

FROM SOFT BALANCING TO BANDWAGONING: CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL-US RELATIONS IN SOUTH AMERICA

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Introduction

Since the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 and, more recently, the outbreak of the pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, labels such as “crisis of the liberal international order” have been frequent in scholarly writings (Ikenberry 2018). The recent United States (US) retraction from the international order it helped create after 1945 and the rise of China has led International Relations (IR) scholars to argue that the world is moving towards a new Cold War bipolarity in which China is the key competitor of the US (Mearsheimer 2021; Zhao 2022). In contrast, others contest the idea of a power transition from the Atlantic to the Pacific (Brooks and Wohlforth 2023).

Although these debates refer mainly to the structure of the international system, it is important to call attention to regional power dynamics as well, since regional powers have assumed crucial roles by either supporting the international order or contesting it from within. In Latin America, more specifically, the end of the Cold War brought about significant changes. Once considered in the past to be the American “backyard,” the successive US retreatment from the region opened windows for regional states to reevaluate their relationship with the hegemon and seek ways to focus on economic development and display political autonomy (Long 2015; Fortin, Heine and Ominami 2021). In this paper, I specifically analyze Brazilian foreign policy towards the US in South America from 2003 to 2022 using the concept of soft

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balancing (Pape 2005; Paul 2005, 2018). The concept has been extensively used to understand great power-level dynamics (He and Feng 2008; Larionova 2020). Still, its focus on diplomacy and institutions also holds considerable potential for exploring the regional power level as well (Flemes and Wehner 2015; Merke 2015; Yang and Lee 2020).

The presidential mandates in the period considered amount to a total of four: Lula (2003–2010), Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), Michel Temer (2016–2018), and Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022). To compare them, it is necessary to identify variables that account for variations and help explain (possible) different outcomes (Landman 2008). The variables I consider are the foreign policymakers' beliefs, particularly the President and their Minister of Foreign Affairs' worldviews, and Brazil's place in the regional power distribution. This focus derives from a methodological choice of prioritizing agents with institutional resources and symbolic power to propagate ideas and translate them into practice, and to consider regional power distribution as a constraint to states (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009).

I argue that from 2003 to 2022, Brazil has implemented two different strategies related to US regional primacy: First, from 2003 to 2016, Brazil relied on initiatives that did not aim to undermine the regional order, but instead, they sought to ease the existing asymmetric distribution of power and to frustrate the US presence in the region by increasing the costs of its actions. Brazil did it by activating institution-creation to “lock in” regional countries in its sphere of influence and marginalize Washington's participation. During this period, Brazil strengthened its political-economic relationship with China to enhance its ability to soft-balance the US in the Americas. There was, then, the adoption of a soft balancing strategy.

The second strategy occurs in the context of regional and Brazilian domestic political changes, particularly in the foreign policy maker group's beliefs that have supported Lula and Rousseff. In foreign policy, Temer's new administration prioritized a close relationship with the US and distanced itself from the region. China remained important, but the bilateral relationship changed from a strategic partnership to a narrowed focus on trade and investment. Temer's two-year mandate is considered a transitional period from the first phase to the second phase. It is marked by the beginning of a retraction of the Brazilian soft balance towards the US to a more aligned position with Washington, which will reach its peak with the 2018 Bolsonaro election.

The rise to power of a far-right president opened space to an agenda of combating what Bolsonaro's Foreign Minister, Ernesto Araújo (2019–2021), called “globalism,” resulting in the establishment of an “automatic alignment”

with US Trump's government (2017–2021) (Hirst and Pereira 2022). This diplomatic posture was profoundly marked by a contest of the liberal international order (Casarões and Farias 2021) and significant modifications in the region's discourse and practices towards the US. Also, the relationship with traditional regional allies such as Argentina deteriorated, and Brazil displayed an unusual leaning on US demands to counter the presence of China in the region. Beijing continued to be crucial for the Brazilian economy, however. The preference towards the US resulted in a bandwagoning strategy (Schweller 1994; Mearsheimer 2014), although the outcomes of this close relationship fell short of what was envisioned.

Therefore, between 2003 and 2022, Brazil moved away from the role of soft balancer vis-à-vis the US in South America during Lula's and Rousseff's terms to a tactical convergence in Temer's to bandwagoning in Bolsonaro's. This paper discusses how policymakers can determine the direction of regional powers' balancing behavior towards great powers and combine domestic and regional factors to explain the variance in the strategies adopted in each presidential mandate.

To develop and illustrate these arguments, the article proceeds in three sections: First, I briefly approach the soft balancing and bandwagoning concepts and the mechanisms through which it is mobilized and discuss the importance of considering beliefs and power in foreign policy analysis. In the sequence, I turn to Brazilian regional foreign policy towards the US, discussing the main drivers of the approaches displayed by each president. In conclusion, perceptions of the US and China and the material ability to check the great powers explain the differences in Brazilian strategies adopted in the last twenty years.

Soft balancing, bandwagoning, and the importance of the beliefs

In the context of unipolarity and US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a heated debate emerged in the pages of *International Security* opposing those who thought that it was difficult, if not impossible, to balance US hegemony due to its global primacy (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005; Lieber and Alexander 2005) and the others arguing the contrary, that balancing was on the way but in a “softer” fashion (Pape 2005; Paul 2005). The common ground between them was the consideration of the usefulness of the balance of power theory as a primary theoretical approach to studying international relations and its implications for analyzing a state's foreign policy. Since then, the debate has

brought new contributions. It now incorporates discussions on the concept's utility, its validity, the conditions under which it may flourish – and work or not – and to what extent it can explain the strategic behavior of great and regional powers in different contexts.

According to Paul (2005, 20), differently from hard balancing, the soft version means that a state balances the relatively stronger state, aiming to “[restrain] the power or aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy via limited, informal ententes, and economic sanctions in order to make its aggressive actions less legitimate in the eyes of the world and hence its strategic goals more difficult to obtain.”

Although soft balancing entails using nonmilitary tools, it nonetheless aims to challenge power. Among the instruments available to states that behave in a soft balancing fashion are territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, signaling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition, and economic strengthening. Denying one state the use of the territory has both a military and political-economic connotation since a state may deny access to its territory in the form of troops or goods. Entangling diplomacy uses multilateral institutions and other formal/informal arrangements to obstruct or frustrate the hegemon's moves considered threatening to others. This mechanism is close to signaling resolve to participate in collective efforts to balance the hegemon. Still, it differs from it in that it may be mobilized without an institution. Economic strengthening means shifting relative economic power in favor of the weaker state through, for example, trading blocs or increasing economic exchange. Then, “a core purpose of soft balancing is not to coerce or even impede the superior state's current actions, but to demonstrate resolve in a manner that signals a commitment to resist the superpower's future ambitions” (Paul 2005, 37).

On the other hand, bandwagoning occurs when secondary states partner with the hegemon in response to a perceived threat. In that sense, it is a strategy of states aligning with a dominant power rather than opposing it. States that bandwagon expect to reap security, economic, or protection benefits from potential threats. This strategy is often pursued when a state perceives that opposing the hegemon would be futile or too costly. Bandwagoning involves alliances, partnerships, or subordination to the great power (Mearsheimer 2014).

Considering this theoretical approach, discussing how the state interprets behavior is essential since different actors interpret a particular act – threatening or not – differently (Keohane and Goldstein 1993). IR scholars have suggested a correlation between how authorities “conceive” and interpret things surrounding them and decision-making (Hermann and

Hermann 1989; Hermann et. al. 2001; Jervis 2013, 2017a, 2017b). For a state to design a balancing strategy towards the other, it should consider the other's behavior or intention a threat to its interests or the interests of its allies. When one talks about perception, a central feature of the concept is the notion of "belief" – or worldview –, which is "[a] cause-effect relationship which derives authority from the shared consensus of recognized elites... Such causal belief guides individuals on achieving their objectives [and] imply strategies for attaining goals, themselves valued because of shared principled beliefs, and understandable only within the context of broader world views" (Keohane and Goldstein 1993, 13).

In foreign policy, the worldview refers to a comprehensive framework of beliefs, values, and perceptions through which individuals or decision-makers interpret and navigate the complexities of international politics. Understanding one's worldview is paramount as it provides a foundational framework that informs and structures overarching principles and priorities that tend to guide foreign policy decisions. "[P]olicies and decisions must be mediated by statesmen's goals, calculations, and perceptions" (Jervis 2017b, 13). These mediations include ideological orientations, cultural and historical factors, and geopolitical considerations. The worldview is one mediation that helps to order the world and shape agendas by reducing the number of conceivable alternatives and turning actions onto certain tracks rather than others, which ultimately has the potential to shape outcomes. So, there is a correlation between "belief" or "conceiving" a specific view of the world and acting on it. A realist worldview, for instance, may shape beliefs about the importance of the state's interests and the centrality of power politics, leading to a focus on the balance of power and competition instead of cooperation (Waltz 1979).

The 1988 Brazilian Constitution postulates that the Executive has the prerogatives of formulating and implementing foreign policy. By "foreign policy," I mean the agenda, initiatives, and guidelines developed and carried out by Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs – known as Itamaraty – and its most relevant players, particularly the President and their Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the Brazilian case, the foreign policy design and implementation attributes a considerable role to the Executive and those subordinate to it. Many works have called attention to the political-institutional dynamics surrounding Itamaraty's bureaucratic model and pointed to its agency's centrality in foreign policymaking (Figueira 2010; Amorim Neto and Malamud 2019).

In this paper, I focus on the worldviews of the Presidents and their Ministers of Foreign Affairs because they occupy the main institutional posts

in the country's foreign affairs, which matters in terms of what they say and do². Although the literature points to different reasons for the President to nominate their Minister of Foreign Affairs (Lopes and Praça 2015; Aldgeire 2023), one can expect that the two share some fundamental beliefs regarding worldview. Accordingly, one expects a cognitive convergence on fundamental issues such as how international politics work, Brazil's role, and Brazil's major interests in foreign policy. The combination of the President and their inner circle on foreign affairs accounts for setting the goals, establishing the ways to meet them, and implementing the policies according to the evaluation of means and ends. Thus, I use the concept of soft balancing and how each President's inner circle considers Brazil's main regional interests to grasp and analyze Brazil's regional foreign policy towards the US in the last twenty years. Specifically, I try to demonstrate that the previous four Presidents relied on soft balancing and bandwagoning strategies to check other powers' behavior in South America, but for different reasons correlated to their different worldviews about Washington and Beijing.

The Brazilian regional foreign policy towards the US: From soft balancing to bandwagoning

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the US's definition of its international agenda and the importance it concedes to Brazil within it constitute one of the main structural features in the Brazilian foreign policy calculus (Hirst 2005). Over the years, the US has become the regional hegemon in the Americas. After the Second World War, it also became Brazil's main political ally and trade partner. For Brazil, this situation poses a set of challenges in terms of how to deal with the regional hegemon because, since the 1940s, Brasília has adopted a pendular posture between an alignment with the US (called Americanism) and a universalist approach, especially towards South-South relations (called Globalist) (Pinheiro 2010) – but never assuming a posture of confrontation against Washington. The relationship of Latin American countries with Washington varies in time and space (Russell and Tokatlian 2007; Livingstone 2009), and Brazil–US bilateral relations have historically experienced transformations, ranging from “alignment” to a

2 While the centrality of the following analysis rests on the beliefs or worldviews of some particular people, I am aware of the methodological limitations of correlating beliefs with policies. There are works that show case studies problematizing this correlation and others corroborating with it, but all of them have pointed out the analytical validity of relying on this theoretical mechanism to grasp an important feature of foreign policymaking and, particularly, foreign policy strategy design (Amorim Neto and Malamud 2015; Burges and Bastos 2017)..

“strategic dialogue” (Soares de Lima and Hirst 2006; Long 2018).

South America, considered by Teixeira (2012) as a regional subsystem in the Americas, is critical to Brazil in at least two ways: First, the region can represent a source of instability in the neighborhood, affecting Brazilian interest in exerting influence – either political, economic, or institutional – in a potentially dysfunctional area. Due to the presence of organized crime, transnational traffic, and “fragile” states, the intervention of the hegemon may be required to stabilize the situation, which Brazil seeks to avoid. Spektor (2010) argues that this situation is particularly delicate as some of Brazil’s neighbors seek to align with Washington (e.g., Colombia and Chile), and others contest vocally the American hegemony (e.g., Venezuela). Either way, both cases ultimately bring the US’s attention and pose a challenge to Brazilian positioning in the region since it raises expectations in Washington about how Brazil would work to face these challenges and turn Brazil into a target of US pressure when their interests are not convergent.

The second way South America matters to Brazil is that it represents a key source for Brazilian international status. As the dominant economy in the region, Brasília tries to turn the region into an asset to establish a regional political-institutional framework to advance its interests and facilitate negotiations, dilute conflicts, and strengthen its position when dealing with outside powers. South America has also been a recurrent theme in Brazilian arguments for pushing a UN Security Council reform that grants Brazil a permanent chair – although there is a clear rejection of this proposal from other regional states. As Amorim (2011b, 265) notes, “Even a big country as Brazil is also a small one in a world like this [...] we do not have the ability to, alone, speak for ourselves, [That is why] Brazil has not a full existence with the union [with South America]”.

First phase: Lula–Dilma Rousseff and the rise and fall of soft balancing towards the US

Lula’s international agenda was formulated by his Foreign Minister, Celso Amorim (2011a, 2011b); Itamaraty’s General Secretary of External Relations, Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães (2001, 2006)³; President’s Foreign Policy Advisor, Marco Aurélio Garcia (2018); and the President himself also displayed presidential diplomacy. This foreign policymaking inner circle favored designing a strategy to augment Brazilian global status, particularly

³ In 2009 Guimarães was replaced by Antonio Patriota, former Brazil Ambassador to the United States.

in the established global governance institutions. Regionally, the main goal was assuming a prominent regional leadership, primarily through institution-building processes.

Lula's foreign policy also tended to privilege South–South relations, although it did not disregard the importance of North–South relations. A common feature in these goals was the long-term view of a Brazilian desire to be as autonomous as possible from the US since the regional hegemon was considered a challenge to Brazil's political and regional interests, particularly in the local institutions where Washington has more relative weight on collective decisions, such as in the Organization of American States (OAS). During Lula's years, Brazilian foreign policy was based on an assessment that the world was becoming multipolar, and that multilateralism matters for Brazil. Consequently, this reflected a perception of a relative decline in the US's weight on global affairs, with significant consequences for Brazilian foreign policy options (Guimarães 2006).

The 2008–2009 global financial crisis accentuated the process of power redistribution, with Brazil, China, India, Russia, and others playing a prominent role in the traditional multilateral institutions⁴, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and creating new arrangements of their own, which the 2009 launching of the BRICS (Rinaldi 2021) and the G20 illustrates accordingly. These episodes consolidate a process of a multipolar world order that Amorim explains as a “subway map,” with lines intertwined and a network of connected stations – some of which, as he notes, remain more important than others (Amorim 2010). On many occasions, Amorim presented the idea of a “benign multipolarity,” according to which many poles would assume a proactive stance on decision-making processes and contribute to augmenting the representativeness of global governance mechanisms. This structural configuration favors the democratization of the international order embedded in the principle of multilateralism.

Implicit in the discourses was a normative belief that multipolarity is superior to any other distribution of global power, especially the 1990's “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer 1990/1991). In Amorim's view, political, economic, and military changes in world politics reinforced the Brazilian strategy of multidimensional cooperation with its own region. He used to say, “Cooperation, integration, and peace: it is around these goals that Brazil wishes to contribute, together with its neighbors, to realize a benign multipolarity” (Amorim 2011a, 23). Guimarães (2006, 275) also posits that

⁴ In this period Brazil moved from the fourteenth to the seventh position in the world economy.

Brazil should work “consistently and persistently favoring the emergence of a multipolar order in which South America would be one of the poles, and not be considered as a mere sub-region for other pole’s economic and political exploitation.”

Lula’s regional foreign policy priority was strengthening the regional integration process, particularly in the economic and political dimensions. According to Amorim (2009), the Common Market of the South (Mercosur) was the regional integration masterpiece. The trade bloc is the only one in the region that created density and development in trade, welfare, politics, and democracy. Another crucial regional goal was to promote political cooperation and commercial integration among Latin American countries. The Union of South American Nations (Unasur) was the political-institutional instrument to find common solutions to regional crises and a way to put aside eventual hegemon interference since Washington was not invited to join. Brazil resumed previous projects of Latin American integration and, in 2004, established a free trade agreement between Mercosur and the Andean Community, creating a South American free trade zone. Brazil also agreed to settle a dispute resolution tribunal under the Mercosur umbrella and establish the Secretary-General’s office of Mercosur headquarters in Montevideo. Two years later, Brasília supported the creation of Parlasur – a legislative organ with civil parliamentary participation from all Mercosur members – and helped to build the Mercosur Convergence Fund, a financial mechanism to lend money to Uruguay and Paraguay for investing in infrastructure projects⁵. Amorim (2011, 230) calls these regional initiatives “responsible activism,” seeking to enlarge Brazilian political institutional compromises with the region.

On the political dimension of regional integration, in 2008, all South American countries signed in Brasília a constitutive treaty by which they created the Unasur. This was a crucial step towards an institution-building strategy, as all states could now count on a common institutional framework to settle political-diplomatic regional disputes. The institution effectively became an active arrangement for discussing themes as sensitive as security and democracy. The consolidation of the South American regional integration processes and the efforts to reach Latin American and Caribbean countries can be illustrated by a 2008 summit in Brazil gathering a Mercosur Summit, a Unasur Summit, and a summit of all 34 Latin American and Caribbean states. Two years later, Brazil was one of the main driving forces behind creating the Community of Caribbean and Central American States (Celac). In Amorim’s words (2011, 230), it was “the first [time] ever to take place in 200 hundred years of the independent life of most countries... [it] was the

⁵ See <https://focem.mercosur.int/pt/o-que-e-focem/>

first occasion on which the Heads of State and Government of Latin America and Caribbean nations met without the sponsorship or tutelage of Europe or North America.”

Historically, both countries have prioritized regional stability in the Brazil–US relationship. However, there were differences in how each conceived the proper way to address this goal. While Washington has long promoted liberal democracies and is suspicious of left-wing governments’ initiatives, Brazil and other American states have emphasized the diplomatic tradition of non-interference. Brazil and the US also shared differences in the hemispheric talks and institutional governance framework on themes such as migration, (narco)terrorism and drug trafficking (Herz 2011). Washington supported OAS as the leading regional institution to face regional problems, while Brasília advocated for the Unasur or Celac’s role. In 2005 Brazil and other South American states opposed the US initiative of establishing a “democracy monitoring mechanism” within the OAS targeting Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. Few Latin American governments have supported the US economic sanctions on Venezuela’s human rights record or embraced the ongoing American commercial embargo on Cuba and its suspension of the OAS. On many occasions, Brazilian leaders antagonized such policies, which helps to explain the desire to build regional institutions where the US was absent (Piccone 2011).

Despite the differences, the Brazil–US relationship during Lula’s years was marked by what Pecequillo (2021) has called a “positive agenda.” After the reelection of George W. Bush in 2005, he and his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sought to regain the trust of regional allies, and Brazil was chosen in Latin America to strengthen political ties and to sign a “strategic dialogue” with Washington (The White House 2010) – whom the US shares with countries such as Great Britain and India. The Brazilian momentum was best captured by the words of former US Ambassador to Brazil Thomas Shannon, according to which “The US needs to get used to the idea that, from now on, it will come across Brazil in places where it previously would not expect to find Brazil” (Pecequillo 2021, 148).

In line with the US’ global security agenda, Washington deployed its 4th Fleet to patrol the South Atlantic, which raised serious concerns in Brasília. Amorim (2011b, 273) notes, “The resolution of South Atlantic issues should be done without the presence of states or organizations alien to the region.” Since the 1980s, the region has complied with the South Atlantic Zone of Peace and Cooperation, and the treaty was immediately invoked by Brazil, Argentina, and other countries from South America and the Atlantic coast of Africa to denounce the US military presence in the region. Washington also

maintained Plan Colombia – including US troops in Colombia – clashing with Brazil’s position of favoring a demilitarized region. In this context, Brasília proposed the creation of the South American Defense Council within the Unasur umbrella, excluding the US from the institutional security framework that was being put in place in the region. All these regional institutions’ strengthening illustrated the Brazilian foreign policy goal of bypassing hemispheric institutions traditionally led by Washington to carve out a space for soft balancing in the region.

As Lula’s foreign policy strategy was designed to check the regional hegemon and increase Brazilian influence in South America, signaling a resolve to participate in a balancing coalition and economic strengthening toward South–South cooperation was a central hallmark of the diplomatic choices. At the heart of this balancing strategy, there was China. In Amorim’s and Guimarães’ views, the Chinese were considered not only an important trade partner, as its participation in the Brazilian external trade rapidly grew over the years, but also a crucial political-strategic ally to help to consolidate the notion of a “benign multipolarity”. In South America, it meant strengthening the bilateral “strategic partnership”⁶ with China and mobilizing China’s diplomatic, economic, and geopolitical assets to augment Brazilian’s role in the region. Brazil–China relations had two different, although not necessarily excluding, dimensions: Pooling efforts to promote economic development and political-diplomatic collaboration searching for a multipolar world. This formation of a diplomatic alliance showed that Brazil could count on “outside options” (Roberts, Armijo and Katada 2016) to accomplish its regional goals of balancing the hegemon. “After two decades of intensifying their engagements [...] Sino-Brazilian relations have become the most comprehensive of all Beijing’s engagements with Latin America” (Schenoni and Leiva 2021, 242).

To the extent that Brazil started diversifying its external commercial markets, particularly with the Chinese, friction with the United States has become more frequent but has not resulted in conflict. During Obama’s administration (2009–2017), relations between the US and Latin America improved in some ways. Washington suspended the Helms-Burton law against Cuba and resumed diplomatic dialogue with Havana. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the US worked with the Brazilian-led United Nations Mission of Stabilization to Haiti to alleviate the dramatic humanitarian crisis in the country. Still, in the 2009 Honduran political crisis involving a *coup d’état* against President Zelaya, the White House’s recognition of the election

⁶ The establishment of the strategic partnership between Brazil and China dates to the 1990s but gained more prominence in recent years due to the strengthening of bilateral relations in the 2000s. In 2012, the relationship evolved into a “global strategic partnership”.

of Porfirio Lobo clashed with the Brazilian stance of backing President Manuel Zelaya. The OAS has played a minimal role in these issues. However, this did not impede Brazil and the US from signing a Military Cooperation Agreement in 2010 and launching an Energy and Global Strategic Dialogue.

So, Lula's regional foreign policy focused on institution-building and engagement with Beijing to soft-balance US regional hegemony. The creation of Unasur, the distancing from the US in regional institutions, and the meeting with Beijing were examples of adopting a soft balancing strategy towards the hegemon. These initiatives were formulated to address the goals of reducing the US intervention in political and regional conflicts, creating more institutional room to accommodate the differences and cooperate in security issues, and improving Brazil's regional position vis-à-vis the hegemon. However, none were formulated to impede US participation in regional affairs; instead, they were built to limit Washington's room to take sides in regional conflict management and constrain its eventual unilateral appetites. There was no adoption of a strategy to undermine the regional order; rather, it sought to improve the Brazilian position to negotiate with the hegemon and constrain its unilateral actions. "This was a conscious attempt to counter US hegemony in the region by transforming Brazil's 'near abroad' into a distinctive regional formation where Brazil could exert some degree of international political authority" (Spektor 2016, 28).

The Dilma Rousseff Turn

The soft balancing strategy during Lula's years started to wane when he left the presidency. After the 2010 presidential election, Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) took office amidst a challenging international scenario marked by the decline of commodity prices on the global market and a domestic economic recession due to the 2008–2009 financial debacle. In Rousseff's mandates, the Brazilian economy suffered from low economic growth rates – in 2015–2016, Brazilian GDP had negative growth of –3.2 percent⁷ – and politically had to face corruption scandals and political disputes involving the government that ultimately led to Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. In this context, foreign policy did not occupy a high priority rank in the government's concerns, although some initiatives had been taken.

Along Rousseff's mandate, the president had three different Ministers of Foreign Affairs: Antônio Patriota (2011–August 2013), Luiz Alberto

7 See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2016&locations=BR&start=2015&view=chart>

Figueiredo (August 2013–December 2014), and Mauro Vieira (January 2015–May 2016). Notwithstanding the changes and natural differences in style and profile, all Ministers shared concerns about the United States hegemonic presence in South America and designed a foreign policy aiming to, on the one hand, assure a Brazilian autonomy space in the region and, on the other, to rely on regional institutions and on “outside options” to check the hegemon (Patriota 2013, 2016). Compared with the previous administration, there were no fundamental reorientations in the considerations of how world affairs work, and the challenges posed to Brazil by the regional dynamics (Cervo and Lessa 2014). Patriota (2013) supported strengthening multilateralism by widening Brazilian political-commercial ties with other emerging countries and demanded reforms of global governance institutions. He also sought to contribute to the debates on humanitarian interventions in the UN by proposing the concept of “Responsibility while Protecting” but had no success (Rinaldi and Pecequillo 2021). However, the weakening of the Brazilian place in the regional power distribution due to Brazilian economic crises helps to understand differences in the magnitude of soft balancing implementation between Lula’s and Rousseff’s periods.

The Foreign Ministers implemented a series of policies aiming to support the initiatives set out previously. The Mercosur–EU talks continued, and the regional trade bloc saw an expansion with the inclusion of Venezuela in 2012. Besides, Bolivia signed an accession protocol in 2015. In 2011, Brazil proposed the creation of the Celac to resolve regional political–and diplomatic issues without US participation, and in 2017 participated in the “Lima Group” launched to deal with Venezuela’s democratic problems⁸. Although there were no efforts to institutionalize Unasur, the South American Defense School and the Center for Strategic Defense Studies, created in 2011, had their charter approved by the Council of Heads of State and Government of Unasur.

Regarding the bilateral relationship with the US, there was an attempt to “reset” the relationship (Pecequillo 2022) after the espionage scandals involving the US National Security Agency. Rousseff also strengthened the partnership with China in bilateral economic terms and multilateral political forums – e.g., the BRICS and establishing the New Development Bank in 2014. This period is tentatively called a “wane soft balancing” characterized by a non-confrontational stance against the US. Still, it was also a moment when Brazil could not sustain the regional initiatives elaborated by her predecessor.

After the 2014 Brazilian financial crisis and the beginning of the impeachment process against her in November 2015, Rousseff’s attention

8 See: <https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/newsroom/news/declaracion-lima-8-agosto-2017>.

moved inward. It coincided with when Washington increased its attention toward Latin America due to China's growing presence. As mentioned, Lula's soft balancing strategy required a material commitment to support the regional institutional-building process. However, the fall of commodity prices in the global market and a decline in Brazilian domestic demand led to an average GDP growth of around 2.3 percent in 2011–2014, contrasting with 4.07 percent in 2003–2010. In 2010, Brazilian GDP registered a growth of 7.53%. From 2012 onwards, the growth rates gradually diminished: In 2012, it reached only 1.9% and in 2013 reached a growth of 3% and then 0.5% in 2014. In 2015, Brazilian economy was in recession and saw a negative growth of 3.5%, while in 2016 the situation aggravated with another recession of 3.2%. During Temer's years, GDP growth reached 1% in 2017 and 1.1% in 2018⁹.

Therefore, fundamental structural views remained in how foreign policymakers conceived world affairs. However, Brazil's position in the regional power distribution waned, and it saw an increasing consolidation of China's economic presence on the continent. The lack of conditions to continue to balance the regional hegemon was aggravated by Rousseff's impeachment. Among the many consequences of this political turning point was that foreign policy strategy was directly affected, marking the beginning of a process that would redirect Brazilian regional foreign policy in the following administrations. The soft balancing strategy would be replaced by tactical convergence with Washington with Michel Temer.

Transitional phase: Michel Temer and the tactical convergence towards the US

Under President Temer (March 2016–2018), there was the nomination of two Foreign Ministers with partisan backgrounds and historically in the opposition camp of Lula's and Rousseff's administrations: Senators José Serra (March 2016–February 2017) and Aloysio Nunes Ferreira (March 2017–2019). Despite being short, Temer's mandate represented reorientations in Brazilian foreign policy aims and strategies towards the region. Serra and Ferreira redirected the political-diplomatic compass towards the US, although they did not disregard the importance of China for the Brazilian economy.

In many aspects, Temer's regional foreign policy was a tactical convergence towards the US because it aimed to, on the one hand, not create unnecessary animosity against China and, on the other, to approach Washington to reap potential benefits from getting closer to the hegemon. As

⁹ See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=BR>.

a candidate for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – a hallmark of Serra’s and Ferreira’s diplomatic aims – Brasília sent a message that it supports the idea of democracy and liberal rules on the world order and that meeting the specific interests of the developing countries was no longer a priority.

Temer’s foreign policy emphasis on (bilateral)trade and investment has led him to pressure Mercosur’s members to reform the bloc towards openness and closer commercial ties with the United States and the liberally oriented Pacific Alliance. In a move in line with Trump’s criticism of the inefficiencies of the regional organs to tackle common problems, Brazil suspended indefinitely its participation in the Unasur in April 2018 and replaced it with greater engagement with the Lima Group, also strengthening the role of the OAS for regional conflict resolution (MRE 2018). The decision to suspend Brazilian participation in the Unasur and the redirection focus on OAS represented a discontinuation of previous government efforts to build a regional institutional framework in which Brazil would occupy the center position (Santos, Leão and Rosa 2021). This resulted in more room for the US leadership in the region and implicit support of Washington’s options to solve regional crises, particularly regarding Maduro’s Venezuela. Serra advocated for the Venezuelan suspension of Mercosur in August 2017 under accusations of the country’s non-commitment with the bloc’s Ushuaia Protocol democratic clause (Mercosur 2017).

However, one issue that remained the same from the previous period was the presence of China on the Brazilian economic radar. While Serra and Ferreira did not praise Beijing as a crucial political partner in balancing the US preponderance in the region, they regarded China as an inevitable player for Brazilian economic interests. In 2016, China accounted for around 20% of Brazilian exports, while the United States represented only 13% ¹⁰. The status of a bilateral “strategic partnership” between Brasília and Beijing, once regarded in political-diplomatic terms, has now assumed an economic-commercial tone. To celebrate 40 years of the bilateral relationship between Brazil and China, Serra emphasized the growing importance of the Chinese market for Brazilian exports and highlighted the Chinese investments in crucial domestic infrastructure areas (MRE 2016).

Although China was not considered a threat to Brazilian interests in the region, Serra and Ferreira saw Washington as the primary reference for their foreign policy goals, particularly the accession to the OECD and the reorientation of the focus towards the traditional regional institutions,

¹⁰ See: <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/BRA/Year/2016/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>.

focusing on the OAS. In exchange for Trump's support of the Brazilian official candidacy to OECD, in 2017, the two governments started to negotiate a bilateral accord previewing the concession of the Brazilian Alcantara basin to US satellite launching. The Serra–Ferreira foreign policy sought to distance itself from the political dimensions of the region and instead strengthened its commercial ties with China and aligned politically with the United States. Temer's government is considered a transitional period since his successor will further some initiatives started this time and implement a fundamental change in Brazilian regional foreign policy.

Third phase: Jair Bolsonaro and the bandwagoning strategy with the US

Unlike in the first and second phases, during Bolsonaro's administration, Brazil sought to move into the region through an unconditional alliance with the US based on a common perceived threat: China (The White House 2017, 2020). During the 2018 presidential campaign, Bolsonaro and some close politicians visited Taiwan, brokering a Brazilian diplomatic tradition since the 1970s. Instead of using Beijing to balance US hegemony, Brazil worked *with* the hegemon to address its newly conceived goal of sponsoring a Western crusade against the "authoritarian league," which includes China and Venezuela. During this period, it defended the imposition of sanctions on Maduro's Venezuela for its non-democratic record and criticized those who adopted what Araújo considered "alarmist" attitudes on the perils of climate change (which he called "climatism") and on the best practices to fight the COVID-19 pandemic (which he called "covidism") (Araújo 2019). He also questioned the legitimacy of traditional international organizations, particularly the UN and the World Health Organization (WHO), to solve global problems.

The fundamental motto behind Araújo's worldviews, which informed and shaped the Brazilian foreign policy design under Bolsonaro, is that in the post-Cold War period, there has been a kind of civilizational clash opposing the West and the "rest". One of the main criteria dividing these two groups is fundamentally ideological. On one side rests the Western civilization with its Christianity and a liberal philosophical thought profoundly committed to linking the "people" with the "nation." The best representative of this group was US Donald Trump. On the other side rests the non-Christian civilizations with their political authoritarian lean and an atheistic/non-monotheistic society that detaches "people" from their "nations." Communist China ranks first in this group. Araújo argued that once most Brazilian Christians elected

Bolsonaro with conservative values, the foreign policy should represent them accordingly ¹¹. Besides, as Trump was considered the savior and protector of the cultural West (Araújo 2017) it would be natural for Brazil to align with him and defend its traditional Western heritage.

Before assuming the highest post at Itamaraty, Ernesto Araújo (2019–March 2021) and Carlos Alberto Franco França (April 2021–2022) – the second Bolsonaro’s Minister of Foreign Affairs – were two low-ranked, low-profile diplomats. With the leadership of Araújo within Itamaraty, Brazilian foreign policy moved towards an ideological agenda in which the containment of the Chinese presence in South America constituted one of its nuclear features. In this scenario lies a particular perception of a Chinese threat. Araújo’s representation of China can be seen in three different but interrelated aspects: First, the country is ideologically Marxist-communist, which means that it embraces a collectivist society that does not put the individual at the center of politics and rejects the role of religion as a critical feature to organize social groups. Second, China is a one-party authoritarian regime, meaning that traditional liberal rights are not respected, and people live under the tight control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Freedoms as crucial as speech, press, and vote nullify the individual as a free citizen to choose their path. Third, as China continues to rise economically and militarily, it will continue to subvert the current liberal international order and replace it with other underlying communist, “totalitarian” values such as atheism, globalism, and collectivism. Communist China, then, seeks to build a world order that mirrors its society, i.e., without liberty and a “free spirit.” This order – the argument goes – would be led by a central agency responsible for “discipline and punish” those contrary to it. So, China is a threat not only to Brazil but also to Western civilization.

The Brazil–US relationship got closer in this context. Since Araújo (2017) praised Trump for being the “first among the Westerners” to defend its civilization, he accordingly pushed Brazilian foreign policy towards an automatic alignment with Washington. On some occasions, however, the relationship between Bolsonaro and Trump seemed more personal than institutional, with the Brazilian President, in a very picturesque episode, saying “I love you” to Trump – which, by the way, did not say it back. In Brazilian foreign policy, the alignment with Washington is not a novelty, but in this case, the level of personalization deserves attention.

Regionally, Araújo’s foreign policy is marked by a complete abandonment of the established regional institutional mechanisms. Among

¹¹ Bolsonaro’s slogan campaign illustrates its religious-conservative politics: “Brazil above everything, God above all”.

other initiatives, its diplomatic moves include the final point on dismantling Unasur and suspending Brazil in the Celac. Araújo articulated the launching of a right-wing initiative called “Progress and Integration of South America,” which resulted, in 2019, in the establishment of a loose institution called “Progress for South America” (Prosur), a regional mechanism to gather right-wing South American leaders that aimed to replace Unasur – which Araújo officialized Brazil’s left of the organization (MRE 2019). Also, the Minister became a vocal supporter of the OAS’s initiatives led by Washington against Maduro’s Venezuela and Cuba. The relationship with Argentina, one of the most important countries for Brazilian external trade, deteriorated profoundly, especially after the election of the center-left Argentinian President Alberto Fernández.

Although Brazil emulated Washington several times and established an automatic alignment, even contradicting traditional national interests, the rewards for doing so were remarkably modest (Ribeiro 2023). The triangular relationship between Brazil–the US–and China was one of the most contradictory features of Bolsonaro’s foreign policy because China is the main Brazilian economic partner, representing 31% of its external trade¹² – compared with only 11% of the US¹³ –, while the ideological importance of the United States for Araújo’s worldviews jeopardizes a political-diplomatic strengthening relations with Beijing. Important to mention that players outside Itamaraty played a role in this case, particularly the Armed Forces and the agribusiness lobby in Congress. Although both did not praise the establishment of political ties with China, they had crucial economic and technological interests in maintaining the relationship with China.

For Araújo (2017, 2019), the nature of the threat was existential (in civilizational terms) and not economic or military, which may explain the separation of economic relations from the political dimension of the relationship with China. Brazil continued to trade with China, but for Araújo that was not the central aspect of Bolsonaro’s foreign policy. In his famous words (Araújo 2019, n. p.): “We want to sell soy and iron ore [to China], but we are not going to sell our soul”¹⁴. Accordingly, the ideological “crusade” against

¹² World Integrated Trade Solution, WITS, “Brazil Trade Balance, Exports, Imports by Country and Region 2021 | WITS Data,” 2021, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/BRA/Year/2021/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>

¹³ World Integrated Trade Solution, WITS, “Brazil Trade Balance, Exports, Imports by Country and Region 2021 | WITS Data,” 2021, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/BRA/Year/2021/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>

¹⁴ See: <https://antigo.funag.gov.br/index.php/pt-br/politica-externa-brasileira/2912-aula-magna-do-ministro-de-estado-no-rio-branco>.

the non-Westerners was his indelible mark. Even with the replacement of Araújo as the Foreign Minister in 2021, Carlos França did not change the adoption of balancing strategy towards China. However, he was much less vocal than his predecessor.

Table 1: Brazilian regional foreign policy strategies (2003–2022)

	Worldview	Brazil in SA	FP Strategy
Lula and Rousseff (2003–2016)	Multipolarity/Global South US as a regional challenge China as a strategic partnership	Regional integration driving force (Mercosur, Unasur, Celac)	Soft balancing
Michel Temer (2016 –2018)	Focus on the Global North (US, EU, OECD) US as a strategic partner China as an economic partner	Reorientation – from politics to economics	Tactical convergence towards the US
Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022)	West x the “rest” US as a special partner China as a civilizational threat	Complete reorientation – implosion of the regional institutions built previously	Bandwagoning

Source: elaborated by the author.

As Trump lost in the 2019 election, the Brazil–US relationship soured for fundamentally personal reasons. Bolsonaro cheered for Trump’s reelection, and after the results, he took over thirty days to recognize Joe Biden’s victory, limiting space for further collaboration. The foreign policy priorities of the new US administration were directed to face transnational

challenges, particularly on climate change, the pandemic, and the defense of human rights and democracies. However, there was again China, and since Washington was profoundly worried about its strategic rivalry with Beijing, Brazil under Bolsonaro was one of the most minor concerns on the US international agenda.

Conclusions

In this paper, I tried to demonstrate the fundamental role of an agent's view in designing and implementing foreign policy strategies. I make a case for considering how people with institutional resources can formulate policies that impact foreign policy design. Notably, the Brazilian regional foreign policy from 2003 to 2022 shows that the different strategies adopted by each government responded to the Foreign Ministers' views about how world affairs work and Brazil's relative position in the regional power distribution. While the contexts and circumstances investigated in this paper relate to Brazil and South America, the analyses suggest broader implications for other regional powers' strategies and options in a context of profound changes in the international and regional orders.

The Brazilian adoption of two distinct foreign policy strategies shed light on relatively weaker states' ability to shape regionalism dynamics in the presence of one hegemon. It also highlights the importance of ideas in developing a causal logic to frame foreign policy's goals, as the way each President's foreign ministers see world affairs and Brazil's place in them shaped two different strategies of conceiving the regional order, the role of institutions, and the nature of the relationship with the hegemon.

Investigating the extent and implication of recent transformations in the Brazil–US regional relationship is necessary. In a scenario where the strategic rivalry between China and the United States will continue and possibly escalate, automatic alignments may represent a costly alternative for Brazil. Further analysis into the role of domestic factors, particularly Brazil's political and economic players, that shape foreign policy formulation could also offer valuable insights on this topic.

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ABSTRACT

Using the soft balancing concept and a comparative methodology, I analyze the diplomatic strategies mobilized by Brazil towards the US in South America from 2003 to 2022. The empirical results suggest that in the last two decades, Brazil moved away from the role of “soft balancer” during Lula’s and Rousseff’s mandates (2003–2016) to a “tactical convergence” in Temer’s (2016–2018) to “bandwagoning” in Bolsonaro’s (2019–2022). The main drivers for these different strategies are domestic and regional changes. Approaching this thematic contributes to a better understanding of Brazilian regional priorities and abilities to deal with the US in the region.

KEYWORDS

Brazilian foreign policy. United States. Soft balancing. Bandwagoning. South America.

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