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Mahrukh Doctor¹

¹ University of Hull
Hull, United Kingdom.
(m.doctor@hull.ac.uk)

 ORCID ID:
orcid.org/0000-0001-8221-2522

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Brazil's Strategic Diplomacy Failures and Foreign Policy Underachievement under Bolsonaro

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Abstract

The article examines the extent of foreign policy continuity or change and level of foreign policy achievement or underachievement during the Bolsonaro presidency. These are analysed through the lens of 'strategic diplomacy', a concept that considers state capacity for agile long-term oriented diplomatic action. It evaluates three areas of foreign policy, including regional integration, OECD membership, and climate negotiations. The main finding was that Bolsonaro's foreign policies, even if achieved, were often strategic diplomacy failures and damaged Brazil's international reputation. The article's contribution lies in applying a new concept to provide a fresh perspective on Brazilian foreign policy.

Keywords: Bolsonaro; Brazil; Foreign Policy; Strategic Diplomacy.

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Introduction

When Jair Bolsonaro won election to the presidency in 2018, Brazilians voters were focused on what he would do on the domestic policy front. Expectations (and interest) were low with regards to foreign policy. During his electoral campaign there was very little discussion of his stance on foreign policy issues, much less their potential impact on Brazil's international influence and reputation. However, once President Bolsonaro took office, foreign policy received a lot of attention, especially abroad. It soon became evident that he would not only disregard some of the long-standing features and goals of Brazilian foreign policy, but also rollback previous foreign policy positions. Almost immediately, foreign policy analysts and scholars presented arguments and evidence that categorised Bolsonaro's foreign policy as inimical to Brazil's international reputation as well as underachieving on its own

terms. They also began examining his foreign policy for signs of continuity and change, with many focused on identifying features of an abrupt transformation and/or a credibility-sapping rupture.

The article analyses Brazilian foreign policy under Bolsonaro (2019-2022) through the lens of 'strategic diplomacy'. The concept was developed as a way to understand the long-term-oriented diplomacy of states trying to navigate the highly complex international system in a context of power transition and strategic surprises (Prantl and Goh 2016). The article contributes to the academic literature in terms of applying this relatively new concept to empirical data to provide a different viewpoint that could further our understanding of foreign policy in Brazil. Thus, the research methodology was not focused on generating new empirical data, but instead on deepening understanding of this new concept. As such, the analysis is based on speeches, interviews and press releases by state sources (government ministers, officials and agencies) and media reports about relevant events, decisions and actions.

The research design prioritised examining a breadth of cases over providing depth in a particular case, precisely because this would allow for broader exploration of the phenomenon of 'strategic diplomacy' in terms of its conceptual development and applicability. It is worth reminding ourselves that concepts emerge when scholars, 'conceptualists' in Philippe Schmitter's words, identify patterns in political phenomena, stick labels on them and explore their causes and consequences (Schmitter 2009). Stable concepts that deal with ambiguities that emerge from conceptual 'travelling' and 'stretching' to help categorise a wider range of cases is essential to broaden knowledge and deepen understanding (Collier and Mahon 1993). This article specifically seeks to compare the pattern and consequences of Bolsonaro's foreign policies with previous Brazilian diplomacy (including its 'strategic' dimension) and to explore insights the case might have for applying the concept of 'strategic diplomacy' beyond its initial focus on East Asia.

To do so, the article addresses three interconnected research questions: First, did the Bolsonaro government achieve its foreign policy goals? Second, in cases of foreign policy failure or underachievement, was this more likely when it represented elements of continuity or change? Third, did Bolsonaro's foreign policy exhibit any features of strategic diplomacy? The analysis considers foreign policy underachievement, when relevant, due to both policy continuity not being well managed enough to yield desired policy outcomes and policy changes not being effectively designed or implemented. The analysis is presented in three sections: (i) defining the concept of strategic diplomacy and how it featured in Brazilian foreign policy pre-Bolsonaro; (ii) discussing signs of continuity and change in Bolsonaro's foreign policy; and (iii) examining the issue of underachievement in terms of strategic diplomacy failures.

Strategic Diplomacy and Brazilian foreign policy

The concept of strategic diplomacy is a relatively new concept in International Relations theory; it was developed by Jochen Prantl and Evelyn Goh (2016) and originally applied to foreign

policy analysis of East Asia. They sought to understand how states develop long-term-oriented diplomacy to navigate the highly complex, inter-connected international system in a context of power transition, newly emerging international phenomena and strategic surprises. Crucially, the key features of strategic diplomacy allow it to be used as both a diagnostic tool and as a policy planning framework (Prantl 2022). In 2019, Prantl invited a group of IR scholars working on Brazilian foreign policy to explore the value of applying the concept to the case of Brazil. This was later published in a special section of the academic journal *Contemporary Politics* in 2022.

Prantl and Goh (2016, 8) define strategic diplomacy as ‘the process by which state and non-state actors socially construct and frame their view of the world, set their agendas, communicate, contest and negotiate diverging core interests and goals’. There are four main features of strategic diplomacy: systemic focus; long-term objectives; dynamic view of national interest; and engaged political leadership. In the Global South, strategic diplomacy can provide a policy framework that allows states to maximise policy space, either by seeking to shape the policy environment or through direct policy actions (Prantl 2022). As Spektor (2022) points out, it can be seen as a political process where, given systemic constraints, states and domestic constituencies construct a vision for foreign policy and set out to implement it.

Strategic diplomacy requires states to balance strategic priorities at a systemic level and remain adaptable, agile and responsive at the unit level. It also implies understanding and analysing both intentions and constraints on foreign policy decisions and actions. In South America, especially in Brazil, there is an additional eagerness to protect sovereignty and avoid entanglements from US-led initiatives (Prantl 2022). Thus, strategic diplomacy is often deployed to prioritise these concerns at the very least.

Since strategic diplomacy implies foreign policy with a long-term orientation, deploying strategic diplomacy requires a level of societal consensus and institutional consistency to guide foreign policy actions. Traditionally, these conditions were satisfied in Brazil, bolstered by the long-standing institutional capacity and bureaucratic competence of the Ministry of External Relations, typically referred to as the Itamaraty. Brazilian diplomats rightfully claim a long history of professional excellence in conducting diplomacy (Cheibub 1985). The ministry’s relative bureaucratic insulation allowed for institutional memory, consistency and a longer-term policy time horizon, which had been conducive to developing conditions appropriate for strategic diplomacy.

Democratisation and a new Constitution in 1988 fostered growing interest in foreign policy among politicians. Political leaders became increasingly central to shaping statecraft and foreign policy behaviour, with leadership style and political mood profoundly shaping diplomacy. Thus, by the late 1990s, it was clear that presidents and various ministries were increasingly involved in foreign policy issues, especially for trade negotiations and other areas of global governance, such as finance and climate change (Amorim 2010; Cason and Power 2009). A Constitutional requirement for the government to publish four-year pluriannual plans soon found governments incorporating ‘grand objectives and strategic direction’, including foreign policy objectives, into

their pluriannual plans (Lessa, Couto & Farias 2009). Inadvertently, this further boosted conditions to embed strategic diplomacy.

Towards the end of the twentieth century in Brazil, economic and political liberalisation made it increasingly difficult to keep foreign policy limited to elite interests, preferences and influence. As a result, societal interest in foreign policy grew markedly, which also impacted the foreign policy-making process and decisions (Cardoso 2019; Doctor 2017; Farias and Ramanzini Junior 2015; Lopes 2017; Milani and Pinheiro 2017). Interestingly, this had the potential to negatively impact the potential for strategic diplomacy. Specifically, the range of societal actors interested in foreign policy demanded more attention when negotiating incompatible strategic ideas and priorities at the domestic level. This in turn could muddy the prospects for embedding the features of strategic diplomacy.

Although the conditions for and signs of strategic diplomacy were often evident in Brazil, this does not suggest that Brazilian foreign policy displayed features of strategic diplomacy uniformly over time and space/issue area. As systemic conditions continually changed, the necessity for constant adaptation became more urgent. These rolling changes also imposed power constraints on Brazil's strategic action, as Spektor (2022) points out. Moreover, in the second half of the 2010s, Brazil experienced a significant political realignment, due to a number of factors, including the massive scale of corruption exposed by Operation Car Wash/*Lava Jato* (Pontes and Anselmo 2022), popular reaction to the severe recession of 2015- 2016 (Hunter and Power 2019), the rise of evangelicals on the political scene (Lapper 2021; Amorim Neto and Pimenta 2020), and the impact of social media on political communications (Oyama 2020).

Notwithstanding the above changes, broadly speaking, Brazilian foreign policy has featured two main objectives: an intermediate objective of policy autonomy and an ultimate objective of national development. The pursuit of autonomy in foreign policy varied over time, including autonomy via distance, participation, integration, and diversification (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2009). Some scholars see a long-standing 'quest for autonomy' (Hurrell 2013; Spektor 2015), but others note that it also experienced 'swings and breaks' (Caballero and Crescentino 2020), where shifts in approach to autonomy appeared at moments of foreign policy rupture (Pinheiro and Lima 2018). It essentially implied Brazilian policy-makers were engaged in a constant search for policy space. Similarly, the nature of the desired development outcomes in democratic Brazil also shifted emphasis over time, evolving from prioritising industrial/economic to human/social to sustainable development. Crucially, the objectives had important normative, strategic and practical implications for the related concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention¹

¹ See the edited volumes by Kenkel and Cunliffe (2016) and Stuenkel and Taylor (2015) for extensive analyses of these concepts in relations to both economic and political/security aspects of Brazil's experiences as a 'rising power'. Also see Vigevani and Ramanzini Junior. (2010) on their implications for regional integration. Discussing them here is beyond the scope of and space available in this article.

The terms, autonomy and development, not only described Brazil's foreign policy objectives, but also embodied important concepts whose meaning developed and shifted over time. In recent years, the meanings of the two concepts were 'shaken to the core' (Spektor 2022, 21), which in turn affected the strategies to achieve the actual objectives. All the same, they shaped some consistently identifiable elements of Brazilian diplomacy from the end of the military dictatorship in the mid-1980s to the election of Bolsonaro in 2018. These elements were multilateralism, pacifism, non-intervention, consensus-building, regional engagement, and cultivating a diversity of partners (Caballero and Crescentino 2020). Additionally, between 1995 and 2018, notwithstanding substantial variation in priorities, Brazil was led by a run of presidents who took a dynamic view of the national interest and Brazil's place in international politics. They also sought to balance global and regional ambitions for their foreign policies (Ramanzini Junior and Mariano 2018). Although all presidents in this period adopted features of strategic diplomacy, this should not be seen as them adopting the same set of foreign policies. Although there was always discussion about foreign policy priorities and changes when a new president took office, researchers mostly found that despite the ebbs and flows of Brazilian foreign policy, it rather consistently followed the above discussed objectives and elements. For example, there were two main distinctions noted in the foreign policy of the Workers' Party (PT) governments: (i) more assertive positions in multilateral organisations based on the narrative and discourse of Brazil as a 'emerging power' and (ii) relatively high emphasis given to South-South Cooperation and relations with other Global South countries (see Amorim 2010; 2017). All the same, after thirteen years of the PT in the presidency, most analyses found that Presidents Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) broadly operated within the traditional parameters of democratic Brazil's foreign policy, with President Cardoso's (1995-2002) foreign policy often serving as the benchmark.

After Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, her successor Michel Temer's (2016-2018) foreign policy also revolved around the traditional objectives and elements, although he emphatically distanced himself from Rousseff. He specifically abandoned the 'emerging power' and South-South Cooperation narratives. Crucially, even though there was a shift in priorities and a much bigger shift in discourse, neither the PT nor Temer implemented any root and branch overhaul of their predecessors' diplomatic strategy in the regional and multilateral arenas.

In contrast, the Bolsonaro presidency, as illustrated in the cases analysed below, turned things 'upside-down' and 'was the first time that far-right ideology found political expression in the country's foreign policy' (Buarque 2022, 2453). As such, scholars feared that under Bolsonaro, the 'Brazilian ruling elite has given up a role ... in broadening the participation of countries in the Global South within multilateral institutions, and a seat in the conversation on global governance' (Herz 2022, 386).

My earlier research on Brazilian foreign policy demonstrated how Brazil was able to develop features of strategic diplomacy, given the long-term orientation of its foreign policy objectives and the relative policy autonomy of the Itamaraty (Doctor 2022). For example, priority to multilateralism

implied a systemic focus to enhancing global governance outcomes by reforming the system from within via consensus-building. Similarly, attention to regional integration – whether of the ‘open regionalism’ or ‘post-hegemonic regionalism’ variety – was predicated on Brazilian policymakers’ understanding that engagement with its regional neighbours, especially in the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), was Brazil’s long-term ‘destiny’ and not just ‘an option’ (as famously noted first by Cardoso’s Foreign Minister Celso Lafer in 2001 and later by Cardoso himself in 2002). Finally, it is worth noting that Brazil was not always successful in adopting a strategic diplomacy stance: the most obvious example of failure was its domestic policies and international diplomacy related to climate change negotiations between 1992 and 2018 (Pereira and Viola 2022).

Foreign Policy Continuity and Change under Bolsonaro

Most analyses of Bolsonaro’s foreign policy approach and actions found that there was considerable rupture. Some even argued that ‘Bolsonaro changed everything’ (Buarque 2022), at least with reference to international perceptions of Brazilian foreign policy. Ernesto Araujo, Bolsonaro’s first Foreign Minister, pointedly claimed that ‘Bolsonaro was not elected to take Brazil as he found it’ (Araujo 2019). This section examines the former president’s foreign-policy decisions and actions to determine whether change was ubiquitous or whether there was more continuity than expected (or implied). It examines three issue areas that were selected because they have direct implications for Brazil’s autonomy and development objectives. They also differed in scope, including a regional, extra-regional and global issue. Each foreign-policy issue is compared in terms of the situation pre-Bolsonaro, the positions of main actors and institutions involved, signs of meeting foreign policy goals on that issue in light of continuity or change, and policy achievement status. Before doing so, two points should be borne in mind:

First, it is important to clarify that effectively there were two wings within Bolsonaro’s foreign policy decision-making (Saraiva and Silva 2019): An ‘ideological wing’ and a ‘pragmatic wing’. The former group saw itself as defending conservative social values and ‘Christian civilisation’ and overcoming the forces of ‘globalism’ and ‘cultural Marxism’ that in its view were damaging the US-led liberal international order. This wing was seemingly less attuned to Brazilian diplomatic culture and upset some long-established elements of Brazilian foreign policy. Moreover, it should be emphasised that Bolsonaro was not exceptional in introducing an ‘ideological’ element into foreign policy (Rodrigues et al. 2019). Meanwhile, a more ‘pragmatic wing’ was focused on economic aspects, especially boosting international trade and investment. Their claim to pragmatism often rested on their focus on immediate or short-term economic gains for Brazil. They repeatedly warned the president to take a more measured tone when dealing with Brazil’s main export partners in China, the Middle East and Europe, and to show more effective engagement in multilateral forums of global governance where Brazilian interests were at stake (Saraiva and Silva 2019).

Second, Bolsonaro's political identity was that of a far-right populist and his policy attention was mostly domestically focused (Sá Guimarães and Silva 2021). In April 2019, among his first externally visible decisions was to order the substitution of the Mercosur symbol (the Southern Cross constellation) on Brazilian passports with the (previous) national coat of arms (this type of symbolic change is typical among populists, e.g. the United Kingdom switched back to dark blue passports immediately after Brexit). Bolsonaro had little interest in engaging internationally, with the exception of showing his admiration for President Trump's political persona and positions. He was less inclined to travel abroad compared to presidents Cardoso and Lula, but two of his trips stood out: (i) travel to Florida in March 2020 to attend a dinner with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and (ii) travel to Russia on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 to get reassurance on continued supply of fertilizer imports from Russia and Belarus. Notably, the former trip was in line with the ideological wing's positions and the latter closely related to more pragmatic concerns and interests.

Bearing the above two points in mind, how did Bolsonaro respond to various foreign policy issues during his time in office? This section examines three examples of his foreign policy decisions and actions, where the need to balance ideological and pragmatic concerns could better demonstrate whether aspects of strategic diplomacy came into play or not. The focus in this section is on two central research concerns: extent of foreign policy continuity or change and level of foreign policy achievement or underachievement. In the next section, these evaluations feed into analysing whether Bolsonaro debilitated and/or undermined Brazil's capacity for agile, yet long-term-oriented, strategic diplomacy.

Regional Integration and Regional Leadership: Historical analysis of Brazil's 'path to integration' with the rest of the region demonstrates the significance of regionalism, especially for Cardoso and Lula. As Briceño-Ruiz and Puntigliano (2017) argue, the three main reasons for Brazilian elites to favour regionalism related to autonomy, development and identity. For Brazil, regionalism was often seen as a means of reinforcing autonomy and protecting sovereignty from extra regional interventions (read: the US). As such, in the context of the 'Pink Tide' in the early 21st century, regional integration efforts that excluded the US were referred to as 'post-hegemonic regionalism' in South America (Briceño-Ruiz and Hoffmann 2015; Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012). Cardoso and the PT presidents consistently supported regional integration in South America (via various political, economic, and social initiatives), with Cardoso emphasising the economic aspects more and the PT increasingly focusing on social aspects.

Meanwhile, Brazilian diplomacy sought to present a regional leadership style based on 'consensual hegemony' (Burgess 2008), but other scholars have noted the difficulties Brazilian foreign policy-makers faced in using regionalism as a strategic platform to gain recognition as a rising power (Bethell 2010). Gardini and Almeida (2016) refer to regional responses to Brazilian diplomacy as 'multiple contestation strategies' which occurred alongside elements of cooperation. Conversely, one should not overstate Brazilian foreign policy's commitment to close integration with its neighbours. Both, governments and diplomats remained wary of creating any supranational

regional institutions, among other institutional deficits (Doctor 2013). As Scholvin and Malamud (2020) argue, regional cooperation is often more about rhetoric than reality.

More broadly, South American regionalism ‘seemed to be overstressed’ even before Bolsonaro’s election (Nolte and Weiffen 2021). Shortly after his election, unsurprisingly, Bolsonaro indicated the intention to turn his back on Mercosur and South America more broadly. In early 2019, he abandoned engagement with the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), an organisation that Brazil had founded barely a decade earlier. In 2020, Brazil also withdrew from the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Nations (CELAC) due to ‘ideological differences’ (Nolte and Weiffen 2021).

Although Bolsonaro did not desert Mercosur, a ‘lean Mercosur’ was the best he could promise Brazil’s closest partners. He initially announced a review of Mercosur’s common external tariff (a 50% reduction was the aim), but this was dropped mainly in response to Brazilian business opposition. As Motta Veiga and Rios (2020, 4) point out, ‘continuity prevailed over rupture’ in Mercosur trade policy. Research suggests that business pressure played an important role in keeping Mercosur alive, especially focused on Brazilian manufacturing exports to Mercosur economies and the prospects of an interregional agreement with the European Union (Loreiro 2022).

More noticeably, relations with individual South American nations deteriorated. Bolsonaro pointedly ignored Argentina. It took him almost a year to hold his first meeting (online) with President Alberto Fernandez. His aim to boost relations with Chile did not progress far, not least because of his defence of the Pinochet dictatorship, but it became especially untenable once the leftist Gabriel Boric won elections there. Although Temer was involved in suspending Venezuela from Mercosur, Bolsonaro emphatically maintained the position and distanced himself (and Brazil) from Venezuela and Cuba (Vidigal and Bernal-Meza 2020).

There was a big change in attitude and approach to the region under Bolsonaro. There was little to no progress on regional integration during this period, but also not a complete break with past patterns of regional agreements and partners. For example, avoiding any kind of regional supra-national institution building was an element of continuity. Notably, Bolsonaro did not ditch Mercosur, but he pulled out of wider regional organisations like UNASUR and CELAC. A search of official speeches by the president or top foreign policy officials found that mentions of regional leadership or a role as regional stabiliser were dropped from foreign policy aims and discourse.

Bolsonaro made no progress in deepening Mercosur regionalism, but then again, he showed no intention to do so. As such, it is difficult to call it a direct foreign policy failure, although arguably it could be considered a strategic diplomacy failure. An important achievement was that after twenty years of negotiations, it was he who signed the European Union-Mercosur Association Agreement as well as a similar agreement with the European Free Trade Association in June 2019. Unsurprisingly, ratification ran into trouble almost immediately, with a number of European governments as well as the European Parliament refusing to finalise it so long as the Brazilian government was implicated in illegal deforestation and violation of indigenous people’s rights (“MEPS call to block Mercosur deal over Amazon deforestation.” 2019). Thus, after a

promising start, progress on the interregional front stalled for the rest of his presidency – in this sense, regionalism was an area of foreign policy underachievement.

OECD Membership: Brazil's relations with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) go back to the 1990s, and it became part of the organisation's enhanced engagement process launched in 2007. It actively participated in various OECD committees and bodies throughout the PT governments. Rousseff signed the Brazil-OECD cooperation agreement in 2015, and allowed an environmental review to go ahead. Brazil applied for OECD full membership in May 2017. Temer and the Itamaraty hoped for a fast tracking of the adhesion process, but were taken aback when the Trump administration was the only OECD member to oppose advancing the Brazilian candidacy at the time. Pre- Bolsonaro, Brazil already adhered to some 84% of OECD norms and among non-members participated in the largest number of OECD committees (Braga 2021; Motta Veiga and Rios 2020a; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2020). Some 12% of OECD norms were expected to face difficulties in terms of the adherence process, because they were likely to come up against considerable domestic opposition (Baumann 2021).

Bolsonaro embraced the idea of OECD membership, partly because it was seen as a Western-led institution that promoted a liberal economic agenda with which his government self-identified (Araujo 2021). His enthusiasm for membership meant that Brazil bilaterally ceded many American demands (with little gain) in the hope of getting support for its application from Trump the second time round (Mello 2020). For example, joining the OECD would require Brazil to give up its developing economy status and lose special and differential treatment in the World Trade Organisation, which would have far reaching implications in areas such as trade and development finance. Braga (2021) warned that membership should not be seen as a silver bullet that would resolve Brazil's development challenges.

Intriguingly, Bolsonaro's stance on various environmental issues were at odds with OECD norms. He seemingly ignored the fact that some 40% of OECD norms dealt with the environment and climate change (Motta Veiga and Rios 2020a). It begs the question, what were his policy plans once Brazil became a full member, when it would be required to comply (or explain why not) to remain a member in good standing. Intriguingly, pursuing membership was part of the ideological wing's agenda, and analysts wary about the bid for full membership called on the government to 'return to pragmatism' as well as reinstate other traditional characteristics of Brazilian foreign policy (e.g. see Braga 2021).

In many ways the OECD application was a case of continuity in the trajectory of relations with the organisation, but it held the potential for significant change (if and when fully implemented). Certainly, giving up developing country status would transform Brazil's treatment in multilateral organisations and also its leading position in the Global South.

Given the limited public debate on the issue and an apparent weak understanding of the complexity of adjustments that would be necessary for adhesion to the OECD's *acquis*, the prevailing selective pattern of engagement might actually suit Brazil better (Mello 2020).

Bolsonaro's announced policy aim was not achieved.. After Trump lost the presidency, Bolsonaro no longer diligently pursued OECD membership nor did he even pay Brazil's dues to the organisation. Arguably, his ideologically motivated preference contradicted many of the government's positions on other matters (notably climate governance) and made little immediate pragmatic sense. In the end, inertia and loss of active interest allowed the status quo to prevail. In effect, this is a case of foreign policy underachievement, but where no consistent attempts were made to deliver the announced policy outcome.

Climate Change Negotiations: Brazilian engagement with international environmental governance first received global attention, when it hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Environmental policies, especially those with impacts on the Amazon rainforest, were a politically sensitive issue from the start, mainly because it quickly became clear that domestic preferences and short-term development imperatives were not always compatible with international agendas. All the same, in the 1990s, Brazil remained engaged on environment and climate issues (even if often on the defensive) in the United Nations. It played an important role in persuading many G-77 members to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and took a lead in proposing what would become the Clean Development Mechanism. In 2009, it contributed actively towards the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations in Copenhagen within the format of the so-called BASIC group (Hochstetler 2012). Moreover, environmental governance became part of the PT governments' South-South Cooperation agenda (Hochstetler and Inoue 2019).

The period of domestic and international climate activism between 2005 and 2010 gave way to one of relative climate negligence between 2011 and 2018 due to severe economic and political crises, including a devastating recession, corruption scandals, and a controversial presidential impeachment (Pereira and Viola 2022; Hochstetler 2021; Hunter and Power 2019). Brazil's approach to climate negotiations seemingly became more erratic. For example, it played a constructive role in the Conference of Parties (COP) in Paris (2015) and Marrakesh (2016), but proved to be an obstructive actor at the Katowice COP in 2018, when it blocked agreement on the carbon market mechanism.

Thus, with the exception of a brief period of climate activism during the Lula government, Brazil rarely showed strong appreciation for the importance of developing a strategic vision for its foreign climate policy (Pereira and Viola 2022). Moreover, the Itamaraty's conservative interpretation of sovereignty alongside various development vulnerabilities meant that Brazil long resisted making binding international commitments in climate negotiations. Also, the Itamaraty was constrained in developing a consistently strategic approach to climate negotiations because this was a policy area that evoked strongly divergent views in domestic politics. It found it increasingly difficult to adopt negotiating positions without societal scrutiny, whether from powerful economic interests (agriculture and energy sectors) or grassroots social movements (environmentalists and human rights advocates) or even scientists.

Notwithstanding this complex and inconsistent picture of Brazil's foreign climate policies, it is still justified to accuse Bolsonaro of making an emphatic U-turn on previous environmental policies and climate governance positions. There was a clear choice made to dismantle previous policies and procedures, to de-fund relevant domestic institutions, and even take advantage of the pandemic to weaken regulations and oversight of environmental legislation (Araujo 2020). These decisions were mostly made by invoking the quest for autonomy to boost development (often finding purchase among the public, especially supporters of the president, by citing the two core objectives guiding Brazilian foreign policy).

Bolsonaro briefly flirted with withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, a position popular among the ideological wing but sharply resisted by the pragmatic wing and many business supporters (see Conselho Empresarial Brasileiro para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável 2022). It is worth noting that both groups adopted a defensive posture towards accusations of illegal deforestation, but the ideological wing was more vociferous when it dismissed climate change concerns. It emphatically asserted Brazil's right to 'economic development', and condemned 'foreigners' and international NGOs from intervening in domestic development matters. The only brake on even more extreme actions came down to the economic counter-arguments of the more pragmatic voices, who feared international backlash with harsh consequences for agribusiness exporters (Brant 2020). The strident tone taken during the Trump years however gave way to a quieter resistance in light of President Biden's open support for the Paris Agreement and climate governance agenda.

Unsurprisingly, critics of Bolsonaro accuse him of 'complete and total rupture' on environment and climate policy, especially at the domestic level (Araujo 2020, 2). Evidence from policy decisions and actions suggest that Bolsonaro and his government can be considered an emphatic break with past positions in international forums on environment and climate governance. It is also worth noting that changes in climate positions had crossover impacts on other foreign policy issues (e.g. ratification of the EU-Mercosur trade agreement). In many ways, environment and climate policies exposed the deepest divergence between global trends and national policy trajectories during the Bolsonaro presidency.

In terms of policy achievements, scholars and policy experts argue that Brazil had not only failed to prioritise strong domestic policies for environmental sustainability and climate change, but also never developed features of strategic diplomacy in the area of climate governance (Pereira and Viola 2022). All the same, Bolsonaro's record stands out as exceptionally poor. It was a policy issue where much bombast and rhetoric were expended, and many damaging actions were taken. As a result of Bolsonaro's stance on environment and climate governance, more than in any other matter, Brazil's international reputation and image abroad suffered huge setbacks.

Table 1 provides an overview and summary of the above three cases in terms of change/continuity and achievements of Brazilian foreign policy under Bolsonaro.

Table 1. Evaluation of Foreign Policy Change and Achievements under Bolsonaro

	Regionalism	OECD	Climate Change
Issue Scope			
Continuity	Some: Mercosur kept alive (mainly due to business pressure)	Yes: increasing engagement with OECD; embraced previous president's application for full membership	Some: Remained in the Paris Agreement and low- key attendance at COPs; defensive and/or obstructive positions on various issues
Change	Yes: in attitude and priority; withdrew from some regional organisations; wanted to sharply cut Mercosur tariffs	Considerable: Dropped traditional emphasis on developing economy status and Global South leadership	Yes: A significant rupture in discourse, action and level of engagement.
Achievement/Success (Bolsonaro Goals)	Failed to engage South American presidents; No specific goals indicated for Mercosur beyond 'lean Mercosur'	No: failed to get early approval from OECD to advance Brazil's full membership application	Many damaging actions, but these were in line with the president's policy announcements; deterioration in Brazil's international reputation/ image
Achievement/Success (Strategic Diplomacy)	No progress on regional integration nor regional leadership	Mixed: shorter term premature loss of developing economy status, but longer term boost to achieving advanced economy status.	Severe damage to Brazil's reputation and role in climate negotiations (knock on effects in other policy areas); dissipated options for strategic diplomacy in global governance forums

Source: Author's elaboration

Conclusion: Foreign Policy Underachievement and Vanishing Strategic Diplomacy

Bolsonaro's foreign policy stance was often jarring and out of sync with the Itamaraty's traditional long-term approach to Brazil's engagement on the international stage, as demonstrated in the previous section. The three foreign policy issue areas discussed above provide further insights when applying the concept of strategic diplomacy as a diagnostic tool to evaluate Bolsonaro's foreign policy. They also shed light on the value of the concept itself to understand a state's foreign policy responses and ability to navigate a highly complex inter-connected international system subject to emerging phenomena and strategic surprises.

Looking for the four features of strategic diplomacy in the foreign policy and diplomatic actions of Brazil under Bolsonaro is a somewhat unfruitful exercise. In terms of systemic focus, the actions taken do not display a keen appreciation of how actions in one issue area might have spillovers into others, e.g. OECD full membership would demand more attention to its implications for environment and climate change positions. Also, the government seemed to have abandoned

the previous logic of diplomacy that there were global benefits to leading a strong regional bloc in multilateral forums. All three cases show a preoccupation with addressing immediate ideological concerns of the far-right agenda, rather than focusing on building on the acknowledged longer-term objectives of autonomy and development.

However, more pragmatic voices did prevail on some points e.g. Brazil did not withdraw from Mercosur nor the Paris Agreement and UNFCCC process. Bolsonaro's views of the national interest were much coloured by his years in the Armed Forces and often harked back to Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). They fit less well with the need for a dynamic view of the national interest and agility in foreign policy in a world where power transition, shifting global supply chains, technological and digital revolutions and a pandemic featured prominently in international relations of the period.

Although many changes in diplomatic style and content can be attributed to political factors (specifically Bolsonaro's right wing political identity), economic factors also played an important role (for example, adjusting to the impacts of the recession and the fears raised about coping with investment and innovation demands required to ensure a greener development path). However, one could still catch occasional glimpses of the traditional features of Brazilian foreign policy – there was more under the radar continuity than was apparent at first glance. Certainly, the language of autonomy and development was still deployed, even though it had taken on quite different domestic policy connotations. Attention to elite interests and economic impacts of foreign policy remained at the forefront of policy-makers decisions – this was another key element of continuity.

However, there were significant changes in diplomatic style and approach to foreign policy decisions. Evidence demonstrated that Bolsonaro showed little inclination to apply strategic diplomacy to foreign policy. His foreign policy strategy (if one could call it that) was short-sighted and mostly attended narrow immediate interests. In sharp contrast to previous democratically elected presidents, he showed little interest in boosting Brazil's international status in multilateral forums (Buarque 2022) or in the Global South. Instead, he took a personalistic approach to aligning with the Trump administration, in marked contrast to Itamaraty's long-standing position of avoiding any 'automatic alignment' with the US (Herz 2022; Hirst and Valls Pereira 2022; Sá Guimarães and Silva 2021). His government's foreign-policy decisions were mostly targeted at impressing domestic audiences with little reference to Brazil's international commitments or its relations with international clients and partners. One could argue it was an assertive domestic policy, in contrast to what Amorim (2017) called Brazil's 'assertive foreign policy'.

To summarise, the three questions were answered with evidence from the three cases discussed above. Firstly, the Bolsonaro government mostly failed to achieve its foreign policy goals. This was especially marked in the high-profile case of OECD membership, but also with regards to ratification of the EU-Mercosur agreement. The situation in regionalism and climate negotiations might not be considered government policy failures as such, because the government achieved what it set out to do, which was to distance itself from these processes. However, arguably, they could be deemed strategic policy failures for Brazil and its diplomacy. Almost immediately, these

choices had negative consequences that damaged Brazil's reputation and constrained the Itamaraty's ability to present a strategically informed diplomacy.

Secondly, failure and/or underachievement occurred most prominently when there was foreign policy change (as seen in some aspects of all three cases). However, there was underachievement even where there were elements of continuity. Thirdly, the above three cases of foreign policy decision-making showed how Bolsonaro's foreign policy was often short-termist, inward looking and off target – a far cry from the features of strategic diplomacy, which required a long-term and systemic focus that could accommodate emergent international phenomena and strategic surprises with agility.

Finally, a subject for future research agendas that would deepen conceptual clarity emerges from the experience of upheaval and polarisation in the Bolsonaro years. Researchers applying the concept of strategic diplomacy as a diagnostic tool might need to consider whether strategic diplomacy is predicated on relatively stable domestic political and economic circumstances. Is a relatively stable domestic scenario necessary before a state can successfully undertake agile and long-term oriented strategic foreign policy decisions? If it is so, then this concept might have limited applicability in unstable domestic contexts found in many regions and states of the Global South.

In conclusion, the concept of strategic diplomacy helped highlight features that contribute to foreign policy-making success, but also exposed the importance of adding broader domestic conditions to its diagnostic framework. The analysis showed how in the case of Bolsonaro's Brazil, few, if any, foreign policies were on target for achieving Brazil's longer-term strategic objectives, but Brazil did not completely abandon the game. As such, features of strategic diplomacy may just have been hibernating awaiting more propitious circumstances. The question is whether Bolsonaro's successor, Lula, narrowly elected to serve a third term from 2023, will be able to revive them.

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