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Brazilian Agribusiness Diplomacy and the Limits of Ideological Foreign Policy under Bolsonaro (2019-2022)

Quando o agro freia a ideologia: diplomacia do agronegócio e política externa no governo Bolsonaro (2019–2022)

Cuando el agro frena a la ideología: diplomacia del agronegocio y política exterior en el gobierno de Bolsonaro (2019–2022)

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Abstract

Recent studies show that agribusiness became a relevant foreign policy actor under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), but less is known about the content of its positions across issues. This article examines the Congressional Agribusiness Caucus (Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária, FPA) in four domains: Amazon deforestation, China, the United States, and Israel and Arab countries, and develops "Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy" as

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an analytical framework. Drawing on 12,084 legislative and executive statements and supervised ideological scaling (Wordscores), we compare the FPA's positions with those of the executive core. The FPA was more pragmatic than the executive on China, the United States, and the Amazon, but converged with the ideological core on Israel. Agribusiness moderation was therefore issue dependent: it prevailed where commercial interests were at stake and weakened where political and religious identities came into play.

Keywords: Brazilian foreign policy, Agribusiness, Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária, Bolsonaro, Wordscores.

Resumo

Estudos recentes mostram que o agronegócio se tornou um ator relevante da política externa no governo de Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), mas pouco se sabe sobre o conteúdo de suas posições em diferentes temas. Este artigo examina a Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (FPA) em quatro domínios: desmatamento da Amazônia, China, Estados Unidos e Israel e países árabes, e desenvolve a "diplomacia do agronegócio brasileiro" como arcabouço analítico. Com base em 12.084 discursos do Legislativo e do Executivo e no escalonamento ideológico supervisionado (Wordscores), comparamos as posições da FPA com as do núcleo do Executivo. A FPA foi mais pragmática que o Executivo em relação à China, aos Estados Unidos e à Amazônia, mas convergiu com o núcleo ideológico no caso de Israel. A moderação do agronegócio dependeu, portanto, do tema: prevaleceu quando havia interesses comerciais em jogo e perdeu força quando identidades políticas e religiosas foram mobilizadas.

Palavras-chave: Política externa brasileira, Agronegócio, Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária, Bolsonaro, Wordscores.

Resumen

Estudios recientes muestran que el agronegocio se convirtió en un actor relevante de la política exterior durante el gobierno de Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), pero se sabe poco sobre el contenido de sus posiciones en distintos temas. Este artículo examina el Frente Parlamentario Agropecuario (FPA) en cuatro ámbitos: la deforestación de la Amazonía, China, Estados Unidos e Israel y los países árabes, y desarrolla la "diplomacia del agronegocio brasileño" como marco analítico. Con base en 12.084 declaraciones legislativas y ejecutivas y mediante escalamiento ideológico supervisado (Wordscores), comparamos las posiciones del FPA con las del núcleo del Ejecutivo. El FPA fue más pragmático que el Ejecutivo respecto de China, Estados Unidos y la Amazonía, pero convergió con el núcleo ideológico en el caso de Israel. La moderación del agronegocio dependió, por lo tanto, del tema: predominó

cuando había intereses comerciales en juego y se debilitó cuando se activaron identidades políticas y religiosas.

Palabras clave: Política exterior brasileña, Agronegocio, Frente Parlamentario Agropecuario, Bolsonaro, Wordscores.

Introduction[3]

Brazil's agricultural sector occupies a central place in the national economy and has exerted growing influence over the country's foreign policy. In a context of global interdependence, diplomatic and trade decisions directly shape agribusiness interests and competitiveness. A growing literature has shown that agribusiness became a relevant foreign-policy actor under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), identifying the organizations and legislative channels through which it operated. Much less is known, however, about the content of its positions and how they varied across issues.

This article analyzes how agribusiness engaged with Brazilian foreign policy across four thematic axes: (1) Amazon deforestation, (2) relations with China, (3) relations with the United States, and (4) relations with Israel and Arab countries. To do so, it examines the *Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária* (Congressional Agribusiness Caucus, FPA), the main legislative representative of agribusiness, during the Bolsonaro government.

In doing so, we propose the model, previously used in other contexts, of "*Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy*," understood as the coordinated attempt by sector actors to shape how foreign policy is designed, carried out, and justified to the public whenever international decisions touch their economic interests, market access, or image abroad. It is not a unified doctrine but the product of material interests, political identities, and institutional access to foreign policymaking. Its positions may therefore align with or depart from the Executive's, depending on the issue.

We demonstrate that although the FPA was one of the main parliamentary bases of support for Bolsonarism, its foreign-policy positions were often more

3 The authors used a generative artificial intelligence tool (Claude, Anthropic) solely for language revision and editing of the manuscript, including improvements to clarity, concision, and consistency of citations and references. The tool was not used to collect or analyze data, generate findings, or develop the article's arguments.

pragmatic than those of the government's ideological core. This was especially evident on issues such as relations with China and the United States and Amazon deforestation, all directly tied to agribusiness commercial interests. On the issue of Israel and Arab countries, the rural sector aligned more closely with the government's ideological core, suggesting that commercial interests do not always prevail. Overall, the FPA acted as a moderating force where commercial stakes were high, but not across the board. Its foreign-policy behaviour followed an issue-dependent pattern, shaped by the relative weight of material interests and political identities in each case.

Methodologically, the article combines qualitative discourse analysis with supervised ideological scaling (Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003). The corpus comprises 12,084 statements by FPA and non-FPA legislators, the Presidency, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2019 and 2022. Quantitative estimates are interpreted against qualitative readings of representative speeches and key foreign policy episodes.

The next section reviews the literature on Bolsonaro's foreign policy and on agribusiness as a foreign policy actor. Section 2 discusses the institutional role of the FPA, and Section 3 presents the framework, method, and results. The conclusion discusses the implications of the findings.

1. Jair Bolsonaro's Foreign Policy

The literature on Jair Bolsonaro's presidency largely agrees that his foreign policy represented an unprecedented break with Brazil's diplomatic tradition. Matias Spektor (2019) anticipated that it would be a phase marked by discontinuities, and subsequent authors confirmed this prediction. Hirst and Maciel (2022), Casarões (2021), Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro (2019), and Guimarães and Silva (2021) describe Bolsonaro's foreign policy as the most disruptive since the proclamation of the Republic. This rupture manifested itself both in the replacement of historical principles, such as multilateralism, non-intervention, and pragmatism; and in the adoption of an identity-based, religious, and ideological orientation.

According to Hirst and Maciel (2022), Bolsonaro's foreign policy rested on three pillars: an ideological core aligned with the international far right, a liberal-conservative economic agenda that privileged agribusiness, and a security policy oriented toward militarization and conservative alliances. Together, these

elements produced a personalistic and ideologized diplomacy marked by affinities with leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Casarões (2021) characterizes the group responsible for foreign policy — Ernesto Araújo, Filipe Martins, Eduardo Bolsonaro, and Olavo de Carvalho as an "anti-globalist troika," driven by Christian fundamentalism and limited diplomatic experience. Guimarães and Silva (2021) further argue that the government reframed national identity through conservative Christianity, opposing liberal, environmentalist, and universalist values. Similarly, Mongelli et al. (2024) show that while Bolsonaro's foreign policy reproduced identities typical of the Western far right, it contrasted with the more pragmatic and multilateral orientation of other Global South populisms, such as India under Narendra Modi.

Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro (2019) argue that the Bolsonaro government instrumentalized diplomacy to mobilize its domestic electoral base, transforming foreign policy into a tool of symbolic politics. Guimarães et al. (2023) further show that this strategy was structured around an evangelical model combining anti-globalism, conservative values, and alignment with the United States and Israel, an orientation that frequently clashed with agribusiness interests. Similarly, Saraiva, Wehner and Guimarães (2024) demonstrate that Bolsonaro's engagement with regional organizations reflected a populist calculus, oscillating between confrontation and pragmatism depending on domestic costs and the preferences of allied groups.

In turn, Saraiva and Silva (2019) highlight the resulting tensions between ideological and pragmatic components of foreign policy, showing that while the "olavista" core sought to impose a conservative and anti-globalist agenda, military, economic, and parliamentary actors acted as moderating forces. The coexistence of multiple autonomous actors ultimately limited the scope of ideological diplomacy, reinforcing the primacy of economic pragmatism.

A growing body of work has examined agribusiness as a foreign-policy actor, and the FPA in particular. Gonçalves and Madureira (2023) trace how the CNA, the FPA, and the IPA shaped Bolsonaro's foreign policy across episodes such as the Paris Agreement, the Amazon fires, the Mercosur–EU negotiations, and the proposed embassy move to Jerusalem, portraying the sector as a moderating force. Loureiro (2022) demonstrates how agribusiness and manufacturing entrepreneurs sought to influence different foreign-policy agendas. Gonçalves, Madureira and Silva (2025) provide the first systematic mapping of the FPA's formal foreign-policy activity, identifying 128 proposals in the Chamber of Deputies between 2015 and

2022 and showing that the caucus relies mainly on information requests and committee reports, overwhelmingly on trade matters. Gonçalves (2026) situates this activity in a longer trajectory, showing how domestic public policies since 2003 built the sector's capacity to shape Brazil's international agenda. Pompeia (2020), in turn, shows that agribusiness political action rests on a concerted but heterogeneous structure led by the IPA, the FPA, and the CNA, and notes that sector leaders saw the Foreign Ministry's criticism of China and its rapprochement with Israel as threats to commodity exports.

Together, these studies establish that the FPA is a relevant foreign-policy actor and identify the channels through which it operates. They leave open, however, the content and variation of its positions. Existing accounts either reconstruct selected episodes qualitatively or map formal legislative instruments, without measuring what the caucus actually said on each issue or comparing it with the positions of the government's ideological core. As a result, the moderation thesis has been generalized across issues rather than tested issue by issue. We still do not know systematically on which issues agribusiness converged with Bolsonaro's ideological diplomacy, on which it diverged, and by how much.

This is where the present article makes its contribution. Rather than asking whether the FPA mattered, it asks where and how its positions varied. Drawing on 12,084 statements and supervised ideological scaling, we compare the FPA with the executive core across four issue areas and show that moderation was issue-specific: strong on China, the United States, and the Amazon, but absent on Israel, where the caucus moved closer to the government's ideological wing.

2. The *Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária* (FPA) and Its International Role

Since the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, Brazil's agribusiness sector has increased its political influence by coordinating action across domestic and international arenas. This process expanded the sector's engagement with the state, particularly in WTO negotiations, and strengthened its institutional presence within the Ministry of Agriculture through specialized bodies dedicated to international agricultural policy (Iglécias 2007; Carvalho 2010; Machado 2009). The creation of the FPA institutionalized agribusiness influence within the legislature. Characterized as a formalized lobbying actor operating across multiple decision-making arenas,

the FPA is able to affect foreign policy by signaling support for or resistance to executive positions at both domestic and international levels (Pflug 2009; Siebeneichler 2021a).

Gonçalves and Madureira (2023) show that the FPA is embedded in a broader institutional ecosystem that includes organizations such as the Instituto Pensar Agro (IPA), the Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil (CNA), and the Conselho do Agronegócio (CONSAGRO). Through advisory, representational, and technical roles, these organizations link agribusiness interests to governmental forums, forming a dense network of political and technical influence over foreign policy decision-making. Mancuso et al. (2024) analyze the relationship between agribusiness power and parliamentary behavior, identifying the FPA as a key channel of institutionalized influence. Combining instrumental and structural power approaches, they show that while agribusiness wields significant influence over the legislative agenda, this power remains mediated by party affiliation and individual-level factors.

During the Bolsonaro administration, the relationship between the FPA and the Executive was marked by ambiguity. Although the Caucus formally endorsed Bolsonaro's presidential candidacy in 2018 (FPA 2018) and sectoral allies occupied strategic positions, such as Tereza Cristina at MAPA and Nabhan Garcia at the Secretariat for Land Affairs, agribusiness frequently diverged from the government on sensitive issues. While the Executive flirted with isolationism and environmental denialism, the FPA generally advocated diplomatic predictability and market openness. Gonçalves and Madureira (2023) emphasize that the sector sought to contain the government's ideological impulses in order to avoid commercial and reputational damage, acting as a moderating force between ideology and pragmatism.

This stance was reflected in the institutional reorganization of foreign policy. Environmental agendas were downgraded within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a Department for the Promotion of Agribusiness was created, signalling a diplomatic orientation explicitly geared toward the export sector (MRE 2019). The decline of environmental issues in the *Resenhas de Política Externa* confirms this shift (Siebeneichler 2021b). In this context, the FPA functioned as an intermediary between the Executive and the business community, seeking to protect Brazil's international image and secure access to foreign markets.

From the 2010s onward, the FPA consolidated its legislative influence by occupying strategic seats on the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committees

of both the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate. In 2021, approximately 60% of CREDN members were also affiliated with the FPA (Siebeneichler 2021a), granting the sector privileged access to debates on trade, environmental policy, and food security. During the Bolsonaro legislature, the Caucus comprised 290 legislators, 39 senators and 251 deputies, making it one of the most influential organized groups in Congress (Brasil 2023).

In the end, the FPA formally supported Jair Bolsonaro's presidential candidacy in 2018 and became a central base of congressional support for his government (FPA 2018). Despite this alignment, the literature has not systematically examined how and on which issues the FPA has acted in foreign policy. While existing studies have mapped the channels of FPA influence, they have not compared the content of its foreign-policy positions with those of the executive across issues. This article addresses that gap.

3. Methodology and Results

Building on the definition introduced above, we treat Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy as a pattern that varies by issue, converging with or diverging from the Executive depending on what is at stake. The Bolsonaro administration offers a revealing context in which to observe it, that is, the FPA was both one of the government's main congressional constituencies and the representative of a sector highly dependent on international markets. The four issue areas examined below show how this tension played out according to the interests and identities each issue activated.

The Bolsonaro administration provides a particularly revealing context in which to observe this pattern. The FPA was simultaneously one of the government's main congressional constituencies and the political representative of a sector highly dependent on international markets. This combination created recurrent tensions between political and ideological affinity with the government and the need to preserve markets, commercial partnerships, and Brazil's international reputation. The four issue areas examined below allow us to identify how these different dimensions of Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy varied according to the interests and identities activated by each foreign policy issue.

Based on a literature review of Bolsonaro's foreign policy and the close reading of hundreds of speeches delivered by FPA members and other members

of the National Congress, four foreign policy issues of particular relevance to the agribusiness sector were identified: (1) Amazon deforestation, (2) relations with China, (3) relations with Donald Trump's United States, and (4) relations with Israel and Arab countries. These issues stood out in the discourse analysis and reflect the priority attributed to each of them by the agribusiness caucus during the period under study.

For the National Congress, we collected 11,159 speeches delivered between 2019 and 2022 from the open data portals of the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate: 5,121 by FPA members and 6,038 by non-members. FPA membership was identified from the official list for the 56th Legislature (Brasil 2023). Only speeches in Portuguese and in direct format were included, excluding third-party posts, interviews, and non-discursive excerpts.

The second source was a database of 2,218 records produced by members of the federal Executive between 2019 and 2022, including speeches, social media posts, and transcribed interviews.. It covers the actors most relevant to foreign policy, including President Jair Bolsonaro, Foreign Ministers Ernesto Araújo and Carlos França, and other senior officials. Of these records, 925 addressed the four selected themes: 708 from the Presidency and 217 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Table 1 presents the number of speeches analyzed for each theme, including those delivered by FPA members, other members of Congress who addressed the same issues but were not affiliated with the Caucus, as well as speeches from the Executive (President) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Foreign Ministers), totaling 12,084 texts analyzed.

Table 1 – Complete dataset: speeches by theme and actor

Themes	FPA	National Congress (non-FPA)	Presidency	MRE	Total
1. Relations with the United States	168	256	73	72	609
2. Relations with China	60	74	42	46	222
3. Amazon deforestation	161	219	79	34	493
4. Relations with Israel — Arab countries	73	51	78	42	251
Total	**5,121**	**6,038**	**708**	**217**	**12,084**

Source: Authors' elaboration based on parliamentary speeches from the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate, as well as statements by the Executive Branch and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019–2022).

Preliminary Data Analysis

The analysis used supervised ideological scaling through the Wordscores technique (Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003), implemented in R. The method positions actors along a scale based on the relative frequency of words in their speeches. For each theme, we first selected reference texts through qualitative analysis to represent opposite positions and assigned them the values −2 and +2, with 0 for neutral positions where applicable (Moreira and Rocabado 2022). The algorithm then estimated the scores of all remaining speeches. Rather than a partisan left–right dimension, each scale captures a substantive support or opposition dimension specific to the issue, such as ideological alignment versus commercial pragmatism in relations with China.

Quantitative estimates were then compared with qualitative readings of representative speeches and with key foreign policy events. This allows us to assess not only each actor's average position but also the nuances of its rhetoric. Table 2 presents the reference texts used for each theme.

The origin, position, and number of speeches included in each training set are presented in the tables below.

Table 2 – Training set: Relations with Donald Trump's United States

Actor	Number of speeches	Position
FPA	1	−2
MRE	7	−2
Executive	5	−2
Congress (non-FPA)	8	2
FPA	1	2
Total	**22**	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

Table 3 – Training set: Relations with China

Actor	Number of speeches	Position
Executive	1	−2
MRE	2	−2
MRE	1	0
FPA	3	2
Congress (non-FPA)	4	2
Total	**11**	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

Table 4 – Training set: Amazon deforestation

Actor	Number of speeches	Position
Congress (non-FPA)	2	−2
MRE	1	−2
Executive	5	−2
MRE	1	0
FPA	3	2
Congress (non-FPA)	5	2
Total	**17**	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

Table 5 – Training set: Relations with Israel and Arab countries

Actor	Number of speeches	Position
FPA	2	−2
Congress (non-FPA)	3	−2
MRE	1	−2
Executive	1	−2
MRE	1	0
FPA	1	2
Congress (non-FPA)	6	2
Total	**15**	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

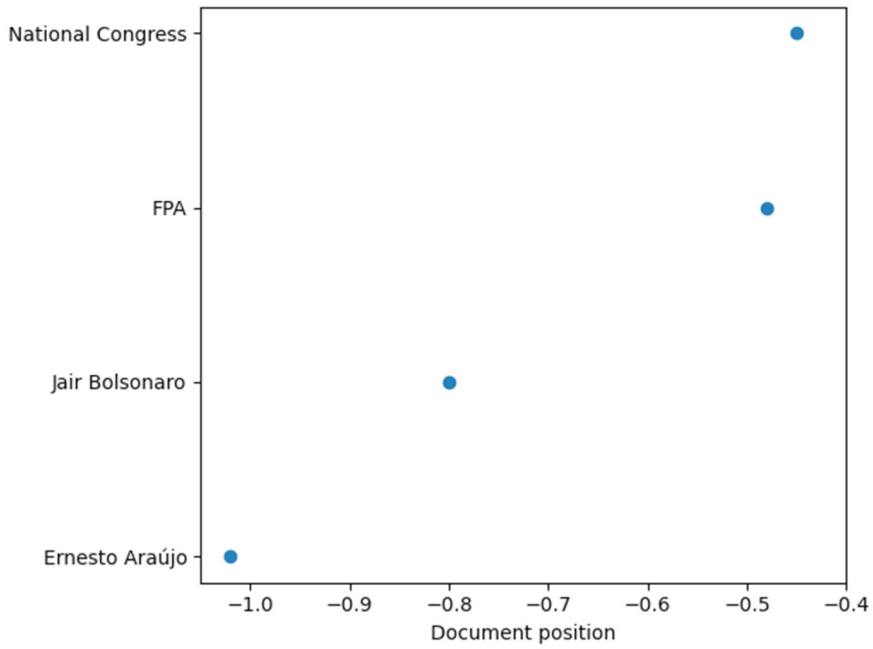
Based on these training sets, ideological scaling was conducted for all remaining speeches by theme. The results are analyzed in the following subsections, together with a brief overview of key foreign policy events during the period under study that underscore the relevance of these issues for the agribusiness sector.

3.1. Relations with the United States

Alignment with the United States was actively promoted by President Jair Bolsonaro and Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo, who viewed Donald Trump as the leader capable of restoring Western centrality in global affairs, as well as by Filipe Martins, who saw the Bolsonaro–Trump alliance as an opportunity to redefine Brazilian foreign policy. This ideological convergence was reinforced not only through rhetoric, but also through symbolic gestures, such as Bolsonaro's salute to the U.S. flag, and the signing of agreements with relevant implications for Brazil's foreign trade and diplomatic relations (Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro 2019).

As Guimarães and Silva (2021) argue, this alignment differed from previous episodes of rapprochement with Washington, as it was directed primarily toward Trump himself, reflecting ideological affinity and proximity to conservative far-right leaders. During the period in which both administrations overlapped, members of the Executive consistently praised this alliance. As will be shown, however, the FPA did not automatically share this position.

Graph 1 – Ideological scaling of relations with Donald Trump's United States and the FPA



Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

Graph 1 is consistent with the reference texts in Table 2. The left side represents support for closer ties with the United States, combined with ideological identification with Trump and criticism of previous governments for alleged anti-Americanism. The right side reflects criticism of this alignment and a more pragmatic approach to bilateral relations. The FPA's position near the latter pole reinforces the qualitative evidence that agribusiness legislators were less receptive than the Executive to an ideologically driven alignment with Trump.

The left side of the graph above represents a position in support of closer ties with the United States combined with admiration for, or ideological identification with Trump, along with criticism of previous governments for what is perceived as hostility toward the United States for ideological reasons.

At this extreme, we find Ernesto Araújo, with speeches addressing challenges allegedly shared by Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro, such as fighting left-wing ideology, the mainstream media, and the political system more broadly (Araújo 2020a). In addition, the minister also emphasized what he understood as proximity in values between the two presidents, especially what he described as the defense of freedom of expression (Araújo 2019a). Jair Bolsonaro's speeches contained similar elements, including criticism of the foreign policy of previous governments that, in his view, were hostile to the United States, even claiming to be the first Brazilian president who would not be anti-American.

The right side of the graph, by contrast, is composed of positions that criticize what is seen as ideological alignment or a subordinate relationship with the United States or, more specifically, with Donald Trump, combined with the view that Brazil's diplomacy toward Trump lacked pragmatism. On this side are FPA legislators' speeches, located very close to the position of the remaining representatives of the legislative branch.

Liberals and members of the rural caucus continued to defend trade with countries targeted by anti-globalists, prioritizing economic objectives over ideology (Casarões 2021). The government's ideological orientation generated internal criticism and contributed to Brazil's growing international isolation (Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro 2019).

The U.S. case thus illustrates agribusiness diplomacy as a moderating force, as commercial considerations led the FPA to distance itself from an ideological alignment that offered uncertain economic benefits to the sector.

3.2. Relations with China

Diplomatic relations with China constituted a major source of tension between the ideological ambitions of a segment of the Bolsonaro administration and concerns over jeopardizing commercial ties with China, Brazil's largest trading partner since 2009 and a strategic buyer for Brazilian agribusiness (Saraiva and Silva 2019; Hirst and Maciel 2022). In line with ideological alignment with Trump's United States and fears of communism and so-called "cultural Marxism," anti-China statements repeatedly threatened pragmatic commercial interests (Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro 2019).

A clear example was the attribution of blame to China for the COVID-19 pandemic, allegedly motivated by political and economic objectives, according to Jair Bolsonaro and Ernesto Araújo. The latter went so far as to suggest that the Asian country was using the pandemic to implement a plan to establish communist ideals worldwide (Araújo 2020b):

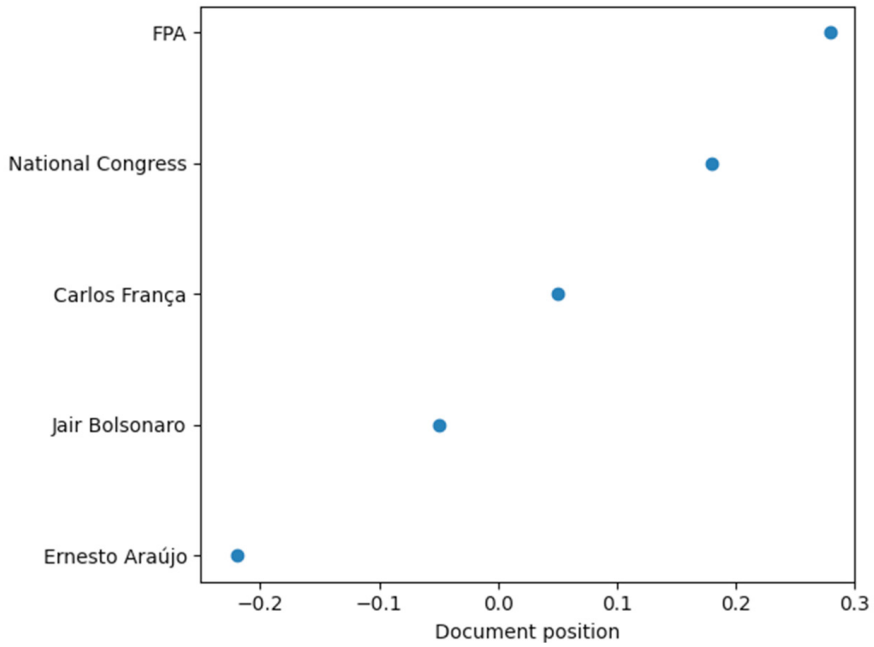
> The "Communavirus" has arrived. This is what Slavoj Žižek—one of today's leading Marxist theorists—shows in his recently published booklet "Virus," released in Italy (…) The coronavirus pandemic represents, for him, an immense opportunity to build a world order without nations and without freedom. [...] It is therefore no surprise that, at least so far, China—already widely employing digital systems of social control—has proven to be the most well equipped to confront the catastrophic epidemic.

Along the same lines, Bolsonaro openly refused to purchase the Chinese vaccine, alleging that it was unsafe, and conflicts also emerged over 5G technology supplied by Huawei (Casarões 2021; Saraiva and Silva 2019).

In this context, then Vice-President Hamilton Mourão traveled to China to ease bilateral tensions after Bolsonaro's visit to Taiwan, despite the president later portraying China as a "predator" of Brazil's economy. Chinese authorities expressed dissatisfaction and warned of the economic costs of confrontation (Guimarães and Silva 2021). Given China's centrality to Brazilian trade, sectors such as MAPA and the FPA pressured for moderation. Then–Minister of Agriculture Tereza Cristina reportedly engaged Ernesto Araújo to stress agribusiness interests and the risks of hostile rhetoric toward China (Saraiva and Silva 2019). Amid these internal disputes, Bolsonaro adopted a strategy of relative equidistance, tolerating anti-China discourse from the ideological core while allowing pragmatic actors to pursue economic engagement with Beijing (Casarões 2021).

As Guimarães and Silva (2021) point out, environmental issues briefly served as a point of truce in Brazil's hostility toward China, which defended Brazil against international criticism by asserting that the country had one of the world's strongest environmental legislations. This episode revealed a convergence between Brazilian and Chinese leaders around the principle of national sovereignty. Nevertheless, the desire to replicate Trump's stance toward China ultimately prevailed over commercial interests. Hostilities toward China were maintained despite the importance of agribusiness interests, contributing to a contradictory foreign policy. As shown in Graph 2, however, agribusiness positioned itself clearly in favor of China during this period, in opposition to the *olavista* core.

Graph 2 – Ideological scaling of relations with China and the FPA



Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

The relationship between the training set and the estimated positions is particularly clear in the case of China. As shown in Table 3, the scale distinguishes between speeches expressing ideological distrust of China and those emphasizing the importance of preserving economic and commercial relations with Beijing. Graph 2 reproduces this divide: Ernesto Araújo and Bolsonaro are located closer to the ideological pole, whereas the FPA occupies the most pragmatic position. This quantitative pattern is consistent with the qualitative evidence showing

FPA legislators criticizing anti-China rhetoric because of its potential costs for Brazilian agribusiness.

The left side of the graph above represents the position that relations with China may be detrimental to Brazil and/or the view, sometimes expressed through insinuation, that China may have been responsible for the intentional creation of the coronavirus. Ernesto Araújo articulated this stance most explicitly, not only by making insinuations about the virus's origin but also by expressing clear aversion to rapprochement with China. He emphasized the importance of preserving values even in economic partnerships, arguing that Brazil should ensure that it "*does not sell its soul*." In his discourse, Araújo associates periods of closer ties with China with moments of stagnation for Brazil (Araújo 2019c).

Jair Bolsonaro maintained a comparatively more restrained position. In a speech criticizing certain measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, Bolsonaro suggested that the virus might have been manufactured as a chemical weapon. For some observers, this statement constituted an insinuation that China was responsible for the global pandemic (VEJA 2021). Excerpt from the speech:

> It is a new virus; no one knows whether it emerged from a laboratory or from someone consuming an inappropriate animal. But here it is. The military knows what chemical, bacteriological, and radiological warfare is. Could it be that we are facing a new kind of war? Which country had the highest GDP growth? I won't tell you. What is happening to the entire world, to its people, to our people, to our Brazil?

The central area of the graph corresponds to statements that acknowledge the importance of maintaining a positive relationship with China for Brazil's commercial interests, without either criticizing or praising the government's diplomatic handling of bilateral relations. Some speeches by Minister Carlos França fall into this category. The right side of the graph, by contrast, represents statements expressing concern or criticism regarding the government's diplomatic approach toward China, particularly the hostile rhetoric and its potentially negative consequences for the Brazilian economy.

Legislators affiliated with the FPA, such as federal deputy Altineu Côrtes of the Liberal Party, openly criticized government positions in congressional speeches for threatening agribusiness interests (Brasil 2023):

> China has been Brazil's largest trading partner for the past ten years. Brazil exports soybeans, beef, poultry, and iron ore to China. Seven out of every ten products most exported by Brazil are sold to China. And yet Minister Paulo Guedes, instead of addressing the problems of the economy and the hunger faced by 20 million Brazilians, attacks China.

In this context of conflicting interests, the anti-globalist group dominated the formulation of the government's international positions, but pressure from legislators and other actors ultimately contributed to the dismissal of Ernesto Araújo (Casarões 2021). Araújo left office amid friction with several senators, including Kátia Abreu, a member of the FPA, and criticism from the presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate during the period analyzed. Arthur Lira and Rodrigo Pacheco, respectively, argued that Araújo's conduct was isolating Brazil and generating friction with key commercial partners, such as China.

For Hirst and Maciel (2022), the ideological dimension of the government's liberal-conservative project created challenges for maintaining commitments to the international financial and monetary system, specifically, in this subsection, Brazil's commercial partnership with China, which was actively protected by MAPA and the FPA. A similar dilemma emerged in Brazil's diplomatic and commercial relations with Arab countries.

The China case provides the clearest expression of the commercially driven dimension of Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy. Given the centrality of the Chinese market, material interests strongly constrained the FPA's willingness to follow the government's ideological preferences.

3.3. Amazon Deforestation

In the environmental domain, Bolsonaro adopted controversial positions, particularly regarding rising deforestation, forest fires, and land grabbing in the Amazon and the Pantanal. Government authorities questioned scientific assessments, including INPE deforestation data and IPCC reports, with Ernesto Araújo framing such analyses as ideologically motivated expressions of so-called climatism (Hirst and Maciel 2022).

This stance closely paralleled the FPA's position on environmental issues. Regarding the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the caucus argues that debates over agricultural production are ideologically biased and that scientific knowledge is selectively mobilized against the sector.

Brazil is frequently listed as one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases (GHGs). However, the caucus points to flaws in emissions accounting methods, arguing that such calculations disregard the carbon fixed through photosynthesis in pasturelands, thereby producing an unrealistic emissions balance. In addition, the FPA contends that deforested areas converted into pasture are erroneously attributed to agricultural activity. According to the caucus, analyses deemed biased end up penalizing agribusiness, despite its alleged contributions to the economy, society, and environmental protection.

The 25th Conference of the Parties (COP-25) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, scheduled to take place in Brazil in 2019, was ultimately withdrawn after Bolsonaro admitted that he had instructed Ernesto Araújo to cancel Brazil's bid to host the event even before taking office, citing excessive financial costs. Bolsonaro also claimed that one of the Convention's proposals, the creation of an ecological corridor in the region, would threaten Brazilian sovereignty. Moreover, during COP-26, Brazil was among the main obstacles to the adoption of the final document, delaying its approval by two days.

The 2019 Amazon fires generated diplomatic tensions, notably with France. Emmanuel Macron raised the possibility of economic sanctions, and Bolsonaro accused him of violating Brazilian sovereignty in yet another globalist attack (Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro 2019). France and Ireland then opposed the European Union–Mercosur agreement, citing low confidence in Brazil's environmental commitments, while Germany and Norway suspended contributions to the Amazon Fund (Hirst and Maciel 2022).

As Hirst and Maciel (2022) argue, agribusiness played a central role in the government's foreign policy. In line with sectoral interests, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs withdrew from multilateral negotiations on environmental issues. This was accompanied by staff reductions in environmental units and the downgrading of the department responsible for environmental affairs within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both changes were implemented by Ernesto Araújo in the name of what he called the "fight against ideological environmentalism."

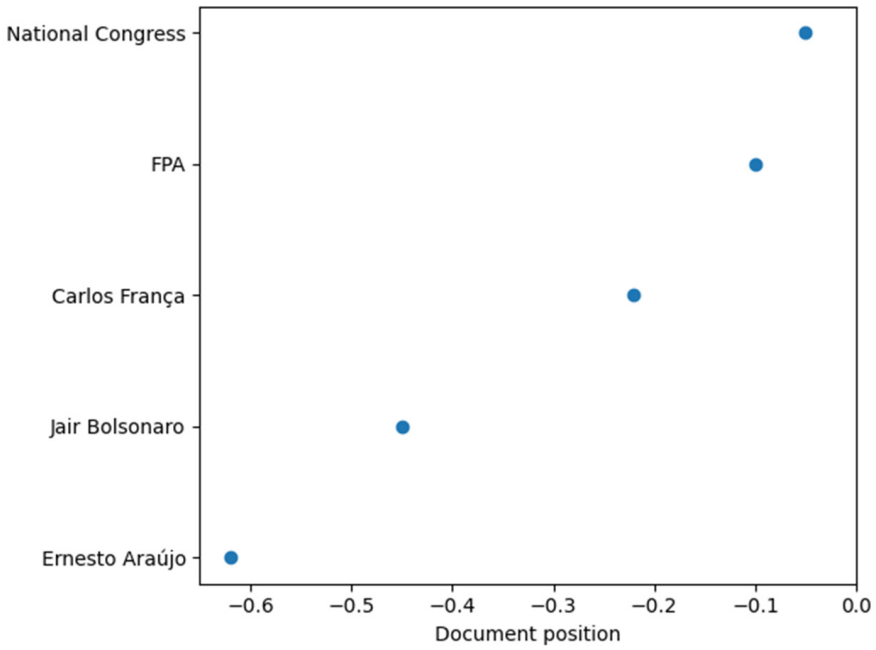
Nevertheless, convergence between the FPA and ideological actors on environmental issues reached clear limits as Brazil's international reputation deteriorated, with tangible consequences for foreign trade. In this context, Kátia Abreu, former Minister of Agriculture under the Dilma Rousseff administration, former chair of the Chamber of Deputies' Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee (CREDN) (2017–2019), and a member of the FPA, publicly criticized

the Bolsonaro administration's political positions. She rejected the government's stance on environmental issues, arguing that environmental protection, like human rights, had become universal values and that agribusiness could remain profitable despite environmental regulation.

As noted by Hirst and Maciel (2022), even though agribusiness exercised substantial influence and lobbying power over foreign policy, the way in which the government conducted this policy produced setbacks by reducing Brazil's diplomatic relevance on the international stage. Beyond abandoning the strategy of leveraging environmental assets as a form of soft power, the adoption of a negligent posture toward environmental issues attracted criticism from international leaders and organizations.

In this regard, the ideological scaling presented in Graph 4 shows a significant distance between the average position of the FPA and that of the *olavista* core, revealing a degree of dissonance between official FPA documents and the speeches delivered by its members in Congress.

Graph 3 – Ideological scaling of Amazon deforestation and the FPA



Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

The left side of the graph represents speeches that downplay Amazon deforestation, attribute responsibility to Indigenous peoples or NGOs, and reject international criticism of the government's environmental policy as unfair. Across

all four themes analyzed, Ernesto Araújo occupies the most extreme position on the graph.

On environmental issues, the minister repeatedly argued that international concern over Amazon protection was a malicious façade aimed at undermining national sovereignty and controlling nations through fear. He referred to climate change ideology, or *climatism*, as a globalist instrument designed to undermine political debate and impose restrictions on freedom of expression, linking *climatism* to Marxism and gender ideology (Araújo 2019b).

Jair Bolsonaro similarly adopted a critical stance toward the Paris Agreement and European countries on environmental matters, threatening the continuity of the Mercosur–European Union agreement. Although more moderate than Araújo, Bolsonaro blamed Indigenous peoples, NGOs, and the media for Amazon deforestation in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly ().

The central position on the graph corresponds to statements that acknowledge the importance of protecting the Amazon rainforest while simultaneously avoiding criticism of the government's handling of the issue and refraining from criticizing the international community for its response to Brazilian environmental policy. Finally, the right side of the graph represents positions that recognize the importance of protecting the Amazon while expressing concern or criticism regarding the Bolsonaro administration's environmental policy, either on environmental grounds or due to the potential commercial and economic consequences of deforestation.

The results in Figure 3 are also consistent with the distinctions established in the training set presented in Table 4. The scale contrasts speeches that minimize environmental concerns and reject international criticism with positions that recognize the importance of Amazon protection and emphasize the reputational and economic costs of deforestation. The location of the FPA between the Executive's ideological core and the broader Congress captures the sector's ambivalent position: partial convergence with the government on sovereignty and environmental regulation, combined with greater concern about the international commercial consequences of Brazil's environmental policy.

In sum, agribusiness benefited from some of the government's choices, such as environmental deregulation and support for the sector, but the deterioration of Brazil's international reputation harmed foreign trade and, by extension, agribusiness itself. As a result, even though the strength of agribusiness and the government's sympathy toward the sector intensified efforts to defend its interests

internationally, ideologically driven actions ultimately hindered negotiations and posed risks to rural producers.

The Amazon case reveals a more ambiguous pattern of agribusiness diplomacy. That is, the FPA shared some of the government's emphasis on sovereignty and resistance to international environmental pressure, but became more critical when reputational costs threatened market access and trade negotiations.

3.4. Relations with Israel and Arab Countries

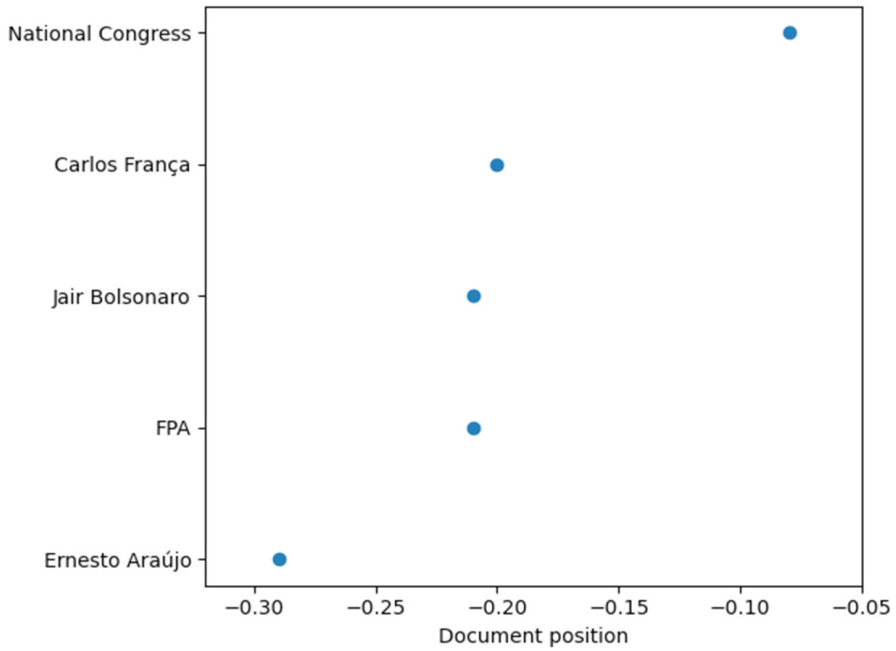
Consistent with his alignment with Trump and the religious orientation of his leadership, Bolsonaro proposed during the campaign the transfer of Brazil's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move that symbolically confronted Palestine and the Arab League and conflicted with the interests of economic elites, particularly in trade with Arab countries (Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro 2019; Guimarães et al. 2023).

The proposal generated strong concern within agribusiness, especially from then–Minister of Agriculture Tereza Cristina, given the importance of Arab markets for Brazilian meat exports (Saraiva and Silva 2019). The dispute was mitigated through the creation of a trade office in Jerusalem, rather than a full embassy transfer (Schutte, Fonseca and Carneiro 2019).

Although the relocation did not occur, Brazil deepened ties with Israel, signaling a shift away from its traditionally balanced stance on the Palestinian issue, including votes against Palestine at the UN Human Rights Council and support for Israel during International Criminal Court investigations (Guimarães et al. 2023).

According to Hirst and Maciel (2022), rapprochement with Israel stemmed from the pursuit of alignment with Trump's United States and from interreligious dialogue between evangelical Christianity and radical Zionist positions. These ideological motivations, however, ran counter to the pragmatic interests of the agribusiness sector, which sought to preserve export markets in Arab countries. Unlike relations with the United States or China, however, the Israel issue revealed greater proximity between the FPA and the government's ideological core.

Graph 4 – Ideological scaling of relations with Israel, Arab countries, and the FPA



Source: Authors' elaboration based on training sets defined by the authors through qualitative analysis of speeches (2019–2022).

The leftmost portion of the graph represents positions that support closer diplomatic ties between Brazil and Israel, combined with expressions of religious affinity toward Israel. The central portion was trained to capture moderate positions, speeches emphasizing the importance of maintaining diplomatic and/or commercial relations with both Israel and Arab countries, without expressing value judgments. The rightmost portion represents critical positions regarding aspects of rapprochement with Israel, emphasizing the potential threat such alignment poses to commercial relations with Arab countries.

Graph 3 yields an important finding: unlike the previous graphs, in which the FPA consistently appeared on the opposite side of Jair Bolsonaro and Ernesto Araújo, the FPA is positioned closer to the left side of the spectrum, namely, in a position similar to that of Bolsonaro and Araújo.

By contrast, federal deputy Heitor Schuch, a member of the FPA, criticized the government's position, particularly regarding Bolsonaro's proposal to transfer the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv and the establishment of a trade office in Jerusalem. In a speech to Congress, he argued (Brasil 2023):

> I now receive news from fellow farmers and union leaders that production units are producing less, and that the gaps between one poultry batch and the next are increasing because of this embassy transfer from Tel Aviv to

> Jerusalem and the opening of that office. Arab countries are simply buying poultry from other countries. Poultry producers will not withstand this situation.

Nevertheless, despite opposition from some members of the Caucus, other FPA legislators expressed strong support for closer relations with Israel, demonstrating deep personal and religious affinity for the country and praising the government for breaking with the practices of previous administrations. Based on the results of the analysis, support for the government's aspirations regarding Israel prevailed within the FPA, specifically among those legislators who addressed the issue in their speeches.

An excerpt from a speech by federal deputy Gilberto Nascimento, from the Social Christian Party (PSC) and a member of the FPA, illustrates this support (Brasil 2023):

> I know this was the first time President Bolsonaro visited Israel. From that moment on, he began to cultivate this love and affection, because those who go to Israel fall in love with that place. [...] We love the people of Israel and we understand the Bible when it says, "Blessed are those who bless Israel."

A similar tone appears in a speech by federal deputy Major Vitor Hugo, from the Liberal Party (PL) and also a member of the FPA (Brasil 2023):

> At present, according to President Bolsonaro, Israel and Brazil are drawing closer not only because of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also because of a strong shared commitment to democracy and freedom. As President Bolsonaro himself has emphasized, Brazil has restored a balanced approach to issues related to the Middle East.

This pattern may also reflect the partial overlap between the rural and evangelical caucuses in Congress. Some FPA legislators simultaneously represented agribusiness interests and conservative religious constituencies, making their foreign policy preferences potentially responsive to both material and identity-based considerations. This helps explain why the FPA strongly opposed ideological positions that threatened major commercial interests, as in the case of China, while showing greater convergence with the government on Israel, where religious and conservative identities could reinforce the preferences of Bolsonaro's ideological core. The evidence presented here does not allow us to measure the independent

effect of this overlap, but it suggests an important mechanism behind the variation observed across the four issue areas.

In a context in which rapprochement with Israel, despite votes and symbolic gestures of support that generated tensions with Arab countries, produced ambiguous commercial outcomes, the divergent positions among FPA representatives underscore the complexity of individual political positioning vis-à-vis the sector's immediate interests. Beyond material considerations, ideological positioning may also be shaped by personal affinities and motivations, including religion and tradition.

An alternative interpretation is that some FPA legislators expected the rapprochement with Israel to have little effect on trade with Arab countries, a view also voiced by Araújo and Bolsonaro. In fact, Brazilian exports to both Arab countries and Israel grew during the administration, according to data from the federal government and the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce. Structural factors may explain this outcome.

Potential negative impacts may also have been mitigated by structural trade factors, as explained by José Augusto de Castro, president of the Brazilian Foreign Trade Association. He argued that it would be difficult for Arab countries to replace Brazilian imports of animal protein and sugar, given the limited number of countries capable of exporting comparable volumes at similar prices. With respect to beef in particular, the next two largest producers, the United States and Australia, had already recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Finally, the Israel case demonstrates that Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy cannot be reduced to commercial pragmatism. Here, political and religious identities among segments of the FPA partially counterbalanced concerns over potential losses in Arab markets, producing greater convergence with the government's ideological core.

Conclusions

This article contributes to two strands of the literature on contemporary Brazilian politics. First, it advances the debate on Bolsonaro's foreign policy by showing that diplomatic decision making between 2019 and 2022 was not limited to a struggle between ideology and pragmatism within the Executive. It was also conditioned by organized domestic actors such as the FPA. Although the caucus

was part of the government's political base, it often acted autonomously and at times in opposition to the administration's ideological core. Building on studies that established the FPA as a foreign policy actor and mapped its channels of influence (Gonçalves and Madureira 2023; Gonçalves, Madureira and Silva 2025; Pompeia 2020), the article offers the first systematic, issue by issue comparison of the caucus's positions with those of the executive core. This allows us to test, rather than assume, the thesis that agribusiness moderated Bolsonaro's ideological diplomacy.

The results show that this thesis holds only in part. The FPA diverged most sharply from the executive on China, where the centrality of the Chinese market made anti-globalist and Sinophobic rhetoric a direct threat to the sector. It also adopted a pragmatic stance toward the United States, favoring commercial stability over ideological alignment with Donald Trump. On the Amazon, the caucus shared the government's emphasis on sovereignty but became more critical as reputational costs threatened market access and the Mercosur–European Union agreement. On Israel, by contrast, the FPA converged with the ideological core, even though some of its members feared losses in Arab markets.

Taken together, these cases show that Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy is neither uniformly pragmatic nor ideologically coherent. It reflects a variable combination of commercial interests, reputational concerns, political identities, and institutional access, whose relative weight changes from issue to issue. Agribusiness constrained ideological diplomacy where its markets were at stake, but reinforced it where religious and conservative identities overlapped with sectoral representation. Brazilian agribusiness diplomacy is therefore best understood as an issue dependent pattern of sectoral foreign policy action.

Second, the article contributes to the literature on the rural caucus and the political power of Brazilian agribusiness. It confirms and extends recent work showing that the FPA's role goes beyond domestic agendas such as environmental regulation, rural credit, and land policy, and reaches into the international arena. Over recent decades, the sector has built an institutional infrastructure capable of shaping not only domestic public policy but also the terms of Brazil's foreign policy debates.

Three limitations point to avenues for future research. First, the analysis measures positions, not influence; tracing whether FPA positions changed specific decisions requires process tracing of key episodes. Second, the partial overlap between the agribusiness and evangelical caucuses could not be measured

independently and deserves dedicated analysis. Third, informal channels such as direct lobbying of ministers remain outside the scope of discourse data.

Bolsonaro's diplomacy, therefore, cannot be understood solely as the product of a cohesive ideological core. It resulted from internal disputes in which organized economic sectors, especially agribusiness, pushed against the boundaries of ideological diplomacy where their interests were at stake, and reinforced them where their identities were.

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