

Operation Crossroads Baker nuclear test at Bikini Atoll in 1946.
(Photo from U.S. Department of Defense/Wikimedia.)

DIPLOMACY

Negotiating Nuclear Safety

By Celso Amorim

While the Cold War has slipped into the past, nuclear threats remain a terrifying contemporary reality. North Korean long-range missile tests, tensions between nuclear-armed states elsewhere in the world, and the danger of terrorists acquiring nuclear materials all underscore continuing existential dangers.

Latin America offers some important lessons on nuclear containment forged in the crucible of the Cold War. “The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean may be the most important treaty you’ve never heard of,” William Perry, the Secretary of Defense during the Clinton administration and a keen observer of nuclear issues, remarked at CLAS in February 2017. He had just returned from a 50th-anniversary commemoration of the signing of that agreement in

Mexico City in 1967. The agreement, created in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, founded a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Latin America that eventually included 18 countries, among them Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Cuba. This treaty was the first “to prohibit nuclear weapons in a populated area,” according to the U.S. State Department, and “led to similar zones that now cover 114 countries.”

Celso Amorim, a former Foreign Minister and Defense Minister in Brazil, writes below about another important effort from South America in “the defense of peace, understanding, and integrated development” when it comes to nuclear materials. He commemorates the 25th anniversary of the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials.

— Harley Shaiken

In a world where nuclear risk is once again high on the agenda, a South American agreement from the 1990s is worth looking at. The 25th anniversary of the Agência Brasileiro-Argentina de Contabilidade e Controle de Materiais Nucleares (Abacc, Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials) is a fitting occasion to celebrate an innovative initiative and to defend its continued development as a key contribution to peace and the integration of South America.

Throughout my career, the issue of nuclear cooperation has come up on several occasions — at a multilateral level, primarily when I participated in panels on the Iraqi disarmament or the creation of the famous 13 steps toward nuclear disarmament at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty conference in 2010, and at a regional level, when dealing with the nuclear issue with our Argentine neighbors.

The negotiations between Brazil and Argentina that led to the signing of the Agreement for the Exclusively Peaceful Use of Nuclear Energy (which would eventually create Abacc) and the Quadripartite Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) constitute decisive moments in the relationship between the two countries. I tend to define this partnership as “the most strategic of our relationships,” since it requires a mutual effort in the defense of peace, understanding, and integrated development, with positive repercussions for the stability of the South American continent. One cannot understand Mercosul or Unasul, which have been so critical to peace and progress in our region, without understanding the history of cooperation between Brazil and Argentina. Furthermore, one cannot adequately evaluate the meaning and the depth of this cooperation without analyzing its nuclear dimension.

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The important sentiment of trust-building had been expressed in multiple settings — in the famous Declaration of Iguazu, which followed the re-democratization of the two countries (undersigned by Presidents José Sarney and Raúl Alfonsín), and in different mechanisms of cooperation between both countries.

During the beginning of the “New Republic” (in 1985), I worked in the Ministry of Science and Technology under Minister Renato Archer, who led the Ministry from 1985 to 1987. My work mainly concerned international matters, and the nuclear issue was not one of my direct responsibilities. At that time, the Comissão Nacional de Energia Nuclear (CNEN, National Nuclear Energy Commission, under the executive branch) and Itamaraty (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) were in charge of nuclear matters. But my interest in the subject was definitely inspired by my work with Minister Archer, who as a young deputy had been involved in the early development of Brazil’s nuclear program thanks to the encouragement of Admiral Álvaro Alberto, the first Chief of the National Research Council (CNPq).

I have a particular memory from this period that relates to [the topic of international nuclear cooperation]. On the eve of the Declaration of Iguazu, I led the Brazilian delegation in a meeting on biotechnology with the representatives from Argentina. Ambassador Junovski, who was then director of international cooperation for San Martín, held a private meeting with me and spoke at length about the importance of nuclear cooperation in consolidating democracy in both countries. Ambassador Junovski’s view that peace, prosperity, and democracy went hand in hand served as an inspiration for future actions.

Many important declarations and symbolic gestures of trust under the presidencies of Sarney and Alfonsín opened the door for future initiatives. In the early 1990s, nuclear cooperation began to take a more concrete form. Argentina presented a proposal for a common system of accountability and control of nuclear material, a suggestion that had previously been ignored. This time,

Brazil had a positive reaction. Negotiations began shortly thereafter, and concrete results were achieved with great speed, given the technical complexity and political sensitivity of the issue.

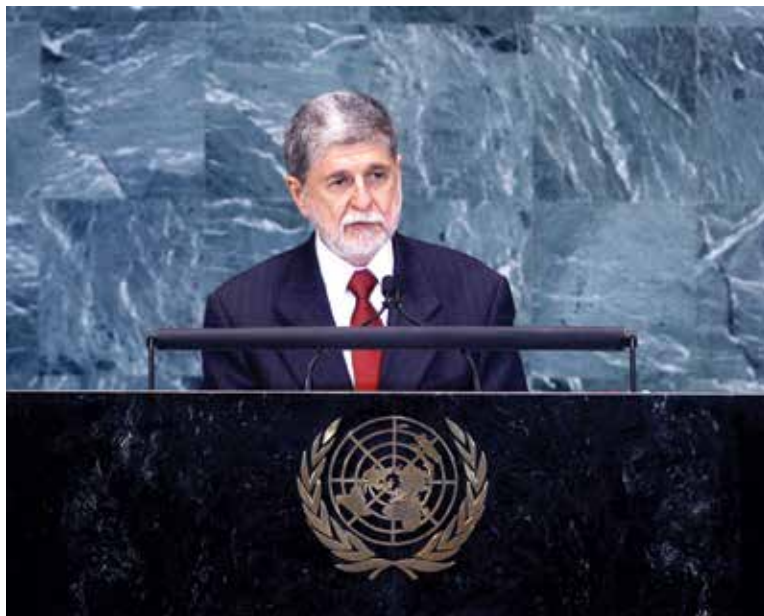
Between 1990 and 1991, I was in charge of the economic department of Itamaraty, where I replaced my friend and partner in many battles, Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, a great champion of Brazil–Argentina integration. During this time, nuclear cooperation issues were overseen by one of the divisions of the department I directed. In my numerous trips to Buenos Aires, whether for commercial negotiations that led to Mercosur or to discuss the nuclear issue, I almost always stayed at the residence of the Brazilian Embassy. Ambassador Franklin Thompson Flores, who was the Brazilian Ambassador to Argentina during the late 1980s, was deeply involved in economic and commercial

negotiations. He used to say, with his characteristic air of tranquility and wisdom, “this nuclear deal is the most important issue; it will define our bilateral relations more than economic issues.”

In the early 1990s, the main concern was that the accountability and control agreement might restrict our ability to produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and jeopardize industrial technological advances made by both countries. There was a great interest in strengthening

cooperation, not only in relation to safeguards, but also in creating joint projects. However, these projects were dependent upon other developments and came to fruition, in a limited way, much later.

The negotiating process that led to Abacc was indicative of both countries’ capacity for creativity and cooperation. We have achieved an exceptional level of cooperation, unprecedented in fact, as deep as or deeper than some European countries have attained with Euratom. In our case, Abacc is a unique system that mirrored the great trust that exists between Brazil and Argentina and offered the possibility of both countries negotiating with the IAEA, based on a jointly constructed agreement.



Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim at the United Nations in 2010. (Photo courtesy of UN Photo).

During the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Declaration of Iguazu, I was the Minister of Foreign Relations under President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva. For both Argentina and Brazil, there was a perception that bilateral cooperation on strategic issues (such as defense, space, and nuclear projects for peaceful purposes) was necessary. In this context — as a result of the discussions between Itamaraty and CNEN and, undoubtedly, parallel conversations on the Argentine side — the idea of close collaboration between both countries for the construction of a multipurpose reactor arose. Beyond the technical aspects, the joint design of a reactor is a result of the maturation and degree of trust in the relationship between Brazil and Argentina. Our countries were able to overcome rivalries, surpass practical difficulties, and engage in cooperation on a complex and delicate issue. We have taken a great step, one of inestimable symbolic value, by developing a joint project in such a sensitive area.

This engagement between the two largest economies of South America reveals, among other things, the steadfast will of Brazil and Argentina to follow their own exemplary path of integration. From

Presidents José Sarney of Brazil and Raúl Alfonsín of Argentina issue the “Declaration of Iguazu” in 1985.



Photo courtesy of IADB.

an institutional point of view, Abacc is an innovation in cooperation among developing countries that also testifies to the political imagination of both nations.

In a world marked by conflict and war, Abacc can serve as a model of how to overcome suspicions and rivalries, which are often based on false perceptions of reality, but still hinder cooperation and progress. In South America, Abacc is proof that the road to constructive cooperation is not only desirable, it is fully possible.

Celso Amorim has served as Brazil’s Minister of Foreign Relations and Minister of Defense. This article was translated by Isabel Nogueira from the preface to *O Modelo ABACC - Um marco no desenvolvimento entre Brasil e Argentina* (Editora UFSM, 2016), published in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the agency. Ambassador Amorim spoke for CLAS on April 19, 2017.