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Brazil's quest for autonomy in Asia: the role of strategic partnerships with China and Japan

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Abstract

This article aims at examining the strategic partnerships Brazil developed with China and Japan, between 2003 and 2020, and assessing how these privileged rapports contributed to the country's quest for autonomy. This will be made through the lenses of Pragmatic Institutionalism and against the backdrop of major developments in global and regional governance that impacted on the Brazilian autonomist project.

Keywords: Autonomy, Brazil, China, Japan, Pragmatic Institutionalism, Strategic Partnerships.

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Introduction

This study attempts to offer a comparative analysis of Brazil's privileged relations with China and Japan in the 21st century in juxtaposition to its traditional quest for autonomy. The latter has been a permanent driver of Brazilian external action and it has traditionally been substantiated through partnerships with strategic actors that have contributed to the expansion of the country's "room for manoeuvre" on the international stage (Ramanzini Júnior 2013, 165, Author's translation). In the literature, 'autonomy' has received multiple definitions and meanings. It has been considered a principle, an ultimate goal pursued in the name of the national interest and a condition allowing a given country to conduct its foreign policy in an independent fashion (Russell and Tokatlian 2003 cited in Vigevani and Cepaluni 2012). For the sake of this study, one will draw on the notion commonly used by Latin American scholars, which refers to "a foreign policy free from constraints imposed by powerful countries" (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2012, 1).

Regarding time frame, the focus will be on the period between 2003 and 2020, which will enable one to illuminate the relationship with these partners, not only during the Presidencies of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, but also after the end of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* - PT) era. This period started with an active and assertive participation on the international stage, only to be followed by a period of declining international profile of Brazil. Such crisis culminated in the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, paving the way to the short-lived Presidency of Michel Temer. After the presidential elections of 2018, Jair Bolsonaro came into power, which resulted in a foreign policy re-orientation towards the conservative government of Donald Trump and an uneasy relationship with China, perceived as an ideological rival (Guimarães and Oliveira e Silva 2021).

Along these lines, this study will attempt to respond to the following question: How strategic partnerships (SPs) cultivated by Brazil with China and Japan in the two first decades of the 2000s or so have contributed to the country's continued quest for autonomy? To this end, one will draw upon the Pragmatic Institutionalism proposed by Pinheiro (2000) who argues that, while seeking to exercise its foreign policy in an autonomous way, Brazil establishes relations with a varying degree of institutional commitment, depending on how a given SP will contribute to its autonomist project. As such, while developing and framing its cooperative links, Brazil tends to adopt a stance based on a liberal realism that incorporates not only a Hobbesian vision of the international relations, but also a Grotian outlook (Pinheiro 2000, 316). Brazil's quest for autonomy has oscillated between a stance that supports cooperation arrangements with a high degree of institutionalization (Grotian facade) and a stance that deliberately supports arrangements with a low degree of institutionalization to guarantee Brazil's advantageous position (Hobbesian facade) (Pinheiro 2000, 326).

Although this article will place emphasis on Brazil's relations with China and Japan, some pertinent considerations will be made to growing US-China tensions and disputes that got more acute with the 'America First' policy endorsed by Donald Trump-led Administration. The US-China rivalry has emerged as a "prime mover of global affairs" (Thompson 2020, 11) and brought multiple challenges to global, transatlantic and regional governance. Great and intermediate powers such as Brazil (Lima and Hirst 2006) have been "caught in the crossfire" (Thompson 2020, 27). Incidentally, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and its internationalization throughout 2020 have damaged China's international reputation and added more heat to the US-China competition towards global governance (Christensen 2020). Yet again, Brazil has been caught in the middle of this reinforced dispute; and this has paved the way to a triangulated relationship informed by political divisiveness and duality, as reflected in Bolsonaro's support of Trump's anti-China discourse concerning 5G technology and the Covid-19 ("Pandemia e Alinhamento Com Trump Desgastaram Relação Brasil-China" 2021).

The present study aims to contribute to the current debate on Brazil's pursuit of autonomy against the backdrop of major developments in global and regional governance by examining the SPs that Brazil has developed with "two most prominent powers in East Asia" that compete

for the status of regional leader in East Asia (Park 2013, 85). Japan and China were selected as case studies due to the political and economic dimensions that characterised their relations with Brazil and have conditioned the existing SPs. Despite being a significant contributor to Brazil's economic development and international insertion, China has generated a decrease of dynamism in the Brazilian economy, while leading to the country's exacerbated investment in commodities. On the other hand, it is important to underline the participation of China alongside Brazil in multilateral coalitions like the BRICS, BASIC and G20, within the framework of which both states have been striving to reform international rules and institutions. Furthermore, Japan has had traditional complementary relations with Brazil marked especially by immigration flows between the two countries in different periods (Uehara 2016). It is worth mentioning the existence of bilateral success stories, as for example the Japan-Brazil Agricultural Development Cooperation Program. This program has transformed the Cerrado region "into the largest agricultural region in the southern hemisphere" (JICA 2011), in which soybean production became its pioneer crop; and this has further contributed to soybean becoming one of Brazil's top exports (OEC 2020). A recent development that has added relevance to the Brazil-Japan relations links to the establishment of a Trilateral Dialogue between Brazil, Japan and the US (JUSBE), within which the three countries agreed to promote shared values, such as democracy and human rights (Itamaraty 2020b).

Relevant literature related to this article's general theme has addressed the presence of China and Japan in Latin America by looking at both countries comparatively (Hamaguchi et al. 2018), but also exploring them individually, notably Japan (Kuwayama 2015; Myers and Kuwayama 2016). Yet, closer to this study's topic, it is possible to identify only a few works that have focused specifically on Brazil-China SP (Oliveira 2012; 2004). Here, although some comparisons are made with the Japanese case, no consistent comparative thrust or exercise is offered. At the same time, the issue linked to Brazil's quest for autonomy is not discussed in depth. In fact, there is no work available that provides a comparative analysis of Brazil's SPs with these two key Asian countries, while exploring how such privileged bilateral relations have contributed to Brazil's autonomist project. As such, the present article will attempt to feed on the contemporary debate about the concept and role of SPs in Brazilian external action (Lessa 2010; Lessa and Oliveira 2013) and to be an addition to the traditional discussion about the country's quest for autonomy by looking at the recent Presidencies of Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro. The attention paid to the post-PT era development of Brazil's bilateral relations with China and Japan against the backdrop of the growing relevance of the Asia-Pacific region – due to the considerable economic growth and geopolitical assertiveness of China and the deepening competition between the US and China - adds relevance and topicality to this work.

The analysis provided by the present article employs official Brazilian documents such as the National Policy of Defence (2005, 2012, 2020) and National Defence Strategy (2008, 2012, 2020), the White Paper on National Defence (2012), and the Defence Scenario 2020-2039 (2017); and also bilateral agreements established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Itamaraty).

As for secondary sources, these include scientific articles, books and book chapters, as well as newspaper articles.

Brazil's strategic partnerships in the 21st century: new wine in old bottles

The expression 'Strategic Partnership' has been used worldwide for decades now and became an increasingly popular concept in foreign policy formulation and implementation of key international actors. Interestingly enough, as noted by some observers, Brazil stands out as one of the "leading initiators" in the utilization of this concept in its relations with third countries (Pan and Michalski 2019, 266). The origins of Brazilian SPs are intimately linked to the pursuit of the so-called Independent Foreign Policy (*Política Externa Independente*) in the 1960s, during the governments of President Jânio Quadros and João Goulart (Manzur 2014). They emerged from a need to expand and diversify their bargaining power with new allies on the international stage (Lessa and Oliveira 2013). Antonio Carlos Lessa defines SPs as "[...] reciprocally remunerative priority political and economic relations, constituted from a universally configured heritage of bilateral relations" (Lessa 1998, 31). Therefore, the establishment of a given SP combines Brazilian historical positioning towards a "selective universalism" (Vaz 2014, 7) that can enable adaptability and independence on the international stage (Lessa 2010). Indeed, the use of SPs by Brazil has an evolutionary nature and its goals have changed through time (Vaz 2014).

When looking at their historical trajectory, one can notice that they went through several stages. Lessa divides the development of Brazilian SPs into two distinct moments (Lessa 1998). The Post-Second World War period saw the emergence of the concept of SP which was depicted as an "escape valve" (Lessa 1998, 39, Author's translation), allowing Brazil to seek alternative partners on the international stage in order to reduce its vulnerability resulting from excessive dependence on the US (Pinheiro 2000; Spektor 2014). During the post-Cold War, SPs have been described as a moment of "qualification of international insertion" (Lessa 1998, 39, Author's translation). In this second period, Brazil emphasised SP as an essential qualifying condition to interact in the international sphere. Hence the diversification of SPs in Brazilian foreign policy portfolio being understood as an essential tool to expand Brazil's diplomatic options to "change the international status quo, consolidate its profile as an important global actor and enhance its regional presence to foster development and stability in its neighbourhood" (Vaz 2014, 17). Moreover, Brazil's SPs and strategic dialogues currently amount to 21 (Itamaraty 2020a).

At the beginning of the 21st century, Brazil established agreements with several states pertaining to the 'Global South', notably India, South Africa, Iran and Nigeria (Onuki and Oliveira 2013). The search for more robust relations in the South-South axis was stimulated by the absence of direct competitiveness and presence of common goals which facilitated political partnerships (Guimarães 1999, 141 cited in Ramanzini Júnior 2013, 167). Apart from gaining access to new technological know-how and capitals, the diversity of SPs cultivated by Brazil in the two first

decades of the 21st century, both in the Southern and Northern hemispheres (for example, with the European Union), further aimed to promote soft-balancing vis-à-vis great powers to reform the international order and leverage the country's influence on the global stage (Ferreira and Martinez 2013; Ramanzini Júnior 2013; Ferreira-Pereira 2016).

A large part of relevant literature on Brazilian foreign policy stresses the country's quest for autonomy inspired in an universalist outlook and desire to promote economic development (Vaz 1999; Cervo 2003; Vigevani and Cepaluni 2007; Lima and Hirst 2006; Burges 2008; Deciancio 2016). As mentioned earlier, in this study one links autonomy to the pursuit of a foreign policy course free of constraints imposed by powerful states - something that Brazil has historically endeavoured to achieve through the promotion of universalism and multilateralism. Brazilian foreign policy has presented itself as functional and dynamic, establishing non-excluding alliances and following the idea that: "No country can afford to relate only with those with whom she (sic) agrees or with whom the affinities are self-evident" (Amorim 2010, 227). Hence the pragmatism underlying Brazil's foreign policy orientation which in this article, along with Saraiva's understanding, is equated with a specific "form of adapting beliefs to new configurations and challenges in the international order" (Saraiva 2011, 65).

Furthermore, from the Brazilian perspective the world should be wide when it comes to the establishment of SPs. Such non-exclusiveness appears to replicate a relational logic exhibited by emerging countries like China, which encompasses cooperation with countries that endorse different ideologies. Here partners transcend ideological differences, focus on common interests and advocate the "principle of equality and mutual respect" (Pan and Michalski 2019, 270).

Historically speaking, Brazil's international strategies to sustain its pursuit for autonomy have taken different manifestations or stances, as reflected in a copiously acknowledged nomenclature: autonomy through distance, autonomy through participation, and autonomy through diversification (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2012). In the sequence of the coming into power of President Bolsonaro and the rising of the Sino-American competition, one has witnessed major adjustments in Brazil's foreign policy with a bearing on the national autonomist project. While outlining such adjustments, the following section will help to shed light upon how the Brazilian SPs with China and Japan fit into the country's autonomist project in the 21st century.

Brazilian foreign policy in the 21st century at a glance: from Lula da Silva to Jair Bolsonaro

In Brazil, the so-called "search for autonomy", along with the national development project, have been key goals promoted continuously within the Brazilian foreign policy (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2012). Additionally, the objectives pursued by Brazil clearly reflected concerns of elevating national development, preserving the country's autonomy, and influencing decision-making processes on the international stage (Vigevani et al. 2003; Vizontini 2005; Vigevani and Cepaluni 2007;

Pecequillo 2008). Although this autonomist project has undergone strategic variations, Brazil's most international assertive period occurred during the governments of former Presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) (Malamud 2017).

However, with the arrival of Dilma Rousseff to the Presidency of the Republic it is observed that there was a distancing from international affairs and greater focus on domestic instabilities (Oliveira 2015). In 2014, Brazil entered a period of economic recession followed by a political crisis which culminated in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, in 2016 (Amorim Neto 2016). After Vice President Michel Temer took upon Presidency in August of that year, Brazilian foreign policy passed through a sort of course correction regarding the previous PT Administrations. It moved away from South-South policies, regional integration, and became more focused on a neoliberal stance aligned with US interests and other developed states (Rodriguez-Dominguez 2017). That being said, the preference showed by the Temer Administration to draw the country closer to member states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been seen as a pragmatic manoeuvre (Prinsloo 2019). Therefore, Brazil sought to adapt to the new international scenario, marked by the financial recovery of the states located in the Northern hemisphere.

President Temer's government represented a transitional phase, marked by changes in Brazilian foreign policy, some of which consolidated with the coming into power of Jair Bolsonaro to the Presidency of the Republic, in 2019. It is arguable that under President Bolsonaro there was no fundamental inflexion regarding Brazil's approach to the European Union (EU). This is so, considering, on the one hand, in 2019, the signing of the Association Agreement between MERCOSUR and the EU (BRASIL 2019a) and the conclusion of negotiations on the free trade agreement between MERCOSUR and the European Free Trade Association (Ibid); and, on the other hand, that relations between Brazil and the EU, within the framework of the 2007 SP, lingered in a state of limbo since 2015 (Ferreira-Pereira 2021).

It became, however, clear that the alignment with Washington and its allies has grown stronger under President Bolsonaro's foreign policy when compared to his predecessor, Michel Temer (Chatin 2019). Such indefectible alignment mirrored in Brazil's closer ties with countries like Israel, led President Trump to air the designation of Brazil as a "major non-NATO ally" or "maybe a NATO ally" (Noack 2019). On the other hand, Bolsonaro's foreign policy has exhibited signs of disruption with the major tenets of Brazilian foreign policy founded on the promotion of multilateralism and defence for respect for international law (Lopes 2020). The same applies to Brazil's good reputation springing from the country's internationally acknowledged active diplomatic role in the climate change global agenda since RIO 1992. Eventually, Bolsonaro's foreign policy has undermined the country's international status as a mediator, while eroding Brazil's soft power (Chatin 2019). The Amazon fires and deforestations that hit the top of the international politico-diplomatic agenda and world news in the summer of 2019 transformed Brazil - once a global leader in climate change - into a threat.

The Brazil-China strategic partnership

China and the reorganization of the global order

Amidst controversy about Chinese impact worldwide, wavering from a potential global threat to a country that attempts to foster harmonious co-existence with Western countries or is indeed creating a parallel order alternative to the US-led one (Stuenkel 2016), China is increasingly becoming a new epicentre of international relations (Machado et al. 2020). Due to its increased relative relevance, China has sought more significant participation in global governance and propagated a desire to reform the world order, defending the achievement of a greater degree of responsibility and influence in the formulation of the rules that govern the international stage (Abdenur 2014; 2016; Stuenkel 2016).

China's exacerbated economic growth has led the country to become an "engine of global growth" (Cunha 2011, 21, Author's translation). The Belt and Road Initiative, launched in September 2013, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, founded in 2016, have reflected its geopolitical influence in international relations and its craving for leadership (Yu 2017, 2). Although the fundamental goal of these two intertwined initiatives has been expanding China's geo-economic, regional and international political influence, the Asian power has reaffirmed that it only sought insertion in the international realm and does not intend to replace the functions exercised by Western international financial organizations (Yu 2017, 10). It is also important to point out the initiative of the New Development Bank (NDB), which has a highly political character and is an instrument used to legitimise China's multilateralist strategy (Abdenur 2014).

The emergence and development of a strategic partnership

Although formal relations between China and Brazil date back to the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation of 1881 (Oliveira 2004), the bilateral relationship between the two countries remained intermittent until the 1970s (Oliveira 2004). By then, China and Brazil re-established cooperative relations on the basis of converging points of views. Among these points, stood out the "adoption of a realistic and flexible policy, without automatic ideological nor political alignments with any power" (Oliveira 2012, 86). This rapprochement resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations, on August 15th 1974, after the signing of the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Federative Republic of Brazil and the People's Republic of China (Oliveira 2012).

In 1993, during a visit by the Chinese Vice Prime Minister, Zhu Rongji, there was an increase in relations to the level of SP. Brazil was the first state that managed to elevate its cooperative relationship with China to the status of a SP (Pan and Michalski 2019). Although at that time there was no clear economic or political gains at stake, China's stance towards SP was based on

“future-looking quality” and on its perception as a diplomatic tool to invest in “potential beneficial relationships” (Pan and Michalski 2019, 270, 271). In 2012, Brazil-China partnership reached a new level when it was elevated to a global SP as part of the two countries’ response to the financial crisis of 2008 and meant that China recognised “Brazil’s position in the international system and the global role it could perform” (Revelez and Raggio 2020, 84).

China’s rising presence and influence in Latin America has been explained in light of the political-economic convergences (Oliveira 2004). Eventually, it became the leading commercial partner for some countries (Hamaguchi et al. 2018); and such relations with China started to grant some autonomy to Latin America countries vis-à-vis the US, since the Asian power has emerged as an alternative to the US hegemonic influence in the region (Jenkins 2010; Ratke-Majewska 2019). Against this backdrop, the convergence of the Brazil-China SP might be observed when looking at trade between 2001 and 2019 as the trade flow between the two actors rose from US\$ 3.2 billion to US\$ 98 billion (MRE 2020a).

However, there is a duality between Brazil and China, which consists of a competition in exports, the attraction of foreign capital, and the impact on commodity pricing caused by dependence on Chinese growth (Veiga and Rios 2010). From Brazil’s perspective, this duality is translated into both opportunism and mistrust, since its cooperation with China also embeds socio-economic threats, notably “the decrease in the share of domestic producers in domestic markets” (Ratke-Majewska 2019, 116). This is observed in Chinese investment in primary products in the region which would reduce Latin American countries’ economic dynamism, weakening, in the long term, the Latin American economies (Lafargue 2006, 8). This dualism was reflected in the actions of President Jair Bolsonaro, who has politically opposed and aligned with countries rival to China, especially the US, to seek new options for Brazilian development (Gabriel et al. 2019). Moreover, Brazil’s ‘anti-China’ stance in the political arena gained clear visibility regarding the current race to 5G technology and the Covid-19 pandemic.

As far as the 5G technology developed by Huawei is concerned, Brazil’s government has shown indecisiveness whether it will participate in the auction due to happen in June 2021 – a position which lacks technical justification and may cause economic and diplomatic consequences (Castro 2020). On the other hand, Brazil was the 50th country to support the Clean Network Program, an initiative created by the Trump Administration which depicted Huawei as “an arm of the PRC surveillance state” and supports only “trusted vendors” such as, Softbank, Taiwan Mobile, and Nokia, Ericsson, to supply 5G network (U.S. 2020). This alignment with American interests regarding 5G is also represented in the JUSBE, which highlights “a common approach to the use of 5G networks which are transparent, secure and based on free and fair competition and the rule of law” (Itamaraty 2020b, Author’s translation).

Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, Brazil, the country with the second highest number of deaths (Johns Hopkins 2020), became a “potential political minefield” where the debate appears to have moved away from the health arena as Bolsonaro insisted to proclaim his criticism and scepticism towards the Chinese vaccine, CoronaVac, being developed in São Paulo by Instituto

Butantan. This represents an intertwined situation between Bolsonaro's foreign policy stance and his domestic interests. Bolsonaro's criticism towards China manifested abroad since Brazil has supported US in its disputes with China, and also in domestic disputes, since CoronaVac has received the support of João Doria, Bolsonaro's political rival and an almost certain candidate in the presidential elections of 2022 (Wee and Londoño 2020).

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that there has been a sort of pause in Bolsonaro's anti-China political discourse. In 2019, amidst the Amazon fires, China has shown support for Bolsonaro and has pledged that "Brazil had one of the most efficient environmental laws in the world" (Guimarães and Oliveira e Silva 2021, 16). This resulted in a brief rapprochement between Brazil and China that soon fell back into antagonism in the sequence of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. This allows us to make an observation regarding Brazil's current foreign policy: even though the ideological rival found some common ground with Bolsonaro by defending Brazil's national sovereignty, China continued "to be perceived as a foe and this reactivates anti-foe narratives" (Guimarães and Oliveira e Silva 2021, 18).

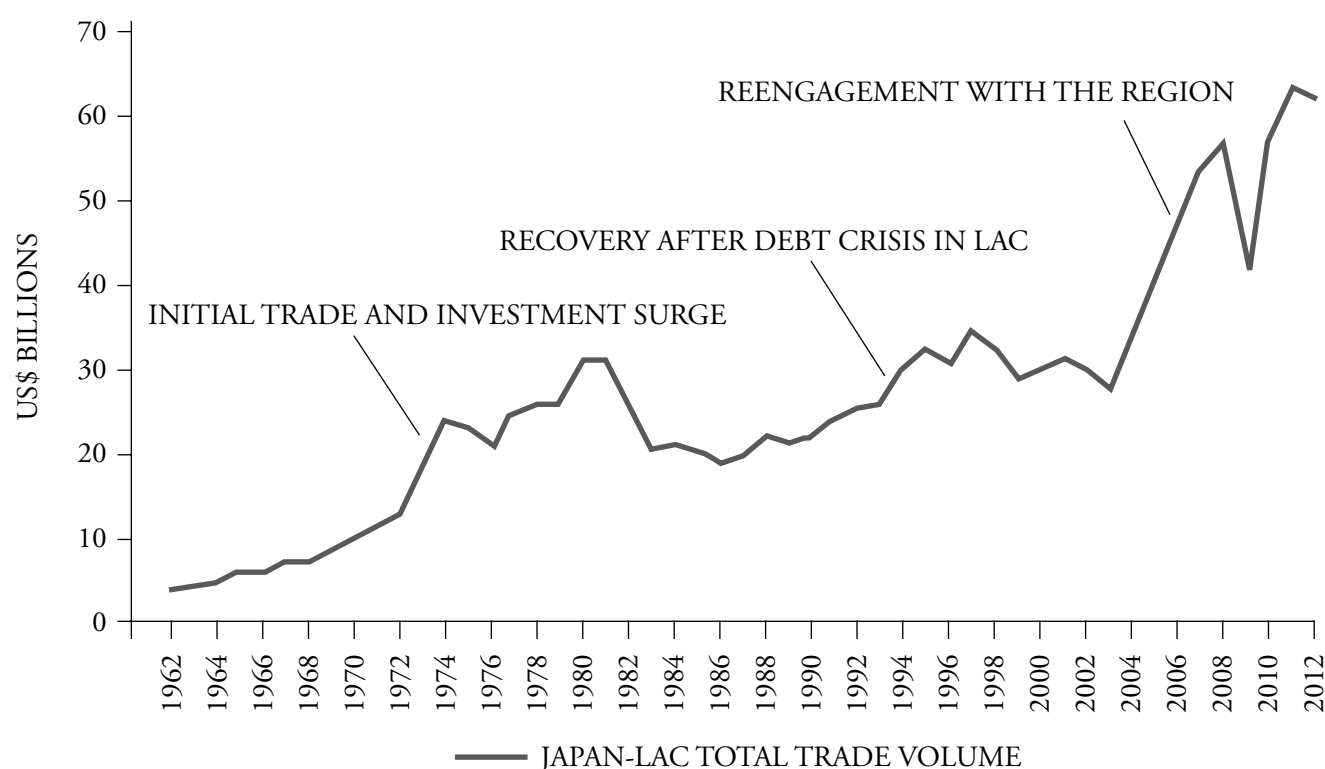
The Brazil-Japan strategic partnership

The roots of a traditional partnership

The relationship between Japan and Latin American countries dates back to the end of the 19th century. As Hamaguchi et al. (2018) mentions, Japan's relationship with Latin America has to do with the migratory movement of people from Japan to Peru and Brazil, resulting in the emigration of approximately 100,000 Japanese, between 1908 and 1924 (Kahn 2016). On the other hand, the economic relationship between Japan and the Latin American region is a phenomenon which is considered recent, dating between 1960 and 1970 (Berríos 2001).

Japan's interest in ensuring safe and stable access to natural resources justifies the maintenance of strategic relations in the Latin American region (Kuwayama 2015). Moreover, the exacerbated Japanese economic growth in the 60s and 70s reflected an interest in increasing its level of influence in the governance of the international stage (Myers and Kuwayama 2016). Thus, Myers and Kuwayama (2016) state that the Latin American region is essential to enable the expansion of Japanese governance and the cooperation model applied in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.

Trade relations between Japan and Latin America fluctuated during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (see Figure 1). However, a new interest arised with the region's rapid recovery from the 2008-2009 crisis combined with the expansion of the domestic market and the reduction of inequality (Myers and Kuwayama 2016).

Figure 1. Trade Volume between Japan and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).

Source: *Japan and Latin America and the Caribbean: Building a Sustainable Trans-Pacific Relationship*, Inter-American Development Bank: Washington, DC, 2013. Based on UN Comtrade data. Cited in Myers and Kuwayama (2016, 3).

This renewed interest in the region was marked by visits made by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, in 2014, to Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia, Chile, and Brazil, as it had been a decade since Prime Minister Koizumi's visit (Hamaguchi et al. 2018). The Japanese initiatives adopted in Latin America were represented by the "Juntos" program, which aimed to emphasise the pursuit for relationships of mutual benefit (Hamaguchi et al. 2018, 36).

It is important to note that Japan has established Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) with crucial partnerships around the globe, including Latin American partners, and these agreements differ from Free Trade Agreements in that they present higher facilitation and cooperation that transcend liberalization investment and trade (Watanabe 2017). It is important to refer that Latin American partners who have EPAs established with Japan (Mexico, Chile, and Peru) are also members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). As far as Brazil is concerned, it is interesting to note that although it is not part of the Asia-Pacific area, Japan is interested in signing an EPA with Brazil. To achieve this goal, in 2015, a roadmap for a Brazil-Japan EPA was established through the National Confederation of Industry in partnership with Japan Business Federation (Keidanren); however, the EPA has not yet been consolidated (Watanabe 2017).

The emergence and development of a strategic partnership

Diplomatic relations between Brazil and Japan celebrated 120 years in 2015, as they were established in 1895 with the signing of the Friendship, Trade, and Navigation treaty (MRE 2020b). Despite being considered a traditional partner of Brazil, a SP was only established with Japan in 2014, with the visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Uehara 2016). The announcement of the elevation of the partnership occurred in a joint statement with former President Dilma Rousseff: “Excited by the celebration, in 2015, of the 120 years of the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Prime Minister and I agreed to raise them to a level of global strategic partnership” (Rousseff 2014, cited in Uehara 2016, 99).

It is important to note that since 2000 relations between Brazil and Japan have advanced to a new level, with the launch of the Japan-Brazil Partnership Program (Sakaguchi 2012). This program consisted of a trilateral cooperation initiative in which both countries sought to produce positive impacts by assisting a third party developing country in achieving a higher development level, which culminated with the launching of the Japan-Brazil Global Partnership for the solution of global issues initiative, in 2010 (Sakaguchi 2012, 227). This program has been beneficial due to its complementary nature, with Japan responsible for financing projects, and Brazil assisting with its knowledge and similarity with the aided states (Uehara 2016). Although former President Rousseff has signed a SP with Japan, President Michel Temer, in 2016, corroborated Brazil’s willingness to ensure priority relations with Japan. This becomes evident with the first trip of a Brazilian Head of State to Japan in 11 years (October 17th, 2016) (Amaral 2016).

Currently, Japan is Brazil’s third-largest Asian trading partner, and, in contrast, Brazil is Japan’s largest trading partner in Latin America (Gabriel et al. 2019). In 2019, Japan was responsible for 2.41% of exports and 2.31% of imports from Brazil, totalling a surplus of US\$ 1,33 billion (MDIC 2019). Notwithstanding, Hamaguchi et al. (2018) mentions that one of the reasons of interest in increasing Japanese presence in Brazil is the growing Chinese influence in the region. Hence, Bolsonaro’s geopolitical alignment with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue¹, which reflects not only fears of growing Chinese presence in Latin America, but also the political alignment with American interests, is further mirrored in the JUSBE.

Brazil’s strategic partnerships in Asia: China and Japan in compared perspective

Based on a compared examination of Brazil’s SPs with China and Japan during the 2003-2020 period, made through the lenses of Pragmatic Institutionalism, it can be said that

¹ This initiative proposed by Japan and involving Australia, India and the US aims at coordinating actions in the “Indo-Pacific” region to “preserve the peace, stability, freedom of navigation and to refrain the militarization promoted by China in the region” (Abe 2012, cited in Gabriel et al. 2019, 6).

Brazilian foreign policy, embedded with a neoliberal institutionalism stance, tends to oscillate constantly between a Hobbesian pole (decreasing the level of institutionalization with a given partner) and a Grotian pole (increasing the level of institutionalization with a given partner), which does not represent a “zero-sum game”, but instead a duality. In other words, one stance does not invalidate the other completely (Pinheiro 2000, 322). Hence Brazilian foreign policy has a dual nature, marked by a “double standard” oscillatory behaviour between its self-interests and international principles (Pinheiro 2000, 320).

Brazil-China's SP was marked by a constant growth in bilateral trade and the increase in the price of commodities between 2003 and 2011, a period that witnessed an emerging Brazil. Yet, it was soon followed by a period of decline, during which deindustrialization and commoditization of the economy made Brazil and other South American countries dependent on the Chinese economy (Veiga and Rios 2010). This so-called dependency is observed in the emphasis on primary resources exports and China's industrial exports overshadowing competition in the region, undermining its industry and subjecting its countries to a “volatile growth” (Stallings 2020, 68).

All this has a negative impact upon the country's international influence (Revelez and Raggio 2020). Therefore, Brazil's SP with China has contributed to curb national autonomist projects since it has affected the country's room for manoeuvre economically and politically. Since the beginning of 2019, Bolsonaro's government began to treat China as an international foe (Guimarães and Oliveira e Silva 2021) and has found itself in the middle of a diplomatic, economic and commercial dispute between China and the US. Eventually, as observed by Revelez and Raggio, the intersection between Brazilian domestic interests and the agenda developed by China and the US will reflect the evolution of Brazil's relationship with these two great powers (2020, 106).

Along these lines, Brazil's SP with China has gone through many fluctuations in the period considered. During the PT era, with the Presidencies of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, Brazilian foreign policy was characterised by activism and reactionism (Lacerda and Nóbrega 2015) and prioritised the Global South. Therefore, to feasibly pursue its autonomy and find an alternative to US dependency, Brazil created institutional arrangements with China based on absolute gains, oscillating its double standard behaviour more towards the Grotian pole. During Michel Temer's short presidential mandate, the choice to prioritise relations with OECD countries and coercion exerted upon South American leftist countries, notably Venezuela, represented a departure from the former pursuit to reform the international order and its Western dominance. As a result, one witnessed an oscillation in the Brazilian foreign policy stance to a more Hobbesian pole, towards the Global South, which includes China. Thus, Temer maintained its relations with China pragmatically, presenting an oscillation between the Grotian and Hobbesian poles, albeit more inclined to the Hobbesian one. However, when Bolsonaro came into power, the Brazilian foreign policy stance towards China appears to have a fixed stance in the Hobbesian pole, seemingly deprived from its double-standard behaviour; therefore, instead of oscillating, Brazil's stance has stagnated in the perception of China as an opposite ideological international foe (Guimarães and Oliveira e Silva 2021, 16).

As for the Japanese SP, it is important to underline that Japan has opted to apply a quality investment strategy in Latin America due to its inability to compete in the number of products offered by China (Kuwayama 2015; Hamaguchi et al. 2018). This way, Japan promotes investment in quality infrastructure, focusing on creating jobs for locals and transferring technology and professionalization (Kuwayama 2015). Moreover, Japan's investment strategy and stimulation of the Brazilian economy has avoided competition with China, presenting cooperative proposals considered complementary to the ones offered by China (Hamaguchi et al. 2018). At the same time, Japanese companies have diversified trade and investment activities in the region; and, in Brazil more specifically, Japan has helped to develop non-traditional exports like soybean, as mentioned earlier (Kuwayama 2015). Anyhow, from the Brazilian perspective, Brazil-Japan SP has been an instrument of soft-balancing Chinese presence in Latin America; and has contributed to Brazil's autonomy. Based on absolute gains, this partnership has a more Grotian nature, seemingly promoting long-term benefits to both countries.

Although a historically traditional partnership, Brazil-Japan relations only became a SP in 2014, under the Presidency of Dilma Rousseff. Since then, the rapprochement with Japan was informed by international principles, therefore, maintaining a stance more prone to the Grotian pole. During Temer's Presidency, the oscillation continued to be more towards the Grotian pole, since Japan represented the type of country with which Brazil wanted to deepen relations: economically and technologically developed and an OECD member. More recently, in the framework of Bolsonaro's Presidency, Brazilian foreign policy towards Japan seems to present a fixed position in the Grotian pole. This is clearly justified by the fact that it is an American ally and thus perceived as a like-minded international partner.

Even bearing in mind that Brazilian foreign policy has a complex and multifaceted tradition resulting from Brazil's colonial history (Guimarães 2020), Bolsonaro's foreign policy stance comes across as a rupture of the traditional Brazilian paradigm. This is the first time in history that far-right conservatism "has found political expression in the country's foreign policy" (Guimarães and Oliveira e Silva 2021, 8). Based on a comparative analysis of the Brazil-China and Brazil-Japan SPs, one could argue that until Bolsonaro took power, the country's foreign policy had constantly oscillated between its double standard behaviour, in order to keep up the country's autonomist project. Yet, since 2019 this behaviour seems to be somewhat fixed/stagnant. Against the backdrop of enormous challenges arising from US and China's disputes and the Covid-19 pandemic, Brazilian foreign policy has showed foreign policy makers' preferences to align with countries with similar ideologies, thereby aggravating critical conditions in the domain of national public health and economy. Therefore, viewed through the Pragmatic Institutionalism, one has ceased to perceive an oscillation between its two-opposing poles (i.e., Grotian and Hobbesian) with Bolsonaro's external strategy maintaining the foreign policy stance stagnant, regardless of the external influences and domestic challenges posed to Brazil.

Therefore, whereas current President Jair Bolsonaro has pledged he would "re-establish an international agenda to rescue Brazil's role in the global scenario" (BRASIL 2019b, Authors' translation), Brazil's post-2019 foreign policy pursuit towards autonomy seems to have ignored

changes in the external and internal background, focusing on ideology. In so doing, the foreign policy stance became fixed in the Grotian pole with allies, and in the Hobbesian pole with ideological foes, turning it, in fact, into a zero-sum game. As a result, although in a somewhat contradictory way, Jair Bolsonaro's Presidency seems willing to maintain Brazil's traditional pursuit for autonomy. But now, such pursuit seems to be undertaken through obstinacy.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the development of Brazil's SPs with China and Japan since Brazil's rise as an internationally recognised emerging political and economic power (2003), until the outbreak and early unfolding of the Covid pandemic (2020). The main goal underlying this study was to explore how these more privileged rapports have contributed to the country's longstanding autonomist project against the backdrop of major developments in global and regional governance. Historically speaking, Brazilian foreign policy pursuit for autonomy has been characterised by adaptation to both external and internal changes and has been implemented through different approaches, notably distance, participation and diversification. Moreover, Brazilian foreign policy pursuit for autonomy has adhered to a pragmatic stance more or less regardless of ideological variations within the Presidency (despite it being right-wing or left-wing oriented). Viewed through Pragmatic Institutionalism, Brazil has constantly presented a double standard position, oscillating from a Grotian stance to a Hobbesian stance, these not being mutually exclusive.

As this study has demonstrated, Brazil's SPs with China and Japan have influenced the country's autonomist project. As far as the Brazil-China SP is concerned, it is clear that although such partnership has generated some benefits, it has negatively affected the core goals of the Brazilian autonomist project. Jair Bolsonaro's Presidency has been vocally critical of China while showing lack of pragmatism, prioritising relative gains and aligning with American interests, particularly those regarding the production of a Covid-19 vaccine and the choice of a 5G technology provider. The SP with Japan, one of America's most esteemed allies, has generated absolute gains and enabled it to counter-balance China's presence in Brazil, which, taken as a whole, has contributed to Brazil's development and autonomy in the international stage. Nevertheless, the Brazil-Japan SP has engendered much less concrete gains than those expected to be earned in a SP framework; it has signalled Brazil's interest in abandoning the Global South priority and pursuing a coalition with American interests.

Since 2019, Brazil's lack of pragmatism when addressing global and regional challenges and the alignment through ideology has put into question the oscillating neoliberal institutionalism of the country's foreign policy. Hence, the argument that Brazil has since pursued autonomy on the basis of a stagnant unilateral stance vis-à-vis each strategic partner considered. On the one hand, Brazil has maintained a stationary Hobbesian stance regarding China, given the perception of this country as an international foe that is undermining national autonomy. On the other hand,

Brazil has maintained a stationary Grotian stance vis-à-vis Japan, as the country is considered an international ally that has been contributing to Brazil's autonomy.

To be sure, Jair Bolsonaro's foreign policy has been mostly guided by an alignment with Washington, prioritising the establishment of partnerships with US allies like Japan, and distancing itself from pragmatism. Although this tendency might experience some adjustments on the sequence of the newly elected Administration of Joe Biden, it has already reflected a distinct approach in the Brazilian quest for autonomy, which we have depicted as autonomy through obstinacy.

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