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## **Burning bridges: The paths to increase Brazil's international status and Bolsonaro's 'new foreign policy'**

*Destruindo pontes: Os caminhos para  
aumentar o status internacional do Brasil  
e a 'nova política externa' de Bolsonaro*

*Destruyendo puentes: Las formas de  
aumentar el estatus internacional de Brasil  
y la 'nueva política exterior' de Bolsonaro*

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### **Abstract**

Brazilian foreign policy has historically held the ambition to achieve higher prestige for the country. Status, however, depends not on one's aspiration, but on how a state is perceived by others. This paper analyses the foreign perceptions about Brazil's search for status and contrasts it with the country's diplomacy under Bolsonaro's administration. It is based on a reflexive thematic analysis of primary data from 94 interviews with the foreign policy community great powers. The article argues that Bolsonaro eroded the main paths powerful nations see as serving for the construction and expansion of Brazil's international prestige.

**Keywords:** Brazil; Brazilian Foreign Policy; International status; Prestige; Jair Bolsonaro.

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## Resumo

A política externa brasileira tem a histórica ambição de aumentar o prestígio do país. Status, no entanto, não depende apenas da aspiração, mas de como um estado é percebido pelos outros. Este artigo analisa as percepções estrangeiras sobre a busca por status do Brasil e contrasta com a diplomacia do governo Bolsonaro. Baseia-se em uma análise temática reflexiva de dados primários de 94 entrevistas com a comunidade de política externa de grandes potências. O artigo argumenta que Bolsonaro corroeu os principais caminhos que as nações poderosas veem como servindo para a construção e expansão do prestígio internacional do Brasil.

**Palavras-chave:** Brasil; Política Externa Brasileira; Status Internacional; Prestígio; Jair Bolsonaro.

## Resumen

La política exterior brasileña tiene la ambición histórica de aumentar el prestigio del país. El estatus, sin embargo, no solo depende de la aspiración, sino de cómo los demás perciben un país. Este artículo analiza las percepciones extranjeras sobre la búsqueda de estatus de Brasil y las contrasta con la diplomacia del gobierno de Bolsonaro. Se basa en un análisis temático reflexivo de datos primarios de 94 entrevistas con la comunidad de política exterior de las grandes potencias. Argumenta que Bolsonaro ha erosionado las principales vías que las naciones poderosas ven como útiles para expandir el prestigio internacional de Brasil.

**Palabras clave:** Brasil; Política Exterior Brasileña; Estatus Internacional; Prestigio; Jair Bolsonaro.

## Introduction – Brazil’s search for international status

For more than a century, one of the main motivations of Brazilian Foreign Policy (BFP) has been to increase the level of prestige and the standing of the state in the stratified international society. Traditional scholarship proposes that the country had many other motivations in its foreign policy, such as the pursuit of development, of an interdependent relation with other countries, autonomy, insertion and an attempt to build consensual hegemony. However, since before independence and the proclamation of the republic in the nineteenth century, the ambition for status has also permeated many of the actions the nation in world (Mares and Trinkunas 2016; Larson and Shevchenko 2014; Stolte 2015; Ricupero 2017; Burges 2017; Rohter 2012; Esteves, Jumbert, and Carvalho 2020; Lafer 2000;





Milani, Pinheiro, and De Lima 2017; Buarque 2022a; Souza 2008; Burges 2017; Buarque 2022b). The theoretical framework of status in IR, however, makes it clear that mere aspiration for status is not enough, as the level of prestige of a nation depends on how it is perceived by other members of the international society (Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Clunan 2014; Renshon 2017; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014).

Although Brazil's international agenda has been marked by the ambition for status, the country was not able to achieve recognition as one of the major powers of the world, even when it was seen as been on the rise between the late 1990s and early 2000s (Esteves, Jumbert, and Carvalho 2020; Mares and Trinkunas 2016; Rohter 2012; Ricupero 2017; Cervo and Lessa 2014). Political and economic crises after 2014 led to a deterioration of Brazil's prestige, and this perceived downfall was further accelerated in 2018, with the election of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), who has been perceived as causing more damage to Brazil's international image, status, and prestige than any other period in the country's history (W. F. H. Chagas-Bastos and Franzoni 2019; Castro 2019; Lafer 2019; Bonin 2021; Passarinho 2021; Carrana 2021; Mendona 2020).

This paper advances the study about the status of Brazil by combining two separate analyses. It discusses perceived ways Brazil could work in order to advance its international status from the perspective of great powers and it assesses the policies of the Bolsonaro administration regarding these suggested paths to improve the prestige of the country. It contributes to the scholarship about the international status of Brazil and to the academic research about the impacts of the controversial Bolsonaro administration to the BFP and to the level of prestige of the country in the world.

The first part of the study is based on a sample analysis of primary data from 94 interviews with members of the Foreign Policy Community (FPC) from the five countries that are permanent members (P5) of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC): United States, United Kingdom, France, China and Russia. It assesses what these beholders in established high status states consider as the strategies Brazil could use in the attempt to increase its global prestige. The second part compares the proposed "bridges" to high status with the actions taken by the country's diplomacy in the first years of Bolsonaro's presidency.

Based on these two analyses, the paper argues that Bolsonaro's administration blocked the work of BFP in developing strategies that the FPC of the P5 perceive as serving for the construction and expansion of Brazil's international status.





The article is divided into four parts. It begins by introducing the theoretical framework of status in international relations used in the analysis. It then presents the research design used to systematically analyse the collected interviews and discusses the data on the perceptions of the FPC of the P5 about paths the country could follow to increase its status, and continues with an assessment of how the election of Bolsonaro radically changed BFP and the strategies regarding the paths the country could follow to gain prestige. A conclusion completes the comparison between the two analyses.

## **Assessing the international status of a state**

The analyses presented here are based on a theoretical framework of status in international relations. IR scholarship regarding status accepts that the behaviour of states is motivated by their interest in their level of prestige, which motivates leaders to pursue agendas that are not entirely explained by other IR theories. The search for status can thus explain actions, reactions and even conflicts between nations (Carvalho 2020; Clunan 2014; Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014; Esteves, Jumbert, and Carvalho 2020; Götz 2020; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014; Renshon 2017).

This scholarship draws from the idea that within IR the status of a state does not reflect simple quantifiable measures of power and wealth but is a result of external perceptions and beliefs about the reality of a state. Traditionally defined as the rank or standing in the hierarchy of a group, status in IR refers to a state's position within a hierarchy of nations and it consists of collective beliefs about a state's standing. Although it does related to valued attributes, it is only recognized intersubjectively, by voluntary deference, referring to the differentiation and rank of states according to their perceived capabilities (Clunan 2014; Götz 2020; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014). This means that status is a result of what people think about the importance of a state, its qualities, power, influence, independently of the factual reality. Status is thus a relational concept reflecting intersubjective evaluations of potential objective qualities (Clunan 2014; Gilady 2017; Murray 2019; O'Neill 1999). Where a state stands in the global stratified society depends not just on what it wants, its power, its wealth and behaviour, but relies fundamentally on how the collective believes of others about the power, identity, intentions and





behaviours of that state (Clunan 2014; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Mitzen 2006; Murray 2019; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014). Hence, this paper does not focus on traditional measures of power or theories of transition of power but focuses on status as an intersubjective attribute dependent on external perceptions.

By approaching status as an intersubjective attribute, it is important to consider the assessment of international images of states and their reputations since status is dependent on external perceptions, beliefs about other's beliefs and foreign recognition of status to exist (Casarões 2020; Clunan 2014; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014).

In order to understand a state's status, thus, one needs to assess the collective recognition of such state by relevant other states (Wohlforth 2014). However, it is impossible to understand the total beliefs of everyone outside such a state, and studies drawing from surveys tend to be more superficial and not to reflect the views of those actively participating in the decisions of the state (Anholt 2007; Aronczyk 2013; 2018; Kaneva 2011; Clunan 2014; Larson and Shevchenko 2019). One means to analyse the intersubjective views about a state is to focus on the qualitative assessments of elite respondents from selected nations in order to understand the perception of a sample of the people responsible for foreign policy decisions in such states, such as the FPC. This allows to understand how the people making decisions think about a given state.

The idea of a FPC is used here as a group of elites such as politicians, diplomats, members of interest groups, leaders of think tanks and NGOs, academics, journalists and businesspeople involved in the international sphere. They can be seen as repositories of collective memories, practices and representations that structure their interaction and discourse. It is true that this community is not homogenous, but they so share a foreign policy field and its imaginary (Esteves and Herz 2020; Esteves, Jumbert, and Carvalho 2020; Souza 2002; 2008).

Based on this framework, this paper builds on a broader study about the status of Brazil from the intersubjective perspective of great powers. It was originally developed by conducting 94 semi-structured interviews with single respondents representing the FPC of the P5. For this paper, however, the focus is not on the general data about the perceived status of Brazil. Instead, it focuses on just one of the themes developed during the analysis of the data. It discusses the strategies the interviewees perceive as the most suitable for Brazil to expand its international status. The following section will detail the process of collecting and analysing the data presented here.





## Research design

This paper is based on a small excerpt of a broader qualitative research about the international status of Brazil developed by conducting 94 semi-structured interviews with the FPC of the P5. It is based on the systematic Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of 60 interviews selected based on their relevance to the general analysis. In total, 12 interviews were selected with sources from each of the countries of the P5. The data was treated as being a general representation of the FPC of the P5.

RTA is a method that allows the researcher find meaning in the interviews and make sense of them using both deductive and inductive approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2012; Clarke and Braun 2017; Braun and Clarke 2019a; 2019b). Based on this method, themes do not passively emerge from data, but are developed and constructed as a result of the reflexive observation of the researcher (Braun and Clarke 2019a; 2019b). The analysis followed a recognized step-by-step guide to conducting this method of qualitative study (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

1. familiarizing with the data;
2. generating initial codes;
3. searching for themes;
4. reviewing themes;
5. defining and naming themes; and
6. producing the report.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted using the NVivo software as an analytical tool when carrying out the analysis of the interviews.

Although most interviewees authorized to be named in the research, codenames were assigned to all informants to offer them anonymity. The files with the transcripts of the interviews were randomly codenamed with initials connected to the country of origin of the interviewees as UK1 to UK12 (with British interviewees), US1 to US12 (American interviewees), CH1 to CH12 (Chinese interviewees), FR1 to FR12 (French interviewees), and RU1 to RU12 (Russian interviewees).

The interviews were conducted between March 2018 and July 2019. The timeframe coincides with the rise of Bolsonaro as a presidential candidate, his election and first months in office. For the original research, however, these developments were not considered, and the interviewees were asked to give their own opinions considering the period between the democratization of the country, in 1989 and the end of 2014. The focus thus was not on the timeframe





discussed in this paper. The analysis of the interviews was used not to discuss the perceptions about Bolsonaro's administration per se, but to understand what the FPC of the P5 perceived as being the best strategies for Brazil to search higher international status.

The most important part of the analysis of these interviews presented in this paper concerns the interviewees views about the paths Brazil could take to try to increase its prestige. This was one of the nine themes developed from the full analysis of the dataset in the broader research project. The theme "Alternative paths to increased status" refers to "alternative" because the main path described by the interviewees was economic development, but they argued there were other policies the country could pursue in its aspirational foreign policy.

The analysis of these perceptions will be complemented in this paper with a discussion about the foreign policy pursued by the country after 2019. It draws from a literature review of studies about the foreign policy implemented by Bolsonaro as well as the analysis of news and opinion pieces related to Brazil's external affairs after the inauguration of the far-right president.

## **Bridges to higher status**

From the perspective of great powers, the best way for a state like Brazil (without a lot of hard power capabilities) to achieve the level of prestige of a great power would be to focus on economic development. However, the perception of the elites that make up the foreign policy of these powerful nations is that even without becoming the economic powerhouse, the state should be able to "pick its fights" in order to improve its reputation and focus on a series of pathways that were seen as legitimate forms for the country to build its prestige and increase its status. The theme "Alternative paths to increased status" was the fourth most prevalent of all the nine themes developed from the full analysis about the international status of Brazil. The theme was developed from codes noted in 53 of the 60 interviews. It is linked to 384 different references to the same general idea.

For the interviewees consulted in this study, the main paths, or "bridges", for Brazil to climb to a higher place in the international stratified society would be: (1) A relevant role in regional leadership; (2) projecting Brazil through multilateralism, building institutional power in different international fora and participating in groups like BRICS and IBSA; (3) the professionalism of





the diplomatic corps of Brazil, recognised as one of the best in the world; (4) participations in UN PeaceKeeping Operations (PKOs); (5) leadership in environmental politics and the fight against climate change; (6) promotion of democracy and promotion of equality through politics; and (7) mediation role in international conflicts.

The table below shows more details about the development of these sub-themes, the codes that were identified in the data and the total number of references related to each one of them. Following that, this section will detail each of the paths proposed by the interviewees, highlighting samples of the arguments presented by the respondents in this research. It is worth noting once more, however, that this is not a quantitative study, but a qualitative reflexive analysis, and the quotes are used more as an illustration of the result of the themes developed from the RTA.

**TABLE 1. Alternative paths to increased status**

Sub-themes	Codes forming the sub-theme	Mentions of the sub-theme in interviews / Number of references to the sub-theme
Regional leadership	Brazil is a leader in Latin America Brazil can play a leadership role in Latin America Brazil failed to have a leadership role in Venezuela Brazil needs to define its role in Latin America Brazil is not like Latin America	35 interviews / 71 references
Multilateralism	Multilateralism Brazil is important in multilateral fora Brazil has a role in shaping multipolarity BRICS can help acquire status Brazil developed institutional power	27 interviews / 94 references
Diplomatic professionalism	Itamaraty is competent and respected Brazil has an independent foreign policy	24 interviews / 54 references
Peacekeeping operations	Brazil has a role in PKOs PKOs can improve the status of Brazil PKOs showed Brazil emerging in IR	20 interviews / 27 references
Environmental politics	Environmental politics as path to higher status Climate change gives Brazil international voice Brazil has image of environmental leadership	16 interviews / 44 references
Democracy, development and equality	Democratic path improves image of Brazil Brazil has been an example of social justice	10 interviews / 17 references
Mediation role	Brazil has a good mediator role	10 interviews / 13 references

Source: Prepared by the author





Regional leadership was the alternative path most of the informants in the study cited for Brazil to build a more relevant role in international politics. For the FPC of the P5, Brazil is the most important country in South America, should be a natural leader in Latin America, and has in some parts assumed this role. However, they perceive differences between the country and its neighbours, and argue that at some points the role of Brazil within the region seems undefined, or the country was unable to assume this leadership position. The status of the leader of Latin America would be an important first step to allow for a stronger role for Brazil in global relations, according to many informants. “Brazil probably has to play more of an active role regionally and be taken more seriously. Not before it can pursue global aspirations, but as a complement to it, or as a building block to it”, explained a senior fellow at Brookings Institute (US11).

Multilateralism was the second most prevalent of the sub-themes related to paths the state could follow to increase its status. The FPC of the P5 viewed multilateral relations as important for Brazilian projection and argued the country could have an important standing within this multipolarity: “Brazil plays an important role in shaping a multipolar world”, argued a professor of International Relations at the People’s Friendship University of Russia (RU1). “Brazil has had a very important role in trying to democratise the international order”, said a professor at the American University, in Washington, DC (US1). The presence in international institutions was also important for many of the interviewees. The most important idea was that Brazil was able to develop power and important role within different institutions such as the UNSC (as a temporary member), the WTO, and others: “It is a very representative country of emerging economies that intends to play a more important role in global organizations, wanting to increase their participation and increase their weight in the decision of international rules and norms”, argued a researcher of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CH2). The third sub-theme within this analysis was the idea that groups of nations such as BRICS can help Brazil acquire status. It was particularly relevant for informants from China and Russia, nations that appear along with Brazil in the grouping, but also from a critical perspective of informants from the US. “BRICS was one of the profile poster children for emerging markets, emerging countries. It definitely put that into the minds of policy makers”, explained a director of analysis at Geopolitical Futures (US3).

From the perspective of great powers, Brazil’s Ministry of Foreign Relations is one of the best in the world, and the very competent work of Brazilian diplomats





would be able to help project the country in the rest of the world and increase its prestige. “The Brazilian foreign service is one of the best in the world, with some very bright people and, a little like some of the European services, has traditionally employed and recruited the elite”, argued a former British Consul General in Sao Paulo (UK6). “The diplomatic corps of Brazil is very impressive, they are very able people, very well educated”, said the chief economics commentator at the Financial Times (UK7). “Itamaraty is the most powerful foreign ministry in the world”, explained a president emeritus and senior fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue (US10). “Brazil’s role is built by one of the best diplomatic corps in the world”, argued a professor at the Faculté de Philosophie et Sciences Sociales of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (FR6).

Participating in PKOs was another of the main bridges Brazil could use to improve the level of its international prestige. The main ideas discussed were that Brazil has an important role in PKOs, and that these showed Brazil emerging in global affairs and they could improve the status of the country. This was particularly relevant when discussing the role of the state in Minustah, the UN operation in Haiti, which Brazil led for more than a decade. “I would like to see a stronger Brazilian military presence in UN peacekeeping operations. Brazil at that stage could afford to lift its profile and demonstrate a presence, and influence and impact”, explained a former British ambassador to Brazil (UK3). The presence in these missions was considered a form of projection of national power at a time when Itamaraty was seeking to open new spaces for Brazil in international organizations.

Building on the importance of the Amazon Forest and on the role the country had hosting Rio92 and Rio + 20 climate summits, great powers perceive environmental politics as one important means for Brazil to build a stronger international status. The main ideas proposed by the FPC of the P5 were that Brazil has a strong image of environmental leadership, that environmental politics are a possible path to higher status, and that the global debate about climate change gives Brazil an important international voice. “It has a global role in the sense that it is part of important countries on the global issues like climate change, in creating policy. It is a player in the larger global processes”, argued a senior vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (US5). “There is a huge influence there on the ecosystem. And its own right and the influence of the Amazon on the world. So, there is part of it that says that whether you like it or not, is actually really important”, said the CEO of Canning House (UK9).





The sub-theme “Democracy, development and equality as paths for status” focused on the positive examples of the country in the turn of the century. The period of the so-called rise of Brazil in the international stage in the late 1990s and early 2000s coincided with one of the longest political and economic stabilities of the recent history of the country, with peaceful alternation of parties in power and a continuation of democratic rule. This was mentioned as one of the possible paths Brazil could use to improve its international status. The main ideas proposed were that the democratic path improves the international image of Brazil, and that in the early 2000s the country managed to become an example of social justice. “People have a somewhat positive view of Brazil, they admire its, at least until recently, democratic path, that it is a large and diverse country that has managed to be a diverse democracy”, argued a senior vice-president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (US5).

Within a context in which Brazil would be able to achieve higher status through its role in multilateralism and the high level of competence of its diplomatic staff, one specific path the country had to improve its international prestige was its attempt to offer peaceful solution to conflicts around the world. According to the informants in this research, the mediation role of Brazil could be a path to higher status. “There are examples where Brazil has stepped in diplomatically to try to get a consensus amongst members within the region, where it has tried to broker peace talks”, argued the CEO of Canning House (UK9). “Brazil has built a role, at least until now, as a peaceful country, mediator of conflicts, and that seeks to favor the development of peace in the world”, explained a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (FR6).

The following section of this paper will contrast these perceived paths for the increase of the prestige of Brazil with the foreign policies pursued by Bolsonaro after his inauguration in 2019. The argument is that a lot of what has been proposed as a new BFP goes against the paths perceived by the FPC of the P5.

## **Burning the bridges**

Many of the different paths suggested by the FPC of the P5 have long been a part of Brazil’s foreign policy repertoire in its historical attempt to put the state at the centre of the most important global decisions. After decades of continuity of the Brazilian foreign policy in the state’s long search for international status,





economic stability and successful strategies to strengthen the power of Brazil's international voice, by 2010 the country was globally perceived as being on the rise. It is true that national protests erupted across Brazil in 2013, starting to change this trend, and that political and economic crises would mean a loss to the international prestige of the country after 2014 (Cervo and Lessa 2014; Zanini 2017; Buarque 2022a; Mares and Trinkunas 2016). But it was the election of Bolsonaro, in 2018, that promoted unprecedented changes to the foreign policy, the external perceptions and the status of the country (Buarque 2022b; Carrança 2021; Passarinho 2021).

Bolsonaro's controversial administration was influenced by a far-right nationalistic ideology and has attempted to reinvent the traditions of Brazilian diplomacy (Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021; W. F. H. Chagas-Bastos and Franzoni 2019; Scherer 2021; Vidigal and Bernal-Meza 2020; Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021; de Freixo 2019; Gonçalves and Teixeira 2020). Since his inauguration, Bolsonaro challenged the established traditions of the country's foreign policy leading to questioning the widely disseminated assumption of the bureaucratic isolation of Itamaraty and changing Brazil's conceptions of global politics of the international community (Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021; Lafer 2019; Castro 2019). He attempted to systematically dismantle the Brazil's profile as mediator and negotiator of conflicts and a potential voice for those in the Global South, trying to undo longstanding diplomatic traditions of multilateralism, pragmatic and universal relations, and peaceful settlement of disputes (Casarões and Flemes 2019).

All this transformation was part of the plan of his first minister of Foreign Relations, Ernesto Araújo, who believed in conspiracy theories of "globalism" and wanted Brazil to change the course of its international insertion with focus on nationalism and leaving behind the search for status and going as far as proposing that it could be acceptable for the country to become an "international pariah" (Della Coletta 2020; Araújo 2020; Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021).

The results of Bolsonaro's so-called new BFP have been visibly erratic, at times incoherent and contradictory (Casarões and Flemes 2019; W. F. H. Chagas-Bastos and Franzoni 2019). The result has been a loss of the country's international status, with the decline of its standing in all international indexes and surveys about the country's image (Gonçalves and Teixeira 2020; de Lima and Albuquerque 2019; Passarinho 2021). Within this broader project to ascertain Brazil's level of prestige from the perspective of great powers, the FPC of the P5 viewed Brazilian





diplomacy as being turned upside-down, affecting the position of the country. The transformation of BFP after the election of Bolsonaro was perceived as a radical change by observers from great powers. One of the changes that most surprised informants in discussing the transformation of Brazilian diplomacy was the reversal of focus from the search for prestige (Buarque 2022b). This is particularly important because the new BFP appears to go against what the FPC of the P5 perceive as being the main paths the country could follow in order to achieve the higher status it historically aspired for.

This paper advances the discussion about the changes in the BFP under Bolsonaro by addressing how his administration abandoned the traditional strategies the country had been using to advance its status. Although both the president and his cabinet often defended a projection that improves the prestige of the country (Araújo 2020; Bolsonaro 2021), the actions of this administration appear to have had the opposite effect. This section assesses how Bolsonaro abandoned these paths seen as the most likely to help increasing the level of prestige of the country. The analysis shows how Bolsonaro's foreign policy led the country away from these paths, in what could be understood as "burning" all that has been pointed as possible bridges to achieve higher status.

**Regional leadership:** The regional dimension built within BFP in the past decades was quickly disrupted by Bolsonaro. As soon as April 2019 the country formalized its exit from Unasur. This fact initiated a series of government actions to include its ideological agenda in bilateral and multilateral relations (Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021). This weakened the role of Brazil within the region, as it grew apart from nations with leaderships that followed different ideologies and was not able to be seen in the rest of the world as representing its neighbours. Not only that, but the changes to BFP broke away from a tradition of non-involvement in other nation's domestic matters, especially in the region. The new direction given to BFP led the country to interfere in the crises in Venezuela and Bolivia and to take sides in the Argentinian presidential elections, regretting the victory of Alberto Fernández (Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021). Such actions weakened the role of Brazil within the region and made it difficult for it to use a supposed leadership in representing South or Latin America in global politics.

**Multilateralism, international institutions and BRICS:** These three paths identified by the FPC of the P5 went through profound transformation after Bolsonaro came to power. Since he became president, he followed Donald Trump's rhetoric against international institutions, adopting the anti-globalist narrative. Bolsonaro





diplomacy included a total rejection to the ideal of multipolarity that dominated previous administrations (Spektor 2019). This position is justified by the idea that it is based on an unequal power relationship, and is framed as an ideological fight against an enemy, as the institutions are seen as supported by globalists and their left-wing sympathizers (Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021).

This change in the BFP also affected the relations with BRICS. Apart from the rejection to multilateralism in general, and the strong alliance with the US under Trump, Brazil drifted away from the other big emerging nations because one of the main foes selected by the Bolsonaro's ideology has been China. The country has been seen as the one of Brazil's most important ideological rivals –even though it is Brazil's number one trading partner (Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021; Casarões and Flemes 2019). The strong alignment with the US, however, stopped being an option for the Bolsonaro's foreign policy ideology after the election of Joe Biden. The Brazilian described his counterpart as a leftist globalist and continued to adopt a rhetoric close to the one of Trump (Saxena and Costa 2020; Chaib 2020; Iglesias 2020).

**Professionalism and competence of Itamaraty:** Until the rise of Bolsonaro to power, there was a relative stability in the country's foreign policy, and it was believed that Itamaraty was bureaucratically isolated and protected from political changes in the country (Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021). Since 2019, an aggressive conservative agenda was implemented within Itamaraty, breaking away from its traditional isolation and independence. Once in office, Araújo challenged Itamaraty's rigid hierarchical structure and made it play a new role in Brazil, acting as a political shield to the president domestically and abroad (F. H. Chagas-Bastos 2019). While Brazilian diplomacy traditionally sought to be accepted and admired in certain diplomatic circles, under Bolsonaro it changed position to stand against supranational systems as Bolsonaro and Araújo's goal was to change what they saw as a globalist conspiracy happening within traditional Brazilian diplomacy (Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021). Itamaraty went through an unprecedented bureaucratic reshuffling, excluding whoever disagreed with the new directives (Casarões and Flemes 2019; de Freixo 2019; de Lima and Albuquerque 2019).

**Participation in UN PKOs:** With the break in the traditional BFP directives under the far-right president, the country stood away from multilateralism and international cooperation, abandoning the defence of universalism and pacifism, and this had direct effect in the country's participation in PKOs (Campos 2019).





The end of Minustah in 2017 started to change the level of presence of the country in PKOs, but the Bolsonaro administration practically ended any role of Brazil in these operations. In 2021, for the first time since 2004 Brazil did not have a robust participation in UN peace missions (Brant and Machado 2020; Godoy 2020). Brazilian participation dropped 72% in 2020 in terms of number of soldiers, and the budget for these missions dropped 70%. (Godoy and Beraldo 2020; Brant and Machado 2020). After the election of Bolsonaro, PKOs were understood by some in the government as an unnecessary expense, in a moment when it was more important to focus in a domestic agenda (Campos 2019).

**Environmental leadership:** The reputation Brazil built over decades was abandoned by Bolsonaro, who changed the position of Brazil, ordered that the country should not host another global summit on the environment, oversaw the deregulation of protection of the natural resources of Brazil and a huge increase in deforestation and destruction in the Amazon. The situation affected the perceptions about Brazil and global businesses have threatened to boycott Brazilian products due to its environmental policy (Ziady 2021). His climate agenda is marked by scientific denialism and strong enthusiasm for environmental destruction (Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021).

**Democracy, development and equality:** The fourth largest democracy of the world has been under threat since the inauguration of Bolsonaro (*Human Rights Watch* 2021). The far-right politician raised a campaign to discredit the national voting system, threatened a military coup and said “only god” would be able to remove him from power (‘Bolsonaro ameaça o STF de golpe, exorta a desobediência à Justiça e diz que só sai morto’ 2021). The domestic threats have created international criticism. France has rejected signing a deal with Mercosur because of Bolsonaro’s positions (Momtaz and Vela 2019), Joe Biden’s administration warned against undermining elections in the country (Boadle 2021) and an open letter of political leaders from different parts of the world have warned for the risks of the country falling into authoritarianism (Wintour 2021). The election of Bolsonaro constituted the most consequential cycle since the end of the military dictatorship in the 1980s (Weizenmann 2019). The president has deeply illiberal inclinations, his discourse was openly authoritarian, constituting a direct threat to Brazilian democracy (Hunter and Power 2019; Weizenmann 2019). As an elected official, he combined a sense of aggrievement with contempt for the norms and limits of democracy (Pagliarini 2021). Bolsonaro is associated with the emergence of a new form of would be autocrat who is democratically





elected but who hollows out democratic rule over time (Daly 2020; Winter 2020; Weizenmann 2019).

It is true that Bolsonaro's election marked not the beginning of a democratic crisis for Brazil, but the punctuation and intensification of a process of decay that has affected the country's democratic system for some time, involves far more actors, and is far more multi-directional and diffuse than simple unilateral executive action (Hunter and Power 2019; Daly 2020). Still, his style, rhetoric and illiberal agenda are enough to completely break from the possibility the country had to use democracy as a path to project international prestige.

**Peaceful mediation role:** Although this is a controversial path, since Brazil's stance in trying to broker a peace deal between Iran and the West and its position in regards to peace in the Middle East were not recognised as important enough by great powers (Lampreia 2014), this is an area that was used to project Brazil, but that has also been changed. Bolsonaro modified this national agenda and adopted an interventionist and bellicose discourse, both domestically and internationally. This position is clear in the support for the Israeli government and in its action towards the Palestinian peoples. It is also evident in the support for the US actions, under the pretext of that the latter would be defending the West.

## Conclusion

Brazilian foreign policy has undergone radical changes since 2019, when Bolsonaro rose to power, altered the priorities and alignments of Brazil's international position, picked fights with historic allies, threatened important economic relations and affected the way the country is seen in the rest of the world. This paper contributes to the scholarship about the international status of Brazil and to the academic research about the impacts of the controversial Bolsonaro administration to the BFP and to the level of prestige of the country in the world. Based on a sample of a broader analysis of interviews with the FPC of the P5, it focused on what these respondents representing the views of great powers perceive as being the strategies Brazil could use to try to advance its international status and compared these to the actual policies adopted within the so-called new BFP under Bolsonaro.

This study argues that Bolsonaro's administration eroded the main paths the great powers see as serving for the construction and expansion of Brazil's





international prestige. The unprecedented changes the president promoted in BFP either neglected or abandoned the importance of regional leadership in Latin America, the defence of multilateralism, a strong presence in international institutions and BRICS, the professionalism tradition of Itamaraty, a strong role in PKOs, a leadership environmental policy, the defence of democracy, and a role in mediation of international conflicts.

This analysis is an excerpt of a more detailed study about the status of Brazil from the perspective of great powers. It focuses on the paths these powerful nations see as appropriate for Brazil to build its global prestige. This paper fills a gap in the literature about international status by focusing on the perception elites in powerful nations have about how a country can climb the stratification of international society. It is also an important contribution to the developing scholarship about the impacts of the Bolsonaro administration to Brazil and its relations to the rest of the world.

The study has limited scope, however, since it is based on a small-n qualitative study and may not tell a complete story about the perceptions of Brazil. At the same time, it is based on interview data collected in the first months of Bolsonaro's administration and is not able to fully grasp the perceptions the FPC of the P5 have about him.

Further research can develop a more complete analysis about the perceptions of the transformation of Brazil by conducting further interviews with elite policymakers in these powerful nations about Brazil. It will also be important to continue the study to assess the long-term impacts of the changes discussed in this paper. With Bolsonaro's defeat and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's election in 2022, a new government promised to return BFP to its traditional path, and it will be important to understand how difficult this may be after four years of bridges being burned.

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