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# Upside-down diplomacy – foreign perceptions about Bolsonaro’s intentions and initial transformations of Brazil’s foreign policy and status

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## ABSTRACT

The election of Jair Bolsonaro for president in 2018 turned Brazil onto a conservative extreme right political path. Beyond the domestic impacts on institutions and democracy, the rise of the far right also transformed the country’s foreign policy as well as affecting its global prestige. The country’s reputation abroad has deteriorated, and both Brazil and the president have been heavily criticised in foreign media. This paper moves beyond the views of the press and the public. It analyses changes in the country’s international status after the election of Bolsonaro from the point of view of elite stakeholders. It draws from a reflexive thematic analysis of primary data collected in 94 semi-structured interviews with experts from the foreign policy community of great powers at the end of 2018 and in the first months of 2019. This article argues that the new president was seen as changing everything, creating a feeling of uncertainty regarding other nations’ relations with Brazil and hindering the chances of Brazil improving its international standing.

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## Introduction

When Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil, in October 2018, he started to transform Brazil, pushing the country in a more conservative direction (Londoño and Andreoni 2019). The far-right politician promoted extreme changes in the style and the rhetoric of Brazilian politics, and upended the traditions of Brazilian foreign policy. He instigated a profound deregulation of environmental protection laws, adopted an economic discourse of liberalism while creating an environment of permanent tension between different powers of the Republic, and threatened democracy with his extreme right agenda and attacks on the media (Hunter and Power 2019; Weizenmann 2019; Casarões and Flesmes 2019; Chagas-Bastos 2019). Many of the effects of these modifications to domestic institutions and in national politics are currently under scrutiny, and scholars are assessing what has happened to the country since 2019. Little is known, however, about how these developments have impacted the standing and role of Brazil on the global stage.

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The election of Bolsonaro profoundly affected Brazil's international image (Passarinho 2021; Waynberg 2020; Buarque 2021). The decision to elect Bolsonaro was lamented by the most important media outlets in the world, with *The New York Times* calling it a sad choice (Editorial Board 2018). The *Economist* argued he would make a disastrous president (Anon 2018), while *The Guardian* declared that he was a bigot, misogynist and homophobe and a danger to democracy (Editorial 2018). Studies have analysed articles published in the international media and have concluded that they show a sharp decline in Brazil's international reputation and the way foreigners evaluate Brazil (Waynberg 2020; Bonin 2021).

This transformation of the country's reputation can have important impacts for its level of prestige and its relations with other nations. Images perceived in the rest of the world such as the ones listed above matter because within international relations (IR), status is defined as the rank of a nation within a global society and is highly dependent on the intersubjective beliefs of actors outside of it. A country has the level of prestige other nations recognise it as having (Beaumont and Røren 2020; Carvalho 2020; Clunan 2014; Götz 2020; Larson and Shevchenko 2014, 2019; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Murray 2019; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014). Status research tends not to pay much attention to the opinion of the general public, however, and to focus more on assessments based on quantitative studies, on strategies used by nations to pursue status and on official discourse of political leaders. The intersubjective factor, although considered important in most of the literature about status, has so far been understudied, and has mostly been discussed as concerning the perceptions of elites and policymakers (Duque 2018; Esteves, Jumbert, and de Carvalho 2020; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014; Røren and Beaumont 2019).

This paper advances the study of the international status of Brazil by developing an assessment about what changed in the intersubjective interpretations about the country's international prestige and its foreign policy after the election of Bolsonaro. It analyses the perceptions of the foreign policy community (FPC) of the five permanent members (P5) of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC): the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China. Based on a reflexive thematic analysis of primary data from 94 interviews with these elites of the P5, the research presented here contributes to the study of Brazil's status in a changing political context, with the rise of Bolsonaro, and provides an initial assessment of foreign perceptions about the changes occurring in Brazil since the 2018 elections. The paper argues that from the perspective of the FPC of the P5, Bolsonaro changed everything for the country. The new president transformed Brazilian foreign policy, created an environment of uncertainty and changed the way other nations think about Brazil, hindering the prospects of achieving higher status.

After this introduction, this article is divided into three main sections and a conclusion. It starts by presenting a thorough review of changes in the Brazilian foreign policy under Bolsonaro. The next section presents the research design used to analyse the interviews, with details about the data collection and systematic assessment. The third section advances the analysis of the data and presents the first impressions of informants about what was happening in Brazil in late 2018 and early 2019, presenting the intersubjective views that the country was being transformed. The conclusion addresses the implications of these changing perceptions and evaluates what this means for Brazil's status, and its ability to pursue its foreign policy goals.

## Bolsonaro's transformation of Brazilian foreign policy

The election of Bolsonaro led to unprecedented changes to Brazil's political reality, with strong effects on Brazilian diplomacy. Since before his inauguration in January 2019, his administration was seen as reinventing Brazil's traditional approach to foreign policy and has been deemed the most controversial in Brazilian history (Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021; Chagas-Bastos and Franzoni 2019; Scherer 2021; Vidigal and Bernal-Meza 2020; Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021; de Freixo 2019; Gonçalves and Teixeira 2020; Londoño and Andreoni 2019). Many governments in the Brazilian Republic's history have made changes to the way foreign policy has been conducted. However, they mostly shared goals and values. Bolsonaro challenged this idea of continuation, and his government marked its most significant rupture to date. It abandoned the profile of a state policy to give way to a government policy, questioning the widely disseminated assumption of bureaucratic neutrality within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021; Lafer 2019).

Traditional IR scholarship tends to see states as being motivated to act by their interests in security and their own survival, to maintain power and accumulate wealth and to build relationships within international institutions (Bull 2002; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Waltz 1979; Wendt 1992). The IR literature focusing on Brazil tends to describe the traditional diplomacy of the country as connected to the pursuit of internal development, of an interdependent relationship with other countries, autonomy, insertion and an attempt to build consensual hegemony – all while defending pacifism, non-intervention in the sovereignty of other nations and, more recently, democratic multilateralism (Burges 2017; Hurrell 2013; Lafer 1990, 2009; Lessa, Couto, and Farias 2010; Ligiéro 2011; Lopes and Vellozo Junior 2004; Pautasso and Adam 2014; Ricupero 2017; Vigevani and Cepaluni 2018).

While not necessarily disagreeing with this traditional approach, this paper focuses on a theoretical framework of status in IR and argues that one of the main historical motivations of Brazil in the international society has been an attempt to increase the prestige and standing of the country in the world. Even if the country has had some of the other motivations that the literature has traditionally described, the ambition for status has permeated many of the actions of the nation in world politics since before the independence of the country. Brazil has traditionally aspired to have a greater active involvement in IR, to acquire a higher status, and to become recognised as an important player in the global arena. The country believes it is entitled to this high status because of the way it sees itself and its role in the world. This builds on the arguments of having a continental territory, a great deal of natural resources, and a strong economic profile (Buarque 2013; Coelho 2015; Esteves, Jumbert, and de Carvalho 2020; Lafer 2000, 2001; Ricupero 2017; Souza 2002, 2008; Burges 2017; Hurrell 2006; Larson and Shevchenko 2014; Herz 2011).

Examples of status as a historical motivation for the country abound in the scholarship of Brazilian foreign policy. The interest in increased prestige was part of the formation of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is evident in the tradition left by José Maria da Silva Paranhos Jr., the Baron of Rio Branco, who is often described as a founding father of Brazilian diplomacy. He is recognised as responsible for inspiring the style of diplomatic behaviour that characterises Brazil, such as a foreign policy agenda that focuses on reducing conflicts, crises and difficulties. He was also consistently concerned with Brazil's international image and prestige as part of a larger strategy to insert Brazil in the international system of his time (Burns 1967; Lafer 2000; Ricupero 2017; Santos 2018, 2010). The focus on status was fundamental in the

candidacy to become a permanent member of the UNSC. Brazil's humanitarian actions in the world and its participation in peacekeeping operations have also been linked to a permanent interest in international recognition as an important global player, as well as the country's attempt to play a role as a regional leader in South and Latin America and even an recent increased presence in Africa (Andrade 2012; Coelho 2015; Vargas 2008; Stolte 2015; Esteves, Jumbert, and de Carvalho 2020; Kenkel, Souza Neto, and Ribeiro 2020; Abdenur et al. 2017; Pinheiro and Gaio 2014; Hirst 2015). The country also tried to project positive images to the rest of the world in nation-branding campaigns, and used hosting the World Cup and the Olympics as part of this strategy to improve its international standing (Bender and Saraiva 2012; Buarque 2015; Castro 2013; Rhamey and Early 2013; Schallhorn 2020). Furthermore, in the country's behaviour at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Group of Twenty Leaders' Summit (G20) it has been argued that Brazil focused on gaining recognition as a leader of developing countries, sometimes even at the cost of realising its full material interests (Doctor 2015).

All of those traditions were evident until the end of 2018, when Bolsonaro was elected president and started to indicate the profile of his administration's diplomacy, breaking away from what was done before him. Since his presidential campaign, Bolsonaro has promised to systematically dismantle the international profile of Brazil as a reliable mediator, a skilled negotiator, and a potential voice for those in the South, changing Brazil's position in regard to Cuba, Venezuela, China and even the United Nations (UN). Since his election, the plan of Bolsonaro has appeared to be to undo Brazil's longstanding diplomatic traditions of pragmatic and universal relations, commitment to multilateralism, and peaceful settlement of international disputes (Casarões and Flemes 2019; Spektor 2019). After he rose to power, he promoted a rupture not only with Brazilian foreign policy traditions but also with the Brazilian conceptions of global politics of the international community (Castro 2019). Under his government, traditional principles of Brazilian diplomacy such as democratic multilateralism have taken a back seat in favour of a focus on national development in technology, infrastructure and trade (Casarões and Flemes 2019). Bolsonaro turned Brazil's back on traditional liberal and nationalist conceptions of foreign policy. For the first time, those responsible for the state have been guided solely by ideas that are not consistent with the concrete interests of the various sectors that are committed to the process of economic and social development in Brazil (Gonçalves and Teixeira 2020).

With Bolsonaro, this was the first time that far-right ideology found political expression in the country's foreign policy. In Brazil, this ideology is based on the belief that the biggest threat to the country's interests in the world comes from the perceived downfall of the West and rise of illiberal powers such as China and Russia, and that 'cultural Marxism' has infiltrated Brazilian institutions to submit the country to the interests of minorities. In this context, international institutions are seen to be working against Brazilian national interests (Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021; Casarões and Flemes 2019; Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021; Chagas-Bastos 2019).

This 'new' Brazilian diplomacy was explained by Ernesto Araújo, Bolsonaro's minister of Foreign Affairs during the first years of his administration, as being based on democracy, economic transformation and development, sovereignty, the values of the Brazilian nation and the concept of freedom (Araújo 2020). This has several problems both in theory and in practice. First, the focus on sovereignty and development has been a permanent objective of Brazilian diplomacy for decades, and there is nothing 'new' about it. Furthermore, Bolsonaro took unprecedented steps to involve Brazil in other nations' domestic matters, declaring

support for political candidates in Argentina and in the US, and hinting at the possibility of intervention in countries like Venezuela (Castro 2019; Baptista, Bertolucci, and Diogo 2021; de Freixo 2019). The idea of a policy based on democracy collides with the political position of the president, who openly defends the military dictatorship, and who aligns himself with the world's autocratic leaders (Hunter and Power 2019; Weizenmann 2019). While the new president turned Brazil's back on traditional partners such as China based on a putative defence of democracy and liberty, it drew closer to other authoritarian countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE (Scherer 2021). The focus on economic transformation, on the other hand, would depend on a policy of greater openness in the country, which despite being mentioned in the speech, has not been seen in practice. Finally, the defence of the values of the Brazilian nation and of freedom are vague concepts and lack a clear relationship with the country.

Although there was a clear change in priorities and tone, the first results of Bolsonaro's foreign policy strategy have been visibly erratic, at times incoherent, contradictory and full of flip flops (Casarões and Flesmes 2019; Chagas-Bastos and Franzoni 2019). All in all, it has been described as a foreign policy based on a strategy of chaos transformed into a declaratory policy space full of cacophonies, and the result has been the erosion of the country's image on the world stage and a growing deterioration of Brazil's foreign relations with other international actors (Gonçalves and Teixeira 2020; de Lima and Albuquerque 2019). Although both the president and his cabinet often defend a projection that improves the prestige of the country (Araújo 2020; Bolsonaro 2021), the actions of this new administration appear to have had the opposite effect.

The loss of international prestige is misunderstood by the government. More than that, Bolsonaro's Itamaraty seems clearly deluded about the country's level of recognition in the world and rejects the perception that the reputation of the country has gotten worse. 'It's exactly the opposite. All our interlocutors visibly transmit, not only explicitly, but in their attitude, a new attribution of prestige to Brazil. [...] Brazil today is seen as a much more important actor than it was before' (Araújo 2020, 576). The government may truly believe this. However, status and prestige within IR are not what a government wants it to be, or tries to project, or hears from one or another interlocutor, but what is seen and recognised by other countries in the world (Beaumont and Røren 2020; Carvalho 2020; Clunan 2014; Götz 2020; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Murray 2019; Paul, Larson, and Wohlforth 2014). It is a difficult phenomenon to measure objectively, but over the past few years, there is no lack of evidence that Brazil is losing status in the rest of the world. Araújo himself said that it would be acceptable for the country to become an 'international pariah' (Della Coletta 2020). Nations with prestige are not pariahs. All international indexes that measure the country's 'brand' show the country in decline since 2013 (and getting even worse since 2018) (Passarinho 2021; Buarque 2017). The following sections advance the discussion about the changes in the foreign policy of Brazil under Bolsonaro by addressing the external perceptions of the transformation he promoted in the country.

## Research design

The qualitative study presented in this paper is based on primary data from 94 semi-structured interviews conducted with individual respondents representing the FPC of the P5.

The analysis is part of broader qualitative research project about the international status of Brazil, developed at King's College London from 2017 to 2021. As part of the research, the interviews consisted of a protocol of questions about different aspects of the international agenda of the country and its level of prestige. For the purposes of the analysis presented in this paper, the focus of the assessment is on the informants' commentary about Bolsonaro's impacts to the country.

By FPC, this study refers to a universe of individuals involved in foreign policymaking or who significantly contribute to forming opinion regarding foreign relations in the countries analysed here. The group includes politicians, diplomats, members of interest groups, leaders of think tanks and non-governmental organisations, academics, journalists and business-people involved in the international sphere (Esteves and Herz 2020; Esteves, Jumbert, and de Carvalho 2020; Souza 2002, 2008). The P5 was selected as the reference to assess the status of Brazil because these are all countries with historically recognised great power status and because the UNSC is still symbolically recognised as one of the main international institutions making decisions about security in IR and as the main symbol of high status in the global stratification (Berridge and James 2003; Andrade 2012; Garcia 2011; Arraes 2005; Mendes 2015; Uziel 2015; Vargas 2008).

The sources were selected by purposive sampling, selecting participants on the basis that they would be able to provide information-rich data to analyse. Since this is a qualitative study, the choice of potential interviewees did not need to be statistically representative, but was intended to include a variety of viewpoints regarding the status of Brazil (Braun and Clarke 2013; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). The research attempted to find a balance between male and female informants but had a higher success rate when trying to interview male sources (78% of the interviewees). Although this is not ideal, it may be interpreted as a result of the field of IR (especially foreign policymaking and analysis) still being dominated by men in most countries (Tickner 1992). The main objective of the research was to conduct interviews during face-to-face meetings; however, due to constraints of time, geography and funding, it was necessary to rely on other methods to conduct the interviews. Out of the 94 interviews, 28 were conducted in person in the UK, in France and the US, 55 were conducted through audio (and sometimes video) conversations via Skype, telephone, WhatsApp and WeChat, and the last 11 were conducted in text form via email exchanges. This use of technology did pose some challenges, but it also enabled the researcher to talk to key interviewees who would otherwise have been unavailable during the fieldwork (Braun and Clarke 2013; Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Lo Iacono, Symonds, and Brown 2016; Seitz 2016).

The data set used in this analysis included data from 60 interviews. This followed a plan to select only the most relevant interviews, with the most relevant sources, using the rest of the interviews as background data. The number of interviews in the data set was defined based on a balance of representativeness per country of origin of sources, and to make the analytical process more feasible. In total, 12 interviews were selected with sources from each nation of the P5. The data set is very representative of the entire data corpus, with sources from think tanks, academic fields, diplomacy, journalism, business and politics.

The study is based on the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of the data set. The data was assessed using a method with a strong focus on the importance of qualitative analysis and how the data was systematised and analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006; Boyatzis 1998; Braun, Clarke, and Rance 2014). RTA is a way to let the researcher reflexively find meaning in the



interviews, to see and make sense of meanings and experiences, using both deductive and inductive approaches (Braun and Clarke 2019a, 2019b). The paradigm of qualitative research adopted does not apply statistical techniques and is exploratory, open-ended, and based on rich and detailed data from semi-structured interviews. The goal was not to transform the interview data into numbers or test what is already known, but to discover and develop new findings grounded in empirical material relevant to the subject studied.

All informants consented to being interviewed, and most consented to be named in the research. However, to offer informants anonymity, their names were omitted in the process, and no direct quotes will be attributed to named sources in the discussion of the results. The interviews were randomly codenamed with initials connected to the country of origin of the interviewees, as UK1–UK12, US1–US12, CH1–CH12, FR1–FR12 and RU1–RU12. After transcribing and anonymising the interviews, all selected files for the RTA were uploaded into a new project in the NVivo software program. The transcripts were systematically analysed and coded and the data was developed into interrelated ideas for the themes that could be inferred from it.

This paper focuses on one of the codes developed from that analysis: ‘Bolsonaro changes everything’. Although in the original research informants were asked about their perceptions about the country in the period between 1989 and 2014, the changes in Brazilian politics with the rise of Bolsonaro influenced the replies of many of the sources in this study. This is because the interviews were conducted between March 2018 and July 2019, a time frame that coincides with the rise of Bolsonaro as a presidential candidate, his election and his first few months in office. For many informants it was impossible, thus, to completely ignore what was happening in the country, and more than a third of the interviews ended up discussing how Bolsonaro was changing Brazilian politics and foreign policy. These assessments are the focus of the discussion presented in the following section. They reveal the perceptions of the P5 about the ongoing political transition in Brazil with the election and inauguration of Bolsonaro as president.

### **‘Bolsonaro changed everything’**

The election of Bolsonaro was seen from abroad as a huge transformation in Brazilian politics and diplomacy. This section analyses the views of members of the FPC of the P5 about the election of the far-right Brazilian politician and his first months in power. The informants in this study commented on the changes to the traditions of the diplomacy of the country, the strong sense of uncertainty the new president brought to the relations with other countries, and the appearance of a chaotic situation in the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main argument presented here is that the foreign perception was that his emergence in the political scene broke away from the traditional domestic arrangements and to the long-term stability of the country’s diplomacy.

Although the time frame considered in the interviews, which were conducted as part of a King’s College London study about Brazil, was limited to the period between 1989 and 2014, it was clear that it was not easy for informants to ignore the election of Bolsonaro, the radicalism of his presidential campaign and his first actions once in power. The main evidence of this is that even if interviewees were not asked about Bolsonaro and were told to ignore the developments in the country after 2014, at least a third of the informants still spontaneously mentioned the new president and what he represented for Brazilian politics and for



the international status of the country. Beyond the main themes developed from the RTA of the interviews in the original research about the status of Brazil, one particular code collected refers to the impacts the election of Bolsonaro had in the political reality of Brazil and the foreign policy of the country. This is the focus of the analysis presented here.

The code 'Bolsonaro changes everything' was developed from replies of 20 of the 60 interviews analysed and was present in 29 different references. This shows that for a significant proportion of the informants of this study, the election of the new president had strong impacts for the status of Brazil. However, as discussed in the Research design section, the focus of the analysis presented here is not on statistical data; rather, the qualitative paradigm adopted uses words as data in an exploratory, open-ended approach that seeks to understand and interpret meanings. From this reflexive analysis, the main argument presented is that Bolsonaro's emergence on the political scene broke away from the traditional domestic arrangements and the long stability of the diplomacy of the country – which is aligned with the IR literature analysing the 'new Brazilian foreign policy', as discussed in a previous section.

'Foreign policy is changing considerably because of the new president, which changes almost everything in domestic policy, and of course foreign policy could not be an exclusion in this sense', argued a professor at the Institute of Latin American Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (RU7). 'Everything that Lula did, Bolsonaro will do the opposite', explained a fellow in Politics at Nuffield College, Oxford University (UK2). 'Bolsonaro is going to be very damaging to Brazil's aspirations', said a president emeritus and senior fellow at the think tank Inter-American Dialogue (US10). 'With the Bolsonaro government, there is a whole new way of looking at Brazil that gets tied to Trump', argued a director of analysis for Geopolitical Futures (US3). 'Some of the ideas that people in Moscow had were somehow shattered by the recent election in Brazil', explained a director general of the think tank Russian International Affairs Council (RU10).

As Bolsonaro was starting his administration, there was a lot of worry among informants in the P5 about the way Brazilian institutions would react to what was seen as a threat to democracy. According to a consultant in subjects related to Brazil at the Quay D'Orsay, the French Foreign Affairs Ministry (FR7),

It takes a while to come to solid conclusions about Bolsonaro and the extent to which he will threaten democracy and human rights. We know he's not a democrat, but he can change his mind on many issues. Anyway, it's a trauma for Brazil and all of Latin America to see a character like that having won the elections. It is horrible. It is sad, but unfortunately there's a lot of that in the world. It's a global trend. These are tough times.

One of the arguments presented by the informants of the P5 was that the changes made the Brazilian foreign policy chaotic, as described by the scholarship about the rise of Bolsonaro. 'We see a diplomacy that, if not without a lot of coherence, does not have a clear orientation and that has a more ideological characteristic than a response to the country's national interests. Which leads to inconsistencies', argued a researcher at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (FR12). With Bolsonaro as president, the same informant argued, 'there is a total rupture with previous administrations'.

The election of Bolsonaro negatively affected the image of Brazil, according to a researcher at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (FR12). 'The profile of the new president Bolsonaro is perceived by people on the right and left in France as very negative. This creates a more negative image of Brazil'.

Bolsonaro's rise to power was perceived as particularly worrying by informants from China, a country that often appeared in the new foreign policy discourse of Brazil as a rival, even an enemy. Before the election, Bolsonaro would attack China and criticise the growing influence of the country, which he said was trying to buy Brazil (Castro 2019; Guimarães and Oliveira E Silva 2021). 'There was much debate when President Bolsonaro took office, and some people say that the relations between China and Brazil may encounter some difficulties,' noted a researcher at the Center for Brazilian Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CH12).

According to a journalist at Xinhua, the Chinese news agency (CH11):

There's an atmosphere of 'what's going to happen?', you know? An atmosphere of suspense. And they are trying to find out in every way they can what the position of the Brazilian government will be, precisely because before the election and even after being elected, Bolsonaro made some not-so-positive statements regarding the presence of China in Brazil. And they know the president's word is the final word.

It is important to take into account that Bolsonaro's rise to power coincided with the intensification of geopolitical competition between the United States and China, the progressive weakening of international institutions such as the UN and the European Union, and the resurgence of non-cooperative nationalism, in what has been described as the greatest threat in a generation to the order established after the end of the Cold War (Spektor 2019). One of the main stresses in the relations between Brazil and China was Bolsonaro's alignment with the US at a moment when the two great powers were beginning what was seen as a trade war. 'If Brazil decides to lean too much with the US it might not be too good for Chinese investments in Brazil,' said an associate professor and assistant dean at the School of International Studies at Renmin University of China (CH5).

Russian informants also mentioned a preoccupation with Bolsonaro's alignment of Brazil with the US, which could affect any possibilities of partnerships with Moscow. 'Putin and Bolsonaro don't have any connection,' argued a political analyst and researcher at Institute of Modern Russia (RU3). Even if they could be seen as both being part of crop of strong men, authoritarian, populist politicians, the alignment with the US could affect the bilateral relations. 'If you look at what Bolsonaro's priorities are – he went to the United States, he didn't go to Russia – so you see this is his priority,' the informant RU3 explained.

A similar perception was described by a director general of the think tank Russian International Affairs Council (RU10):

Now, with the very serious political change in Brasilia, some people are confused about what to expect from the new leadership, and whether Brazil is a country that still can be considered a potential partner, because, for example, the leadership took a very strong position on Venezuela, and definitely Russia and Brazil have very different views on this country and its future. But also, the new Brazilian leadership raised a question about Brazil joining NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], and definitely it's not likely to happen, but the inclination itself suggests that probably this position of Brazil [as a potential partner of Russia] was overrated.

The idea of Brazil aligning with the US was perceived more positively by American informants in the research. Although scepticism remained about the actions the new president would take, the changes were interpreted as breaking away from what was perceived as the country's earlier rejection of US hegemony in the region and some

anti-American sentiments that were seen especially during the administrations of the Worker's Party (PT). According to an executive director of the Brazilian Studies Association (US6):

One of the things that strikes me now is that ... this shows effort of Brazil of over a generation, especially with the PT to sort of not accept US economic hegemony in the Americas, to come up with alternatives, Mercosur and whatever, then it all seems to completely disappear now. As the new government says that it wants to be closer to the United States and have better trade relations and blah blah blah. Maybe that won't last, but that seems to me like a real shift of the traditional weariness of being under US economic domination.

One of the transformations that most surprised informants in discussing the changes Bolsonaro represented for Brazilian diplomacy was the change of focus from the search for prestige and candidacy to a permanent seat at the UNSC as the main symbol of this pursuit of a higher international status. Even though Bolsonaro would still refer to the UNSC reform as one of the objectives of the country (Bolsonaro 2021), his first actions after coming into power were in the opposite direction to the traditional foreign policy of the country. According to a professor at the Institute of Latin American Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences (RU7),

What is absolutely new, and surprising, is the current vision surrounding Brazil's long-standing, many-decade long desire to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This desire is no longer a priority for Brazil, according to Minister [of Foreign Relations Ernesto] Araújo. This is interesting, because it happens for the first time in many, many years, even going through right-wing and left-wing governments. This is surprising, but it is part of the new logic of foreign policy, that Brazil should not participate in multilateral relations, and has to develop, like the United States, bilateral relations only. And multilateral relations can influence Brazil. And that Brazil no longer wants. If Brazil wanted to be a permanent member of the Security Council, it means that Brazil wants to participate in multilateralism. As this is no longer a priority, the search for this vacancy in the UN is no longer a priority. This is an absolutely new thing.

These foreign interpretations are evidence of the uneasiness the new president of Brazil promoted in the international status of the country. Many elite informants in powerful countries were clearly shocked and had a difficult time understanding the meaning of the far-right turn of Brazil, and worried about the future of the country. The international perception of the election and first months of the new administration were that this change in Brazilian politics had the potential to turn the country upside-down and transform Brazil's place in the world, subverting its historical attempts to achieve higher international status. These views go beyond the simple analysis of news articles about the Bolsonaro presidency and surveys with the general public of other nations. The analysis of foreign perceptions contribute to understanding the status of Brazil by assessing the impact of the changes in Brazilian foreign policy has reached the elites that think about IR in great powers.

Based on these external perceptions, it is possible to see that the changes Brazil is going through have important implications both for its international status and its foreign policy ambitions and strategies. With Bolsonaro, Brazil will have difficulty achieving the high status it has long sought, since any improvement in its standing would depend on the intersubjective perceptions that could lead to a recognition from the nations that have higher status, and the data analysed here shows that the perception of the president's policy is mostly

negative. On the other hand, with the changes described here, Brazil may have started to leave behind its long-held ambitions to achieve a high level of prestige and adapt its international agenda to a lower level of prestige of the country.

## Conclusion

Brazilian political reality and foreign policy have undergone a series of transformations since Bolsonaro was elected president in 2018. The new government changed the priorities and alignments of Brazil's international positions, picked fights with historical allies, threatened important economic relations and affected the way the country is seen by the rest of the world. These developments have the potential to change Brazil's international status.

This paper contributes to the study of Brazil's level of prestige in a changing political context, with the rise of Bolsonaro and the far right to power in the country. It provides a very important first look at the initial foreign perceptions about the changes going on in Brazil since the 2018 elections, observed by informants in real time after Bolsonaro's election victory, inauguration and first few months in office. As discussed in the previous section, the FPC of the P5 described a strong sense of uncertainty surrounding the rise of the new president. Bolsonaro created international tensions and the appearance of a chaotic situation in the Brazilian ministry of Foreign Affairs. Informants in this study perceived his emergence onto the political scene as breaking away from the traditional domestic arrangements and the long stability of the country's diplomacy.

Apart from the external perceptions of the new Brazilian foreign policy, the transformations brought about by Bolsonaro may represent the end of Brazil's quest for higher status. This traditional ambition of the country, as shown in this paper, has been the basis of many of the actions of Brazil in IR, even if the nation was not able to accomplish the goal of becoming a great power. With the new foreign policy approach, Brazil may be content to remain on the periphery of global relations, with the role of a mere supporting actor in the big decisions of international politics. Although this is a radical rupture from a long-term diplomatic tradition, it could have a positive effect, as the country assumes a role closer to that of a middle power and ambitions nearer its actual capabilities. This would lead to giving up what some critics have referred to as a complex of greatness, a megalomaniacal international agenda (Degaut and Kalout 2017; Røren and Beaumont 2019; Stolte 2015; Zanini 2017).

However, the new administration seems not to have given up completely on the search for status. During his term as minister of Foreign Affairs under Bolsonaro, Ernesto Araújo argued that despite the negative coverage of Bolsonaro in the international press, Brazil's prestige was on the rise (Araújo 2020). The analysis of interviews with stakeholders in powerful nations shows that this was not the case. These changing perceptions of Brazil among the FPC of the P5 will make it much harder for the country to increase its status, if that is still the goal of Brazilian foreign policy. The views were mostly negative, associating the new administration with a change in the direction the country was going when it was seen as 'rising' in the global arena. It is also problematic that the democratic system of the country is seen as being under pressure since the election of Bolsonaro. Consolidation of Brazilian democratic credentials has often been cited as one of the positive aspects driving the

emergence of the country, along with its economic development and the reduction of inequalities.

The negative views about the president are not the only challenges to the international status of Brazil, however. Although there are not many studies analysing the intersubjective status of other nations in political transition, it is easy to see that nations such as Russia and China are not recognised as democracies by the rest of the world, and their leaders are described as autocrats, but they still maintain their high status and their permanent seats at the UNSC (Larson and Shevchenko 2019). Similarly, India's democracy has been described as being threatened by Narendra Modi, but this has not resulted in an evident loss of status for the country (Gupta et al. 2019; Larson 2019). Moreover, the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 US election and Joe Biden's administration may have shown a path to recover the image of a nation after the negative impacts of an insurrection and coup attempt. The problem with Bolsonaro is not only that he changed the direction of Brazilian foreign policy and worsened the image of Brazil, but that his administration has not been able to generate positive results that could help project the country internationally. The country has not been able to offer solutions to global problems, and its economy has not generated the growth and liberalism promised in his campaign. There has been an increase in poverty nationwide, and Brazil was seen as having one of the worst policies in fighting the global COVID-19 pandemic (Ferigato et al. 2020). With all of this, the other traditional means through which a nation could increase its standing would be a growth in military power, which so far also seems not to be part of the strategy developed by Bolsonaro.

In this context, it is possible to argue that Bolsonaro has limited any possibility Brazil had to increase its status. And even if most of the negative perceptions are directly connected to his persona, rather than the country as a whole, there will be long-term impacts of his administration on Brazil's prestige. His administration has reinforced a negative view that Brazil lacks a coherent and clear international agenda, which is seen as fundamental for the development of a comprehensive strategy to pursue the interests of the nation. This has very problematic implications for the future of Brazilian foreign policy, as the rupture brought by Bolsonaro may taint the image of Brazil in the long term, making it harder for any other administration in the near future to convince the world that the country would not once again change what is supposed to be a state policy immune to the whims and radical views of any one government. Even if Bolsonaro ends up leaving the presidency and Brazil returns to the pattern established before his rise, it will probably not be easy to reset the Brazilian foreign policy and put it back on the path it once had of an emerging power on the rise.

The study presented here is, however, limited in scope. The first caveat is that it is based on interviews conducted in real time while the Brazilian political context was going through changes, which thus reflected perceptions of situations that were not completed or resolved. This could influence the perception of uncertainty described by informants. It is also based on small-n, qualitative research, building on semi-structured interviews that were not designed to focus on the rise of Bolsonaro to power. This, on the other hand, can be seen as making the data even more relevant, as sources consulted for this study volunteered to discuss the subject, showing how relevant they perceived the political context of Brazil to be.

Future research should be conducted to develop a more detailed understanding of foreign perceptions of the Bolsonaro administration and the transformation of Brazilian politics and foreign policy. It would be important to carry out new interviews and data collection to develop an understanding of how Brazil's turn to the far right changes the way the country

is perceived. Future research should focus on an assessment of the impacts of those changes in Brazilian politics on the international status of the country.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Daniel Buarque** holds a joint PhD in War Studies and International Relations from King's College London (UK) in partnership with Universidade de São Paulo (Brazil) and also holds an MA in Brazil in Global Perspective from King's College London. His research focuses on the study of international status of states from an intersubjective external perspective, working towards a theory of how nations can increase their level of prestige. He has published widely in the *International Journal of Communication*, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, *Brasiliiana* and more. A journalist with more than 20 years of experience in Brazilian news outlets, has also published six books, including *Brazil, um país do presente* (2013) and *O Brasil é um país sério?* (2022).

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