

A Politização da Política Externa Brasileira na relação entre os poderes Executivos e Legislativo

Drivers of Brazilian Foreign Policy Politicization: Horizontalization, Pluralization, and Presidentialization¹

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Abstract

Since the turn of the century, Brazil has experienced profound transformations in foreign policymaking (FPM), largely due to its economic and political liberalization. This shift has challenged the traditional dominance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in FPM. Scholars increasingly advocate for viewing foreign policy as a public policy, emphasizing processes such as horizontalization, pluralization, and presidentialization. Despite this, the phenomenon of politicization remains underexplored, lacking a clear conceptual definition and empirical boundaries. This study suggests that politicization is influenced by the aforementioned processes, which serve as intervening variables that shape the effects of economic and political liberalization. Using a most-likely research design, this paper provides initial evidence of politicization from the beginning of Rousseff's second term (2015) to the current term of Lula (2024). Findings indicate that foreign policy politicization in Brazil reflects domestic political cleavages between the government and opposition, with political elites mobilizing resources and institutions to influence public debate and secure political benefits from foreign policy. This analysis highlights the need for further empirical testing of the proposed theoretical causal relationships.

Key words: Foreign Policy; Politicization; Brazil; Public Policy

¹ Work in progress.

Introduction

International transformations since the end of the Cold War and Brazilian changes since re-democratization have impacted the formulation and implementation of Brazilian foreign policy (BFP). Aware of these changes, researchers have argued for the need to analyze it as a public policy (Milani and Pinheiro, 2013; 2017; Sanchez et al., 2006).

This new approach gained momentum with the adoption of new theoretical frameworks influenced by Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) studies (Casarões, 2018; Salomón and Guimarães, 2021; Salomón and Pinheiro, 2013). Scholars linked Brazil's political and economic opening and the global political, economic, and financial transformations of the late 20th century with the democratization of foreign policy.

The process is multifaceted and has been conceptualized in different ways, depending on the scope of the analysis: horizontalization and the reduction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE or Itamaraty) bureaucratic insulation (Figueira, 2010); pluralization of actors and diversification of interests, characterized by the increased influence of non-state actors (Milani and Pinheiro, 2017; Pinheiro and Milani, 2012); presidentialization, the increased influence and participation of the executive leader in foreign policy (Burgess and Bastos, 2017; Cason and Power, 2009); among others. There is a significant overlap between the processes and concepts and variations in their definitions, but broadly speaking, they address the reduction of the bureaucratic insulation of the Itamaraty in the face of the increasing participation of other state and non-state actors.

Even though politicization, another related process, has been on the radar for some time (Faria, 2008; Lima, 2000; Milani and Pinheiro, 2017), we lack studies exclusively dedicated to analyze this phenomenon. While there is a general view of the other processes as positive and potential drivers of a broad democratization process of the BFP, politicization has generated controversy due to its interrelation with processes of ideologization or partisanship (Lopes, 2011; Ricupero, 2010) and its relation to political party influence or political intervention in public administration (Santos and Lopes, 2023), which have negative connotations in Brazilian public debate.

Politicization is an essential variable because it results from the other processes, being more of a dependent variable than an independent one (redistributive impacts of foreign policy and consequent pluralization of actors) or an intervening one (horizontalization and presidentialization). Considering this variable is a backbone that agglutinates the effect of all other variables, it is essential to carefully define it conceptually, differentiating it from those other variables, and discuss ways to observe it empirically.

Thus, the object of analysis in this article is the process of politicizing foreign policy issues by political elites, especially presidents and congress members. The focus on the relations between the Executive and Legislative is justified because it serves as a thermometer

to indicate when foreign policy issues are politicized. In these arenas, we might observe cleavage between opposition and government and main reactions to the foreign policy agenda.

The empirical analysis is conducted qualitatively and based mainly on primary sources, focusing on a period framed as a most likely case, that is, the best conditions to identify the occurrence of the phenomenon of interest, the politicization of BFP (Odell, 2001). It demonstrates that political elites use the politicization of foreign policy to gain more public reach and political electoral returns. This strategy was used by both presidents and the opposition to mobilize or cater to the interests of their electoral bases, albeit with different strategies. Broadly speaking, politicization brings foreign policy issues closer to other domestic policy issues, following similar lines of mobilization and political disputes between the government and opposition.

This article is structured as follows. First, we review the main concepts used by scholars to characterize changes in Brazilian foreign policymaking, such as horizontalization, pluralization, and presidentialization, and discuss how they are empirically observed. This discussion highlights the key differences and overlaps with politicization, concluding with a definition of the latter and guidelines for identifying its occurrence. In the subsequent section, we provide an empirical analysis covering the period from the beginning of the second Rousseff Government (2015-2016) to the first year and a half of the third Lula Administration (2023-2024). This analysis demonstrates how presidents and legislators mobilized resources and politicize bureaucracies to bring foreign policy issues to public debate reflecting the main cleavages in Brazilian politics. The final section briefly discusses the findings and proposes future research agendas.

Framing Brazilian foreign policy democratization

The literature has conceptualized the different dimensions of the democratization process in various ways, with a significant overlap between the concepts, the causes of their occurrence, the type of influence, and the stage of BFP they impact. Far from conducting an exhaustive review of the debate, I will focus on the main concepts discussed, seeking to organize how they relate, are employed, and observed empirically.

Horizontalization, Pluralization, and Presidentialization

As pointed out by Farias and Ramanzini Júnior (2015), in addition to horizontalization, terms such as decentralization, pluralization, de-encapsulation, politicization, democratization, power shift, and diversification of interests are used to describe the breakdown of the supposed monopoly of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) in BFP. There is also a recurring

lack of clarity between concepts and their forms of measurement/observation, which can lead to potential weaknesses in proving these transformations.

Although the concept of horizontalization (generally linked to the reduction of the bureaucratic insulation of the Itamaraty compared to other ministries) is used as a synonym for democratization (although the latter is more general) or pluralization (more related to the diversification of actors participating in the BFP), for differentiation purposes, we will relate the concept to its form of measurement as a way of delimiting it.

Thus, even though it might be conceptualized as the "greater proximity of the structure to the client [...] the proximity to the citizen to the detriment of institutional insulation, the transparency in public actions" (Figueira, 2010, 5), the phenomenon is more usually related to the dynamics within the executive branch "in which the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [...] ceases to act in isolation in conducting this policy" (Silva, Spécie, and Vitale, 2010, 7).

Therefore, horizontalization is observed through the increase in inter-bureaucratic dynamics resulting from the creation of interministerial commissions and the exchange of human resources between ministries to deal with new topics, such as the environment and human rights (Faria, 2012; Figueira, 2010), or even by identifying institutions of the executive branch with legal competence to participate in the BFP process (Silva, Spécie, and Vitale, 2010).

Formally, there is an evident process of decentralization, with the assignment of foreign policy competencies to other bureaucracies at different stages (formulation and implementation), even though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seeks to maintain a central position in this conduct and coordination (Silva, Spécie, and Vitale, 2010).

Data collected by Figueira (2010) show some of the changes: the number of interministerial commissions and the participation of the MRE increased. Thus, although considered incipient, there was an increase in porosity, implying a decrease in the bureaucratic insulation.

Different bureaucracies of the federal executive branch are advancing in intra-governmental coordination and mobilization for the production of BFP through reforms in the institutional structure responsible for the area. This includes various ministries establishing Secretariats of International Relations and expanding foreign policy competencies beyond the MRE (Faria, 2012).

These transformations were significant in the area of trade policy, for example, with the replacement of the Foreign Trade Department of the Bank of Brazil (Cacex) by the Foreign Trade Chamber (Camex), which was structured with the responsibility of coordinating foreign trade actions as an advisory body (Arbix, 2008), or the advancement of ministerial dialogue through the creation of thematic interministerial commissions such as the Interministerial Goods Group (GIB) and the Interministerial Services Group (GIS) (Figueira, 2019).

Pluralization has a significant conceptual and empirical intersection with horizontalization but refers more directly to actors and agendas than to structures. In general terms, it involves the pluralization of social and state agents with interests in foreign policy, including civil society actors such as interest groups, particularly unions and businesspeople, and to a lesser extent, civil society organizations and political parties, as well as other state actors, including both the federal executive and the legislative branch, with the latter moving away from delegative behavior in BFP (Faria, Lopes, and Casarões, 2013).

Such a process is a direct result of the pluralization of agendas related to International Relations, a process that made it difficult for the MRE to monopolize the BFP (Milani and Pinheiro, 2017). Empirically, the pluralization of agendas is part of a process observed at both global and local levels, involving the liberalization of the Brazilian political regime and trade opening, as well as the diversification of the country's interests due to the end of the Cold War and the intensification of globalization (Salomón and Pinheiro, 2013).

Regarding pluralization, it is important to assess the participation of another relevant actor in the dynamics of Brazilian coalition presidentialism: the legislative branch. Formally, it is responsible for definitively resolving treaties and international agreements that "entail significant burdens on national assets," ratifying the president's signing of treaties, authorizing the president to declare war, and approving the appointment of permanent diplomatic mission chiefs (Federal Senate). Additionally, it must approve declarations of war and the making of peace and the signing of international treaties. However, it does not formally participate in either the implementation or the evaluation of foreign policy (Brasil, 1988).

In practice, identifying the influence of Congress is more complex. Initially, there was a predominant view that the Brazilian Congress abdicated its authority, with the Executive being its sole decision-maker (Lima and Santos, 2001).

Even though there was evidence supporting the thesis that foreign policy issues are restricted to the Executive Branch, it is not possible to assume that the stance is always one of passivity, marginality, or subordination. As Pinheiro (2013, 10) argues, low participation does not mean "little influence, much less abdication. There are indeed efficient means of action that guarantee the Legislative a relevant role in the decision-making process, without presenting a high degree of activism, such as the power of ratification."

Thus, it should be considered that delegation is different from abdication. This means that despite the predominance of the Executive, as in other public policies, foreign policy is subject to parliamentary influence, especially when there are divergences of interests, moments when the Executive is pressured to alter its policies by the Legislative (Neves, 2003).

In the pursuit of efficiency, Congress delegates to the Executive and acts during the ratification process or implementation (when changes in domestic legislation or budget allocation for execution are necessary) and through congressional monitoring mechanisms:

police patrol, which represents oversight of executive acts and their agencies; and fire alarms, joint action with other interested political actors (Martin, 2000). In the Brazilian case, forms of parliamentary control include requests for public hearings, which bring society's participation into the legislative debate, and requests for information and summoning ministers of state to provide clarifications (Santiago, 2019).

Ferrari (2011) considers that Congress will cooperate whenever there is disinterest in the issue or a convergence of interests. When there is low conflict of interests, there may be a type of coerced cooperation, either through direct mechanisms (urgent requests by the Executive) or indirect mechanisms (budget control or the Executive's legislative powers), or by the Executive anticipating preferences due to the *ex post* nature of congressional consideration. Finally, in scenarios with high conflict of interests, there may be strong resistance from Congress, increasing the likelihood of rejection and making mechanisms to pressure congressional collaboration ineffective.

This is the result found by Santiago (2019). The *ex post facto* action of the Chamber would be greater (79%) whenever dealing with international acts of greater relevance, either by requests for review, discussion of the matter in plenary, use of amendments, reservations or substitutes, and votes against the report presented in committee. Such relevance and congressional participation also increase the chances of Executive interference (178%), through mechanisms of urgent requests and agenda withdrawals.

Furthermore, to secure parliamentary majorities, the president builds legislative support by distributing ministries and positions (Amorim Neto 2006; Amorim Neto and Samuels, 2011), which can be decisive in the president's relations with his governing coalition. The recent weakening of the 'political value' of positions and ministries due to the increase in demand for parliamentary amendments does not limit the functioning of this logic; it merely changes the type of incentive used by the Executive.

In foreign policy specifically, the primary dimension that explains congressional voting is the government-opposition dichotomy; whereas in other areas, a second dimension, the greater relevance of party ideology in structuring parliamentary votes, is identified (Feliu, 2018).

Regarding pluralization through the participation of non-state actors, we can empirically observe an increase in two ways. On the one hand, there were reforms initiated by the bureaucracy, such as the creation of consultative forums and institutionalized communication channels with business and labor unions to coordinate positions adopted in international negotiations. Examples include Senalca (National Section for Coordination of Issues Related to the FTAA) and Seneuropa (National Section for Coordination of Issues Related to Mercosur-European Union Negotiations) (Figueira, 2019), or the Private Sector Advisory Council (Conex), linked to Camex (Arbix, 2008).

On the other hand, there was the mobilization of productive sectors to create sectoral and supra-sectoral organizations to serve as a bridge between the demands of the productive sector and the government, providing information on negotiations and analyzing the impacts of international agreements on the sectors. Organized through initiatives of already consolidated groups such as the National Confederation of Industry (CNI), the Brazilian Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock (CNA), and the Brazilian Exporters Association (AEB, currently the Brazilian Foreign Trade Association), entities like the Brazilian Business Coalition, the Brazilian Agribusiness Association (Abag), the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB), and the Permanent Forum for International Agricultural Negotiations (Fórum) were created (Carvalho, 2003).

Another process analyzed is presidentialization or presidential diplomacy, which deals with the "personal conduct of foreign policy matters, beyond mere routine or *ex officio* duties, by the president" (Danese, 2017, 67). This involves the direct participation of the president in the formulation and conduct of BFP, aligning it with the objectives of the government, the party, and/or the president. Conversely, the president may choose to participate less in this agenda, considering that they have the power to define the decision-making autonomy of the Itamaraty, either through omission or delegation of power (Lima, 1994). The degree of the president's involvement in foreign policy will depend on their political interest in the subject and their personal engagement. Cases where there is participation outside the traditional patterns of diplomacy (discreet and institutional), with presidents engaging in *ex officio* tasks, are referred to as presidential diplomacy (Danese, 2017).²

The actions of presidents would be the most drastic indicator of power shifting away from the MRE, causing changes in traditional diplomatic practices due to the influence of their party, ideology, and personality. The result would be less consistent and strategic behaviors, with presidents concerned about the electoral horizon and loosening the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries (Cason and Power, 2009).

The most common indicator of presidentialization is the number of presidential trips abroad, measured either in days absent from Brazil (Cason and Power, 2009) or as a percentage of time spent abroad. The results indicate that the Lula da Silva II and I terms, followed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) II and I, were the peaks of presidential diplomacy (Amorim Neto and Malamud, 2019).

The increased presidential participation in foreign policy generated significant controversy, especially during Lula da Silva's administration, due to his partnership with Celso

²Even though the president's influence on foreign policy is considered significant by the literature, there are associations between the presidential profile and foreign policy that have not held up against more robust empirical analyses. This is the case with the thesis that links the decline in international projection during Rousseff's administration to the president's profile (Burin; Feliu, 2022).

Amorim, who later joined the Workers' Party (Lopes, 2011). Criticisms emerged due to the potential politicization of bureaucracies through the appointment of political allies to key positions in the administration as a way to control decisions, similar to what happens in other ministries (Batista and Lopez, 2021).³

Politicization as a dependent variable

Politicization is not only a result of the increased presidential activism in foreign policy but also of all the processes discussed above. It is more of a dependent variable (result) rather than an independent one (end of the Cold War with the pluralization of international agenda issues, and Brazil's political and economic opening, with redistributive impacts on foreign policy) or an intervening one (horizontalization and presidentialization processes).

The causal chain in this process, considering the relationship between the types of variables, is outlined in Table 1. This theoretical proposition is not entirely novel; rather, it serves as an organization of the literature discussed in the previous subsection. It essentially links (a) the emergence of new international agendas and economic multilateral negotiations to an increased internationalization of bureaucracies less engaged in foreign affairs and legislative participation (i.1); and (b) domestic changes (e.g., economic liberalization and political democratization) to a growing involvement of non-state actors and heightened presidential interest in foreign affairs (i.2, i.3).

Table 1 – Relationship among variables considering their types

Independent variables	Intervening variables	Dependent variable
I. International I.1. emergence of new agendas (e.g., human rights, environment etc.) I.2. multilateral economic negotiations	i. Pluralization of actors: i.1. horizontalization (e.g., bureaucratic decentralization, legislative activism).	Politicization
II. Domestic: II.1. political democratization II.2. economic liberalization	i. Pluralization of actors: i.2. participation of non-state actors i.3. presidentialization	

Source: elaborated by the author

Politicization turns an issue more salient. As a result, the political agenda attracts greater public interest and more participants in the debate (Zürn, 2019). Buzan, Wæver e Wilde (1998) argue that any public issue can be placed somewhere on a spectrum ranging from non-politicized (the state does not deal with it, and it is not a topic of public debate and decision), to politicized (it is part of the public debate, requiring decisions and resource

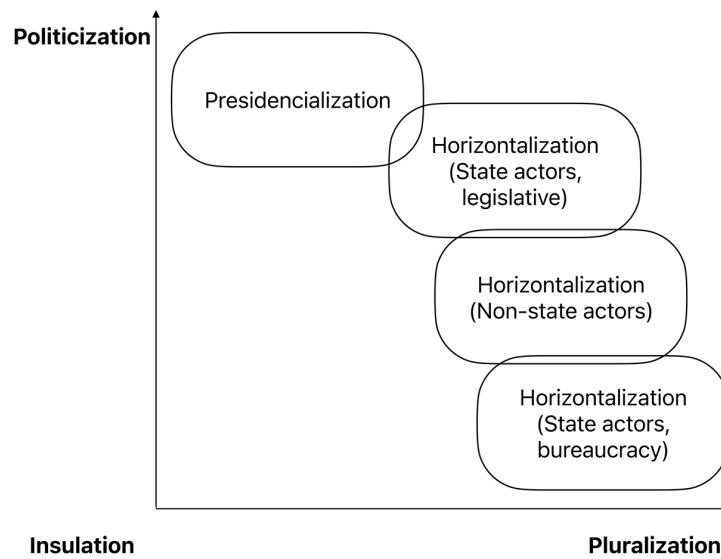
³ It is important to highlight that politicization differs from partisanship. While the former emphasizes the influence of political parties on foreign policy, usually observed through the affiliation of diplomats or ministers, the latter is related to the influence of party preferences on policies (Lopez, 2015).

allocation), to securitized (the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside traditional political procedures). The essential difference between the latter two lies in the outcomes since politicization leads to opening the debate for decision-making, while securitization leads to the adoption of exceptional measures and, therefore, outside public control and debate.

Bringing the debate to Brazilian Foreign Policy (BFP), politicization can be conceptualized as the “intensification of the debate of ideas, values, and interests regarding policy choices, as well as, and consequently, inter and intra-bureaucratic disputes, debates among different social actors on the best way to address their demands.” This results from the diversification of actors, the internationalization of other areas, and consequently, eliminates its differentiation from other public policies (Milani and Pinheiro, 2013, 30). This process is also related to the increased political influence within the Itamaraty (Faria, 2008).

Considering the concepts mobilized in this section, it is essential to evaluate how international and domestic transformations (independent variables) influenced the development and implementation of BFP (intervening variables), generating politicization as an outcome. Figure 1 organizes the relationship between the concepts, seeking to identify how they relate and how the pluralization of actors can lead to politicization. The diversification of involved actors directly generates pluralization and, indirectly, might lead to politicization, depending on each actor's stance and the mobilization of foreign policy for domestic political objectives. Furthermore, the addition of new actors tends to increase politicization, following a spectrum that ranges from the pluralization of involved bureaucracies, the participation of non-state actors, Congressional activism, to presidential diplomacy, following a scale defined by each actor's potential to mobilize public opinion and influence political debate on the BFP agenda. The higher the up on a scale of political power and resources, the fewer actors are needed to politicize.

Figure 1 – Relationship between concepts and impacts on politicization



Source: elaborated by the author

Despite this theoretical organization of the process, it is complex to observe empirically. This is because the process is essentially intersubjective, making it difficult to objectively define when topics move from non-politicized to politicized due to measurement issues. Additionally, topics that become politicized vary depending on the country. To observe this, one can identify political actions and speeches, as well as public and media reactions to these actions (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 1998).

Considering politicization definitions and its application to BFP, to empirically observe it, we will follow two paths: 1) an increasing in the participation of actors (Flores and Jatobá, 2016), usually when preference conflicts emerge and there are reactions to issues not usually in the public agenda, resulting in the mobilization of organizational resources to influence policies by relevant foreign policy actors; 2) an expansion of political control over policy implementation or the rewarding of political allies with positions in public administration, raising the “control and supervision over the direction of policies” or the appointment of “people based on party affinities” (Lopez, 2015, 22–23).

Observing presidents and legislators for evidence

Owing to the intersubjective nature of politicization, commonly used indicators to evaluate transformative processes in BFP do not apply to it. Thus, the counting of interministerial commissions, which measures bureaucratic horizontalization, or presidential trips, which captures presidentialization, are not necessarily indicators of politicization. Therefore, a qualitative analysis to further explore the phenomenon is essential.

The politicization of BFP is not new. Civil society, Parliament, universities, and the press, engaged in foreign policy debates (Saraiva, 2005). Public opinion, although often overlooked as a determining factor in international policy decisions, occasionally influenced the decision-making process, especially in contexts of strong social mobilization and amid internal disputes between different currents of thought, such as nationalists and liberals (Manzur, 1999).

Since the early days of the Cold War, Brazil has experienced significant disputes over its foreign policy. This was evident during Getúlio Vargas's second term, marked by conflicts such as the 1952 Military Agreement with the U.S. and the creation of Petrobras in 1953 (Castro, s/d). During the period of the Independent Foreign Policy, populism and the spread of mass media brought a gradual polarization of public opinion, particularly regarding Cuba and relations with the United States (Manzur, 2014). Even under the military regime, the adoption of universalism raised significant political disputes, with U.S. relations being especially contentious during the Figueiredo administration (Ferreira, 2009).

However, it is the period beginning with Dilma Rousseff's second term (2015-2016) that will be analyzed in more detail to find evidence of the politicization of BFP. During this period, foreign policy gained prominence in the national public debate and became a primary field of political dispute between the opposition and the government, whether during political successions (impeachment and elections) or during administrations. In the political debate, a clear conflict emerges between groups that take positions on foreign policy, mobilize their political resources to define the agenda, and seek to increase their political control over the institutions responsible for foreign policy.

Unable to consolidate a coalition with ten parties in a highly fragmented legislature, Rousseff sought to attract political and economic support by redistributing ministries (Nunes and Melo, 2017) and appointing an economy minister supported by the financial sector (Joaquim Levy). The measures taken to build political support proved ineffective, and with low popularity and no support from Congress, the president was impeached. Her impeachment resulted more from the ideological disparity between the Executive and Legislative branches and the dissatisfaction of political elites, curbing the progress of Operation Car Wash than from fiscal responsibility infractions (Limongi, 2017).

In terms of foreign policy, in addition to seeking a rapprochement with the United States (including an official visit) and signing an agreement with the OECD (Actis, 2017), Rousseff made greater concessions in the negotiations of the Mercosur-European Union agreement and reduced Brazil's global prominence (Frenkel and Azzi, 2018). Her choice to appoint career ministers reflects her interest in circumventing the pressure exerted by the strengthening narrative of the ideologization of BFP as well as corresponding to a trait of her personality,

oriented towards the accomplishment of short-term tasks and results (especially in foreign trade) (Burin and Feliu, 2022).

On domestic and international fronts, the president was attempting to regain political support and combat the rising criticisms fueled by the increasing politicization of foreign policy. However, despite her initiatives to adapt foreign and economic policies to mitigate these criticisms, the period was marked by a growing politicization of this agenda. Narratives began to permeate public debate, emerging as key issues in the 2018 political debate, such as the "ideologization" of foreign policy and support for leftist dictatorships through loans from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES), with a focus on Venezuela and Cuba.

During this period, the rise of anti-PT sentiment also emerged from the Senate Foreign Relations and National Defense Committee (CRE), highlighting a point of contention between the Legislative and Executive branches and the origin of politicization among political elites (president and parliamentarians). Upon being elected chairman of the committee, Senator Aloysio Nunes announced that he would seek to improve relations with the United States, which had been strained during Dilma's government, and reform Mercosur (Ulhôa, 2015). A shift towards closer ties with the Global North at the expense of South America or South-South relations was strongly advocated by the opposition during this period and was the basis for criticism of the PT's foreign policy.

Early in his tenure, Nunes led a Senate parliamentary mission to Washington, which included the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—Senator Rob Corker, the Government Leader in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—Senator Ben Cardin, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs—Ambassador Tom Shannon, and the Secretary-General of the OAS—Luis Almagro. This approach to U.S. leaders was a critical initiative in response to Rousseff's distancing after the espionage scandals, and to the OAS as an alternative regional institutional space to Mercosur, also criticized by the opposition.

Under his chairmanship, the committee received opponents of Maduro (Deputy Luis Florido, Chairman of the Foreign Policy, Sovereignty, and Integration Committee of the National Assembly of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and Deputy William Dávila, Vice-Chairman of the Committee). During the meeting, opposition deputies (José Serra, PSDB; José Agripino, DEM) used the committee to criticize the government's lack of action against democratic backsliding in Venezuela and the foreign policies of "lulopetismo" and "chavismo," drawing parallels between the governments as missed opportunities to take advantage of the commodities boom (Senado Federal, 2016).

Actions in this legislative arena represent initiatives to mobilize organizational resources to influence public policy and mobilize public opinion to achieve political objectives,

marking the emergence of conflicts of interest in the foreign policy arena, which is evidence of politicization.

The agreement that enabled President Rousseff's impeachment had considerable repercussions for the conduct of foreign policy. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) is not traditionally of interest to parties in the ministerial division, the PSDB, as a party that supported the impeachment and joined the new coalition led by the MDB, was able to appoint ministers. Two senators enthusiastic about the narrative of PT's ideologization of foreign policy led the Itamaraty.

Serra's acceptance of the position was tied to the relocation of ApexBrasil to the MRE, with the aim of supporting his proposal for a "New Foreign Policy" that sought to expand foreign trade. This move was also seen as a strategy to increase political and electoral influence, considering the minister's status as a presidential candidate (Casarões, 2016). Aligned with the PSDB's diplomatic vision, the government project "Bridges to the Future"⁴ focused on opening markets for Brazilian exports and establishing alliances with the world's largest economies—United States, Europe, and Asia (Oliveira, Pennaforte, and Martins, 2018). The occupation of the ministry and the demand for the relocation of ApexBrasil are indicative of the presidential candidate's interest in exerting influence on foreign trade and increasing his resources to achieve political results, also indicative of bureaucratic politicization.

In the external front, Serra vehemently criticized the governments that opposed Rousseff's impeachment process, issuing statements that categorically rejected the declarations from Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), and the Secretary-General of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) (Casarões, 2016). Within the first few months, the foreign minister had already met with Secretary of State John Kerry, marking the first step in the new phase of the relationship between Brazil and the United States (Serra, 2016).

The rapprochement with the Global North at the expense of the region is not necessarily evidence of the return of the MRE's prominence or its depoliticization, as promised by Serra, but rather the emergence of a position demanded by the then-senator in the CRE before the impeachment (Serra, 2015). On the contrary, the implementation of this proposal and the reiterated criticisms of the previous government's foreign policy, in the wake of anti-PT sentiment in the political debate, are indicative of the politicization of the BFP during Serra's tenure as foreign minister.

This stance persisted when Aloysio Nunes assumed the role of Foreign Minister. During his speech at the 48th Regular Session of the OAS General Assembly, the foreign

⁴ Temer's government project (2016-2018) (PMDB, 2015).

minister focused on the Venezuelan situation, which he described as controversial and dramatic, emphasizing the country's democratic and human rights issues (Nunes, 2018).

In addition to a shift towards the North, the PSDB administrations in the MRE downplayed the multilateralist tradition of Brazilian foreign policy in favor of pursuing bilateral free trade agreements and distanced Brazil from neighboring countries due to their association with the previous administration. The connection between Serra's and Nunes' criticisms of the Legislature during Rousseff's administration, the PSDB's involvement in the impeachment, the use of aggressive rhetoric against neighboring countries and governments close to the previous administration, and the rapprochement with the United States in the early days of the new government reinforced the perception of the politicization of BFP.

In the wake of the anti-PT discourse and criticism of foreign policy, especially for its closeness to leftist governments and the financing of infrastructure projects through BNDES, the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro was elected in 2018. In domestic politics, the president used executive prerogatives to govern and sought ad hoc support to secure legislative victories on mutually beneficial agendas for the executive and legislative branches. As a result of this strategy, the president issued more provisional measures than his four predecessors, although only 42% were approved (Bittar and Brandão, 2020).

In terms of foreign policy, Bolsonaro promised a break from the past. Initially, he centralized its conduct within his inner circle, distancing it from national traditions and aligning it with his ideology, the beliefs of his main supporters, and other far-right governments worldwide. Ernesto Araújo, along with other influential figures in the area such as Eduardo Bolsonaro (one of the president's sons) and Filipe Martins (Advisor on International Affairs), were key players in this process, resulting in alignment with Trump's agenda and constant rhetorical confrontation with China, Brazil's main trading partner.

The president's statements on foreign policy also echoed the anti-PT sentiment that had driven the politicization of the BFP during this period. In his inauguration speech, Bolsonaro promised to free Brazil and Itamaraty from ideologically biased international relations (Bolsonaro, 2019).

The same stance was echoed by the three individuals mentioned above, all holding essential government positions, even though Eduardo Bolsonaro had to settle for the chairmanship of the Foreign Relations and National Defense Committee of the House of Representatives (CREDN) after his nomination for Ambassador to Washington became politically unviable.

The entry of new actors in the formulation of foreign policy and the fragmentation of the decision-making process, which reduced traditional diplomacy's ability to assert its vision, were crucial for implementing changes in BFP. Ideas such as anti-globalism, climate change denial, anti-communism, and sovereign nationalism, as well as the election of left-wing

presidents in the region, limited space for cooperation in South America, where the most significant changes occurred (Saraiva, 2022). The abrupt shift was a clear signal to the president's support base, marking the politicization of the international agenda with the continued political dispute and public debate around this agenda, and the exploitation of political capital around the discourse of the ideologization of BFP during the PT governments.

Bolsonaro's foreign policy followed the traditional bases of the global far-right, with populist traits, religious elements, and a rejection of the liberal international order (LIO) (multilateralism, multiculturalism, etc.), which are historical foundations of BFP. His rhetoric was antiglobalist, anticommunist, and religiously nationalist, thus challenging the normative and institutional foundations of the LIO. In practical terms, the most significant results were rapprochement with authoritarian monarchies and opposition to UN agendas on human rights, gender, and climate change (Casarões and Farias, 2022).

Despite opting for a career diplomat, Bolsonaro chose an unknown figure. Alongside a career diplomat, he implemented an institutional reorganization within the ministry, including changes in the training and admission processes at the Rio Branco Institute. However, this created a paradox: institutional weakening also limited the capacity to change and sustain new foreign policy (Pinheiro; Santos, 2022)

One initiative with a significant impact on the politicization of the bureaucracy was Decree No. 9,683, dated January 9, 2019, which dismissed occupants of commissioned positions, authorized individuals from outside the diplomatic career to occupy advisory positions in the Itamaraty, and allowed lower-level diplomats to occupy positions traditionally held by more experienced diplomats (Diário Oficial da União, 2019).

Due to his interest in implementing significant changes, Bolsonaro had to engage in internal and international political battles, but not always successfully. Although he managed to introduce a new emphasis on religion and economic liberalization and engaged in a rhetorical battle against communism and globalism, the results may have been superficial. Bolsonaro's inability to significantly alter the diplomatic course of Brazil can be attributed to his inability to control internal political and bureaucratic processes (Guimarães and Silva, 2021).

As Bolsonaro's popularity declined and pressure for his impeachment began to build (Mattos, 2020), he had to build a coalition with the *Centrão*,⁵ following a logic similar to previous administrations but replacing, at least partially, the strategy of ministerial division with the distribution of parliamentary amendments through what became known as the "secret budget" (Neiva, 2022).

⁵ The *Centrão* is an amorphous group that is self-serving and clientelist, but not ideologically located at the center of the political spectrum. It is a way to organize an inter-party or supra-party bloc of self-serving parliamentarians.

In this new domestic political configuration, with Bolsonaro weakened in the face of political and economic elites, his highly ideological foreign policy anchored in constant politicization became the target of criticism from both the opposition and new groups that joined the government. His stance during the pandemic, which limited the conditions for international cooperation to purchase vaccines, was largely detrimental. The accusations against Senator Katia Abreu by Araújo triggered the mobilization of the Legislature, including the *Centrão*, to remove the foreign minister, who was also pressured by interest groups dissatisfied with the delay in purchasing vaccines and aggressive statements towards China (Coletta, Uribe, and Carvalho, 2021).

Ricardo Salles, due to his stance on environmental issues, was also a significant element in the constant political mobilization of Bolsonaro's BFP and had a substantial impact on international isolation during the period. He also succumbed to pressure. These cases represent the activation of the fire alarm mechanism triggered by dissatisfaction with the government's foreign policy direction, and the weakening of the president along with realignment in Executive-Legislative relations created the conditions for this.

As a result, the president was compelled to moderate the politicization of the BFP, doing so by appointing Carlos França, who worked to mend relations with China and tone down controversial statements. Consequently, the nationalistic and sovereigntist rhetoric about the Amazon shifted toward efforts to position Brazil positively on the environmental agenda, and Bolsonaro's inner circle softened its criticisms of China (Souza et al., 2021).

With slight economic recovery and progress in election polls, Bolsonaro gained momentum and parliamentary political support (also interested in continued access to generous parliamentary amendments) that joined the president's electoral campaign.

In parallel, Bolsonaro reinforced his attacks on the electoral system, culminating in what can be considered the most atypical diplomatic event in Brazilian history. He summoned representatives from all embassies present in Brasília into a speech that questioned the integrity of the Brazilian electoral system. This discomfort was evident during the event and even led to expressions of support for the country's electoral system from foreign diplomats (Hessel, 2022). This episode symbolizes the final period of his term, marked by the president's unpredictable conduct and his allies' attempts within the *Centrão* to moderate his more radical actions (Sadi, 2022).

Thus, the president's controversial initiatives in foreign policy, aimed at generating constant politicization of this agenda, and his efforts to reorganize the MRE and allocate political allies to key foreign policy positions, led to hyper-politicization of the agenda. This provoked reactions from the legislature and public opinion, which forced the politically weakened president to temper his extremist policies (deviating from the historical pattern of the BFP) and reorganize his bureaucracy.

In Lula da Silva's third term (2023-current), foreign policy remains politicized. The prominence that the president gave to the international agenda during his first term was notable, and although the impact of his international activism is debated (Cason and Power, 2009; Ricupero, 2010), the number of trips and visits shows that he was the president who historically dedicated most of his political agenda to international affairs (Milani et al., 2015; Otavio, Pretto, and Soprana, 2023).

The president appointed a career diplomat, Mauro Vieira, as a foreign minister but brought his traditional partner on the international agenda, Celso Amorim, to the position of chief advisor of the Special Advisory of the Presidency of the Republic. Amorim, who served as minister during Lula's previous terms, has been associated with the ideologization and partisanship of the BFP.

In this third term, presidential diplomacy began even before the inauguration, with his participation in COP-27 (Egypt-2022) as president elect, highlighting the importance of the environmental agenda in the BFP. However, other issues have been politicized, particularly the two conflicts that have dominated international news: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the conflict between Hamas and Israel.

Regarding the former, opposition parliamentarians reacted to Lula's statements about responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict. Most congress members evaluated the position of the *Palácio do Planalto* on the issue as poor or very poor, and the president's statements resonated with Congress. By contradicting the dominant Western narrative of an unprovoked Russian invasion, it provided an opportunity for opposition deputies such as Ricardo Salles (PL-SP) to criticize the CREDN (Sales, 2024). The president's declaration also served as an opportunity to politicize foreign policy issues by linking them to other themes dear to the opposition, as occurred when Senator Rogério Marinho (PL-RN), leader of the opposition in the Senate, criticized Lula's statement on the Ukraine War and the large delegation taken by the president to China, which included the leader of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), João Pedro Stédile (Agência Senado, 2023).

The most politicized issue, however, was the Israel-Hamas conflict, particularly Lula's statement comparing Israel's actions to the Nazi Holocaust. This is due both to the president adopting a more controversial and less equivocal stance and to the opposition's attachment to Israel for allegedly religious reasons. In his capacity as President of the Senate and leader of the governing coalition, Rodrigo Pacheco (PSD-MG) commented that the president's comparison was disproportionate and suggested the need for a retraction, but he also criticized the reaction from the Israeli chancery. Other senators allied with the government criticized both the Hamas attacks and Israel's response. The opposition, through its leader, labeled the comparison as "infamous" (Agência Senado, 2024).

A few days later, 68 deputies led by Rodolfo Nogueira (PL-MS), mostly from the opposition, signed a criminal representation in the International Criminal Court against the president for committing a crime against humanity, targeting Jewish people (Nogueira et al., 2024). The congressmen are aware of the likely inadmissibility of the court's request, based on the substance and legal grounds of the text, but by disseminating its content and action to the media, they made clear their interest in politicizing the initiative.

In its initial period, the Lula Government bore similarities to previous administrations in foreign policy, both domestically and internationally. The partnership with Celso Amorim, involving a high degree of political convergence (playing the role previously assumed by Marco Aurélio Garcia), and the appointment of a diplomat to head the Itamaraty. On the action front, there is notable presidential prominence, with significant politicization of the agenda through presidential statements during his participation in various international forums.

Broadly, throughout the period under scrutiny, despite variations in the strategies to mobilize resources from the government and opposition, one continuous feature of BFP is a well-established dynamic in which foreign policy is closely aligned with each administration's broader political objectives. Hardly, one might still defend Itamaraty's institutional insulation. Foreign policy is defined as the subject of public debate and domestic political cleavage.

Discussion

During the period under review, there were multiple instances of politicization by political elites as conflicts of interest emerged. In this section, we return to the theoretical propositions to evaluate how the variables interplayed.⁶

Rousseff took several initiatives aimed at regaining political support and countering rising criticism due to increasing foreign policy politicization. Despite this, the opposition mobilized its resources, such as their positions in the legislative arena, to bring foreign policy into public debate. This served to garner political support against Rousseff and enabled opposition senators to secure ministerial positions that they intended to use for other political objectives, such as presidential candidacies. Consequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Itamaraty) was politicized, with politicians occupying the ministerial post for the first time since the FHC administration during Franco's mandate (1992-1994).⁷

During this process, we observed legislative participation (i.1) in reaction to the international involvement of a bureaucracy (BNDES) (a). This occurred because of (1) an increasing involvement of political actors after a conflict of preferences (foreign aid to PT partners), which mobilized organizational resources (CREDN). The aftermath had (2) ministry

⁶ Consider variables and concepts proposed in table and figure 1.

⁷ Considering Celso Lafer as an academic, instead of a politician.

appointments based on party affinities and political influence within the Itamaraty, as stated by Faria (2008). Despite promises of “de-ideologization” by Serra and Nunes, politicization intensified after, as anti-PT sentiment fueled the emptying of the regional agenda and rapprochement with the United States.

Bolsonaro also rose in the wake of anti-PT sentiment, promising foreign policy change. He centralized it within his inner circle, aligning it with far-right ideologies and Trump’s agenda, highlighting presidential involvement in foreign policy (i.3) and aiming to exploit it to his future electoral advantage (b). His controversial foreign policy moves and internal reorganizations within the MRE further politicized the agenda (2), provoking legislative and public backlash (i.1, i.2). Incidents such as the accusations against Senator Katia Abreu by Araújo exemplify the activation of mechanisms of oversight triggered by dissatisfaction with government policies and how public reactions emerge after conflicts of interest (1).

During Lula’s third term, presidentialization continued as a dominant foreign policy characteristic (i.3). His declarations provoked significant reactions from the opposition, which used them to revive criticisms of PT foreign policy, particularly its closeness to dictatorships such as China, and to tie it to other domestic issues such as social movements. These episodes show how the frontier between foreign and domestic issues faded, as proposed by (Milani; Pinheiro, 2013).

Conclusion

This article explored the recent politicization of Brazilian Foreign Policy (BFP), treated as a dependent variable in the various transformation processes of this public policy. By organizing the concepts and their observations, it was possible to theoretically delimit the phenomenon under analysis and identify ways to collect evidence of its occurrence.

Although the literature uses the end of the Cold War and democratization as initial markers of BFP transformation, international changes that began mainly in the 2010s have intensified these dynamics. The drop in commodity prices, which led to negative trade results and economic deterioration in Brazil, followed by a systemic transition with rising tensions between China and the United States, intensified domestic disputes over international strategies and preferred partnerships to overcome adverse conditions. Other recent events, such as the pandemic, the growing importance of international agendas like the environment and immigration, and the rise of the far-right, accelerated the interdependence between national and international issues.

Political elites, especially presidents and parliamentarians mobilized resources to gain political benefits from this public policy. The MRE has not been apart from this dynamic, being internally influenced by the politicization process. Within the executive branch, other ministries (such as the Ministry of the Environment with Salles) or the Special Advisory of the Presidency

of the Republic have also been mobilized to control and supervise foreign policy through political appointments. In the legislature, preference conflicts emerged in CRE and CREDN, serving as an arena for public debate and the contestation of ongoing policies.

Beyond a value judgment regarding the potential harm of politicization to Brazil's diplomatic credibility abroad, a more mature public debate on long-term BFP objectives is needed. Foreign policy, like all public policies, needs to mirror the governmental guidelines chosen by voters, but ideology should not always supersede pragmatism. Scholars must critically evaluate this process, ensuring conceptual clarification to differentiate politicization from ideologization, as political actors will constantly create narratives with political motivations that could potentially damage Brazil's international image.

Further qualitative analysis of other periods might also bring new insights into the debate, especially to overcome the limitations of this explorative qualitative analysis. In addition, systematizing evidence of politicization, it is still necessary to advance in ways of observing this process, such as proposing indicators that can quantify its occurrence, for example, through content analysis of political elite statements or media coverage.

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