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# From the quest for autonomy to the dual break: structural and agential changes in Brazil's foreign policy during the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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## Abstract

Informed by an understanding that the quest for autonomy can serve as a compass of Brazil's foreign policy, this paper undertakes an extensive interpretative analysis of the concept in relation to the agency/structure debate. Our aim is to use these theoretical tools to analyse Brazil's international action during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, paying special attention to Bolsonaro's administration. This article argues that we are witnessing a dual break in autonomy: an essentially structural break related to the underlying trends currently redesigning the international world as we know it, and another more agential break, resulting from president Bolsonaro's particular worldview.

**Keywords:** Brazil; Brazilian foreign policy; autonomy; agency-structure; Bolsonaro

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Historians describe historical events as resulting from the will of an individual: Caesar, Napoleon, Bismarck, etc. However, to say that a hundred thousand people died in Russia, slaughtering one other because one or two people wanted it that way, is as absurd as saying that a mined mountain of a million puds falls because the last worker hits it with a shovel.  
(Tolstoi 2004, 904)

## Introduction

Historically, Brazilian diplomacy, as embodied by Itamaraty, has enjoyed a highly prestigious status in the international arena. As a result, Brazil has been regarded as a diplomatic power

and has benefited from the pervasive perception that the country exercises its capacities through diplomatic channels to settle conflicts and achieve peaceful resolutions. Ultimately, Brazilian diplomacy and, more specifically, Brazil's foreign policy, have traditionally been subordinated to a higher-level goal — to promote Brazil's development — through an intermediary objective — greater autonomy in decision-making on the international stage.

Brazil's priorities in foreign policy have fluctuated, influenced as much by the systemic context as by presidential charisma and leadership (Danese 1999). Nevertheless, there has been continuity in the centrality and ambition that Brazil's foreign policy has conferred upon itself both in its role as a vehicle for change (agency capacity), and a means of giving form to the explanatory narrative surrounding Brazil's needs in the world (generation of performative discourse). This dual normative dimension of actorness and performance has contributed to bolstering Itamaraty's prestige, as well as the widely lauded professionalisation and autonomy commonly attributed to Brazilian diplomacy. This necessitates a more nuanced and precise understanding than the commonly cited “quest for autonomy” as part of the DNA of Brazilian diplomacy.

On the other hand, in the current international context, Jair Bolsonaro's administration has not only implemented changes in how Itamaraty operates, but has also called for a “de-ideologisation” of Brazil's foreign policy<sup>1</sup>, while paradoxically introducing one of the most deeply ideological biases into Brazil's external action that the country has ever witnessed. This vision incorporates the unconditional alignment between presidents Bolsonaro and Trump, a reduction in Brazil's aspirations to be a global player (Malamud 2011; Caballero 2011) and a reductionist and economically pragmatic foreign policy adopted as a crisis response measure (Caballero 2019a).

Informed by an understanding that the quest for autonomy can serve as a compass of Brazil's foreign policy, this paper undertakes an extensive interpretative analysis of the concept in relation to the agency-structure debate. Although distinct theoretical approaches have engaged with the agency-structure problem in various ways (Caballero 2019b), the majority of theories concur that there is a kind of interrelation between these two elements. We adopt a structurationist approach *à la* Giddens (1979), in which the agent has the capacity to make decisions and partially modify reality, yet always constrained by existing social structures. Despite this mutual feedback between agent and structure, a distinction can be made between long-lasting structures embedded in institutions, values and ideas (Cox 1996) and malleable stakeholders anchored to passionate and selfish human behaviours.

This article seeks to make a theoretical contribution to Brazil's foreign policy by combining a longitudinal qualitative research method with an extensive review on the literature related to the concept of autonomy. Through this conceptualisation, our aim is to engage more effectively with research questions on the evolution of Brazilian foreign policy's structural and conjunctural shifts throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, paying special attention to Bolsonaro's administration operating in an uncertain global context.

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1 As Bolsonaro himself argued in his first international appearance in Davos 2019, the “ideological vein [of Brazil's foreign policy] would cease to exist” (Ministério das Relações Exteriores 2019).

## The theoretical and conceptual debates surrounding autonomy

There have been various studies focused on analysing the axes and underlying assumptions that govern Brazil's foreign policy. Generally speaking, the explanatory paradigms formulated have been the products of a persistent diplomatic tradition: a set of principles understood as part of the country's historical heritage and intrinsically linked to its behaviour on the international stage. This accumulated history (Cervo 2008), or legacy of a diplomatic tradition (Lafer 2001, 20), is indicative of trends which persist in spite of the successive changes and fluctuations in foreign policy (Silva 1998, 142). The literature on the subject has generally highlighted certain constants, such as universal vocation; Brazil's ambition to become a key actor in international politics through multilateralism; pacificism; non-interventionism; defending the sovereign equality of states; non-confrontation; self-determination; legalism; and pragmatism (Silva 1998; Ricupero 2000; Lima 2005; Amorim Neto and Malamud 2015). Other studies have attempted to update these concepts by analysing to what extent attitudes and behaviours have remained consistent over time, concluding that Brazil's external action exhibits a degree of continuity. This has led to the incorporation of these historic principles into the 1988 constitution, enshrining a set of values which establish Brazil as a member of the international community, such as democracy, human rights, environmental concerns, non-proliferation and anti-organised crime measures (Lampreia 1998, 14).

Despite certain critiques, there is a broad consensus regarding the existence of high levels of professionalisation, autonomy and bureaucratic isolation, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' monopoly on the design and execution of foreign policy (Cason and Power 2009, 119-120). In turn, members of Brazil's specialised foreign policy academic community also subscribe to this consensus regarding Brazil's ambition to play an influential role on the international stage, but are divided on which mechanisms should be employed to achieve this objective: one group espouses that the country should strengthen its position through participation in the formulation of global regulations and institutions; the other emphasises the search for autonomy through collaboration with similar countries in Latin America (Giacalone 2012, 338). However, as Cervo (2003, 13) points out, these two strategies were never exclusive or in conflict with each other; rather, they provided, through dialogue and interpenetration, a mixed model of development.

Ultimately, as Lima (2005) states, the importance of any belief or idea is not so much that it is false or true, but rather that it is held to be true by important groups within a community. In the long term, epistemic communities must interact with decision-makers if they wish to defend and justify specific principles, and this ultimately results in a significant impact on policy formulation. Moreover, if they are part of and interact with academic communities, as is the case with the Itamaraty school, the impacts are greater still.

In this vein, various explanations or lines of interpretation regarding Brazil's external action have emerged concurrently with the delineation of these fundamental principles, resulting in the formulation of distinct foreign policy paradigms. These diplomatic action theories have been

formulated around an integrated set of base ideas which act as cognitive maps, making the complexity of the world that surrounds Itamaraty more comprehensible (Silva 1998, 141). They seek to use both domestic and systemic variables to explain external behaviour, with a view to analysing foreign policy as a whole, disregarding abnormal behaviour (Milani et al. 2017, 596-597) and formulating a model with an explanatory logic capable of accounting for new behaviour. As Milani et al. (2017) illustrate, these paradigms have been formulated along three lines of interpretation: the dichotomy between Americanists (pragmatic and ideological) and globalists (Hobbesians and Grotians) (Lima 1994; Silva 1995; Pinheiro 2000), national development policy (Lafer 2001; Cervo 2003) and the quest for autonomy (Hurrell 1986; Fonseca Jr 1998; Vigevani and Cepaluni 2009).

The concept of autonomy thus became one of the most fruitful and recurrent explanatory concepts when analysing South American foreign policy. This has led authors such as Briceño Ruiz and Simonoff (2017) to assert that the concept of autonomy constitutes one of South America's most significant contributions to the discipline of International Relations. Understood in this way and despite interpretations according to which, until 1980, Brazil's foreign policy was informed by an uncritical and one-dimensional analysis of diplomatic history, the theoretical proposal of autonomy was a crucial contributing factor to escaping the determinism of dependency theory (Giacalone 2012, 336). However, a more nuanced (re)formulation emerged following the end of the Cold War, resulting in various schools of thought on the understanding of the concept.

First of all, this interpretation is, in part, a subsidiary analysis of another. Autonomy was framed as an intermediate objective, subordinated to the ultimate objective of foreign policy: the promotion of national development. Autonomy serves to prevent a country having to obey orders from foreign actors, while development serves to foster endogenous capacities (Malamud 2011, 175). Second, autonomy, as an explanatory narrative for Brazilian external action since 1930, served as an ideal channel to generate a performative discourse. Foreign policy academics then used this narrative to frame Itamaraty as a central vehicle of change (agent) for Brazil's dependent status at the international level. This conceptualisation was integrated into the aforementioned bureaucratic tradition of continuity and professionalism, through which the institutional history of the Ministry was interpreted as external to the ideological swings of central governments (Cheibub 1985).

Thus, a variety of theoretical explanatory constructs were formulated around this premise, ones which apply as much to conservative as they do to liberal or social democratic governments, and both democratic and authoritarian ones. These include: pragmatic equidistance (Vargas), autonomy within dependence (Vargas), autonomy through industrialisation or through pendulum (Vargas), responsible and ecumenical pragmatism (Geisel), autonomy through distance (Geisel) and through participation (Collor de Melo, Franco, Cardoso), autonomy through modernisation (Collor de Melo) and through integration (Cardoso), and autonomy through diversification or through coalition (Lula da Silva), to name a few. These conceptualisations could only become congruent with the historical narrative of continuity in the autonomist sense by making the

concept more malleable. As Fonseca Jr. (1998, 361) points out, definitions of autonomy have varied across historical and spatial contexts and in accordance with the interests and positions of powerful groups.

Helio Jaguaribe (1979), one of the founding theorists of the *Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros* (ISEB) laid the foundations for the systematisation of the debate on this subject as it relates to the Brazilian context. Jaguaribe claimed that the Cold War engendered a hierarchical system of international stratification that consisted of four levels of diminishing capacity for self-determination: 1) general primacy, 2) regional primacy, 3) autonomy, and 4) dependency. Within this structure, a country's level of autonomy depends on two factors: on the one hand there are enabling requirements, such as national viability (material, human and technological resources) and international permissiveness (geopolitical capacity to neutralise the risk from possible aggressors and to impose material and moral penalties through both economic-military and diplomatic measures). On the other hand, exercising requirements, which offered peripheral countries two routes to autonomy: the increasingly complex and unattainable domestic technical-business autonomy, or by taking advantage of the existence of a favourable intra-imperial relationship, possibly by way of an ethnic-cultural identification with the values of the hegemonic centre. These theoretical developments allowed for the identification of distinct levels of autonomous self-determination: general, regional (restricted to a region) or sectoral (exercised at the economic level, by virtue of comparative advantages) (Jaguaribe 1979, 91-93, 128).

In a similar vein but with the distinction of making a direct reference to the definition of countries' international action, Gerson Moura explained that foreign policy is conditioned by the power structure in which the country is located, as well as by the domestic and external political contexts (specifically, the immediate decision-making processes in both the hegemonic centre and dependent countries). Consequently, foreign policy is conditioned both by structural determinations, which delimited decision-makers' scope action, as well as agential determinations, produced by policymakers' decisions and actions (Moura 1980, 42-43).

According to Hurrell's 1986 doctoral thesis, autonomy is a relational concept. This means that a country's status is defined with reference to a continuum between two ideal typological behaviours: autonomy and dependence. This does not mean, however, that greater autonomy implies withdrawal from the international system towards an autarchic model. In fact, in Hurrell's understanding, autonomous behaviour is not necessarily incompatible with a high degree of participation in the international political and economic system. Instead, autonomy implies the ability to independently and consistently determine national policies, resist attempts at external control, flexibly adapt to and exploit favourable trends in the international context, and limit and control the effects of unfavourable trends. However, Hurrell highlights that a distinctive contextual feature of Brazilian foreign policy was the conscious decision to prioritise other objectives, particularly economic development, over forging a more extensive international role or seeking to maximise autonomy and independence (Hurrell 2014, 38-42).



Hurrell's theorisation was, therefore, ahead of its time, in the sense that it made a partial break with previous theoretical constructions which were deeply influenced by realist interpretations of the Cold War context. The end of Communism brought with it new schools of thought that sought to understand this *new context for action*, a context which, according to Russell and Tokatlian (2002), rendered the traditional conceptualisation of autonomy obsolete. Their response was to propose a shift from an antagonistic autonomy, as a country's power to isolate itself and control external processes and events, to a notion of relational autonomy, constructed within a context of relationships and defined as a country's capacity to productively participate in and exert influence on global politics. This resulted in an understanding of autonomy as countries' capacity and political willingness to make decisions both independently and in cooperation with other countries, in order to resolve global issues collaboratively, thus decreasing asymmetries of power through competent, active, committed and responsible participation (Russell and Tokatlian 2002, 175-180). This gave a theoretical foundation to the earlier formulation of Fonseca Jr., who made a distinction between Brazil's external action in the pre- and post-Cold War periods, as autonomy through distance and autonomy through participation, respectively (Fonseca Jr. 1998, 353-374). This distinction was termed isolationist autonomy and autonomy by integration by Lampreia (1998, 11) and Lafer (2000, 263).

Incorporating this reading into their analysis of Brazilian foreign policy, Vigevani and Cepaluni view autonomy as a condition which allows states to implement decisions based on their own political objectives, without external interference or restriction, by way of their capacity to control processes and events beyond their own borders. In doing so, they added a third stage (Lula da Silva's autonomy through diversification) to the earlier distinction between autonomy through distance (autarchic economic development through a distancing from major international problems and the search for South-South alliances) and autonomy through participation (acceptance of liberal norms and international regimes in the hope of obtaining long-term influence on and participation in the decision-making processes of international institutions). They defined this additional stage in terms of international insertion through alignment with countries in the global South in the hope of finding multilateral solutions (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2009).

As we have seen, the concept of autonomy remains in the foreground for both the epistemic communities focused on the study of Brazilian foreign policy and Itamaraty's institutional discourse. This has not, however, prevented criticisms regarding the way the concept is employed, such as those made by Lessa et al. (2010) and Lima and Pinheiro (2018), which, in addition to the idiosyncrasies of each study, have paved the way for the delineation of two general trends in the interpretation of autonomy's role in Brazil's foreign policy. In this sense, as Bueno (1980, 122) states, the History (HIR) and Theory (TIR) of international relations are both concerned with the same empirical subject, yet they are divided in their conceptual approaches: while the HIR is interested in the singularity, subjected to the force of time, TIR is concerned with the present and seeks to formulate scientific generalisations and typifications. These epistemic communities are, of course, in constant exchange, complicating and enriching the debate with new theoretical propositions, yet each has developed its own approach.

On the one hand, the Brasília<sup>2</sup> and São Paulo schools base their understanding on Cervo and Bueno's formulation of structural process within Brazil's IR, thereby revealing its historical "profound forces" (in the terms of Renouvin). Following on from Cervo's theorisation on national concepts, Brasília and São Paulo scholars are committed to the nation-building-and-branding process. However, by framing development as a vector of foreign policy, their understanding retains the primacy of the unitary state as an international actor, while simultaneously combining Itamaraty's diplomatic discourse with Brazilian foreign policy itself (Santos 2005, 26). Consistent with the narrative of an independent Itamaraty elaborated by Rio Branco, their understanding of Brazilian foreign policy has normally been defined by understanding the concept of autonomy as continuity.

On the other hand, the Rio de Janeiro school is based on the ideas outlined by Maria Regina Soares de Lima and Gerson Moura, and is institutionally centred on the University Research Institute (IUPERJ), the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) and, more recently, the Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ). From an IR and Political Science perspective, their work seeks to inquire into Brazilian foreign policy by deepening its understanding as a public policy, thereby unveiling the plurality of actors and agendas involved in the foreign policy-making process. As a result, their reading – and indeed, the one from which this paper derives - has tackled the agency-structure IR debate in order to explore an interpretation of autonomy in terms of discontinuity.

This does not prevent researchers from Brasília, such as Lessa et al. (2010), from being critical of their school's own tradition and advocating for the understanding of autonomy as a discursive construction, which, combined with the diplomatic rhetoric, has made the work of Brazilian foreign policy analysts more difficult. Continuing in this vein, these authors criticise the fact that, due to a need to adapt to explanatory concepts, an attempt has been made to explain the dynamics of Brazil's international insertion using exogenous categories, thereby moving the axis of causality out of the country. Their criticism goes even further, by examining the nature of the literature produced in relation to the interests of the diplomatic corps which occupied Itamaraty from 1985 onwards. According to Lessa et al. (2010, 356-357), the construction and application of two distinct and opposing categories (distance and participation) in two different historical moments (the Cold War and the new world order, respectively) aided the consolidation of an image of the country as one that had progressed away from the military regime, and was now focused on the formulation of global regulations. However, this had dangerous implications for academia, as it excluded alternative narratives and causalities, while simultaneously reproducing the diplomatic rhetoric.

In fact, Lessa et al.'s (2010) analysis was important for two reasons. First, it was one of the first studies to criticise the concept of autonomy as continuity, a notion which had been a constant

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<sup>2</sup> In the terms of Bernal-Meza (2013), an epistemic community generated around the interaction between the University of Brasília and Itamaraty, to which we add the support provided by the São Paulo State University (UNESP).

in Itamaraty's identity since the works of Hurrell (1986) and one which was reproduced by Fonseca Jr. (1998) and Vigevani and Cepaluni, (2009). This previously uncontested mainstream reading was thus critiqued through an empirical analysis of Brazilian diplomacy's multilateral behaviour. Informed by an awareness of the distinction between autonomy through distance and autonomy through participation, this analysis examined the makeup of specific autonomist moments in the history of Brazil's foreign policy. Second, and indirectly, their empirical analysis provided a crucial counterpoint to Russell and Tokatlian's (2002) notion of relational autonomy, by analysing how the changes in Brazilian diplomacy's behaviour did not coincide with the appearance of the new context for action which emerged in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. Such a proposal led authors such as Saraiva (2014) to question the usefulness of the concept of autonomy as an analytical category for post-Cold War governments, particularly in the cases of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff.

Subsequent studies responded to these considerations by returning to an understanding of autonomy as subordinate to domestic development. Spektor (2014) has taken up the relationship between autonomy and the notion of national viability emphasised by Jaguaribe. In this conceptualisation, foreign policy is subordinated to a higher-level goal of increasing national elites' room for manoeuvre and negotiating power within a regional system characterised by American hegemony and an asymmetrical international system. For Spektor, autonomy is ultimately manifested in the search for national development driven by industrial modernisation, with a view to developing a form of national capitalism that adheres to global capitalism while remaining autonomous. Consequently, he succeeds in distinguishing five autonomist strategies (balancing, diversification, coalition building, distancing and belonging), applied during three historical phases and with a strong theoretical basis in the propositions previously outlined by Fonseca Jr. (1998) and Vigevani and Cepaluni (2009).

Mariano (2015) conducts an additional subsidiary analysis of the concept of relational autonomy, in which autonomy is understood as a constant search to increase the room for manoeuvre and the capacity to influence and make decisions within the international system. However, despite adopting Vigevani and Cepaluni's historical periodisation (2009), the author recognises that, discursively, autonomy has taken various forms, depending on the political context in which it emerges. This is due to the fact that concepts constructed by the diplomatic corps have been used to interpret reality in such a way as to enable the planning of organisational adaptation in the face of shifts in the political environment. In turn, this has reinforced the idea of continuity and recreated the conditions necessary for it to emerge. From this perspective, the narrative of autonomy is understood as a constant diplomatic attempt to obtain favourable conditions in which to exercise autonomy (Mariano 2015, 44-45).

Finally, Lima and Pinheiro (2018) have succeeded in bringing together the various strands of criticism related to Russell and Tokatlian's (2002) concept. The authors posit that, by understanding the autonomist strategy as a search for sovereignty, the conceptualisation of relational autonomy leads to a loss of the concept of autonomy's original analytical value. This is due to the fact that,



as this concept does not differentiate between individual states' behaviour, it loses its normative value as a differential political objective of foreign policy strategies adopted by countries located on the periphery of the global power system and the capitalist order. Lima and Pinheiro's analysis, on the other hand, differentiates between two autonomist behaviours: situational/contextual autonomy and behavioural autonomy. This is made possible by emphasising the importance of agency as a driving force and a central element, both in disadvantageous contexts of systemic dependency and in situations of systemic opportunity and national viability.

Ultimately, and in line with Bernal-Meza (2013, 212), autonomy is understood as a condition constructed by agential decisions. This is a consequence of the fact that, in situations in which systematic conditions constrain a country's room for manoeuvre, only by having a capacity to exercise agency can a country alleviate the unfavourable conditions its peripheral position entails (Lima and Pinheiro 2018, 18). This observation is present in the original formulation of the concept of autonomy as opposed to dependency (Giacalone 2012, 337). Lima and Pinheiro (2018), like Lessa et al. (2010) and Mariano (2015), understand that the shift in meaning towards relational autonomy has become a diplomatic strategy intended to validate the narrative of continuity in foreign policy. By constantly qualifying the concept, academic communities have failed to recognise that, rather than constituting continuity, the search for autonomy has been the axis during moments of rupture in Brazilian foreign policy.

## Brazil's foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: autonomy and dual break

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a convergence between certain agential and structural phenomena, which contributed to a heightened leadership role for Brazil on the international stage (Lima and Pinheiro 2018, 14). On the one hand, there was the election of Lula da Silva as president (2003-2010), who was particularly active in international politics and had the charisma needed to conduct meetings and negotiate with the most important world leaders. This was linked to the consolidation of a "*Petista* sub-family" in the heart of Itamaraty marshalled by Celso Amorim and Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães and profoundly connected with Planalto through the presidential advisor for international affairs, Marco Aurelio Garcia. This connection fomented the synergies necessary to allow Brazil to become a global player. On the other hand, from a structural perspective, the emergence of BRICS, in conjunction with the decline of the unipolarism of the 1990s, created the space necessary for the irruption of new actors ("the rise of the rest"), and also moved Latin America beyond the radar of the United States. As a result, Latin American countries were able to develop their own regional strategies — particularly ones related to post-liberal/post-hegemonic regionalism paradigms —, as well as their aspirations at the global level: in the South American context, Brazil had a crucial role in both.

Specifically, these aspirations for a greater degree of autonomy have been channelled at the regional level through a reorganisation of MERCOSUR in 2003 to incorporate a more pluralistic

agenda and a greater role for the state, in addition to the gestation of the South American Community of Nations (2004) and the subsequent UNASUR (2008), which centred on the formation of regional infrastructures and the promotion of geopolitical stability. This strengthening of Brazil's regional role, its large internationalised companies and, ultimately, the promotion of stability and predictability in the region, has helped Brazil to increase its room for manoeuvre (and legitimacy) on the international stage.<sup>3</sup> In short, the efforts to both build and re-establish regional integration organisations, such as MERCOSUR and UNASUR, and to become the architect of IBSA and BRICS, corroborate the existence of this new direction in Brazil's international political action. However, while Brazil was proactive in maintaining its leader status at the regional level, at the global level it preferred to form new coalitions with stronger partners. Unable to take the lead in these processes, Brazil sought to take advantage of its oscillating position between the 'Lion of the *Status Quo*' (United States) and the 'Revisionist Wolf' (China), in the hope that this would translate into relative gains (Rodriguez 2012, 85-86).

As Danese (1999) argues, understanding presidential leadership is fundamental to understanding Brazilian foreign policy. In fact, Burges and Bastos (2017) distinguish a clear contrast between the political capital invested by presidents Collor de Melo (1990-92), Cardoso (1995-2002) and Lula (2003-2010) (while recognising that each instance presents its own idiosyncrasies), and the kind of inertia in or neglect of foreign policy development experienced under the regimes of Itamar Franco (1992-1994) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016).

However, this agential factor, taken in isolation, is in itself insufficient to account for the success of Brazil's foreign policy. Despite the undeniable political successes achieved during Lula's presidency, Brazil's image as a model to follow both in the region and among the emerging powers was largely due to a benevolent international economic situation; in an example of a favourable convergence between agency and structure present during the period 2003-2013, Brazil, like many other countries, benefited from the high commodity prices driven mainly by sustained demand from China. What was initially perceived as an opportunity to promote economic take-off and translate it into development, on the contrary, actually involved becoming anchored in the recurrent Latin American economic pattern of exporting non-value-added products.

As a result, by the end of Rousseff's first term of government, Brazil had turned towards a domestic consumption model, with a deep scarcity of domestic investments and technological progress, the absence of a foreign trade policy and only one dynamic sector going by itself: agribusiness. 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. In this sense, regardless of the partial maintenance of the universalist claim in foreign policy, the decline of Brazil as an emerging power during the Rousseff governments was shown by the BRICS' protagonism shift

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3 Two concrete examples of this unprecedented global role were the fact that Brazil led the UN mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), and partnered with Turkey to lead the negotiations on nuclear activities with Iran in 2010.

to Russia and China, the drowning of the IBSA Trilateral Forum and a loss of weight in the country's capacity to challenge or influence the international institutions, norms or agendas (Cervo and Lessa 2014).

At the regional level, the limits of the national development model were reflected in a breakdown of the governing coalitions, which generated two events with implications that went beyond the episodic. While, on the one hand, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff reverberated positively in Brazil through a reconfigured liberal-conservative alliance, Mauricio Macri's victory in the Argentine presidential elections, on the other, constituted an interruption of twelve years of Peronist hegemony. In both cases, the respective heads of state were replaced in less than a year (from the end of 2015 to mid-2016), although the Argentinean transition of power was achieved through a fair democratic election, whereas the Brazilian one was the result of a highly controversial legal - yet hardly legitimated - process. These changes, far from being merely circumstantial, are causally related to an entrenched structural framework. Therefore, irrespective of the limited room for manoeuvre and capacity for agency at the *Casa Rosada* (Mauricio Macri at the time and Alberto Fernández since December 2019) and the *Planalto* (Michel Temer followed by Jair Bolsonaro since January 2019), their respective pragmatic foreign policy gambits, which are conditional on the achievement of an economic-commercial agenda, transcend the capacities of their own governments.

From this point of view, phenomena such as Brexit or the election of presidents such as Trump or Bolsonaro are not construed as circumstantial outcomes (and therefore as “unexpected episodic effects” or “black swans”), but instead are framed as constitutive causes; that is, as processes that shape — and reveal — a new ontology of world geopolitics. These realities should serve as the context within which to analyse both the logic governing Brazil's foreign policy during Bolsonaro's presidency and its relationship with the once widespread objective of promoting Latin American regionalism as a means of achieving greater autonomy in decision-making. As some scholars have noted (Caballero and Arbiol 2018), since the inauguration of Argentine President Macri and the Brazilian impeachment which installed Temer, we have been witnessing an acceleration of pragmatic reductionism in the region's foreign policies, with Brazil being a case in point. Eventually, the perfect storm of economic crisis, social disaffection, and an absence of charismatic presidential leadership would lead to deliberately reductionist, short-termist and economically-orientated foreign policies, guided by two maxims as a road map: attracting foreign investment and promoting exports, as stated by Dilma's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mauro Vieira<sup>4</sup>. In this context, instead of seeking autonomy to make decisions that promote national development, foreign policy decisions are limited to “rescue” and damage control measures in response to various crisis and obstacles. The aim is no longer to increase autonomy, but rather to adhere to policies that minimise the damage of an eminently adverse and hostile international structure.

<sup>4</sup> Speech by Minister Mauro Vieira on the ceremony of the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs' transfer of authority (Ministério das Relações Exteriores 2015).

Therefore, whether we interpret a break or a continuity in the notion of autonomy as linked to the project of national development, it is vital to revisit the relational component of the concept, in the sense of serving national interests through a relationship with the dominant power. The strategic game of approximation to/distancing from the hegemonic power configures what Lima views as one of the essential paradigms necessary to understand Brazilian foreign policy from a historical perspective: the conflict between Americanists and globalists (Lima 1994). However, this does not mean that these two conflicting paradigms are to be applied in absolute terms or that governments order their priorities solely according to either one or the other. On the contrary, there is a huge variety of approaches that fall between these two extremes and which combine various perspectives depending on the field of action and the geographical space in which Brazilian foreign policy is to be applied. Additionally, the new spaces of possibility which open up for certain medium-sized actors within a hypothetical context of power transition from the U.S.A. to China must also be taken into account.

Therefore, while on the one hand the pragmatism of Rousseff's government seemed to constitute a departure from Silva's conceptualisation of autonomy, Temer's government took advantage of this redirection and sought to align itself with this understanding of autonomy through an Americanist reading of international relations. In this context, highly polarised elections took place between the PT candidate, Fernando Haddad, and the conservative Jair Bolsonaro, supported by the BBB coalition at the National Congress ("bullet" - the armament faction -, "beef" - the rural faction -, and "bible" - the evangelical faction). Thus, the new Brazilian right designed an electoral strategy that altered the electoral scheme, dominated by the alternation of PSDB, PMDB and PT parties.

To do this, Bolsonaro structured his program around three factors: (a) a strong neoliberal orientation and the consequent withdrawal of the state from the economy, (b) a conservative social behaviour control, based on the safeguard of 'Western and Christian' values (notably, in the field of sexual, religious, cultural and educational orientation against 'cultural Marxism' and 'gender ideology'); and (c) a critique of democracy and the political party system, combined with nostalgia for authoritarian ages and their values (Santos and Tanscheit 2019, 157). The political alliances that founded Bolsonaro's candidacy in 2018 were reflected in his ministerial structure, organised around three key categories: (a) anti-globalist readings, concentrated around the self-named governmental philosopher, Olavo de Carvalho; (b) the nationalist military perspective, defined by its vice-president, retired general Hamilton Mourão; and (c) the neoliberal arm, defined by the technocrats Paulo Guedes, Minister of Economy, and Sergio Moro, Minister of Justice and Public Order (Chagas-Bastos 2019, 96).

In this vein, Bolsonaro's government seems to have transcended the limits which had held back previous governments more fully committed to the Americanist paradigm (arguably those of Dutra, Castelo Branco and Collor de Mello). In other words, using Jaguaribe's terminology, it is a case of activating the exercising element with which peripheral countries can attain autonomy: taking advantage of a favourable intra-imperial relationship generated by an ethnic-cultural

identification with the values of the hegemonic centre. In short, the notion of Brazil as a privileged ally of the hegemonic power and the guardian of Latin America in the name of Christian Western civilisation. In other words, the particular actions of Bolsonaro and his circle are framed in an agency dimension where the challenging and irreverent language, as well as the climate of constant polarisation, become elements of mass mobilisation and personal support. On the other hand, this way of acting only fertilises in an environment in which the structural narrative is explained by the alleged decline of the Western civilising pillars in a scenario of economic crisis and, even more importantly, a crisis of values, where the priority would be to reinforce the Western Christian order to consequently strengthen Brazil. For instance, the aforementioned agency and structural features of Brazilian foreign policy are embodied in the explicit harmony with Donald Trump.

Nevertheless, the objective of “re-engaging with the world” (one that Argentine president Macri posited) by means of a favourable intra-imperial relation — namely, alignment with the U.S.A. —, contains a diagnostic error: the global context on which it is premised no longer exists. Bolsonaro’s foreign policy is informed by his binary and myopic reading of world politics. The resulting foreign policy assumes an ideological alignment with the vision of the world contained in Trumpism, even if this worldview involves a degree of Latin American isolation. This vision has strengthened Brazil, whose interpretation of it has been consolidated ideationally by Olavo de Carvalho, who provides the theoretical justification of anti-globalist political movement, and on the pragmatic level by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araújo, who was appointed by Carvalho; Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president of the *Comissão de Relações Exteriores e de Defesa Nacional* (Foreign Affairs and National Defence Commission of the Chamber of Deputies) and leader of Steve Bannon’s far-right political movement in Latin America (The Movement), and Bolsonaro’s international affairs advisor, Filipe Martins.

As already observed, after Celso Amorim’s (2003-2010) longevity and high-profile as Brazilian Foreign Minister, the rapid successions of Patriota (2011-13), Figueiredo (2013-15), Vieira (2015-16), Serra (2016-17), Nunes (2017-2019) and Ernesto Araújo (2019-) illustrate various agential factors. On the one hand, from the institutional point of view, a lack of continuity in the design of Itamaraty’s foreign policy can be witnessed. On the other, from the individual point of view, we can discern an attitude on the part of these ministers in which foreign policy merely serves to mitigate the effects of Brazil’s commercial isolation, while simultaneously promoting an unprecedentedly low international profile with the intention of minimising the damage to Brazil’s reputation in the eyes of the world, caused by cases of corruption (Caballero 2019a). In stark contrast to the previous “globalist” period, the context in which Bolsonaro and his chancellor Araújo’s operate illustrates what Frenkel (2018) calls “Americanism” and “de-Americanisation,” in the sense that the former implies a privileged relationship with the United States, while the latter involves a distancing from the region as a whole.

Brazilian foreign policy during recent years seems to corroborate the notion that, far from aspiring to a greater degree of autonomy in relational terms, as proposed by Hurrell, the capacity for agency is, for the most part, subordinated to other factors. An analysis of these limitations is



determined by a disquisition between two plausible scenarios. On the one hand, one potentially fruitful line of enquiry might be to examine whether the lack of leadership and presidential political capital (as proposed by Burges) is the main “agential” impediment, despite the fact that the current structural conditions (the so-called enabling requirements in Jaguaribe’s terminology) might serve to increase Brazil’s autonomy.

On the other hand, a second scenario might give credibility to the notion that it is systemic change itself, of a structural nature, that makes attaining any degree of autonomy impossible. In other words, once more following Jaguaribe’s typology, neither national viability (Brazil experiencing economic crisis and a powerful socio-institutional disaffection), nor international permissiveness (in an increasingly protectionist world immersed in a kind of crisis of globalisation), would allow agential exercising requirements to be autonomously implemented. Against this backdrop, it is possible to interpret the unconditional unity that Jair Bolsonaro exhibits with Trump’s strongly ideologised policies as, perhaps, the intention to foster a kind of benevolent “intra-imperial” relationship.

In spite of the fact that both scenarios previously mentioned can coexist to a certain degree, the first is premised on a conjunctural understanding of the current situation which emphasises the role of agents in the development of foreign policy. However, it does not seem to be the case that the shifts which take place obey the same episodic swing of the pendulum or that presidential elections are determined by passing circumstances. If this were the case, it could be expected that the election of future presidents and/or the dynamics of decision-making actors (Itamaraty, for example), would swing once more and reproduce a hypothetical tendency towards continuity in Brazil’s foreign policy.

However, the present article maintains that the origins of the break run much deeper than the agency capacity or agential decision-making of individual presidents and diplomats. Instead, the causation of the break must be understood in terms of a reversal of more deeply-rooted trends within what can be thought of as systemic changes of a structural nature. An ongoing crisis in globalisation is producing changes in the global context (Sanahuja 2017). Additionally, the still unknown extent of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout 2020 must also be factored into the equation, something that some analysts have already begun to explore.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, the structural nature of these changes compels us to understand autonomy in terms of breaks rather than as continuity. Additionally, the posture adopted by president Bolsonaro and his immediate circle seems to suggest that maximising the degree of autonomy, far from being an objective in itself, is in fact secondary and subordinated to an ideological agenda concerning the hegemonic power of the U.S.A., one that, more specifically, results from his alignment with Trump. Another reality that also needs to be acknowledged is the narrow understanding of foreign policy that indicates the adoption of a damage-limitation

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5 One example among many is Andrés Malamud (@andresmalamud), “¿Qué consecuencias tendrá la pandemia sobre la política internacional? Diez reflexiones exploratorias. HILO” Twitter, March 17, 2020, 12:35 pm. Access: 17th March, 2020. <https://twitter.com/andresmalamud/status/1239938378415706115>, or Richard Haass’ article “The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It” (Haass 2020).

approach within an increasingly uncertain and hostile international political climate. We might, therefore, be in the midst of a process of dual break. On the one hand, there could be a break more closely related to structural change whose starting point could be thought of occurring during Dilma's second presidential term: the break from Lula da Silva's ideal of autonomy (which was ground-breaking in itself). On the other, a rupture more closely linked to the agential decision-making process of the triad managing Brazil's foreign policy (Araújo, E. Bolsonaro and Martins) and the impact of Bolsonaro's presidential diplomacy. All in all, the efforts of these four actors are reflected in the break in Brazil's behaviour and historic role at the multilateral level and the country's adjustment to Planalto's current priorities.

## Conclusion

Growing uncertainty and an increase in unexpected phenomena can be witnessed in the current context, with many questions remaining unanswered. Such conjunctural understanding, in this instance, acquires a greater degree of importance as, not only are efforts being made to determine the scope for action of agents who are constrained by international structures, but we are also witnessing systemic change which is modifying the structures themselves as we know them. Following on from certain authors (Sanahuja 2017), the conjunction of a wide range of economic, social and political factors allows us to sketch out a context of "crisis in globalisation," in combination with profound geopolitical shifts. Although we might not yet be capable of minutely characterising this budding new international paradigm, new trends are being imposed on the international economy (digitisation, relocation and capitalist resource depletion), in society (growing social disaffection, revision of the social contract and nostalgic — and nationalist — reinventions of non-existent pasts) and in international politics (a geopolitical turn from the United States to China, institutional delegitimation caused by an inability to respond to global issues and the instrumentalisation of fears as a compass of political strategy).

The quest for autonomy is a narrative that has been historically constructed in terms of Itamaraty's continuity, and a guarantee of loyal adherence to several strands in Brazil's foreign policy, independent of Planalto's corresponding ideological outlook. However, as has been expounded in this article, the reality has been very different. While this narrative has masked the turns in the history of recent foreign policy and, more specifically, the disruptions derived from both agential (presidential diplomacy, foreign minister, power relations within Itamaraty) and structural regional and global shifts (post-Cold War, open regionalism, BRICS, post-liberal regionalism, globalisation crisis and reactionary nationalisms), the fact that, instead of continuity, it constituted the axis and fundamental vector of breaks in Brazilian foreign policy has also been blurred. Indeed, far from acting as cohesive or unifying elements, the diverse interpretations of autonomy and how to obtain it have caused and justified the various swings and breaks.

This article has argued that we are witnessing a dual break. The first, due to the underlying trends that are redesigning the international world as we know it, is of a predominantly structural nature; the other, more agential in nature, is the product of president Bolsonaro's particular worldview and inner circle. Both are effecting changes in the canon of presidential diplomacy in Brazil. Seen in this way, the key to understanding Brazil's current foreign policy is the agential capacity of actors such as president Bolsonaro (including the "ideological redirection" in Itamaraty) and his attempt at "bandwagoning" with the Trump administration. But even more relevant is the erroneous reading of the structural framework. Moreover, this supposed agential pragmatism, to be utilised to obtain a favourable intra-imperial relationship in the current context of global uncertainty, does not in itself produce either an intra-hegemonic relational autonomy or the situational autonomy applied by Vargas.

This simplistic and populist strategy, bolstered by the alignment with Washington, lacks the incisiveness to detect the systemic change which has been taking place during recent years and which has become manifest in the current crisis of globalisation. It is these enabling requirements that must be rethought and incorporated into Brazilian national interests in order for the country's search for autonomy to be more fruitful. Namely, Brazil should prioritise attaining a reduction in its degree of dependence on external actors and interests and an increased capacity to advance national development goals, which is the ultimate objective of foreign policy.

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