

## **BOLSONARO, CHINA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: CHALLENGES IN SIGHT<sup>1</sup>**

### *BOLSONARO, CHINA E O INDO-PACÍFICO: DESAFIOS À VISTA*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay aims to focus on the initial perspectives about Brazil's foreign policy and strategic thinking on how to cope with the rise of China's economic and political might since the inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro's administration. Bolsonaro demonstrates an interest in approach to the United States' grievances against China. This paper advocate this strategy faces some hurdles: geographical and economic issues constrain countries such as Australia, India, and Japan to assume assertive instances against China, although they present uneasiness with the Chinese regional ambitions and Washington's demands of a more active role in the Indo-Pacific. These countries compose with the United States the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an initiative that seeks to facilitate their policy coordination towards the Indo-Pacific. However, Canberra, Tokyo, and New Delhi uphold a pragmatic strategy in order to maintain their special ties with the United States and to avoid skirmishes with Beijing.

**Keywords:** Brazilian Foreign Policy; China; Indo-Pacific.

## RESUMO

Este ensaio pretende focar nas perspectivas iniciais sobre a política externa e o pensamento estratégico do Brasil sobre como lidar com a ascensão do poder econômico e político da China desde a posse do governo de Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro demonstra interesse em se aproximar das queixas dos Estados Unidos contra a China. Este artigo defende que essa estratégia enfrenta alguns obstáculos: questões geográficas e econômicas impedem que países como a Austrália, a Índia e o Japão assumam posições assertivas contra a China, embora apresentem desconforto com as ambições regionais chinesas e as exigências de Washington de um papel mais ativo no Indo-Pacífico. Esses países compõem, ao lado dos Estados Unidos, o chamado Diálogo Quadrilateral de Segurança, uma iniciativa que busca facilitar sua coordenação política em direção ao Indo-Pacífico. No entanto, Canberra, Tóquio e Nova Déli mantêm uma estratégia pragmática para manter seus laços especiais com os Estados Unidos e evitar confrontos com Pequim.

**Palavras-chave:** Política Externa Brasileira; China; Indo-Pacífico.

### 1. BRAZIL AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: UNAWARENESS OR A BET?

In October of 1961, an article published on Foreign Affairs, written by the former president of Brazil Jânio Quadros few days before his resignation, claimed that Brazilian commercial ties with Asia were practically "terra incognita" (Quadros, 1961). China currently is a well-known partner for some productive sectors, but the Indo-Pacific, where are placed many important diplomatic and economic partners of Brazil, still does not receive the due attention (Gabriel, Pires and Carvalho, 2018; Lopes, 2017).

The term Indo-Pacific recently emerged as a strategic idea adopted officially by countries such as Australia, India, Japan and the United States amid the geopolitical movements and power

shifts occurring in the region of confluence of two oceans: Indian and Pacific, according to the Japanese Prime-Minister Shinzo Abe during a speech for the Indian Parliament in 2007 (Medcalf 2018, p.10; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007).

In addition to semantics, this name upholds its strategic meanings by reshaping the diplomatic and military awareness. In the last six years, since Australia was the first to use this terminology in 2013, many countries have adopted Indo-Pacific (Medcalf 2018, p.16). Most recently, the United States replaced its traditional conception of Asia-Pacific to this new approach in two crucial documents: the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy (White House 2017a, pp.45-46; United States Department of Defense 2018, p.2). Likewise, the Foreign Minister of China demonstrated some uneasiness because media outlets and scholars claimed that Australia, India, Japan, and the United States adopted Indo-Pacific as a manner to craft a single policy towards the region envisaging the containment of Chinese international ambitions (Jingtao and Zhou, 2018).

Indo-Pacific became a key-word for scholars and diplomats in order to grasp the power shifts within the international arena. Donald Trump's administration recalculates Washington's policies towards the Eastern hemisphere. Although the White House withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Indo-Pacific gained momentum in Washington when Trump went to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit, in November 2017, and unveiled his vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" where sovereignty and the rule of law would be respected (White House, 2017b). Trump's administration officially recognizes China as a "revisionist power" which "expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of the others" (White House 2017a, p.25). As a result, the United States has waged a trade war on Beijing and has developed some mechanisms for its Indo-Pacific strategy such as: (a) approving the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018, aimed to assist their allies, to support regional architecture and to ensure the rule of law (United States Congress, 2019); (b) endorsing regional diplomatic and security initiative with partners and allies (Wuthnow, 2018); (c) encouraging India to play a proactive role in the region (Department of State, 2018a); (d) renaming its military fleets responsible for the Indian and Pacific oceans to United States Indo-Pacific Command (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2018); and (e) attempting to increase the number of regional partnership through bilateral negotiations. For example, the visit of the United States' Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo to Nepal at the end of 2018 (Nepali Sansar, 2018).

Diplomatic quarrels within the Indo-Pacific and the soaring rivalry between Washington and Beijing has triggered many issues throughout the world. Although China has dismissed the idea that its government and citizens are repeating old practices of strong countries seeking hegemony, many leaders show reticence with the widespread of Chinese companies and diplomatic initiatives, such as the Belt and Road, aimed at the improvement of commercial and political ties with other countries (Mastro, 2019; Rolland, 2017). Germany joined the United States, Japan, Poland and Australia in their complaints of the fact that Chinese were acquiring their

enterprises, but they were supposedly submissive to Beijing in terms of assisting its intelligence bureaucracy (Ayres, 2019; Carvalho et al, 2019; Fernández, 2018; Mosher, 2018).

However, Bolsonaro promised to change some traditional aspects of Brazilian international engagement. On China, the Brazilian leader frequently showed concerns about the purchase of lands in Brazil and made investors upset by considering a matter of national security to avoid Chinese state's companies to join the process of privatization of governmental energy companies (Spring, 2018). Likewise, on this shift in Brazilian diplomacy, some aspects must be stretched more.

China is the largest destination for the Brazilian exports since 2009, attracting 21% (January 2019) of the exports last year (Ministry of the Economy, 2019b), and, since 2012, it became the main supplier of imported goods by Brazil. According to official data from the Brazilian government, in 2018, Brazil exported US\$ 64.2 billion worth of goods to China, especially soy, iron ore and oil, while the country imported US\$ 34.7 billion worth of manufactured goods, especially machines and equipment (Ministry of the Economy, 2019b). Chinese enterprises have also entered the Brazilian market, obtaining remarkable participation in some sectors. Initially concentrated in the primary sector, aiming to secure the natural resources demanded by the high growth rates of the Chinese economy, the Chinese investments have changed their focus to the industrial, farming, financial and infrastructural sectors, such as telecommunications, energy production and distribution, and railway development. In 2017, nine of the ten largest acquisitions by foreign companies in Latin America were in Brazil, and seven involved a Chinese buyer (Corrêa and Barbosa, 2017; Farias, 2018). Likewise, Brazil is also a partner of two China-led development banks: the Asian International Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Route Fund (SRF), which aim to finance infrastructural projects (Dominguez, 2016; Babones, 2018).

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Nonetheless, beyond China, Brazil maintains important diplomatic and economic ties with other countries in Asia and Oceania such as Australia, Japan, and India. Since the beginning of this century, the relations between Brazil and Asia have intensified with the development of technical cooperation programs and cultural activities, and the numbers of Brazilian tourists and immigrants in the continent have risen as well (Lamazière, 2017).

Nowadays, Japan figures like Brazil's third-largest commercial partner in Asia, also figuring as the fifth largest exporter to Brazil and as the eighth largest importer of Brazilian goods in the world. On the other side, Brazil is Japan's main commercial partner in Latin America. As of 2018, Brazil exported to Japan US\$ 4.334 billion worth of goods, Brazil imported from Japan US\$ 4.355 billion worth of goods (Ministry of the Economy of Brazil, 2019d; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

Brazil and India enjoy significant commercial relations. India is the eighth largest importer of Brazilian goods and the eleventh largest exporter of goods to Brazil. In 2018, Brazil exported US\$ 3.9 billion worth of goods to India, especially crude oil, cane sugar, and copper ore, while Brazil imported US\$ 3.6 billion worth of goods to India, especially heterocyclic compounds, textiles and insecticides (Ministry of the Economy, 2019c). Brazil and India have been working to expand and diversify their trade through the India-Mercosur Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), which was signed in 2004 and came into force in 2009. The PTA encompasses 450 tariff lines in both sides, but Brasilia and New Delhi pursue the enlargement the comprehensiveness of the Agreement to 2.500 tariff lines in both sides (Sandy, 2018; Viana Júnior, 2017). Furthermore, albeit not listed among the largest commercial partner of Brazil, Australia is a developed country which importations from Brazil are composed mainly by manufacture goods – 73.5% of the total amount in January 2019 (Ministry of the Economy, 2019a).

Brasilia's new foreign policy would converge with the fears of Washington, Canberra, Tokyo and New Delhi in relation to the expansion of Chinese influence. Ernesto Araújo, the Foreign Minister of Brazil, would have defended, few days after his nomination, in a document revealed by the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*, the approach of Brazil with “Christian nations” and countries governed by “nationalists” (Bilenky, 2018). Australia and the United States now have leaders related to the religious and conservative public, Japan and India are ruled by nationalist parties. As a result, Bolsonaro’s administration would break with the traditional Brazilian wariness before the complex Asian scenario and would tilt towards Washington and the hardening its positions to Beijing. However, ideological alignments offer uncertain gains and clear risks. There are no signs that Brazil may have allies on ideological grounds in the Indo-Pacific willing to face Beijing.

Diplomatic relations with China affect Brazil's position also in its region. Chile, Colombia, and Peru, seen by Bolsonaro's staff as possible ideological allies, organized the Alianza del Pacífico (Foxley and Meller, 2014) to take advantage of the opportunities opened up by China's commercial and financial expansion, an initiative that was later joined by Mexico (Carvalho et al, 2019). Argentina tried recently to improve its relations with Washington but also sought to attract Chinese investment and deepen trade preference arrangements with Beijing. In Central America, China is advancing Taiwan's diplomatic isolation, offering more investment to regional governments.

## **2. BRAZIL AND THE QUADRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE: UNCERTAIN POSSIBILITIES**

Bolsonaro’s administration demonstrates a geopolitical perspective close to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, abbreviated to Quad, in terms of how to see Chinese global ambitions and the changes in the global balance of power. The Quad is a diplomatic association composed by four countries: Australia, India, Japan, and the United States aimed to facilitate the convergence of these countries in terms of policies towards the Indo-Pacific (Madan, 2017). According to the United States’ Department of the State (Department of State, 2017), these four partners gather together because they are “committed to deepening cooperation, which rests on

a foundation of shared democratic values and principles, and to continue discussions to further strengthen the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region”. Shinzo Abe claimed, in 2012, that these countries should have developed an alliance in order to preserve the peace, stability, freedom of navigation and to refrain the militarization promoted by China in the region (Abe, 2012).

The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently demonstrated irritation with the Quad calling it “an idea that would dissipate like the sea foam” (Trigkas, 2018). This initiative gained momentum recently because of its revival by the four members in 2017, in Manila, after a ten-year hiatus from the first attempt of formalization, in 2007, the association composed by these countries during the Tsunami in 2004 (Ayres, 2019; Madan, 2017; Jaishankar, 2017). As a matter of fact, this diplomatic association has never gone further than a “less-than-alliance formation” in which these four countries demonstrated common reticence to the rise of China’s international political and economic clout and to the consequent redefinition in the global balance of power, but they were not able to consolidate assertive policies in terms of security in the Indo-Pacific due to constraints imposed by domestic politics issues (Ayres, 2019; Jaishankar, 2017; O’Neil and West, 2019). As a result, Quad’s capacities were overestimated because an assertive engagement towards balancing diplomacy against China is avoided mainly by India, Japan, and Australia due to their commercial and economic ties with Beijing (Smith, 2018; Tellis 2014, p.29).

Some politicians from the United States have already demonstrated an interest in formalizing this alliance. In spite of their ideological convergence, Quad faces different harsh challenges. Quad is not a new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or even an Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance because: (a) it is a group without a legally binding treaty; therefore, its members are not officially committed to the principle of mutual defense among themselves (Kuo 2018, p.38). (b) The four members issue self-reported documents after the meetings, instead of doing it together (Panda, 2018). (c) The Quad has not an official schedule. (d) The meetings are not even formalized as a ministerial level (Tweed, Koutsoukis and Scott, 2018). (e) The name Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is not institutionalized. Leaders and bureaucracies from the four countries have not used a unique denomination to refer to this initiative. For example, the last National Security Strategy of the United States demonstrates the existence of a “quadrilateral cooperation” and Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade called it in 2017 as “Australia-India-Japan-United States consultations on the Indo-Pacific” (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; White House 2017, p.46). In fact, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was coined and widespread by scholars and journalists in order to allocate India to the already existent Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) between Australia, Japan and the United States (Lu 2018, p.75; Sharma 2010, p.278).

The Quad holds symbolic meaning. It reflects the increase in the number of diplomatic mechanisms and dialogues established by these four countries; that is, it is important to “examine the Quad less as a bloc of four countries and more as a matrix of trilateral and bilateral relationships” (Jaishankar, 2018).

The visit of the United States' Vice-President, Mike Pence to Japan resulted in the announcement of a massive funding policy for development, infrastructure projects and energy-related investments in the Indo-Pacific. The amount provided by Washington of US\$ 60 billion is definitively marking the end of the political rhetoric and the beginning of an evident strategic competition in the region in order to challenge the Chinese regional insertion. Japan and the United States, together, will invest US\$ 70 billion in the Indo-Pacific (Kawashima, 2018). In addition, in 2019, Japan will hold the rotating presidency of the G-20 Summit, an opportunity the Abe government must seize to reconfigure the international order (Nikkei Asian Review, 2018).

Likewise, Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne recently outlined that Canberra desires to improve its ties with India in order to reassure their mutual commitment to maintaining an order-based in the Indo-Pacific, which has implications for the future of the regional security architecture. (Bachhawat, 2019; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019; Lee, 2019). Australia government announced US\$ 25 million investment in South Asia Regional Connectivity Initiative and also supports New Delhi's involvement in its own backyard, the South Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019). In addition, both Australia and India see Indo-Pacific as a platform for cooperation and are unwilling to attach great importance to it, differently to what the United States and Japan have been trying to do. Given Quad's anti-China outlines, Delhi and Canberra are committed to downplaying difficult relations with Beijing (Bachhawat, 2019; Lee, 2019).

India aims to be a major state in the balance of Indo-Pacific. The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, met with Putin and Xi Jinping seeking to improve Russia-India-China relations, but this prospect also strengthened his rapprochement with Donald Trump and Shinzo Abe for the coalition of Japan-US-India strategy through the investment agreement between Japan and the USA (Department of State, 2018b). The Indian multi-alignment strategy priors the maintenance of political space in order to preserve its strategic autonomy. However, this is a policy that also misleads the potential of Indian foreign policy by creating a "deficit of confidence" in their relations (Hemmings, 2018). Narendra Modi has sought to clarify that his country understands that Quad is a dialogue mechanism and Indo-Pacific is a concept – not a private club (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Quad does not define Indo-Pacific and it is not an alliance. New Delhi's mistrust on the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative persists leading its bureaucracy to state that the Chinese infrastructure project must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in China's economic corridor in Pakistan that Delhi believes to be a direct challenge to India's sovereignty (Sibal, 2018).

In this context, the Quad demonstrates two aspects crucial to Brazil: (a) India, Japan, Australia, remain reticent with Chinese international influence and economic clout. The convergence with the United States in establishing mechanisms in order to facilitate their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific due to the fact that: (I) India uphold some grievances against China's presence in the South Asia and in the Indian Ocean and they still have outstanding border issues; (II) Japan, a historic rival of China, keeps a wary eye on Beijing's actions in the South China

Sea and its capacity to interfere in the regional order; and (III) Australia has traditionally avoided initiatives that run counter to its main economic partner, but now there is a strong internal debate on the political participation of foreigners. Canberra has introduced legal measures to curb foreign influence in the country, including additional restrictions on immigrant rights, and expanded budget allocations for intelligence and security agencies (Madan, 2017; O'Neil and Weis, 2019; Smith, 2018). (b) However, even the conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific varies according to each country's interpretation of its capabilities to deal with Beijing. That is, these countries avoid provoking an unfavorable response from China. As a result, if Brazil assumes a stronger position against China, it will be difficult to find partners in the region who adopt more assertive strategies. Brazil would approach Washington but would find uncertain results in Asia and Oceania.

### 3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Indo-Pacific has become the center of global geopolitics. The power shifts in this region spark consequences throughout the world. The soaring rivalry between Washington and Beijing implicates in commercial and diplomatic issues that concern Brazil. Therefore, it is expected that Brasília begins to develop new strategies and policies towards this region.

Brasília's new foreign policy would converge with the fears of Washington, Canberra, Tokyo and New Delhi in relation to the expansion of Chinese influence. Ernesto Araújo, the Foreign Minister of Brazil, has allegedly defended the approach of Brazil with "Christian nations" and countries ruled by nationalist governments. Australia and the United States now have leaders related to the religious and conservative public, Japan and India are ruled by nationalist parties.

Nevertheless, the strategy of a mere Brazilian approximation to the Quad is jeopardized by two main factors. The first factor is that China is Brazil's main trade partner. The country is a crucial consumer market to the Brazilian agribusiness, a sector that tends to be politically conservative, and that widely supported Bolsonaro's campaign during Brazil's 2018 elections. If Bolsonaro's anti-leftist and nationalist rhetoric continue to blame the Chinese investments of imperialism, it may seriously hamper a trade relation that is superavitary for Brazil, and, consequently, risks to lose the political support of the powerful agribusiness sector. The sector occupies 117 seats in the Brazilian Congress, representing roughly 20% of the total of seats (Zaia, 2018). It would constitute a very dangerous turnaround to a newly-elected government that intends to implement radical changes in the labor legislation and the pension system.

The second factor is that Brazil cannot count on the Quad members to confront China in the international arena. The group lacks institutionalization, its members do not share a unified vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific", what hinders the strategies of the concertation, and, above all, India and Australia share close trade and diplomatic relations with China, what makes them tone down their engagement to the Quad. Basically, Quad members agree that the rise of China is a threat to their interests, however, they are not sure if they want to openly confront it.



It is possible to conclude that Brazil will have to thoroughly assess the gains and losses of a more confrontational strategy towards China and at the same time realize that it will hardly have allies ready to back it. Bolsonaro and Araújo still have a long path in the process of building a sound Brazilian foreign policy for China and the Indo-Pacific, which pursues economic prosperity and, at the same time, guarantees the Brazilian national security.

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