

New standards of action in foreign policy: Can Brazil still be considered a regional power?

Nuevas normas de actuación en política exterior: ¿se puede seguir considerando a Brasil una potencia regional?

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Abstract

During the administrations of Cardoso (1995-2002) and Lula da Silva (2003-2010), Brazil considerably increased its activism on international issues, seeking to consolidate a leadership position among South American countries. Especially in recent decades, the diplomatic tradition has reiterated the need to obtain the region's support as an instrument to boost international projection. In this sense, based on qualitative research analysis of Brazilian foreign policy, this article aims to answer the following question: Can Brazil be considered as a regional power? To this end, the article examines how the governments of Rousseff (2011-2016), Temer (2016-2018) and Bolsonaro (2019-2022) have changed the patterns of foreign policy action, leaving little room for more effective action by the country as a regional leader.

Keywords: regional integration; foreign policy; political leadership.

Resumen

Durante los gobiernos de Cardoso (1995-2002) y Lula da Silva (2003-2010), Brasil aumentó considerablemente su activismo en cuestiones internacionales, buscando consolidar una posición de liderazgo entre los países sudamericanos. Especialmente en las últimas décadas, la tradición diplomática ha reiterado la necesidad de obtener el apoyo de la región como instrumento para impulsar la proyección internacional. En este sentido, a partir de investigación cualitativa de la política exterior brasileña, el artículo pretende responder a la siguiente pregunta: ¿podría considerarse a Brasil como una potencia regional? Para ello, el artículo examina si los gobiernos de Rousseff (2011-2016), Temer (2016-2018) y Bolsonaro (2019-2022) han cambiado los patrones de actuación de la política exterior, dejando poco margen para una actuación más eficaz del país como líder regional.

Palabras clave: integración económica; liderazgo político; política exterior.

Artículo: Recibido el 15 de abril de 2023 y aprobado el 4 de junio de 2023

Cómo citar este artículo:

Pasquarelli Bruno Lippe, (2023) New standards of action in foreign policy: Can Brazil still be considered a regional power? *Reflexión política* 25(51), pp. 64-75. doi: <https://doi.org/10.29375/01240781.4687>

Introduction

Historically, Brazilian foreign policy has sought to achieve international recognition for the country (Hirst & Lima, 2006). Despite being an emerging power, Brazil is associated with the notion of a soft power,¹ in that it has no intention of becoming a military power, and that it uses peaceful means to mediate

1. The concept of soft power is linked to the ability to achieve the goals of the nation through co-optation - not coercion - using ideas and institutions as instruments (Nye, 2004).

conflicts. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, negotiation – and not war – has prevailed in the configuration of the country's territorial space, as a result of which the country has peacefully resolved its territorial disputes with neighboring countries and engaged in the process of state-building through diplomatic negotiations, rather than military disputes (Gratius, 2007). And, especially in recent decades, the diplomatic tradition has been reiterating the need to obtain the support of the region as an instrument to boost international projection.

Throughout most of the 20th century, Brazilian diplomatic action has experimented with different foreign policy models (Lima, 2005, p. 11-15). Initially, from the administration of Barão do Rio Branco (1902-1912) to redemocratization, Brazil shaped its relationship with the United States as an important political counterpoint in its relations with neighboring countries. However, since the democratization process that took place during the 1970s and 1980s, the country has been trying to exercise a leadership role, privileging good relations with other Latin American countries in order to promote regional integration,² in addition to actively defending and promoting democracy and its respective institutions, ensuring stability and controlling political crises with greater engagement.

At the time, Brazil considerably increased its activism on international issues, seeking to consolidate a leadership position among South American countries. In this sense, based on the debate in the specialized literature and the analysis of some paradigmatic cases, this article will analyze the role of Brazil in South America, seeking to answer the following questions: Can Brazil be considered a regional power? And would this role of regional leadership be recognized by its South American neighbors? To this end, first of all, the concept of regional power will be examined, using analytical instruments that help in the identification and classification of regional powers. Secondly, these instruments will be used to examine Brazil's diplomatic action in the post-democratization period in three central axes: regionalism, intervention in political crises, and sovereignty relative to security and defense on the continent, highlighting the points and paradigmatic cases that may or may not classify it as a regional power. Third, the article will investigate how, during Dilma Rousseff's, Michel Temer's and Jair Bolsonaro's administrations, Brazil experienced internal and external crises that led to changes and a visible reduction in its regional activism. Lastly, final considerations will be made.

1. Identification and classification of regional powers: the concept of power

At both the global and regional levels, the classification of large, medium and small powers has always given rise to intense academic debate, both in terms of the realistic approach and the constructivist bias of the institutional-liberal perspective. However, according to Nolte (2010), in order to define whether a country is characterized under the prism of regional power, it is necessary to analyze the classification of powers based on the concept of power. Wight (1978) was one of the first to differentiate three types of powers (dominant, major and minor) into two categories of states (major regional powers and middle powers). For Organski (1958), the international system is hierarchical in terms of the distribution of political and economic power resources, and has a dominant power at the top with the subordination of large, medium and smaller powers. In turn, Lemke (2002) developed a multiple hierarchical model in which, instead of an international hierarchy of power, there are parallel hierarchies – or hierarchical subsystems, and each regional or sub-regional system, subordinate to the global hierarchy, has a dominant state. Thus, according to the multiple hierarchical model, regional powers may be influential in their geographic region, but at the same time exercise little influence on a global scale (Nolte, 2010, p. 889).

It is also important to highlight the need to understand the categories of power and regional leadership based on structured models that are adequate for the reality of peripheral countries (Escudé, 2008). The complexity of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis, added to the condition of “peripheral countries,” creates the need for new ways of understanding reality that contemplate other perspectives of the world and, consequently, of power (Dallanegra Pedraza, 2008). For the author of the

2. Defined as a process in which states voluntarily mix, merge, and unite with their neighbors, losing attributes of sovereignty, but acquiring new ways of resolving conflicts through the creation of permanent and common institutions - capable of making decisions linked to all members (Schmitter, 2004).

so-called “structural systemic realism,” approaches that only consider power (such as realism) fail to acknowledge other types of power, which makes them unsuitable for understanding the foreign policy mechanisms of peripheral countries.³

In this sense, to understand power, regional leadership and foreign policy, or make any decision in which the external factor is present, we “must first understand the workings of the global system in which the country is embedded – in temporal terms” (Dallanegra Pedraza, 2008, p. 32). Thus, rather than an instrument of subordination, the foreign policy of peripheral countries should focus on finding better ways to change their situation and condition in their own benefit – considering the characteristics of the international system and the lack of power of Latin America’s peripheral countries. Without such leadership, the region would be disintegrated, and its development would depend on the security and economic policy priorities of the most powerful countries, which have nothing to do with the region. Brazil, despite being an undisputed leader for the region, lacks sufficient leadership since it does not direct the region towards a project of development and international insertion that would give it a more significant role (Dallanegra Pedraza, 2008).

Peripheral realism was another important theoretical movement of the 1990s that affected Argentine foreign policy praxis and defended a more pragmatic alignment with central countries, given that Latin American countries are seen as peripheral and with little power and relevance in the international system. According to Escudé (2008), there are great costs for a peripheral country to challenge a great power, and any foreign policy (and, consequently, regional leadership) executed by such countries confuse the positions of the great powers with the needs of the peripheral states. Thus, the main reasons for failures in the foreign policy of integration (specifically in the Argentinean case, but also in the Brazilian case) are linked to a country’s exaggerated perception of its own power and its role in the world – which can generate confrontations with great powers and difficulties for economic development.

Based on these assumptions of peripheral realism, any South American country that seeks to strengthen aspects of regional leadership must

consider the alliance with regional powers and with world powers as a fundamental path for the country’s international insertion (De la Balze, 1995, p. 25). Therefore, the privileged relationship with countries (such as, for example, the relationship between Brazil and Argentina) should not occur at the expense of a privileged relationship with the United States, since both broaden the capacity for dialogue. Belonging to and strengthening regional integration institutions, such as Mercosur, would be important to develop the negotiation capacity of regional powers.

But, then, how to define what a regional power is? In a simple definition, a regional power is a state that has material resources and capacities in a certain geographic region, exercising leadership in such a scenario (Nolte, 2010, p. 884). However, as there are few analytical instruments to identify and compare regional powers, it is necessary to use a broader definition. This is because, according to Nolte (2010), it is difficult to draw a clear dividing line between the concepts of regional and middle powers.⁴ For Jordaan (2003, p.165), middle powers are states that do not have broad powers and are not on the margins of international relations, but have the capacity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system. In turn, a middle power with regional power enjoys support within its own region and the recognition of this support. Therefore, a middle power should be understood as a category that depends on the recognition of other countries, and on obtaining and influencing followers (Malamud, 2011). In this sense, the definition of regional power refers to influential and powerful states in certain regions or geographical sub-regions, and which may be medium or large powers at the global level.

From these theoretical assumptions, Nolte (2010, p.893) defines a regional power based on eleven characteristics: i) it is economically, politically and culturally interconnected with the region; ii) it claims to have a leadership position in a geographically, economically and politically delimited region; iii) it displays material (economic, demographic and military), organizational (political) and ideological resources for the projection of the region; iv) it influences the geopolitical delimitation and the ideational construction of the region; v) it exerts its influence through regional governance

3. For this, the author uses the concept of “worldview”, considering that, when one develops a theory, the abstraction process of the level of explanation is nothing more than a perspective in which the theorist situates himself to observe reality. Realism, therefore, is nothing more than a totalising worldview, contemplating the incidence of power as a central variable in the characteristics and functioning of the world system. Thus, it is very frequent that dominant schools of thought, with their own visions of the world and of power, predominate in the literature, making it necessary to analyse the perspective of leadership from the perspective of the periphery (Dallanegra Pedraza, 2008).

4. Many countries that could be regional leaders could also be seen as middle powers - such as India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. They are, then, concepts that are not exclusive, but complementary.



structures; vi) it has great influence on regional issues (activities and results); vii) it significantly defines the regional security agenda; viii) it defines and articulates a project and a common regional identity; ix) it is integrated into global and interregional forums, articulating not only in self-interest but also as a representative of regional interests; x) it provides collective goods for the region or participates in the provision of such goods; xi) its leadership position in the region is recognized or at least respected by other states (whether in the region or not) – especially by other regional powers.

It is important to highlight the reasons why other countries may follow or challenge the regional leadership of a given country. For the neo-realist approach to international relations, the lack of support should be explained through the balance of power approach, where countries can build regional or non-regional coalitions to balance regional power (Mearsheimer, 2001). For the ideational approach, legitimacy and moral obligation are the drivers that motivate people to follow a certain leadership. To this end, it is important to consider symbolic, cultural, psychological and subjective dimensions, emphasizing the legitimacy and credibility of the regional power. Ideational power considers resources such as culture, its norms and values, and the consequences for its action in foreign policy (Nye, 2004; Lake, 2006).⁵

2. Leadership, mediation and sovereignty: Brazil's role in regional integration until 2010

In order to understand Brazil's leadership role in South America, it is necessary to observe the central assumptions of the country's diplomatic action. Thus, Brazilian foreign policy today has three central characteristics (Hirst & Lima, 2006, p. 22-33). In the first place, it has an instrumental nature and a close relationship with the country's economy. This is because its approach to the territory is based on peaceful negotiations focusing on economic considerations. Thus, until the mid-1970s, foreign policy was guided by the central role of the developmental state as an inducer of industrialization. With the end of the military

regime, the focus shifted to the competitive integration into the global economy, aiming, at first – during Collor, Franco and Cardoso governments – to achieve credibility (according to which the country does not have surplus power). In a second moment, the autonomy strategy adopted by Lula da Silva's government (2003-2010) focused on international projection, diversification of options and multilateralism, where cooperation with its neighboring countries and deepening regional insertion and corporate leadership in South America became strategic for the country (Lima, 2005). Secondly, Brazilian foreign policy is guided by commitment and active involvement with multilateralism and international cooperation, acting as a mediator and with an agenda in favor of promoting development for countries in worse conditions,⁶ and committing itself to strengthening the legitimacy of international organizations.⁷ Finally, and most important for the present analysis, there is the growing importance of regional and security policies based on three central axes related to South America: the promotion and strengthening of regional agreements; intervention in political crises; and the defense of the sovereignty of the country and the continent.

The first axis of visibility of Brazil's possibility of leadership concerns the strengthening of regional integration processes. For much of the 20th century, there was mutual distrust in Brazil's relationship with its neighbors in the region. As Mello and Silva (1995, p. 95-118) point out, the evolution of the thinking of the main foreign policy actors indicates the distrust of its South American neighbors. Barão do Rio Branco viewed Brazil's neighbors with deep distrust and suspicion; similarly, for Joaquim Nabuco (Brazil's first ambassador to Washington), any agreement with South American countries was detrimental to the alliance between Brazil and the United States; in the Estado Novo, Osvaldo Aranha assumed that Brazil was surrounded by potentially hostile neighbors. Only in the 1960s, with the "Política Externa Independente" of San Thiago Dantas and Araujo Castro (1960s), was there a change in the positioning of Brazil's main players in international issues. With the strong influence of Cepaline thought, it sought the construction of an

5. According to Lake (2006, p. 36), "states often form hierarchies over one another based on relational authority, which itself rests on social contract theories that posit authority as an emergent property or equilibrium of an exchange between a dominant state and the set of citizens who comprise the subordinate state [...] This exchange entails the provision by the dominant state of a social order of value to the subordinate state in return for the subordinate's compliance and legitimacy. Regional orders emerge because of the strong positive externalities of social order and economies of scale in its production, and the mutually reinforcing legitimacy accorded the dominant state by local subordinates."
6. In the 2000s, for example, with the formation of the G20 in the Doha round of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Brazil renewed its role as a mediator in advocating its interests for agricultural liberalization.
7. Brazilian diplomatic action has repeatedly highlighted the need to reform the decision-making process of the United Nations Security Council, to increase the legitimacy, representativeness and effectiveness of collective decisions. In addition, Brazilian diplomacy has also sought to strengthen multilateral bodies by expanding the role of the United Nations in peace operations in El Salvador, Mozambique, Angola, East Timor and Haiti."

economic identity among Latin American countries – for example, with the creation of the ALALC, which emphasized integration and cooperation.

While the Brazilian diplomatic tradition maintained privileged relations with the United States and other countries of the globe, other South American countries were suspicious of the supposed Brazilian territorial hegemony. However, especially after the process of redemocratization, the relationship with South American countries became a priority on the Brazilian foreign policy agenda. This was because in the mid-1980s, with the exhaustion of the import substitution model, high inflation and foreign debt, it was necessary to think of a new model of economic development, with a preponderance of external openness and regionalism. In this new model, Brazil's competitive insertion into the international economic system would be vital, so that regional integration via Mercosur and the alliance with Argentina would enable greater weight in international institutions and economic guidelines, increasing the capacity for relations with the largest centers of power. The focus then became on regional integration and the development of Mercosur.

Initially, Mercosur focused on trade, customs tariffs and market access; but between the lines, it aimed to provide preferential access to the Brazilian market in exchange for Argentine support for Brazil's international trade strategies (Bouzas et al., 2002, p. 145). With the crisis of the real and the recession in Argentina, there was a weakening of integration and a reduction in cooperation. However, the Mercosur crisis should not only be explained by economic reasons, but also by political and structural elements (Vigevani et al., 2008, p. 5-27).

Mercosur is considered an instrument to increase Brazil's insertion in the world economy, aiming at international credibility and autonomy. Thus, since its inception, the organization has favored a low level of institutionalization and presidential diplomacy, without the need for a heavy bureaucracy, with a view to acting more independently and strengthening the country's leadership. The intergovernmental logic, based on the actions of governments and presidents, enabled the balance of the treaty, but with low intensity

and minimal bureaucratization, prioritizing the non-institutionalization and weakness of regional mechanisms. It additionally sought to mitigate pressures from elites or interest groups (Vigevani et al., 2008, p. 6-12). The degree of institutionalization, then, was kept purposefully low, ensuring the regional leadership of the country as an instrument for freedom of action in the international system.

With the launch of IIRSA (Integration of South American Regional Infrastructure) in 2000, under the Cardoso government, a central concern was the resumption of the economic development cycle to overcome the crisis of the neoliberal model. To this end, the infrastructure sector was prioritized to leverage growth through financed projects. Already in 2007, UNASUR was created, with the establishment of a South American Defense Council (CDS) in order to represent the consolidation of new autonomy and leadership efforts.

The second axis that characterizes Brazilian regional leadership is observed in diplomatic interventions in political crises. During Itamar Franco's administration, the model of non-intervention and peaceful resolution of conflicts prevailed. However, since the second half of the 1990s, the country has adopted more intrusive positions on regional issues, privileging the defense of basic principles of governance within neighboring countries, guided by the precept of non-indifference (Spektor, 2010, p. 28), which was predominantly implemented based on consensus, the dissemination of ideas and implicit coercion (Burgess, 2008).⁸

Therefore, during the Cardoso administration, the country's diplomatic leadership sought to ensure security and democratic stability by mediating crisis situations in South America.⁹ During the Lula administration, the strengthening of autonomy and leadership led to the abandonment of defensive positions, showing the Brazilian presence as a factor of stability and defense of democracy throughout the region, assuming a role of containment of local crises (Saraiva, 2007). In Venezuela, Brazilian diplomacy sought to control disagreements between the Chávez government and opposition groups, raising concerns about the violation of democratic principles; in Bolivia, it mediated the transition between the Losada and

8. Burgess recovers the Gramscian concept of hegemony to analyze Itamaraty's actions, emphasizing the importance of co-optation and cooperation as central instruments for regional leadership - and not coercion, the traditional concept of hegemony of the neo-realist approach, determined by the component of economic and military domination as a vital factor for the strength of a given state, which must expend sources of power to maintain its position of world leadership. Thus, according to Burgess (2008, p.72-3), the Gramscian approach opens space for the transmutation of cooperative hegemony into consensual hegemony, without preponderance of coercion and domination.

9. Acting, for example, in political crises that occurred in Paraguay (in 1997, it acted contrary to the coup that occurred) and in Peru (mediating the territorial dispute with Ecuador that occurred between 1995 and 1998).



Mesa governments; in Ecuador, it sought to resolve the political crisis of the Gutierrez administration, appeasing the conflict in the OAS; and, in Haiti, it led the peace mission (MINUSTAH) in the region.

Brazilian diplomatic action in crisis situations can be seen in two emblematic cases: in 2006, in Bolivia, during the process of nationalization of hydrocarbons initiated by President Evo Morales, the principle of non-intervention prevailed; and in 2009, in Honduras, during the coup that overthrew President Manuel Zelaya, it took a stance of non-indifference. In the first case, after being elected in 2005, Evo Morales adopted measures linked to the oil and gas sectors, involving the nationalization of the properties of foreign companies that used Bolivian gas, including Petrobras. After intense negotiations, Petrobrás, which had invested in the country and collaborated with the increased prospecting of natural gas reserves, had to renegotiate its contracts. Although criticized by the opposition, the Lula da Silva government stressed that Morales was acting in the name of Bolivian sovereignty, acting in a conciliatory manner and preserving the integration of South America. However, this event prevented Bolivia from becoming a reliable partner. In the second case, in 2009, Honduran President Manuel Zelaya was removed from office. With this, Brazil acted jointly with the United States in the OAS to suspend the Central American country, rejecting dialogue with the coup government and defending the principle that the military could not oust a democratically elected president. To this end, it took on the role of mediator in a case in which it did not have immediate interests.

Finally, the third axis of the positive role of the Brazilian leadership in the region is related to the issue of security. To this end, at the domestic level, the country sought to defend sovereignty, and to protect territorial integrity and national interests through economic growth strengthened by the negotiation of multilateral agreements. As there were no ways for Brazil to bear the economic costs of security, the Foreign Affairs Ministry (Itamaraty) extended sovereignty and autonomy to the continental level, protecting democracy and establishing that territorial boundaries should be seen as borders of cooperation (and not as zones of separation), as armed interventions could delay the country's larger foreign policy objectives. Thus, as already observed, the preservation of the

democratic ideal was a central issue for the country's consensual hegemony, restraining the actions of the United States (as in the fight against drug trafficking) and of supranational organizations, and ensuring the preservation of national governments (Burgess, 2008). In addition, it should be noted that the defense of internal sovereignty was also one of the fundamental foundations of Brazilian regional leadership. In 2005, with the approval of the new decree on national defense and regional and international security, the Lula government established the main priorities, such as the Amazon (war against trafficking) and the South Atlantic (for its commercial role, linked to resources from the pre-SALT), in addition to establishing the country's growing role in peacekeeping operations. It should also be noted that the establishment of the CDS has made it possible to develop strategic thinking for South America, emphasizing autonomy in the field of security and defense and investment in the preservation of sovereignty and non-interference.

Therefore, based on the three axes analyzed, it can be observed that Brazilian diplomacy sought to exercise leadership in the region through regional integration (maintaining the weak institutionalization of Mercosur as an instrument for international action), mediating crisis situations and strengthening security aspects, in which consensus and non-indifference principles prevailed.

From 2003 to 2010, Brazilian foreign policy presented a high profile action, highlighting aspects of South-South cooperation and the projection of initiatives at the regional and global levels, highlighting the agenda of an active and proud diplomacy (Amorim, 2015), with continuity of existing integration projects, such as Mercosur and IIRSA, and the launch of UNASUR in 2007 and CELAC in 2010.¹⁰ There was, in this sense, a process of assigning greater weight to South America as a platform for international projection, with greater solidity of the institutional pro-integration arrangements.

However, until 2010, the expansion of political involvement in local crises and the growing investments did not mean the acceptance and automatic legitimization of Brazilian leadership in the region. What, then, were the causes of the non-adherence of the South American neighbors to the Brazilian leadership? To answer this question, it is necessary to observe three central aspects: the

10. Also, according to Carmo & Pecequillo (2016, p. 55), an attempt was made to strengthen the region as a platform for global insertion through the creation of interregional negotiation mechanisms.

degree of regional support for the global objectives of Brazilian diplomacy; the existence of competition for regional leadership, and its actual performance in building regionalism.

In the first place, Brazil faced difficulties in obtaining support from its South American neighbors to make its global interests viable. During 2004, the country aspired to a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. However, Argentina, the main regional partner, was opposed to the creation of permanent seats – favoring the introduction of a semi-permanent association. Still in the Lula da Silva administration, Brazil presented a candidate for the post of Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Competing against a Uruguayan candidate, Brazilian diplomacy did not receive the necessary support from South American countries.¹¹

Brazil has attempted to overcome such failures by acting in other forums that have boosted the positivity of Brazil's reputation, such as membership of the BRICS, and IBSA's South-South cooperation¹² (India, Brazil and South Africa), the agility in international negotiations in the G-20,¹³ the strategic partnership with the European Union, and action on Haiti's stabilization and pacification mission. With this, especially during the Lula administration, Brazil exhibited leadership attributes, working together with its regional partners and legitimizing a military intervention; however, the success in the global sphere was counterbalanced by some failures in regional leadership (Malamud, 2011).

Second, in certain periods, other countries competed with Brazil for leadership and hegemony in the region. Argentina saw itself as a legitimate competitor for regional leadership, strengthening ties with the United States and Venezuela to counterbalance Brazilian power, and adopting protectionist and anti-integrationist trade measures. Before the political and economic crisis that plagued the country, Hugo Chávez's Venezuela managed to attract the loyalty of countries that were under Brazilian influence – such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay. But some countries continued to support the Brazil's regional leadership role. Peru and Colombia, despite favoring bilateral agreements with the United States, remained reliable partners, respecting Brazilian interests. Finally, Chile is

still the region's most reliable partner, respecting international laws and contracts.

Third, Brazil has privileged the construction of Mercosur (as well as Unasur) with low institutionalization, aiming to act with greater independence at the international level; and, despite advances in the areas of politics and security, there have been difficulties in the economic sphere, with several obstacles on the bloc's negotiating agenda. However, by using the bloc as an instrument of international insertion, the country cannot be characterized as a typical regional power, since it does not assume the position of the region's main driver, hesitating in some situations where it is forced to impose itself – such as in the funding of regional prominence and in the imposition of principles of complex interdependence to promote cooperation in cases that require shared decisions. This is because, on the one hand, the logic of Brazilian foreign policy in the region aims to protect against threats and preserve action against regional instability; on the other hand, regional activism would be a tool to increase the power of broader interests, maintaining stability, cooperation and institutionalization among countries as instruments to maximize the freedom of Brazilian action. Thus, the perception of neighboring countries is that Brazil is the main regional center of power, but it does not respond effectively to power asymmetries, emphasizing internal development and the primacy of national solutions and without worrying about the governance of the region or the conciliation of self-interest with the provision of public goods and the resolution of collective action dilemmas.

Therefore, for some authors, despite the regional prominence, Brazil did not translate its structural and instrumental resources into effective leadership, because its main allies did not endorse the guidelines and objectives of Brazilian foreign policy. However, there was no strong resistance either, which increased the global recognition of Brazil's regional leadership. Consequently, regional integration ceased to be a priority, and the emphasis shifted to achieving global agreements (Vigevani et al., 2008). However, even with the limitations of regional integration, Burgess (2008, p.65-6; 70) reiterates that the Brazilian consensual hegemony achieved gains that compensated for the lack of cooperation and affirmation of Brazilian diplomatic

11. In addition, the country had bilateral problems with Ecuador (in the operations of the Odebrecht company) and Paraguay (claims by the Lugo government to renegotiate the terms of the Itaipu Treaty).
12. With increased protectionism and difficult access to the markets of the richest countries, the trade and economic gains from cooperation among the countries of the South have become too important for Brazil.
13. Formed by nations that represent 60% of the world's population, 70% of agriculture, and 26% of exports of agricultural products, its objective is to defend the agricultural commercial interests of developing nations, being an opportunity for Brazil to exercise its role of intermediary power.



leadership in South America without any forceful imposition, causing other states to accept and internalize central elements of the hegemonic order, guided by inclusive leadership, active participation and contribution to subordinate participants. As regionalism involved little cost to the Brazilian hegemonic project, Itamaraty used Mercosur to improve the region's economies and attract new technologies, guiding the domestic interests of other South American countries towards Brazil and the continent as a method to strengthen the consensual project, including common priorities and results.

3. Crisis of regionalism and leadership vacuum during the Dilma Rousseff, Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro administrations

Until 2010, Brazil made progress in advancing its South American agenda, and an optimistic climate regarding the future of the region prevailed. However, in 2011, with the administrations of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) and Michel Temer (2016-2018), began a period of decline in foreign policy activism and power vacuum in the region.

Dilma Rousseff, of the Workers' Party, was the successor of the Lula government and inherited similar foreign policy strategies, with a revisionist approach towards international institutions, active participation in multilateral forums, and proactive orientation towards the regional dimension (Saraiva, 2014). However, due to the external and internal conjunctures, Brazil's foreign policy experienced changes and a visible reduction in proactivity, with a marked decline in the country's international relations (Cervo & Lessa, 2014, p. 133).

According to Saraiva & Gomes (2016, p. 83), during the period, the United States recovered economically, reinforcing the centrality of the G7 and reducing the action spaces of emerging countries. At the same time, China's rise increased the imbalance in the international economic order, pushing back the high prices of the commodities exported by Brazil. The domestic economic scenario suffered the impacts of the international financial crisis, compromising the balance of payments and GDP growth. In a troubled context in the political, economic and social field, Rousseff was re-elected; however, the street protests of 2013 were the

first signs of what would happen later, with the impeachment of the president in 2016.

As can be seen, in view of this scenario, the progress observed until 2010 began to suffer several setbacks, causing the loss of space and leadership (mainly because Rousseff's attention was focused on internal issues), the increase in regional instability, and the dropping of the subject of integration,¹⁴ whose projects have slowed down to a snail's pace.

In the three areas examined in this article, the low level of performance (also influenced by the deterioration of the relationship between the President and the Itamaraty, in addition to the reduction in presidential diplomacy and Brazil's proactive participation in global politics) led to a turning point, especially in terms of Brazilian leadership in the region. The government failed to sustain the political will displayed by previous administrations to articulate regional leadership, and the country's engagement towards the region was all but absent. Mercosur's difficulties became more evident, with the Dilma government showing less willingness to make concessions to Argentina in the economic field, and the frictions were not resolved.

Regarding the regional crises, it is important to highlight the beginning of the deterioration of Venezuela's political, economic and social system. According to Saraiva & Gomes (2016), Brazilian diplomacy and the Presidency of the Republic contributed little to solving the crisis, and did not attempt to build a substantive consensus. In the face of the Venezuelan crisis, UNASUR acted most vehemently, and any attempts at a solution came from this body, and not from Brazil.

In relation to South America's security and defense, the CDS, created under Lula's administration, was in standby mode, as Brazil's actions were based on bilateral ties with neighboring countries through technical and financial cooperation. Moreover, with the economic crisis, it became more and more unviable to pay for regional cooperation initiatives, and the Rousseff administration was reluctant to do so.¹⁵

As can be seen, Rousseff's administration has given little priority to foreign policy aimed at playing a leadership role in regional integration, which is no longer a government priority. As a

14. According to Veiga and Rios (2011), short-term economic issues have once again taken central stage in foreign policy, to the detriment of political actions for international projection and strengthening of integration.

15. Despite the impracticability of bearing the costs of integration and the rejection of strengthening cooperation institutions, Brazil has succeeded in gaining support from the region for some of its aspirations for elected positions, such as the election of Roberto Azevedo to the WTO's Director General, José Graziano to the FAO's Director General, and Roberto Caldas to Judge of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

reflection of the unfavorable internal and external conjunctures, there was a more reactive and less assertive stance, with little dedication to regional foreign policy.

After her impeachment in 2016, then Vice-President Michel Temer took over the Presidency of the Republic and began to effect changes in the design and implementation of foreign policy. In a first moment, the main metamorphosis reflected a “non-ideological” and anti-PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) direction of Brazilian Foreign Policy,¹⁶ with the redirection of international relations from the South-South axis to the North-South axis, prioritizing free trade agreements, a low profile in multilateral forums and the replacement of integration processes by bilateral meetings and the diplomatic isolation of Venezuela – suspending the Mercosur country on grounds of a breakdown of the democratic order. In 2017, with the escalation of the crisis in Venezuela, the various governments of the region began to meet in the Lima Group,¹⁷ promoting a realignment with the global center and the emptying of Unasur, considered as the main regional institution of South America’s progressive circle.

The objective of Temer’s foreign policy was the search for investments supported by the construction of an image of Brazil as a country that defends the current international order – and not as a revisionist of the international order. The commitment to the integration of South America was maintained, but with a greater attempt at rapprochement with the Pacific Alliance and a visible change in the country’s relationship with Venezuela. There was no leadership action for integration processes, since both Mercosur and Unasur were no longer priorities.¹⁸ On the other hand, the country’s rapprochement with the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) was privileged as an integral part of the narrative to try to improve the country’s image in the world in the commercial sphere (Silva, 2019).

It should be noted that, while internal economic problems and changes in the priorities of the Rousseff and Temer governments ended up weakening Brazil’s foreign policy towards South America, China deepened its economic ties with the

region, and the United States returned to economic growth. With the crisis and the prioritization of internal problems, there was an emptying of the integration agenda, which reduced Brazil’s power of attraction over the other countries of South America. At the same time, the Pacific Alliance gained prominence, indicating that the United States and China are leading the region (Carmo & Pecequilo, 2016).

Finally, the decrease in the central role of the Brazilian leadership for the region has also been observed in the government of Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022). Bolsonaro’s foreign policy can be characterized by a major rupture, since the country abandoned the posture focused on multilateralism, instead allying itself with countries that are skeptical about the multilateral system, and began to act in an unpredictable manner – due to the presence of three groups in the formulation of foreign policy (the military, the “olavists”, and the technocrats) – which reduced Brazil’s capacity to assume any form of leadership in South America.

During Ernesto Araújo’s leadership as ambassador at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (from 2019 to 2021), a radical change in Brazilian foreign policy guidelines and orientations was implemented, with criticism of so-called “globalism”, multilateral institutions of world governance (especially in relation to human rights, climate change, and the notion of a global public good), and the deconstruction of the initiatives, projects, and commitments of Latin American progressivism. To this end, the foreign policy of the Bolsonaro government was based on the alignment with the views of the international extreme right (especially a privileged relationship with former President Donald Trump), with the deepening of the agenda of neoliberal economic reforms, and the strengthening of the Security and Defense Complex through alliances with the United States (and other governments such as Israel, Poland, Hungary, the United Arab Emirates and India).

Furthermore, the few initiatives of multilateral and regional coordination and cooperation, the controversial positions in the field of environmental protection and the denialism towards the coronavirus pandemic have implied a

16. It should be noted that, unlike the last governments, which had been delegating the position of Minister to career civil servants, Temer appointed political leaders of the PSDB (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira), the PT’s main adversary in the political field. The first to be appointed was José Serra, who directly criticized the foreign policy implemented by the PT governments, as well as pointing out that Brazil would no longer be restricted to an exclusive and paralyzing adherence to multilateral efforts within the WTO (Brazil, 2016). After José Serra’s departure in March 2017, Aloysio Nunes took over, and also sought to dissociate himself from the guidelines adopted by the party previously in power.

17. The Lima Group was formed in 2017 by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Paraguay, with the aim of resolving the Venezuela crisis peacefully. It has operated as the main international opposition to Nicolás Maduro, which has drawn much criticism due to the defence of proposals for intervention in the country.

18. In April 2018, Brazil, together with Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Paraguay, suspended their respective involvement in Unasur.



growing isolation in the international community, distancing the country from normative proposals and possibilities of cooperation with countries in the region.

In relation to South America, the Bolsonaro government did not have a project for the region. In a first moment, there was the deconstruction of the initiatives and commitments of Latin American progressivism, seeking a rapprochement with other right-wing rulers in the region, such as Sebastian Piñera (Chile), Iván Duque (Colombia) and Mauricio Macri (Argentina). In the meantime, at the beginning of 2019, Prosul (Forum for the Progress of South America) was created, whose founding document was signed by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guyana, Paraguay and Peru. However, the Bolsonaro government clearly lacked any commitment to ensuring a regional leadership role. In the following years, Chile and Argentina elected center-left governments, which dynamited any possibility of strengthening Prosul. In addition, Bolsonaro made several statements opposing bilateral negotiations with Argentina and Chile, which increased the importance of intra-regional political differences in government projects and weakened the possibility of regional leadership.

Conclusions

In the post-Cold War context, Brazil sought to preserve its independent action on the international scene, expanding its regional presence in multilateral institutions and committing itself to reducing the uncertainties of the power asymmetries of the poorest countries, thus acquiring a more active stance in foreign policy – especially until 2011. Specifically in South America, Brazilian diplomacy sought to strengthen some forms of regional integration, striving to defend democracy, stabilize the region and sovereignty. In view of the above, can the country be characterized as a regional power?

On the one hand, it can be highlighted that Brazil meets six of the eleven characteristics that distinguish a regional power. This is because it is interconnected (economically, politically and culturally with the region); it coexists and dialogues with all countries; it has a leading position in the main multilateral organizations and forums, and it influences the definition of the regional security agenda through the defense of democracy and sovereignty, and promoting the establishment of

geopolitical delimitation and territorial limits as zones of cooperation. Finally, Brazilian diplomacy acts through regional governance structures (such as Mercosur and Unasur), operating as an interlocutor with South American neighbors in international forums and organizations, where it articulates and represents the regional interests, seeking the recognition of developing countries as equal partners.

On the other hand, Brazilian leadership is dubious in three areas. While the country exhibits political resources to strengthen regional integration, its material resources – economic, demographic and military – are destined mainly for the defense of internal sovereignty and for economic growth itself; in addition, the ideological factor is an important element, but it is not essential for the international projection of the region. Thus, there is no clear project for a common regional identity, because the country's regional initiatives do not highlight a set of values or a shared community perception that would give basis to regionalism. Finally, Brazilian diplomacy has a leading position in the region, acting in crises and in defense of sovereignty. This fact characterizes Brazil as a situational leader¹⁹ in South America, because it guides its neighbors towards consensual decisions at critical moments – either through direct mediation or through bodies created specifically for such purposes, such as Unasur.

Lastly, Brazil fails in two aspects of regional integration: it does not have much influence on the activities and results of regional affairs, and it does not provide collective goods for the region. For the strengthening and institutionalization of regional integration, three types of conditions are necessary (Malamud, 2008): demand (trade, investment, social interactions, treaties and common opportunities), supply (acting as paymaster, distribution of regional budget and public goods, presidential diplomacy and supranational entrepreneurship) and inertia (monitoring institutions, enforcement, dispute resolution, socialization forums). Thus, it can be seen that, specifically in Mercosur and considering Brazil's performance as the main leader in South America, demand conditions are weak, with a relative decline in regional interdependence, in addition to the existence of few resources or entrepreneurship, and the absence of formal institutions and regional norms.

19. There are five ways in which a country can lead a region: structural, institutional, situational, coercive and instrumental. In situational leadership, the State acts on specific opportunities to build and guide the current political order (Ikenberry, 1996, p. 395).

Brazilian diplomatic action in the region is guided by the defense of democracy, sovereignty and the principle of non-indifference – which evidences its characterization as a regional power. The integration process is centered on Brazil, which uses collective forces and individual states as a platform for insertion into the international system, seeking to unify trade issues, promote the integration of physical structures, security, the protection of democracy, and international cooperation. However, since the main objective of Itamaraty is to strengthen the country through insertion, autonomy and credibility at the international level, regional integration is characterized by low institutionalization, in which the country bears little of its costs, which delegitimizes its position of regional leadership. And for a state to demonstrate its capacity to assume the role of regional leader, it would need stronger and healthier supranational institutions, with higher costs to the country, but being accepted among its own neighbors as a responsible leader. In this sense, in order to be able to count on cooperation and ensure the status of South America as a powerhouse, the need for Brazil to act as a paymaster becomes evident, offering subsidies and public goods and promoting the greater institutionalization of regional organizations.

While during Lula's administration there were several attempts to strengthen regional integration and Brazilian leadership, in the last governments it has been noticed that the Brazilian leadership initiatives are substantially diminished, compounded by its reduced interest. Whether due to the internal or international context, the foreign policy dimension that had the greatest negative impact was the regional dimension, so that expectations in the region about Brazil's role as the main country in strengthening integration and solving crises have been frustrated. In Dilma Rousseff's government, unfavorable internal and external contexts have meant that the president has only played a minor role at the regional level, weakening Brazil's regional leadership. This was also the case during the administration of Michel Temer, who sought to promote changes in foreign policy, favoring bilateral agreements in the economic sphere and paying little attention to strengthening integration processes. In turn, in the government of Jair Bolsonaro, the articulation between negationism and isolationism implied an anti-regionalist foreign policy profile, with the production of a "bad-neighborhood" policy, and no

pretensions of occupying spaces of power at the regional level.

Therefore, we can point out that during the end of the Cardoso administration and in Lula's administrations, Brazil sought to act as a regional power, emphasizing its leadership in aspects of integration, crisis containment and the development of security for the region. However, the good political and economic moment experienced by the country, in addition to the optimism of the country's international position, was not translated into the strengthening of integration, since Brazil's integrationist projects had fragile institutional bases – which did not translate into effective leadership for the South American continent. And, since 2011, we have seen a strong reversal in the country's role in the face of the challenges of regional leadership – mainly due to changes in foreign policy performance, internal political-economic crises and the strengthening of the large world economies. In this way, we can see a clear decrease in Brazil's role as a regional leader.

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