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BALANCING CONTINUITY AND ADJUSTMENTS IN BRAZIL'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CHINA: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH BETWEEN BOLSONARO AND LULA'S THIRD TERM

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Abstract

Bolsonaro's foreign policy, characterized by a staunchly conservative identity aligned with far-right populist ideologies, emphasized anti-globalism, nationalism, and adversarial narratives. His administration fostered close ties with the Trump Administration, influencing Brazil's shift away from emerging countries and international blocs. This pivot tested Brazil's previously strong relationship with China, leading to stagnation in diplomatic and political relations, contrasting sharply with the proactive approaches of Bolsonaro's predecessors. With Lula da Silva's return to the presidency in 2023, Brazilian foreign policy underwent significant revision during his first hundred days. Lula aimed to restore key elements of his earlier foreign policy, emphasizing South-South cooperation, revitalizing the BRICS, and redefining Brazil's international agenda amid the ongoing Ukraine conflict. This reorientation notably impacted Brazil-China relations. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of Jair Bolsonaro's foreign policy towards China from 2018 to 2022 and examines the first year of Lula da Silva's administration in 2023. It explores the diplomatic and economic dimensions of their respective approaches towards China, highlighting both changes and continuities. The main argument posits that during Bolsonaro's tenure, Brazil's relations with China underwent political and diplomatic adjustments in line with the administration's conservative foreign policy narrative. Despite this, China retained a crucial role in Brazil's economic agenda. Following Lula's return to power in 2023, diplomatic initiatives towards China were rejuvenated, reflecting a political rapprochement with Beijing. This shift materialized through high-level official engagements and continued robust economic ties, illustrating a restored bilateral and multilateral relationship.

Keywords

Brazil foreign policy, autonomy, China, middle power, economic relations.

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Resumo

A política externa de Bolsonaro, caracterizada por uma identidade firmemente conservadora alinhada com ideologias populistas de extrema direita, enfatizou o antiglobalismo, o nacionalismo e narrativas adversas. A sua administração promoveu laços estreitos com a administração Trump, influenciando o afastamento do Brasil dos países emergentes e dos blocos internacionais. Este pivô testou o relacionamento anteriormente forte do Brasil com a China, levando à estagnação nas relações diplomáticas e políticas, contrastando fortemente com as abordagens proativas dos antecessores de Bolsonaro. Com o retorno de Lula da Silva à presidência em 2023, a política externa brasileira passou por uma revisão significativa durante seus primeiros cem dias. Lula pretendia restaurar elementos-chave da sua política externa anterior, enfatizando a cooperação Sul-Sul, revitalizando os BRICS e redefinindo a agenda internacional do Brasil no meio do conflito em curso na Ucrânia. Esta reorientação impactou notavelmente as relações Brasil-China. Este artigo fornece uma análise aprofundada da política externa de Jair Bolsonaro em relação à China de 2018 a 2022 e examina o primeiro ano da administração de Lula da Silva em 2023. Explora as dimensões diplomáticas e económicas das suas respectivas abordagens em relação à China, destacando tanto as mudanças como as continuidades. O principal argumento postula que durante o mandato de Bolsonaro, as relações do Brasil com a China passaram por ajustes políticos e diplomáticos em linha com a narrativa conservadora da política externa do governo. Apesar disso, a China manteve um papel crucial na agenda económica do Brasil. Após o regresso de Lula ao poder em 2023, as iniciativas diplomáticas em relação à China foram rejuvenescidas, reflectindo uma aproximação política com Pequim. Esta mudança materializou-se através de compromissos oficiais de alto nível e da continuação de laços económicos robustos, ilustrando uma relação bilateral e multilateral restaurada.

Palavras-chave

Política externa brasileira, autonomia, China, potência média, relações econômicas.

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FLORENCIA RUBIOLO

GONZALO FIORE

1. Introduction

Brazilian foreign policy has historically been characterized by an active and pragmatic diplomacy, based on principles such as non-intervention, self-determination and the search for international cooperation. Several works have identified Brazil as a country with a universal vocation, and with the ambition to become a key actor in international politics. (Caballero & Crescentino, 2020). Building on a highly qualified and professionalized diplomatic tradition, Itamaraty became an example of professional and institutional foreign policy for other Latin American countries and beyond.

Regarding the geographical scope, Brazilian relations with the so-called Global South countries have been a priority. South-South relations and regional alliances became fundamental means to diversify partnerships and reduce asymmetries with developed countries, adopting a reformist and more assertive diplomatic stance (Neto & Malamud, 2015). Diversification became an essential pillar in Brazil's foreign policy, and China, with special emphasis on South-South relations. In this context, China has emerged as a crucial player in Brazil's economic diversification strategy.

During the first decade of the 21st century, China and Brazil witnessed a significant strengthening of their economic and political ties. This period marked the establishment of a robust trade partnership, with bilateral trade soaring from just over 3 billion USD in 2001 to surpass 44 billion USD in 2010 and then reaching 100 billion USD by 2019 (Myers & Gallagher, 2024).

Concurrently, the two nations deepened their political collaboration, notably through initiatives like the BRICS grouping - comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa - and the establishment of corresponding multilateral financial institutions like the New Development Bank. For an extended period, Brazil has consistently ranked as the primary destination for Chinese direct investment in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), even in the face of initial challenges related to investing in sectors such as green

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energy, transportation infrastructure, and agriculture within the country (Studart and Myers, 2019).

Bolsonaro's foreign policy, characterized by a strong conservative identity, aligned with far-right populist ideologies, focusing on anti-globalism, nationalism, and anti-foe narratives (De Sá Guimarães & De Oliveira e Silva, 2021), maintained closed links with the Trump Administration and its political objectives in South America, driven Brazil's focus away from emerging countries and blocs. Brazil's close relations with China were, then, tested. Diplomatic and political relations stagnated, with few gestures from the Brazilian government towards Beijing, in sharp contrast with Bolsonaro's antecessors (De Sousa, Abrão & de Souza Porto, 2023; De Sá Guimarães & De Oliveira e Silva, 2021; Gomes Saraiva and Costa Silva, 2019).

With the return of Lula da Silva to the Planato in 2023, during his first hundred days there was a review of Brazilian foreign policy (de Oliveira, 2023) that had to do with returning to some milestones of Lula's first foreign policy and restoring the agenda. South-South cooperation, rebuild and rethink the role of the BRICS and remake an international agenda within the framework of the war in Ukraine (Gallego, 2023). This reorientation had an impact on Brazil-China relations, which will be analyzed in the following sections.

In this paper, we aim to provide an insightful analysis of Jair Bolsonaro's foreign policy towards China during his term from 2018 to 2022, as well as examining the initial year of Lula da Silva's administration in 2023. We will analyze the diplomatic and economic dimensions, highlighting changes and continuity in their approaches towards China. As a main argument we suggest that Brazilian relations with China underwent political and diplomatic adjustments during Bolsonaro's administration, in line with the government's narrative and conservative foreign policy identity. But, in the economic realm, China maintained a core place in Brazilian global agenda. After Lula's return to power in 2023, diplomatic initiatives towards China were restored, - both at the bilateral and multilateral arena - reflecting the political rapprochement to Beijing, which materialized in high level official actions, paralleling the ongoing density of economic ties.

The theoretical approach centers on the concept of autonomy, and its interpretations through different Brazilian administrations, particularly on the political and economic dimensions. We also focus on the notions of the continuity, changes and adjustments in foreign policy, to understand the dynamics during both presidential periods under study in the bilateral relation with China. In doing so, we will examine bilateral investment and commercial figures for the economic dimension, and systematize foreign policy actions such as official visits, statements and bilateral documents during the period under study.

This paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, in section two we present the theoretical debates to frame Brazil's foreign policy during Bolsonaro's and Lula's governments, with a focus on the concept of autonomy. In section three and four we discuss the specific features of Brazil's relations with China during each Administration, delving into the economic and political dimensions, to identify traces of continuity, adjustment or change between the two periods. Overall, the study aims to offer insights

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into the complexities of Brazil-China relations and their significance within the broader context of international diplomacy.

2. Theoretical perspectives on Brazilian foreign policy and autonomy

In recent decades, Brazil's foreign policy has attracted significant attention from academics, especially since the country solidified its position as a middle power on the global stage. Soares de Lima & Hirst (2006, p. 21) underline this trend by suggesting that "since the early years of the twentieth century, Brazil's major foreign policy aspiration has been to achieve international recognition", based on its self-definition of a big country which should assume a global role. In this same vein, Sotero (2010) highlights Lula's role in shifting towards a more assertive and innovative approach in global affairs, driven by the country's increased international activism and self-confidence. This aspiration for international recognition, adds Malamud (2011), has driven Brazil to engage actively in multilateral forums and regional initiatives to enhance its global standing, aligning with the country's self-perception as a significant player.

A cornerstone of Brazilian foreign policy since, at least, the second half of the twentieth century has been the pursuit and consolidation of autonomy (Rodriguez, 2012). This concept played a central role for several South American governments and has been a guiding concept for analysts from the region as both a goal and an instrument for explanatory purposes. In the Brazilian case, autonomy, according to Caballero & Crescentino (2020, p. 2) can be considered as a "compass of Brazil's foreign policy".

Autonomy has several interpretations as a foreign policy concept, particularly developed in Argentina and Brazil's academic circles. As Briceño Ruiz & Simonoff (2017) underline, the autonomy approach is an outstanding contribution to Foreign Policy theoretical debates from a South American perspective, although its impact for IR theory has been mostly regional. Notwithstanding the diverse definitions the concept adopted throughout the decades, autonomy is intimately related to the broader objective of foreign policy which is the promotion of national development. (Caballero & Crescentino, 2020) Under the light of becoming a vehicle to overcome dependency and to avoid becoming an "obedient" country (Malamud, 2011), autonomy also had a performative narrative role in academic circles, with an impact on governmental discourse.

Regarding Brazil's foreign policy, autonomy can be classified by different periods reflecting both the country's self-perception and the surrounding international and regional environments. From the end of the Cold War, and along with a resurgence of the autonomic debate (Briceño Ruiz & Simonoff, 2017), Brazil's search for autonomy was built on participation in international institutions and regimes "in order to leverage the country's foreign policy leeway" (Neto & Malamud, 2015: 14), reflecting principles such as pacifism, multilateralism, and non-intervention. This new orientation became known as "autonomy through participation" and meant that "foreign policy retained its 'desire for autonomy' but, at the same time, sought to remove the legacy of authoritarianism and to respond to the international power of global liberalism" (Soares de Lima & Hirst, 2006, p. 24).

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In 2003, Lula came to power and a new impetus was given to Brazil's foreign policy, particularly in the regional scenario but also in the desire to build the nation as an unequivocal middle power with a dynamic participation in multilateral institutions and emerging blocs. In contrast to previous administrations, Lula's foreign policy centered on Latin America as a privileged scenario for integration. Vigevani & Cepaluni (2007) highlight that autonomy remained a central goal for this government's foreign policy, with a renewed emphasis on diversification. the authors define this concept as the "adherence to international norms and principles by means of South - South alliances, including regional alliances, and through agreements with non-traditional partners (China, Asia-Pacific, Africa, Eastern Europe, Middle East, etc), trying to reduce asymmetries in external relations with powerful countries." (Vigevani & Cepaluni, 2007, p. 1313) The idea underlying this new orientation is that Brazil's power asymmetry vis-a-vis developed countries could only be balanced and, eventually, reduced by strengthening the political and economic relations with non-traditional partners from the Global South and adopting a more assertive diplomatic stance towards international institutions in order to introduce reforms that could also favored the developing world.

Although autonomy through diversification has been widely adopted among academics to analyze Lula's period (Neto & Malamud, 2015; Crescentino & Caballero, 2021), Pereyra Doval (2013) distances herself from this definition and introduces the concept of "autonomy by coalition". This notion refers to "the constant search for partners to form coalitions and thus coordinate policies in common forums" (Pereyra Doval, 2013, p. 120). Although the concept reflects Brazil's projection in the period, in this work we use the previous definition as it better portrays the evolving dynamics of Brazil's relationship with China, particularly in the economic domain.

China became a central partner within the diversification strategy, with a particular focus on the economic dimension. But the economic prosperity that resulted from the commodity prices boom between 2003-2013, which largely benefited Brazil exports, nor autonomy neither trade diversification was improved, given the absence of a trade and investment policy. "Far from granting greater autonomy at the international level or a desirable diversification of the export matrix, this repressing of exports generated a pendulum, causing China to replace the U.S.A. as Brazil's preferred trading partner" (Caballero & Crescentino, 2020, p. 10). Somehow, the result was a diversification of dependency, since relations with China continued to reproduce a model dependent on the demand of the third country instead of being the outcome of national long-term policy or strategy.

In the aftermath of Rousseff's interrupted second term, China had become a major economic partner, but political relations were dependent on Beijing's political interests and the relevance Brazil could represent in a wider international strategy aimed at positioning China in a global stage through multilateral fora, such as BRICS. In other words, diversification as a means to achieve greater autonomy was only partly successful, mostly in trade terms.

Temer's short period was marked by a strengthening of an economistic and reductionist foreign policy approach, focused on using diplomacy as a commercial lever, giving priority

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to the nexus with the United States. The strategy of its foreign ministers (José Serra and Aloysio Nunes) consisted of defending internationally the legitimacy of the administration, while dismantling the foreign policy design woven throughout the PT government, claiming a supposed de-ideologization of foreign relations. (Crescentino & Caballero, 2021; Gomes Saraiva, 2020).

According to Gomes Saraiva (2022) Bolsonaro's foreign policy represented a reorientation in the country's external relations path, breaking with diplomatic traditions. Unlike institutionalists who supported normative frameworks and autonomists who aimed to amend them, Bolsonaro's approach was aggressive and reactive, challenging multilateralism and existing international standards, and viewing the international order as a threat to Brazilian autonomy. This period's foreign policy, with a strong emphasis on economic-commercial interests, escalated a process that began during Dilma's second term and was consolidated during Temer's interim period. The construction of a critical narrative about the ideological footprint of Lula's foreign policy is not new in the Bolsonaro period, although there has been a radicalization of that discourse. As a consequence, during Bolsonaro's term, autonomy became a secondary goal, subordinated to the ideological agenda that granted the US and the West a privileged status in Brazil's foreign policy. (Caballero and Crescentino, 2020)

As we will analyze in the following section, relations with China showed increasing tensions, stemming from the executive's anti-communist rhetoric and alignment with Trump's foreign policy that deepened rivalry with China since 2017, mainly through the trade war. But, as months passed by, economic pragmatism reemerged and relations with Beijing improved, given the relevance the country had for Brazil's foreign trade and economic stability. Notwithstanding this, the rapprochement to Beijing did not follow the autonomous goal it had during previous presidencies. Instead, there was a material-mercantilist imprint, which resulted in an improvement of economic indicators of the bilateral relations, coexisting with constant political and diplomatic tensions.

Lula's return to power in 2023 implied a new turn to foreign policy orientation. Autonomy regained centrality, as a guiding principle, tool and goal, but with a different interpretation. As Soares de Lima (2023) underlines, Lula's foreign policy 3.0, faces several changes both at the domestic and the international levels. In the external front, the war in Ukraine; China's economic slowdown and its consequent global impact; and the escalating US-China rivalry, are the main features in a rapidly evolving systemic context. According to Rodrigues (2023), under this new administration, autonomy can be characterized as pragmatic. This notion, 'pragmatic autonomy', combines the country's leadership aspirations on issues such as climate change and combating hunger with the desire to maintain a balance between opposing powers in the international system, mainly China and the United States (Rodrigues, 2023).

As Caballero and Crescentino (2020) suggest, autonomy as a concept, given the multiple interpretations it had through the decades, has become an indicator of breaks rather than a measure for continuity. We will utilize this concept as a theoretical framework to examine Brazil's interactions with China during the two administrations under evaluation. Additionally, we will uncover discrepancies between the economic and diplomatic aspects,

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as they have followed diverging trajectories in each presidency. It is useful to understand that autonomy has a political pillar, based on a self-identification as a developing country, seeking to amplify the margin of maneuver in international affairs and to lessen dependence on external powers; and an economic one, which has been central to seek developing goals in South American country, and to maintain domestic economic stability, even through different political ideologies.

Finally, given the notable contrasts in foreign policy between Bolsonaro and Lula's third term, we resort to the notions of change, adjustment and continuity to grasp the complexities of Brazil's interactions with China in both political and economic spheres. In this line, Busso (2019) approaches foreign policy as a dynamic and complex phenomenon in constant evolution. Change in foreign policy implies a deliberate break with established practices, whether due to changes in political direction, ideological considerations or new geopolitical realities (Busso and Barreto, 2020). In their approach, adjustment is presented as a more nuanced and adaptive process, reflecting responses to external changes without a complete reconfiguration of foreign policy frameworks. Busso highlights the importance of identifying elements of continuity, which indicate the persistence of certain principles, alliances or strategic priorities over time, even in contexts of political transition. In this line, Hermann (1990, p. 5) suggests that adjustments refer to "occur in the level of effort (greater or lesser) and/or in the scope of recipients (such as refinement in the class of targets). What is done, how it is done, and the purposes for which it is done remain unchanged." This adjustment can manifest itself in the review of alliances, the adoption of new diplomatic strategies or the recalibration of priorities based on emerging circumstances (Rusell and Tokatlian, 2009). Regarding continuity, it stands out that, despite changes in government, foreign policy should maintain certain guiding principles and fundamental strategic lines over time. This continuity is essential to preserve coherence and predictability in the country's international relations.

As we discuss in the following sections, Bolsonaro's foreign policy represented a shift from previous administrations. The alignment to Trump's policies; a retreat from Latin American multilateral initiatives; and constant diplomatic tensions with Beijing, driven by the anti-communist rhetoric; were some of the main features of the new government. However, based on the data analysis, it is evident that adjustments were made to bilateral relations with China instead of significant changes, as previously defined.

3. Brazil-China relations under Bolsonaro (2018-2022)

Since the late 1990s, Brazil had pursued an international strategy focused on diversifying relationships (hedging) and investing in multilateral institutions to navigate the challenges posed by superpowers and collective action issues. In recent years, the relationship between Brazil and China "has become increasingly relevant in the context of Brazilian foreign policy" (Feitosa et al, 2022, p. 2). The growing economic importance of China worldwide has led to an intensification of commercial ties and cooperation between both countries. Pragmatic institutionalists, by advocating close cooperation,

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seek to capitalize on the economic opportunities offered by the relationship with China (Shqueitzer, 2021).

In that sense, Jair Bolsonaro's government was an adjustment in Brazil's foreign policy, giving rise to a decision-making structure divided into two large sectors: one of an ideological nature, with an inclination towards Washington, and another pragmatic, which prioritized the defense of national interests and did not frown upon deepening the relationship with Beijing. In this sense, Bolsonaro's government introduced "new ideas, a new road map of the world, and new partnerships, putting at stake the standards that have guided Brazil's international presence for an extended period" (Gomes Saraiva, 2022, p. 1).

This dichotomy can be associated, in turn, with the geopolitical competition between the United States and China. An illustrative example is the case of the Chinese-based multinational company Huawei and 5G technology services in the Latin American country, generating indecision in the Brazilian government due to the position (Shqueitzer, 2022). The Bolsonaro administration seemed to opt for an automatic alignment strategy with the United States. Such alignment strategies are commonplace, especially among medium-sized countries like Brazil, aiming to minimize costs or gain incentives by aligning with superpowers. However, the issue in the Brazilian context lies in the lack of concrete evidence supporting national gains resulting from this alignment (Hirst & Valls Pereira, 2020).

In relation to the anti-China rhetoric, it is observed that Jair Bolsonaro has expressed critical comments toward the Asian nation, especially during the electoral campaign period (Burton, 2018). However, once in office, a modulation in his tone has been noted, acknowledging the significance of the relationship with China for the Brazilian economy. This change in perspective could suggest a pragmatic adaptation by the Bolsonaro government based on the country's economic interests despite what his main vocal supporters may have said on social media (Lopez Conte, 2021). The complexity of the relationship between both countries is thus manifested in the intersection of political, economic, and environmental factors.

Trade and technological tensions between Brazil and China have arisen in the context of the development of the 5G network in the South American country. The participation of the Chinese company Huawei led to conflicts, prompting the Bolsonaro administration to consider restrictions. However, a complete ban on Huawei's participation was not implemented. This episode highlights the delicate balance that the Brazilian government seeks to maintain between its trade and technological relationships with China and its political alignments (Esteves, 2020). At the beginning of 2019, according to Stuenkel (2022, p. 5) "relations faced its most difficult moment in history". Despite these strains, in January 2019 Chinese authorities invited members of then-presidential party PSL for a visit to China and between may 23rd and 26th in 2019, Bolsonaro's Vice-President, Hamilton Mourāu had an encounter with Xi which served to rebuild the bilateral relationship after Bolsonaro's campaign statements. His main task was to improve the tarnished image of Brazil by convincing the Chinese government that pragmatic forces within the Brazilian administration were in control of the situation, able to restrain

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attitudes which could damage bilateral relations. His visit also led to a reactivation of COSBAN (Sawicka, 2020).

Bolsonaro engaged in two bilateral encounters with Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2019. The first took place from October 24th to 26th in Beijing, followed by another meeting from November 14th to 16th in Brasilia during the BRICS Summit (Paulino, 2020). During that Summit, Economy Minister Paulo Guedes also travelled to Brasilia to meet his Chinese counterpart (Dryomova & Stolyarova, 2019). Bolsonaro's stance towards China has been marked by a volatile evolution, oscillating between seeing China as an arch-enemy, a strategic partner, and an ideological rival within a short span of time. Initially, he portrayed China as a significant ideological adversary, emphasizing his visits to Taiwan and positioning Brazil alongside the United States and Israel (Guimarães & De Oliveira E Silva, 2021). This approach, however, incurred swift responses from Beijing, highlighting the importance of careful diplomacy in choosing allies. Bolsonaro depicted China as a predatory force aiming to dominate key sectors of Brazil's economy, fueling tensions further. Despite China's status as Brazil's top trading partner, Bolsonaro's administration explored ways to diminish dependence on China, raising concerns among crucial constituencies, notably farmers.

The dynamics shifted during the Amazon fires crisis in 2019 when, amid mounting international criticism, particularly from figures like French President Macron, who questioned Brazil's sovereignty over the region, Bolsonaro found an unexpected ally in China. Beijing supported Brazil, aligning momentarily on issues of sovereignty and rebuffing international criticism (Marra et al, 2021). The three-day visit of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro to Beijing marked a significant shift in his approach towards China. In a complete turnaround from his previous criticisms, Bolsonaro adopted a tone of cooperation and openness, acknowledging the mutual dependency between Brazil and China. His words emphasized the importance of this bilateral relationship, describing Brazil as a vast ocean of opportunities willing to share with China. 25 agreements in the areas of politics, science, technology, education, economy, trade, energy, and agriculture were signed. The agreements include sanitary protocols for the export of processed meat and cottonseed flour from Brazil to China, as well as cooperation for the development of new and renewable energy (Vidal Liy & Gallaraga Gortázar, 2019).

This newfound alignment, though pragmatic, didn't substantially alter Bolsonaro's underlying views on China. His subsequent apology to Xi Jinping was overshadowed by domestic accusations of Chinese involvement in the COVID-19 pandemic, perpetuating a narrative of Chinese threat. Bolsonaro's diplomatic tightrope walk underscores the complexities of balancing economic interests with ideological differences, epitomizing Schmitt's notion of the "political enemy" as existentially different, yet necessary for engagement. During the 2019 BRICS summit, which was chaired by Brazil, Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes announced that the government of Bolsonaro was in talks with China to establish a free trade area between the two nations. This move aimed to strengthen the bilateral economic relationship and diversify Brazil's trade partnerships. Guedes emphasized the importance of greater integration with China, even if it entailed a shift in the trade balance, stating that the country could balance itself in the future through increased exports (Hooijmaaijers, 2021). During the covid-19 pandemic, the

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bilateral relation went through hard times again. The initially harmonious stance towards Chinese provider Huawei in Brazil's 5G network auction, announced by the government in April 2020, underwent a stark transformation amid the Coronavirus pandemic. The rift began with President Bolsonaro's son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, attributing global blame for the crisis to China, followed by the resignation of the recent Minister of Education, who insulted the country in a racially charged and childish speech. This deterioration in relations was further evidenced during a late April cabinet meeting, where Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo criticized China as undemocratic and dismissive of human rights, advocating for Brazil to spearhead a new global order alongside like-minded nation. However, disrespectful comments towards China were reportedly struck from the record, with Economy Minister Paulo Guedes highlighting the economic necessity of maintaining ties despite ideological differences (Ibañez, 2020).

China issued a warning to Brazil, stating that there could be "negative consequences" following the characterization by Brazilian lawmaker Eduardo Bolsonaro of Chinese activities regarding 5G technology as "infamous espionage." This stark message, conveyed through the Chinese embassy in Brasilia, represents a notable shift in tone toward the South American nation, a declared ally of outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump and his anti-Beijing rhetoric. Eduardo Bolsonaro, who was also serving as chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Chamber of Deputies during his father's presidency, subsequently deleted the contentious tweet following discussions with the Minister of Communications and advisors from the National Telecommunications Agency (Meier, 2023). The central focus of these talks was the 5G auction in 2021. The embassy's statement, urging Brazilian figures to refrain from aligning with U.S. rhetoric and disinformation against China, underscores the potential repercussions of straying from the path of Sino-Brazilian friendship, highlighting the historical responsibility to maintain the stability of the China-Brazil alliance. After this, in May 24th of 2022, there was a meeting during the COSBAN Summit, where Mourão met with Chinese Vice President Wang Quishan (Roberto, 2022).

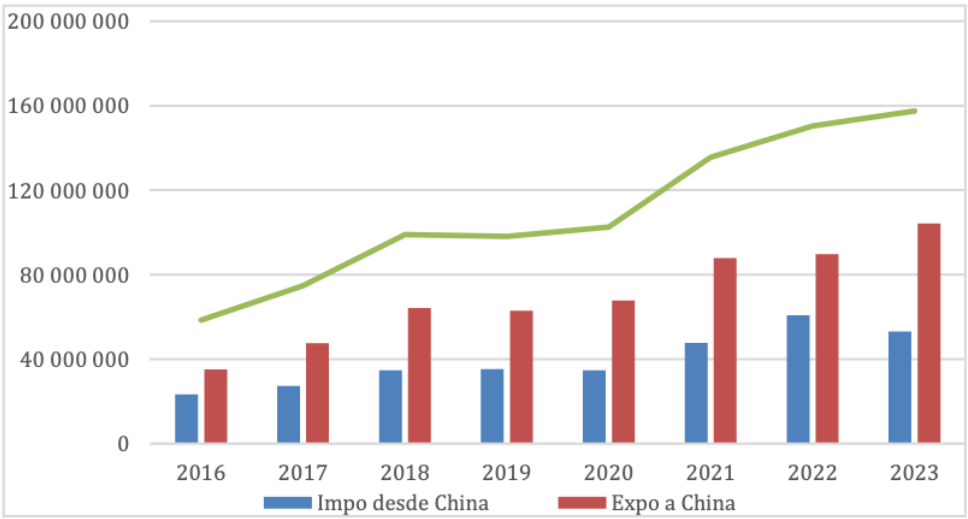
Bolsonaro's administration, marked by a dichotomy between ideological alignment with the United States and pragmatic engagement with China, underscores the geopolitical competition between superpowers, reminiscent of the arguments presented by pragmatic institutionalists like Shqueitzer (2021). The volatility in Bolsonaro's stance towards China, oscillating between adversarial rhetoric and moments of cooperation, reflects the delicate balance between economic interests and political alignments, as highlighted by Hirst & Valls Pereira (2020). Despite initial tensions and criticisms, Bolsonaro's government ultimately pursued a pragmatic approach, acknowledging the significance of the Brazil-China relationship for economic stability and technological advancement. However, challenges persisted, particularly regarding the integration of Huawei into Brazil's 5G network, revealing the complex interplay between trade, technology, and political considerations (Esteves, 2020). Amidst challenges and disagreements, efforts to deepen economic cooperation, such as discussions on establishing a free trade area and navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, underscored the importance of maintaining stability and continuity in the China-Brazil alliance, as emphasized by the warnings issued by the Chinese embassy in Brasilia (Meier, 2023).

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3.1 Strengthening economic ties with China: Growth in trade and investments despite political tensions

The economic dimension, particularly in trade terms, showed not only continuity, but also a growing dynamism, in contrast with the prevailing tensions in the diplomatic front. Trade has been a core pillar in Brazil's relations with China since the beginning of the 2000s. In 2009, China became the main destination for Brazil's exports, surpassing the United States for the first time, and becoming the country's largest global trading partner.

Figure 1: Total Trade Brazil - China, 2016-2023, in thousands of US dollars.

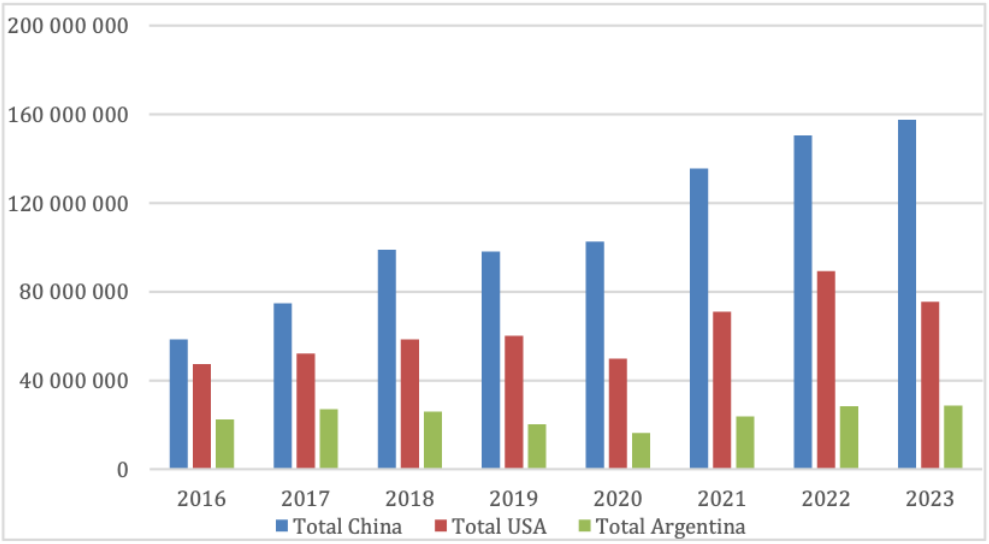


Source: Authors, based on data retrieved from the International Trade Center (2024).

As a result of this unprecedented trend, China's growing role as core trade partner for Brazil had impacts on the overall participation of other partners and on the country's global commercial basket composition. In both dimensions, partners and compositions, there was a gradual decline in diversification. As shown in figure 2, Brazil's total trade with China in 2023, more than doubled that with the United States, and was 5.4 times larger than total trade with Argentina. Furthermore, total trade with China grew faster than with the other two partners, particularly between 2018-2023. As figures show, Brazilian trade with China concentrated 20.3% of the country's global trade in 2017 and 27.1% in 2023. (ITC, 2024) So, in contrast to Bolsonaro's rhetoric, especially during his campaign and first months as president, China not only sustained a privileged position as Brazil's primary trading partner but also significantly increased its participation throughout the period.

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Figure 2: Brazil's Main trade partners. 2016-2023, in thousands of US dollars.



Source: Authors, based on data retrieved from the International Trade Center (2024).

Brazilian exports represented the main bulk of Brazil-China total trade, and their increase surpassed that of the country's imports from this partner. In fact, in the period under study, Brazil's exports to China were almost three times greater than those to the United States and eight times greater than exports to Argentina, the second and third largest destinations respectively. In terms of participation, Brazil's exports to China, reached 30.7% of total exports in 2023, with the highest share in 2020 -during Bolsonaro's period-, accounting for 32.4%. (ITC, 2024). Analyzing these numbers, there is no doubt Brazil's trade relations with China reflected continuity during the whole period under study. This continuity is further demonstrated by the ongoing asymmetry in trade composition, which has only strengthened in recent years, emphasizing an interindustrial trade pattern. Since 2017, the majority of Brazil's main export products to China have consistently comprised an average of 86% of total items, indicating a highly concentrated portfolio. (International Trade Center, 2024) Until 2019, the four main products in Brazil's export basket were soya beans (42%), petroleum oil (22%), iron ores (18%), and chemical wood pulp (5%). In 2020, after Beijing granted permission in September 2019 to 25 additional Brazilian beef, pork and poultry plants to ship to the country (Bloomberg, 2019), meat became the fourth exported item, a position that was reinforced in the following years, accounting for 9% of total exports in average between 2020 and 2023.

Chinese investments have also become increasingly relevant for Brazil since 2009. As Sawicka (2020) recalls, that year the China Development Bank provided Petrobras with a loan of 10 billion USD, and in 2010, the State Grid Corporation of China, the largest power company in the world, acquired seven Brazilian companies in the electric energy sector. Moreover, in 2016, State Grid purchased a controlling stake in Brazil's largest power distributor, CPFL. Between 2005 and 2022, this South American country was the world's fourth largest recipient of Chinese investment in the world. However, in recent

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years, China has taken a more cautious and selective approach towards outbound investment for several reasons. The focus on domestic priorities and a more uncertain global geopolitical landscape have prompted Beijing to adapt its strategies and concentrate on key partners, such as Brazil. (Cariello, 2023)

During the Bolsonaro administration, the number of investment projects announced and confirmed showed a fluctuating trend. In 2019, projects announced were 31 and confirmed 24. But in 2020, as a clear result of the Covid-19 outbreak, confirmed investment projects plummeted to a total of 8. The years 2021 and 2022 portrayed a significant recovery, with 28 and 32 confirmed projects respectively. (Cariello, 2023) Then, despite Bolsonaro's hostile initial rhetoric towards China, "several cooperation agreements and sectorial MoUs were signed, resulting in the expansion of Chinese business operations in Brazil" (García et al, 2023, p. 8). In terms of flows, figures show that after a peak in 2017 (17.4 billion USD) -that was mainly due to State Grid's acquisition of a majority stake in CPFL for a total of 12.5 billion USD (García et al, 2023)- investments dropped to an average of 3.5 billion USD between 2018 and 2022. The main sectors receiving Chinese investments include energy, mining, automotive and finance. Between 2007-2022, measured by value, the electricity sector absorbed 45.5% of total investments by Chinese companies in Brazil, followed by oil extraction (30.4%), extraction of metallic minerals (6.2%), manufacturing industry (6.2%), infrastructure projects (4.4%) and agriculture (3.4%) (Cariello, 2023).

Overall, economic relations between Brazil and China remained stable during the Bolsonaro period in comparison with previous administrations, and although total figures are not still available, it is supposed to continue during Lula's current term. Both trade and investment flows reacted more to external conditions -such as the pandemic outbreak, China's domestic conditions, and international conflicts- than to Brazil's political changing orientation. In the aftermath, continuity rather than change or adjustment, was the result of a pragmatic lecture during Bolsonaro's years, that privileged material needs over ideology and political values in its relations with Beijing.

4. Brazil-China relations under Lula's third term

In the first hundred days of the new foreign policy under Lula's presidency, an attempt was made to reverse the negative impact of Bolsonaro's previous management on Brazil's foreign relations. Lula and his team diagnosed a deterioration in the country's image due to the dismantling of internal policies and an isolationist vision in the international arena. The objective of Brazilian Foreign Policy under the new government was to bring Brazil back to the world stage (de Sousa et al, 2023). The first hundred days of Lula's new foreign policy emphasized the reconstruction of Brazil's international image, the reorientation of bilateral relations with China and the search for opportunities for internal development, global projection and cooperation on crucial issues at the national level. worldwide (De Sousa et al, 2023).

During his first presidency from 2003 to 2010, Lula sought to strengthen ties with China, recognizing the country's growing economic power. He visited China four times during

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his tenure, and in 2009, China surpassed the US to become Brazil's largest trading partner, a position it has held since then. This event can be seen in the context of the commodities boom of the early 2000s, which created a favorable environment not only for Brazil but also for other Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela, to deepen economic ties with China, then seen as a key market for their exports and a potential source of investment and technology transfer (Almeida, 2010).

Since President Lula took office again in early 2023, bilateral relations have significantly improved, with Lula seeking to rekindle the relationship with China and showing eagerness to develop bilateral trade and investment ties. In late March 2023, China and Brazil signed an agreement to settle all trade exchanges in their respective currencies rather than in US dollars. In April 2023, Lula continued the bilateral dialogue by meeting Xi in Beijing (Giaccaglia, 2024). This agreement, along with President Lula's comments during his visit to China, shows Brazil's willingness to disrupt the dominance of the US dollar as the primary trading currency, aligning with Beijing's aspirations to internationalize the renminbi (Da Rosa, 2024).

During President Lula's trip to China in 2023, over 20 agreements were signed, and high-level meetings took place, underscoring Brazil's renewed commitment to a robust and multifaceted relationship with the Asian powerhouse. During these meetings included the appointment of former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff as the new head of the BRICS Bank, underscores Brazil's renewed commitment to a robust and multifaceted relationship with the Asian powerhouse given that "Lula's decision seeks to give geopolitical relevance to this scheme" (Giaccaglia & Dussort, 2023, p. 9). Set against the backdrop of escalating tensions between China and the United States, Lula's visit reflects Brazil's pursuit of a pragmatic, mutually beneficial approach, consistent with its tradition of neutrality and negotiation in international affairs. Accompanied by a diverse delegation including ministers and governors, Lula's journey represents a significant step towards diversifying Brazil's foreign relations and exploring new avenues of cooperation in strategic sectors.

According to the Joint Declaration between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil on the Deepening of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, released during the visit, the two countries intend to deepen cooperation in various fields and jointly address a wide range of issues, such as poverty reduction, social development, technological innovation, environmental protection, climate change, low-carbon economy, and digital economy (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2023). The bilateral agreements cover many of these fields and more, aiming to boost bilateral trade and investment across a wide range of industries, including trade facilitation, research and innovation cooperation, information and communication technology cooperation, industrial investment promotion, strengthening cooperation in the digital economy, cooperation between finance ministries, and social and rural development cooperation aimed at eradicating hunger and poverty. Moreover, the renewal of cooperation in the aerospace industry was highlighted, with the signing of documents to renew cooperation in the aerospace sector and restart the China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite program (Huld, 2024).

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"Under the new agreements, both sides agree to accelerate the development of CBERS-6, the sixth satellite built through their partnership, and to implement related projects within the China-Brazil Space Cooperation Program" (Huld, 2024), reflecting a joint effort to promote research and development of new technologies and undertake projects including technology transfer elements (Alcalá et al, 2023). Furthermore, agreements were made to facilitate trade in agricultural products, with efforts to digitalize customs procedures and promote cooperation in disease management that could affect bilateral trade and supply chain stability. Additionally, agreements were reached to resume Brazilian beef exports to China, although no timeline was provided for lifting the suspension (Da Rosa Muñoz, 2024). In June 2024, during another COSBAN Summit, Brazilian Vice President Geraldo Alckim met with Chinese Vice President Han Zheng in Beijing (Secretaria de Comunicação Social, 2024).

The dynamic evolution of Brazil-China relations under Lula's third term epitomizes the interplay of theoretical concepts elucidated within the framework of Brazilian foreign policy. Lula's pragmatic approach, characterized by a pursuit of autonomy and strategic partnerships, resonates with the notion of "pragmatic autonomy" as articulated by Rodrigues (2023). The reinvigoration of bilateral ties, spanning economic, technological, and environmental cooperation, underscores Brazil's pursuit of comprehensive strategic partnership, echoing Tokatlian's (1996) emphasis on foreign policy as an expression of national identity and strategic interests.

Final Remarks

In a developing country like Brazil, despite its GDP level and status as a global middle power, the material conditions linked to development needs set the pace for foreign policy decisions. During his campaign, Bolsonaro built an anti-communist, anti-Chinese rhetoric aligned with the Trump administration, which initially led to a cooling of relations with Beijing. Since the moment the new government comprehended that the economic ties with China were truly irreplaceable and that Brazil's well-being and economic stability depended on them, the President toned down his criticism and showed gestures of diplomatic rapprochement, particularly through official visits and the signing of economic agreements.

Unlike previous governments, the quest for autonomy was not in Bolsonaro's agenda towards China, but pragmatism, which is also a traditional feature of Brazilian foreign policy, gradually became a compass for managing the relationship. In the aftermath, economic pragmatism prevailed over ideological differences, and relations with China remained stable through most of Bolsonaro´s administration and strengthened economic ties. Economic interests, and the unavoidable evidence that the relation with Beijing is a cornerstone of Brazil's economic progress, were the essence of continuity besides the outstanding political differences with previous governments.

Lula's return to power in 2023 signaled a shift back towards a more autonomous foreign policy orientation, also characterized by pragmatism. Under Lula's leadership, autonomy regained centrality as a guiding principle, aiming to balance Brazil's relationships with

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central powers, namely China and the United States, while pursuing leadership aspirations in global issues like climate change and hunger eradication. This pragmatic autonomy acknowledges the complexities of the international system and seeks to maintain a balance between national interests and global realities.

Lula's government has clearly emphasized the central role China plays for Brazil, both bilaterally and multilaterally. However, times have changed. Geopolitical rivalry has intensified, the Global South has lost leverage, and multilateralism is under threat in a less flexible international environment. Lula now faces the dual challenge of restoring Brazil's international standing while addressing increasing domestic social and economic demands. Global conditions are not as favorable as they were during his previous administrations. Although the relationship with China remains pivotal, it must be leveraged in response to the shifting international dynamics and conditions.

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