itself (a lot closer to the 90% needed for a bomb), it has since rushed to do just that. No sooner had Lula left Tehran than Iran's nuclear chief said that enrichment to both the lower and the higher levels would continue. So America pushed forward with sanctions.

America and Brazil are now fuming at each other. Brazilian officials claim that the Tehran deal was in line with what Barack Obama had suggested to Lula in April, in a letter that they leaked to the local press. The Americans retort that this was just one of many communications with Brazil over the issue and has been plucked out of context. Worse than the Tehran deal itself was the leak and Brazil's rejection of a Turkish proposal that both countries should have joined Lebanon in abstaining rather than voting against the resolution, according to a senior American official.

Under Lula, Brazil's foreign policy has become more assertive. The government has recruited some 300 extra diplomats (and plans to add a similar number over the next four years). It has strengthened its ties with other emerging powers such as China, India, Russia and South Africa. Brazil now has more diplomatic missions in Africa than Britain has. Lula's government has claimed leadership in Latin America more forcefully than its predecessors. And it has played a more active role on global issues such as trade, climate change and regulating the international financial system.

Much of this new assertiveness flows naturally from Brazil's growing power, which stems from stability, a robust democracy, faster economic growth and successful social policies. It has generally been welcomed by the United States and Europe. But in the past couple of years Lula has taken up some more controversial stances. He has offered uncritical backing to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Cuba's Castro brothers. And he has struck up a friendship with Mr Ahmadinejad. All this goes down well at home with his Workers' Party. His opponents detect a streak of anachronistic anti-Americanism.

The attempt to negotiate with Iran is part of "assuming our responsibility to promote peace and security" in the world, says Antonio Patriota, a senior diplomat. But it has given ammunition to the domestic critics of Lula's foreign policy, who include some prominent retired diplomats (and, they say, many serving ones). "The Iranian adventure is incomprehensible, especially since there are various conflicts closer to us in which we haven't tried, or haven't managed, to mediate," wrote Sérgio Amaral, a former ambassador, in *O Estado*, a São Paulo newspaper. He worries that Lula has gained nothing and succeeded only in drawing attention to Brazil's refusal to accept enhanced outside inspection of its own peaceful nuclear programme (it says this would force it to divulge technological secrets, and that it allows Argentina to inspect its facilities freely under a bilateral agreement).

Lula's adventure in Tehran smacks of the overconfidence of a politician who basks in an approval rating of over 70% and who sees the Iraq war and the financial crisis as having irreparably damaged American power and credibility. But the United States is still Brazil's second-largest trading partner. Although some American and Brazilian officials are keen to prevent ill-will over Iran from spoiling co-operation in other areas, it nevertheless may do so. The United States Congress may be even less willing to support the elimination of a tariff on Brazil's sugar-based ethanol, for example.

Lula wants the UN reformed to reflect today's world, with Brazil gaining a permanent seat on the Security Council. But by choosing to apply his views on how the world should be run to an issue of pressing concern to America and Europe, and in which Brazil has no obvious national interest, Lula may only have lessened the chances that he will get his way.

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