

BRAZILIAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER “LULA 3”: THE REFORM OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AS AN EXTENSION OF DOMESTIC POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL (RE)ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

After two consecutive and mostly successful administrations in the 2000s, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva made a comeback and became Brazil’s President in 2023. Both the domestic and the international landscapes have considerably changed since he left power back then, and new challenges have arisen for his third term. However, one historical, long-term goal has been reframed again by the country as one of its most pressing matters: the reform of global governance. Hence, this paper seeks to understand the reasons behind the (re)prioritisation of the reform of global governance in Brazil’s foreign policy during the first year of “Lula 3”. Based on qualitative research, it deals with the foundations and recent developments of Brazilian foreign policy, particularly when it comes to Brazil’s relations with China and its considerations on the Global South, as well as the dynamics between Lula’s presidential diplomacy and the institutional role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also known as Itamaraty. Furthermore, it addresses debates involving Foreign Policy Analysis, Global Governance, and the interactions between domestic and international politics. This article concludes by identifying that Brazil has prioritised the reform of global governance as a way to align its international aspirations with its domestic needs.

Keywords

Brazilian Foreign Policy; Brazil’s Domestic Politics; Foreign Policy Analysis; Reform of Global Governance; China and the Global South.

Resumo

Após dois governos consecutivos e bem-sucedidos na década de 2000, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva retornou ao cargo de Presidente do Brasil em 2023. Os cenários tanto interno quanto externo mudaram consideravelmente desde que Lula deixou o poder da última vez, e novos desafios mostram-se prementes para o seu terceiro mandato. Contudo, um objetivo histórico e de longo prazo foi reenquadrado novamente pelo país como uma questão de alta relevância: a reforma da governança global. Dessa forma, este artigo visa a compreender as razões por trás da (re)priorização da reforma da governança global na política externa do Brasil durante o primeiro ano do “Lula 3”. Baseado numa investigação qualitativa, ele lida com as bases e



os recentes desenvolvimentos da política externa brasileira, particularmente no que concerne às relações do Brasil com a China e suas considerações acerca do Sul Global, bem como com as dinâmicas entre a diplomacia presidencial do Lula e o papel institucional do Ministério das Relações Exteriores, também conhecido como Itamaraty. Ademais, ele trata dos debates que envolvem Análise de Política Externa, Governança Global e as intersecções entre política interna e externa. Este artigo chega a sua conclusão ao identificar que o Brasil priorizou a reforma da governança global como uma maneira de alinhar suas aspirações internacionais com suas necessidades domésticas.

Palavras-chave

Política Externa Brasileira; Política Interna do Brasil; Análise de Política Externa; Reforma da Governança Global; China e Sul Global.

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Introduction

In January 2023, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva started his third term as President of Brazil. Having captained the country from 2003 to 2010, he left an important legacy in foreign affairs, not only due to his policies to expand the number of Brazilian diplomats and embassies around the world, but also because of the active and leading role the nation aimed to adopt in the international stage on a wide range of matters, from socioenvironmental to security. Indeed, his personal interest in the area and the resulting presidential diplomacy he conducted, alongside the existence of a favourable political environment and the availability of a capable body of foreign policymakers and decision-takers alongside him, in particular, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also known as Itamaraty, turned Brazil into a significant player on the global stage.

In March 2009, during Lula's visit to the United States, Barack Obama (2009) stated that he had been "a great admirer of Brazil and a great admirer of the progressive, forward-looking leadership that President Lula has shown throughout Latin America and throughout the world. We have a very strong friendship between the two countries". The subprime mortgage crisis was being widely felt, especially by developed nations, and Global South countries were on a rise in the international scene. A month later, at the G20 Summit in London, Obama greeted Lula, saying "that's my man right there [...] The most popular politician on Earth" (Newsweek, 2009). Meanwhile, in that same year, China became Brazil's main trade partner for the first time in history, and both countries sought to further boost their strategic partnership, established in 1993 — the very first promoted by the Asian nation in the globe. Notably, in a joint communique issued during Lula's visit in Beijing, the two sides agreed to "enhance coordination with other developing countries, to increase the participation and voices of developing countries in international affairs" (Global Times, 2009).

Fast forward 15 years, and relations between Brazil and the United States — and, to a certain extent, European nations — though stable, have more frictions, as domestic politics in a number of these countries has become more challenging, and the



international society faces relevant adversities. Additionally, the Brazilian position on certain matters is seen as less aligned with traditional partners from the West, and more with other Global South nations, in particular, China. Stuenkel (2023) even affirmed that "Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's honeymoon with the West ended remarkably quickly", after his win over Jair Bolsonaro had been met with relief. Notwithstanding, with the exception of the years under Bolsonaro, Brazilian foreign policy has actually remained rather solid in recent decades, based on a pragmatic set of principles and goals. Possibly, surprises coming from American and European parties involving Lula's current and complex take on foreign policy may derive much more from a lack of attention or thorough understanding about Brazil's goals and vision for international relations than from an effective course correction or drastic change in policymaking.

This is very much clear when looking at the country's historical objective of reforming global governance. In multiple ways, from seeking a permanent seat in the United Nations (UN) Security Council to rebalancing the power structures in multilateral institutions and defending the building of a multipolar world, Brazil has been implementing efforts in this regard since the previous century, though with varying levels of attention and effort (Steenhagen, 2023). The latest example is that the country has stipulated the reform of global governance as one of the three priority axes — figuring alongside the formation of a global alliance against hunger and poverty, and the combat against climate change — of its first G20 presidency under its new format, bringing the topic as a central one in the recent meetings of the grouping to project the nation as one of the leaders of the Global South (Soares, 2024).

In this context, the paper will focus on the following research question: Why has the reform of global governance been (re)prioritised in Brazil's foreign policy during the first year of "Lula 3"? The main hypothesis is that this new wave of strong support to advance on this broad goal is likely the result of two main factors: At the international level, the rise of China and the strengthening of the Sino-Brazilian partnership can favour Brazil's historical foreign policy interests, reinforcing the country's image as one of the go-to references for the Global South; and, at the State level, foreign policy is now considered to have the unusual capacity to influence sociopolitical outcomes and impact domestic politics, contributing to further enhance or undermine the image of Lula before the population and part of the electorate.

In order to deal with the topic at hand, it is pondered that a qualitative approach best fits the research pursued here. Therefore, it will be primarily based on published materials, such as academic articles and books, official government documents, and available interviews and speeches from public authorities. Moreover, although the research will be qualitative-based, some quantitative sources will also be used, such as public opinion surveys. The study carried out is relevant for multiple reasons, and it is worth highlighting two of them: The importance to better examine interactions between domestic and international politics, and the need to better understand Brazilian foreign policy.



First, as domestic politics has become more gruelling in politically divided societies such as Brazil, the realm of international relations gained a prominent place in the first year of Lula's third run as President, with foreign affairs serving as a potential tool to increase or at least maintain his popularity and win over a slice of centrist citizens. In this sense, the G20 and the themes prioritised in it could play a crucial role under the Brazilian presidency, as it is arguably one of the most important international forums nowadays, a place where countries with largely different world views can still have productive exchanges and reach agreements without all the weight of having to carry out more rigid positions in organs like the UN Security Council. Moreover, the G20 includes a wide number of countries, from the BRICS to the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union (EU), Japan, and Mexico. All of the nations involved represent approximately 85% of the global economy and two thirds of the world population, as well as more than 75% of international trade.

Second, Brazil is an indispensable member of the international society and the Global South, which has increasingly demanded more participation and decision-making power in global affairs. The South American nation is also one of the 10 main economies of the world, with a population of over 200 million people. Despite its importance and the need to further comprehend its foreign policy, misunderstandings and gaps of knowledge about it remain, given the prevalence of debates coming from Western great powers.

With that said, this paper will be divided into four main sections, in addition to this introduction. First, it will provide a theoretical discussion on foreign policy analysis and global governance, highlighting the relevance of utilising a two-level analysis to deal with increasingly complex scenarios and advancing the framework of Role Theory. Second, it will investigate the impacts of domestic politics on Brazil's foreign policymaking and identify the resulting dynamics between Itamaraty and Lula during the first year of his current presidential term. Third, it will examine the renewed push for the reform of global governance in light of the "Brazil is back" slogan and the influential synergies between Brazil and China in the international stage. Fourth, it will provide concluding remarks.

Intersections between Foreign Policy and Global Governance: The Two-Level Analysis and Role Theory

Foreign Policy Analysis has been gaining an increasing attention as a sub-field of International Relations, as the number of high-quality publications on the discipline throughout the last few years has maintained a steady growth (Alden & Aran, 2017; Ostermann & Mello, 2022; Thies, 2018). It has its origins linked to the 1950s, when foreign policy began to be conceptualised as a "complex, multilayered process, consisting of the objectives that governments pursue in their relations with other governments and their choice of means to attain these objectives" (Kubáľková, 2001, p. 17).

Traditionally, the concept of foreign policy has also been approached either as an abstract expression of relations between political entities, seeking to understand how organised groups interrelate, or as a way to differentiate the political self from the other, identifying two distinct realms, the "inside" and the "outside", the State and the interstate system



(Leira, 2019). However, more recently, new trends have appeared, historicising it as a practice concept and associating it with institutions, ideas, politics, and policies, especially due to the pluralisation of actors in the foreign policymaking process and the existing interconnections between domestic and foreign affairs (Leira, 2019).

Just like diplomacy, or maybe even more, foreign policymaking is often entangled with domestic politics, with groups pursuing their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favourable policies, and the national government seeking to maximise their ability to satisfy domestic pressures while minimising the adverse consequences of foreign developments (Putnam, 1988). In this two-level game, the national political leader, the main actors or interest groups, and the key decision-makers, who strive to reconcile domestic and international imperatives simultaneously, are essential to the understanding of the dynamics at play (Putnam, 1988). Since decision-making factors and conceptions of agency continue to be underdeveloped in contemporary theories of international relations (Kaarbo, 2015), under which global governance studies tend to situate themselves, this paper fills a gap between Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations investigations, discussing how both domestic and systemic factors can shape foreign policies (Putnam, 1988; Milner, 1997).

Indeed, "foreign policy analysts, in a conscious departure from systemic theories of world politics, have always highlighted the considerable variation in national foreign policies and pointed at the relevance of domestic-level variables for explaining this behaviour", and current challenges in a wide number of areas, from security to climate change, and at all levels, have brought an unprecedented contestation of foreign policymaking (Ostermann & Mello, 2022, p. 3). In this sense, several dimensions of foreign policy analysis have been expanded and further explored, such as the role of leaders, their reputations and personal characteristics, the rise of populist parties and their impact on foreign policy, the influence of civil society, social media, and technological innovation, and the role of emotions for foreign policymaking (Ostermann & Mello, 2022).

While the international component is, naturally, omnipresent in foreign policy studies, domestic politics are considered simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in academic investigations (Kaarbo, 2015). Meanwhile, foreign policy analyses associated with global governance issues, underdeveloped as they are, have been appearing as a clear emerging trend (Mendez, 2017). In this regard, according to Mendez (2017), Foreign Policy Analysis is the best situated discipline and social scientific practice to research global governance to the requisite depth, including when it comes to issues involving the (re)shaping of the international architecture and the risks posed by elitism, especially from Western elites.

Keohane (2009, p. 363) has already recognised that the field of International Politics "is heavily American and to some extent European [...] As the economic and political centres of gravity shift away from Europe and the United States [...] this is bound to change. Political science will become a global discipline". Truly, "Western ideologies still dominate intellectual and academic frameworks. All of the modern ideologies are products of the West" (Zhang, Gu & Chen, 2015, p. 7). Furthermore, Acharya & Buzan (2007, p. 288) affirm that almost all IR theory "is produced by and for the West, and rests on an



assumption that Western history is world history [...] the almost exclusively Western sources of international relations theory conspicuously fail to correspond to the now global distribution of its subjects”.

Similarly, despite becoming more pluralist in recent years, Foreign Policy Analysis still has its strongest institutional footing in the United States, and most empirical research usually focuses on this country (Ostermann & Mello, 2022). There is an urgent need to diversify such studies, and this is an effort promoted by this paper, which brings Brazilian foreign policy to the forefront. After all, Global South countries have, since the 2000s, questioned the absolute dominance of Western powers on international law and foreign affairs as a whole, highlighting the need to further democratise the international system and to consider more complex scenarios of global governance than before. Again, as Mendez (2017) indicated, combining Foreign Policy Analysis and Global Governance approaches can give good results to understand the transformations occurring in national and international scenarios.

Meanwhile, the concept of global governance only gained prominence after the Cold War, when a new wave of globalisation took place, economic interdependence was clearly increasing, the international agenda was considerably expanded beyond security affairs, and a plurality of non-State actors began having a stronger voice around the globe. Global governance encompasses the handling of transnational or international challenges, such as development, security, climate change, and poverty, by a plurality of actors through collaborative ways. In addition, it can be defined as a cooperative problem-solving arrangement that includes – but not necessarily limits itself to – the United Nations system, serving to manage global problems and help actors, both State and non-State, to pursue global objectives through concerted efforts (Thakur & Weiss, 2004; Ortega, 2007). Therefore, it is closely connected to foreign policy goals and debates, and a major concern arising from these studies has been the push for the reform of global governance, promoted by developing nations.

Under this scene, one of the risks at the system level, as Stuenkel (2016) elucidates, involves the rise of parallel or complementary structures of global governance by the Global South, particularly China, and the consequent reduction of the universal claim of Western-led institutions. In this sense, while “policymakers in Beijing (and Delhi & Brasília) can be expected to continue to invest in Western-dominated structures and push for their reform [...] they quietly expand networks in many different areas, ready to engage those who feel today’s institutions fail to satisfy their needs” (Stuenkel, 2016, p. 120).

In the case of Brazil under “Lula 3”, a relevant factor to be taken into consideration is the role of the leader (Byman & Pollack, 2001; Peveri, 2022) in the shaping of the country’s foreign policy and global governance mechanisms or institutions, particularly in light of the presidential diplomacy conducted by him and his perception that “Brazil is back” to its prestigious place in the international stage after the Bolsonaro administration (Hirst, 2023; Fonseca, 2017; Santos, 2021). Another factor is the dynamics between foreign policy and domestic politics, as the latter has had an increasing relevance in the former, and vice-versa.



Indeed, although international debates might appear too far from people's realities, individuals can and should be considered as actors in the international society, and national citizens, either individually or collectively, have played substantial roles in the global stage in a wide number of areas. In truth, people end up getting involved with global issues, in particular, when they care about the subject at home too. Since, domestically, Lula and Bolsonaro are the main representatives of the electoral panorama in Brazil, and they profoundly diverge in terms of foreign policy and international engagement, foreign policy and global governance matters have entered the realm of domestic politics and elections in a clearer way than before.

To guide such examination, this paper utilises Role Theory, which, as the name suggests, is a theoretical framework devoted to the study of behaviour using the notion of role. According to it, States can be presented as playing a variety of roles, and diverse factors, such as domestic needs and demands, critical events or trends in the external environment, and the projections of other governments, shape foreign policy orientations, create role perceptions, and develop expectations for States to carry out certain role performances (Sekhri, 2009).

This framework is especially appealing to the study of Global South nations' foreign policies, because they attempt to play different roles both regionally and globally, often experiencing role conflict as a consequence of their multi-dimensional forms of dependency on Western great powers and of bilateral or multilateral relations between themselves (Sekhri, 2009). In the case of Brazil, Sekhri (2009, p. 8) argues that the country has emerged as a significant political and economic power in Latin America and a key player in global affairs, playing prominent roles in them, "including the role of 'Leader' in Latin America and rest of the Third World, and the role of 'Mediator' in the North-South and South-South frameworks".

Impacts of Domestic Politics on Brazilian Foreign Policymaking under "Lula 3"

Bringing Role Theory to the national level, Wehner & Thies (2021, p. 1425) argue that "leaders are the backbone of foreign policy decision-making who make choices about continuing existing roles, modifying such roles, or choosing new roles to play with significant others in the international system". Moreover, they note that "roles are the representations of state identity, interests, and behaviour in foreign policy, while leaders are the key agents to enact the roles that they have inherited, or to adjust and reinterpret them, and even to change them altogether", highlighting that the theoretical framework boasts as one of its key promises the potential to bridge multiple levels of analysis (Wehner & Thies, 2021, p. 1426).

Although it is a misconception to consider that Brazilian foreign policy has gone through drastic changes throughout the 21st century, there is no doubt leaders have played a significant role in influencing its direction and, especially, the intensity to pursue certain goals, and not others. Even if both of them were from the Worker's Party (PT), there is a clear difference in the relevance Presidents Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (2011-



2016) gave to foreign policy and international politics, with the former having a personal interest in the area, and the latter being widely known for her somewhat lukewarm approach to it. An even bigger contrast was seen under the Bolsonaro administration, with Brazil abandoning its traditionally strong international presence, in favour of isolationism, a situation which led the country to be seen as a global pariah (Brum, 2021).

As previously showed, domestic politics and, in particular, the national leader are important factors to be taken into consideration when it comes to foreign policy. As Milani (2017) explains, its formulation and implementation are deeply connected with governmental choices, and, consequently, with interest groups, bargaining, disputes, and negotiations with coalitions. Traditionally in the case of Brazil, two actors are seen as key in foreign policymaking: the President, due to the fact that Brazilian presidentialism system concentrates a considerable portion of agency in this position; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, given its long-standing professionalism, stability, and prestige (Milani, 2017).

Throughout most of the 20th century, Itamaraty saw itself, and was seen by the other actors, as the sole agent responsible to formulate and to implement the country's foreign policy, a situation which was frequently supported by the Presidency of the Republic (Lima, 1994). In Brazil, Foreign Policy Analysis studies on bureaucratic behaviour have shown, indeed, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been one of the earliest governmental bodies to operate in bureaucratic insulation since its establishment, in order to reduce interferences from external actors (Ives, 2024).

Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, debates about the need to remove foreign policy's exceptionalism and conceive it as a public policy like any other began to surface (Lima, 2000), resulting in Itamaraty's increasing openness and dialogue with other bureaucracies and with society as a whole in more recent decades (Ives, 2024). As a public policy, it is also more prone to changes depending on the political front, both by state and non-state actors. Additionally, this gradual process of "opening-up", which gives more transparency to its policymaking and decision-taking, still has further room to develop, but it has arguably already transformed foreign policy from a distant and less palpable matter to something that is more concrete and relatable to the overall population, especially with the strengthening of the media and communication sector and the democratisation of the access to information.

The assumption that the public knows relatively little about foreign affairs and, as a consequence, structures its beliefs only by taking cues from partisan elites has been increasingly challenged by recent developments, which show patterns where political elites are united, but the public is divided (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Indeed, as Kertzer & Zeitzoff (2017, p. 544) show, "members of the public may often lack information, but they do not lack principles, and information need not cascade from the top down [...] individuals have general predispositions toward foreign policy they can rely on when forming attitudes toward specific policy issues".

In Brazil, Diniz & Ribeiro (2008) have pointed out that, as international matters have gained a growing importance domestically and, in some cases, impacted public opinion polls, members of the Congress have also tended to get involved in such debates. This



also helps to reject the commonly advanced idea that foreign affairs are too distant from the ordinary lives of citizens, resulting in their lack of interest in it, a low level of accountability by leaders, and irrelevant electoral impacts. In fact, according to Lopes & Faria (2014), foreign policy has become an electoral topic in Brazil since the country's transition to democracy in the 1980s, but it was under the second term of President Lula that it had unprecedented visibility in the public electoral propaganda on TV and radio. For the authors, recent trends seem to suggest that there is, at least, an expectation that foreign policy, if it does not have the capacity to directly provide votes, can undermine the image and the prestige of political parties, candidates, and leaders (Lopes & Faria, 2014).

When it comes to the previous two Lula administrations, undoubtedly, one of his main legacies lie, justifiably, in the fields of foreign policy and diplomacy, bringing Brazil to the spotlight in the global stage. Certainly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by seasoned Ambassador Celso Amorim — now Chief Advisor to the Presidency in "Lula 3" — had a decisive role, but one cannot understate the positive impact of Lula's presidential diplomacy in both the country's prestige abroad and his own electoral gains internally. It is worth remembering that Lula left the Brazilian presidency after two terms as a global phenomenon, as shown in the introduction of this paper, and, domestically, according to surveys from the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (Ibope), with a personal approval rate of 87%, while his government had 80% — numbers never before seen in the country's history (Bonin, 2010).

Notwithstanding, the panorama has changed. In a recent survey conducted by Ipec, former Ibope, in early March 2024, the trust in Lula sits at 45%, and only 33% evaluated the government on a positive note, with another 33% evaluating it as average (Nicoceli & Croquer, 2024). Among other reasons, this can be explained by the stringent sociopolitical polarisation which has been a constant in Brazilian society since the Worker's Party (PT) fell from grace for part of the society in the mid-2010s and bolsonarism gained track in the latter half of the decade. With the country marked by clear political and electoral divisions, without a lot of margins for manoeuvre, the foreign policy terrain has surprisingly appeared as one which can bring political rewards domestically. Due to his international prestige, there is potential for Lula to capitalise on his global presence with the more centrist or even traditionally conservative electorate, which is more inclined to approve of Brazil being praised and fulfilling its "predisposition" to be a regional and global leader.

Amid such division between supporters of Lula and Bolsonaro, it is possible to identify the existence of a form of adversarial politics, characterised by a distinctive manner of representing, battling, and mobilising against political opponents in a populist environment.¹ In this regard, it is worth noting that the scholarship related to Foreign

¹ Although populism remains an essentially contested concept, as Cadier (2024) indicates, it can amount to an "othering" discourse, particularly through a discursive construction of an enemy or opposition, which can include not only elites, supranational institutions or the establishment, but also previous governments and political opponents. Under these lenses, foreign policy provides an appropriate terrain for populist articulatory practices, be it through the amalgamation of domestic actors and opponents with foreign "others" and interests, be it with the projection of the populist logic onto the international stage, using foreign policy as a battleground to combat domestic political adversaries.



Policy Analysis has already documented that “the type of strategy chosen by governments in dealing with political opposition is in turn a key mediating factor in how and to what extent domestic politics affects foreign policy” (Cadier, 2024, p. 2).

Indeed, populist leaders, or leaders dealing with a populist environment, tend to politicise foreign policy once in office, and confronting political opponents is precisely at the core of their legitimation, mobilisation, and popularity-maximising strategies, something which consequently produces effects on foreign policy (Cadier, 2024). In the end, as Cadier (2024) argues, it seems that these actors are inclined to use foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics by other means, defining their foreign policy preferences and choices in opposition to those of their political predecessors or adversaries and investing in foreign policy as an instrument and a ground to battle political opponents. This, in turn, ends up contaminating the political game and the strategies associated with the successors of such populist actors.

Bringing back Role Theory to the table, it is possible to see that, during his presidency, Bolsonaro reinterpreted, adjusted, and modified Brazil’s roles in the international stage, overhauling the country’s behaviour in terms of foreign policy and defining them as the opposite of what came before. When Lula won the last presidential elections, he sought to recover Brazil’s previously existing roles and the historical traditions of its foreign policy, something which is clear with the slogan “Brazil is back”, widely used during his first year back in power both for domestic and international purposes. Lula has always been a powerful political force in the national landscape, and now the context favours a more personalistic, alongside an institutional (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) or party-based (PT), approach to politics and foreign policy.

Therefore, the presidential diplomacy renews its relevance under “Lula 3”, clearly differentiating itself from the administration of Bolsonaro, who did not travel abroad as much and distanced himself from the international community. A presidential diplomacy takes place when the President has a personal, active, and effective participation in the conception and execution of foreign policy based on three foundations: the conduction of the decision-making process of foreign policy; the diplomacy of initiatives, in which the leader proposes and reap the rewards of foreign policy initiatives; and the diplomacy of visits and travels (Pasquarelli, 2010). At the same time, such an ambitious foreign policy, with leadership goals in the region and the world, should encompass not only Brazilian national interests, but also common, wider aspirations from the Global South and other big players in the international scenario, and the reform of global governance is a key aim in this regard.

“Brazil Is Back”: A New Era for the Sino-Brazilian Partnership, A New Era for the Reform of Global Governance and the Global South

Brazil has historically seen itself as a global player and tried to occupy a relevant place in international politics, with this being a dominant trace in its foreign policy and a constant during Lula’s first two terms as President (Fonseca, 2017). During this period, the BRICs came into existence, China became Brazil’s main trade partner, the 2008 crisis



profoundly affected Western great powers, and developing nations implemented their strategies to benefit from the appropriate conditions to better influence global governance and increase their voices and participation in the international system (Fonseca, 2017). Not coincidentally, Brazil has revisited historical goals associated with the reform of international institutions, such as the pursuit of a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (Steenhagen, 2023).

As Almeida (2004, p. 162-163) notes, "it is in its external relations and international politics that the government of President Lula resembles the most the discourse of PT. [...] certainly the party discourse in international politics themes [...] commands the governmental action, more than in any other institutional area".² In this sense, Brazil's role as a leader has not been constrained only to its region, and Lula has believed that such a role could be achieved through diplomatic activism, including his presidential diplomacy, and the formation of strategic alliances (Almeida, 2004). Perceiving the changes in the international landscape, with an unprecedented strategic partnership already signed in 1993 — updated to the level of global strategic partnership in 2012 — and a mutual interest in strengthening ties based on common interests and goals, Brazil and China started a trajectory of reinforcing their bilateral and multilateral relations in a way that has established Lula as "China's old friend".

This marks a stark contrast to the previous and atypical government. Under Bolsonaro, Brazil broke up with previous foreign policy traditions and promoted antiglobalism, conservatism, anticommunism, and religious nationalism (Casarões & Saraiva, 2021). Simultaneously, the role of Itamaraty was decreased, based on an active pursuit to reduce its importance, dismantle its bureaucracy, and weaken its diplomatic capacity, under the perception that the institution was one of the bodies responsible for the country's globalist insertion (Pinheiro & Santos, 2022). Despite a strong alignment with the United States under the Trump administration, after Biden's election, Brazil distanced itself from the nation, all while its relations with both Europe and China also deteriorated in the sociopolitical field (Saraiva & Reis, 2023).

With the advent of "Lula 3", there is a strong restructuring of Brazilian foreign policy, and the country seeks to be involved again in the great themes of international politics, whether they are directly connected with its direct goals or not (Saraiva & Reis, 2023). According to Saraiva & Reis (2023), this quick foreign policy restructuring and Brazil's reinsertion in the international stage, putting an end to Bolsonaro's approach to the area, was made possible due to the role of the leader, as Lula still has a considerable political weight internally and internationally, as well as to the expertise from his policymakers and other actors who influence foreign policy. Some positions on international conflicts were modified, progressive, instead of conservative, orientations were promoted in topics such as human rights, global governance, elimination of poverty and hunger, and sustainability, Latin American integration and international engagement made a

² Translation made by the author. In Portuguese: "é nas relações exteriores e na sua política internacional que o governo do Presidente Lula mais se parece com o discurso do PT. [...] certamente que o discurso partidário em temas de política internacional [...] comanda a ação governamental, mais do que em qualquer outra área institucional."



comeback, interactions with the United States and Europe were stabilised and cherished, and relations with China were normalised and further strengthened.

On the Asian country's side, as Pu (2019, p. 3) explains, the 2000s and the 2010s saw its rise in the international stage, and "the nature and content of the international order in coming decades will partially depend on what roles the emerging powers, especially China, decide to play". Certainly, policymakers' ideas about China's role in the international system have a considerable influence on its foreign policy and on its decision-making process, as China engages in a search for a new identity as a global player, one that encompasses both continuity and adaptation (Noesselt, 2014). However, as Pu (2019) notes, China's grand strategy ends up including contradictory elements and competing visions for its emerging roles in the world, and this can be identified both in the domestic and international stages.

Inside China, perceptions on the existing international order have been molded by historical and uneasy experiences, resulting in three basic positions (Tang, 2018). The first, which is linked to Mao Zedong's ideas of a revolutionary State and figures as a marginalised one in China today, considers the existing order is mostly unjust and needs fundamental restructuring, and the country should therefore lead the way in shaping global governance (Tang, 2018). The second and the third, which are the core of the debate under the present leadership, are interconnected by the premise that the current order is mostly acceptable, only needing to be fine-tuned; however, while the former considers China should take the lead to press for reforms, the latter believes the Asian nation should not even seek leadership in this sense and should work with other countries, both Western and non-Western, to achieve that goal (Tang, 2018). To some extent, this last position is somewhat similar to the one permeating Brazilian foreign policy, in particular, under Lula.

Associated with the two abovementioned main positions is the idea of a "governance with Chinese characteristics", which can be divided into responsible State governance, and governance through global partnership (Chen, 2016). The first is intrinsically attached to an effective management of domestic affairs — which directly and indirectly impacts global governance — and to the avoidance of exporting negative externalities through domestic and foreign policies (Chen, 2016). Meanwhile, the second presupposes that China, in opposition to hierarchical schemes of hegemonic governance and order and their inherent injustices, should serve as a partner in four aspects of non-aligned global partnership governance: joint global governance, incremental global governance, joint regional governance, and global governance reform (Chen, 2016). This second aspect is particularly important to understand the alignment of vision and behaviour between Brazil and China in global affairs, as the former, under Lula and PT, largely agrees with it and would like to see more inclusiveness, representation, and legitimacy in international institutions historically dominated by Western powers.

As a result, it is not uncommon for analysts in the United States and Europe to be puzzled about the foreign policy of "Lula 3". During his first year back in the presidency for a third term, Lula strongly promoted the slogan that "Brazil is back", which had both domestic and international purposes and targets and sought to clearly show a fresh start for the



country, after what is considered to be a disastrous Bolsonaro administration, and to instigate hope for a better future (Maschietto, 2024). In terms of foreign policy, the slogan indicated that the South American nation would go back to its traditions, end the ideological alignment with the global far-right, and redirect its attention to an active positioning in the international stage based, amongst other things, on the pursuit for leadership as a representative of the Global South (Maschietto, 2024).

In late 2022, during his first speech to the population as president-elect, among other matters, Lula stated that "we will fight again for a new global governance, with the inclusion of more countries in the UN Security Council and the end of the veto right, which undermines the balance between nations" (G1, 2022). Subsequently, in 2023, Amorim affirmed that "Brazil wants to reform global governance [...] We would like to have a world governance which does not look like the present Security Council" (Balingit & Tobin, 2023), meaning a renewed global governance, one which does not resemble the political panorama of the post-Second World War period.

In this context, Brazil's presidency of the G20 has appeared as a great opportunity for the country to test its strategy of "active nonalignment", balancing engagement between powers without picking a side and focusing on an agenda that is firmly grounded in the priorities of the Global South (Timerman, 2024). It may seem like a longshot in a more divided world, but, as Timerman (2024) states, "if anybody can leverage the importance of the global south on the international stage, it's the one-name international superstar Lula" — something which also confirms the maintenance of his personal status as a recognised leader, especially for the Global South, and how useful this can be in the domestic landscape.

Therefore, Brazil under "Lula 3" might have disappointed expectations from the United States and Europe in terms of close alignment in face of certain current global challenges, such as the Russo-Ukrainian war. However, its current foreign policy is not a major departure from its previous positionings; for instance, when Russia invaded Crimea, Brazil also did not promote strong pushbacks against the country, and Putin even visited the South American nation for the BRICS Summit later in the year, regardless of protests from Western powers. In spite of its efforts to balance relations with American and European partners, on the one hand, and developing nations, on the other, it is clear that the country's broad interests and goals have inevitably lied more aligned with the latter. And, although American and European disappointment towards certain aspects of Brazilian foreign policy exists, it can be said that this is partly due to their own omissions and neglections, both old and new.

Overall, as Stuenkel (2023) notes, the Global South has shown a certain level of reluctance to align with the West on specific topics, such as the support to Ukraine in light of the war with Russia. In the case of Brazil, four key factors explain such reluctance (Stuenkel, 2023). First, Brazil, whether led by leftist, centrist, or rightist governments, has maintained positive relations with China and Russia, both in the BRICS and outside of it, and this connects with its efforts to preserve a nonaligned position internationally. Second, Brazil perceives Western rhetoric in a number of subjects as grating and hypocritical, especially in light of numerous violations of international law coming from



great powers when it suits them. Furthermore, it believes that the supposedly rules-based liberal order has often shown to be neither liberal nor rules-based, with Western great powers failing to take the Global South and its demands seriously. This is one of the reasons the country has attempted to reform global governance for many decades, including through the establishment of parallel institutional structures.

Third, Brazil has strongly believed that the best way to preserve its strategy of autonomy and nonalignment is through the active promotion of a multipolar global order. This, in turn, just like the second factor, closely aligns with the foundations of China's foreign policy. Fourth, Brazil has been traditionally convinced that it has a role to play in the international stage, and Lula, in particular, has shown an eagerness to provide meaningful contributions under the vision that the country is a diplomatic powerhouse. The "Brazil is back" slogan clearly seeks to revive what is seen as the glorious days of the 2000s and the early 2010s. With Brazil at the helm of the G20 now, it brings a huge opportunity for Lula and the PT to show their capabilities when it comes to foreign affairs, both to the domestic and to the global public.

Notwithstanding, it is possible to argue that Brazil feels even more comfortable to nourish the thrust towards global governance reforms, especially in a rhetorical way, due to the strengthening of the Sino-Brazilian partnership throughout the last decade and China's own initiatives that already impact global governance. In this regard, Lula has a central role in the efforts to advance Brazil's push for the reform of global governance. As Hirst (2023) points out, the presidential diplomacy in Lula's third term has become as or more central than during the 2000s, and there has been considerable connections between his national leadership and his international and regional projection, with the project of international insertion pertaining to the President, but its execution depending on the operational capacity of the Itamaraty.

At the same time, Lula's margin for political manoeuvres is now reduced if compared to his previous administrations, given that the reality, both domestically and internationally, has changed. Consequently, while Brazil's current foreign policy might resemble, in many ways, that of the 2000s, it has gone through adaptations and renovations, and one should not expect from it the same intense and proactive behaviour as before due to existing constraints in the micro and macro levels (Carvalho, 2023). After all, Lula faces not only a more challenging domestic landscape, struggling to win certain political and legislative battles, but also a more demanding international scenario, all while lacking sufficient resources to promote an expanded agenda of global governance reform and South-South cooperation, and, as a result, having to be more strategic in the implementation of his foreign policy (Carvalho, 2023).

Specifically, regarding China, the Asian nation has increasingly shown an interest to expand policy coordination in global governance issues, especially when it comes to the UN, the G20, and the BRICS, and the interest deriving from the Brazilian government to give high priority to the dialogue with China was immediate (Hirst, 2023). The case of the Brazilian presidency in the G20 is emblematic: All three priorities launched in the first year of "Lula 3" — combat against hunger and poverty, sustainable development, and reform of global governance — are, of course, closely connected with domestic needs



and international aspirations or opportunities, but they are also intrinsically associated with common interests involving China and, more broadly, the Global South. Indeed, relations with China seem to be increasingly strategic for Brazil on these two fronts.

Domestically, Brazil has been trying to seek opportunities and investments from the Chinese side that are closely aligned with its development goals, especially those related to (re)industrialisation, sustainability, and technological innovation (Sousa, Abrão & Porto, 2023). Internationally, the South American nation sees its Asian counterpart as a fundamental partner to help advance its regional and global interests, as well as contribute to the strengthening of individual or collective positionings and agendas (Sousa, Abrão & Porto, 2023). The effort to take the bilateral relationship to the next level and the vision that China can bolster Brazil's diplomatic image abroad can be inferred, for instance, from Lula's statement that "we want to have with China a relationship which goes beyond economy and trade"³ (República Federativa do Brasil, 2023a), as well as from the list and content of the agreements signed during Lula's official visit to China a few months after he took office (República Federativa do Brasil, 2023b). In sum, Brazil under "Lula 3" sees in China an instrumental partner for it to achieve both its domestic and its international objectives, which are directly and indirectly associated with global governance reform.

Conclusion

This paper has sought out to check the reasons behind the (re)prioritisation of the reform of global governance in Brazil's foreign policy during the first year of "Lula 3". After the analysis, it is possible to confirm the main hypothesis put forward. Indeed, the new wave of support coming from President Lula and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to advance this broad goal is most likely linked to two main factors: at the State level, foreign policy has improved its capacity to influence sociopolitical outcomes and impact domestic politics, contributing to alter, either positively or negatively, the image of Lula before the population and part of the electorate; and, at the international level, the rise of China and the strengthening of the Sino-Brazilian partnership have favoured Brazil's foreign policy historical interests, giving the opportunity for the country to reinforce its image and positioning as one of the go-to references for the Global South.

In the end, it is possible to identify that Brazil has prioritised the reform of global governance in the G20 and beyond as a form of alignment between its international aspirations and domestic needs. Domestically, this is a topic that facilitates the strengthening of Lula as a competent leader who favours the country's development and national interests. Internationally, it pushes forward the projection of a Brazil that pursues its key historical objectives, that leads the way toward the democratisation of the international system, and that serves as a reference for the Global South and as a bridge-builder between developing nations and great powers, in particular, between China and the BRICS, on one side, and the United States and Europe, on the other.

³ Translation made by the author. In Portuguese: "Queremos ter com a China uma relação que vá além da economia e do comércio."



Overall, though, with the exception of the Bolsonaro administration, Brazilian foreign policy, in terms of principles and goals, has remained pragmatic and stable, and potential changes seem to be more connected with mechanisms — from a purely institutional to a combination of presidential and institutional diplomacy — and the level of emphasis on certain subjects and audience — as is the case of the reform of global governance, now targeted for domestic and global purposes — than with an effective and thorough change of course in its substance.

Brazil occupies the presidency of the G20 from December 1st, 2023, to November 30th, 2024, and it is expected that over 130 meetings will be held in 15 Brazilian cities throughout this period, with the most important one, the G20 Heads of State and Government Summit, taking place between November 18th and 19th in Rio de Janeiro (Cardoso, 2024). During this time, China's President Xi Jinping plans to make an official State visit in a year that celebrates the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations, and the expectation is that this visit will bring significant results for the bilateral relationship, including a potential agreement for Brazil to join the New Silk Road, officially called Belt and Road Initiative (Moreira, 2024).

Indeed, in August 2024, Lula made a positive signalling about this subject. During a speech at the National Industry Confederation (CNI), he stated that "the Chinese want to discuss with us the Silk Road. We will discuss the Silk Road. We will not close our eyes, no. We will say 'What do you have for us? What do I get?' Because this is the debate."⁴ (Estadão, 2024). If Brazil finally gets on board, it would be a considerable boost to the Chinese-led project, and it could be interpreted as a firm recognition that China is effectively capable to influence global governance and to offer concrete benefits for Brazil's development — and, consequently, to help Brazilian goals in the domestic and international stage to be achieved.

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⁴ Translation made by the author. In Portuguese: "Os chineses querem discutir conosco a Rota da Seda. Nós vamos discutir a Rota da Seda. Nós não vamos fechar os olhos, não. Nós vamos dizer: 'O que é que tem para nós? O que eu ganho? Porque essa é a discussão.'"



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