Chapter 3

Brazil in the World: Role Conception, Drive for Status, and Status-Seeking Strategies of a Power on the Rise

After having given an overview on the theoretical concepts of Great Power status in international relations and status-seeking as a driver of state behavior, the following chapter will examine Brazil’s international identity, its role conception, and its status-seeking strategies in order to delineate the country’s self-understanding and its ambitions in the international society. Arguing that status-seeking has been a dominant and constant factor in Brazil’s foreign policy, the chapter provides the basis for the analysis of status-seeking motives and mechanisms in Brazil’s Africa engagement in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.1. Brazilian International Identity and Drive for Status

Being a country of continental scale, Brazil has always believed in its destiny to become a Great Power. Already at the moment of its entry into the international society of states, Brazil was convinced about its “future of greatness and power” (Murilo de Carvalho 2000:67). With the declaration of independence from Portugal in 1822, Brazil not only gained sovereignty but also proclaimed its status as an empire. This steep rise in status—from colony to empire—at the moment of its birth as a sovereign country has shaped Brazilian international identity and its international status expectations from the beginning.
Already, when the Portuguese court moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, there had been the idea of “the possibility of creating an empire that in no distant future will take its place among the first powers of the universe” (ibid.). After independence, the notion of greatness soon became part of the country’s self-conception. In 1908, Brazil’s first ambassador to the United States, Joaquim Nabuco noted that “Brazil has always been conscious of its size and has been governed by a prophetic sentiment with regard to its future” (quoted in Lafer 2000:207). A century later, former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso explained to an international audience: “In Brazilian people’s minds, we are a giant . . . So we have always aspired to a big role” (Cardoso 2012).

The idea of greatness, based on the immense size of the country, can be considered a fundamental trait of Brazil’s international identity. Until today, the so-called “complexo de grandeza” (complex of greatness) is very present in the role conception of the South American country. With reference to the enormous territorial dimensions that make Brazil the fifth largest country on earth, Brazilian elites frequently justify their claim for the recognition of Brazil as one of the key international players. Writing about the Brazilian international identity, Brazil’s former Foreign Minister Celso Lafer, for example, argues that “given the size of its territory . . . Brazil is naturally involved in the shaping of the international order” (Lafer 2000:208). Book titles like “Brazil. Great Power in the XXI century”1 (Dória 2012) and pronouncements by politicians like the former Brazilian President Lula da Silva, stating that Brazil was finally “preparing to transform itself into one of the great nations of the world”2 (Da Silva 2012) leave no doubt where the Brazilian elite sees the country’s place in the international hierarchy.

Yet, Brazil’s strong belief in its destiny as a Great Power is directed predominantly toward the future (Murilo de Carvalho 2000). While recognizing the deficits that have prevented the country from fulfilling its Great Power destiny, Brazilians have no doubt that these are to be overcome in the future, thus finally enabling the country to assume its Great Power role. In this respect, the confidence expressed by the Brazilian Foreign Minister Oswaldo Aranha (1937–1945) that “sooner or later our country [Brazil] will inevitably be one of the great economic and political powers of the world”3 is still very present in Brazil’s international role conception. A study conducted among Brazil’s foreign policy community in 2008, for example, showed that more than 90 percent of the interviewees believed that Brazil would have a more important international presence in the future (De Souza 2008:10).