

Brazil Between Global Recognition and Neutrality over the Russian War Against Ukraine

CLARISSA TABOSA*

*Institute of European Studies and International Relations,
Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University
in Bratislava, Slovakia*

Abstract: This contribution investigates what explains Brazil's neutrality narrative regarding the Russian war against Ukraine. Brazil's position can be seen as a consequence of the economic interests of Brazilian agrobusiness, but mainly due to its historical tradition of diplomatic neutrality. However, neutrality seems to clash with Brazil's self-conceptualization as being a relevant player at the international level, especially since the 2000s. I show how this identitarian clash has led to an attempt to move from "neutrality" to an "impartiality" discourse, and argue that Brazil might partially align with the West to meet core strategic foreign policy goals.

Keywords: Brazil, neutrality, Russia, Ukraine, war

Introduction

In Europe, the argument that the war against Ukraine is the fault of the West (Mearsheimer 2014; 2022) did not resonate among the core political elites and the vast majority of the population. However, in the largest Latin American (LA) country, Brazil, the scenario is somewhat more puzzling. Brazilian politics has been extremely polarised, especially in the context of the presidential elections that took place in October 2022. Nevertheless, one issue seems to unite both sides, Lula da Silva and Jair Bolsonaro: the War against Ukraine. For both, Russia is not entirely to blame for the war, Brazil should assume a neutral position, and the choice to isolate Russia is not a constructive solution to the conflict.

Bolsonaro argued that Brazil "won't take sides. We will continue to be neutral and help, where possible, the search for a solution" (in Bloomberg Línea 2022). Under his leadership, Brazil abstained from voting against Russia on several occasions at the United Nations (UN). Lula, still during the campaign, claimed that Zelensky should have negotiated more and "Putin should not have invaded Ukraine. But it's not just Putin who is guilty. The US and the EU are also guilty. What was the reason for the Ukraine invasion? NATO?"

**clarissa.tabosa@fses.uniba.sk*; ORCID: 0000-0002-5938-1894.

Then the US and Europe should have said: ‘Ukraine won’t join NATO’” (in Nugent 2022). His statement illustrates what Kazharski (2023) in his contribution points out as the legitimisation of Russian invasion based on IR realist reasoning.

This contribution aims to investigate what explains Brazil’s neutrality narrative in times when neutrality means support for Russia. Furthermore, I reflect on the implications of Brazil’s narratives following the election of Lula da Silva for Brazil and on how Brazil’s position might have a greater regional impact.

Competing Identities: Global Recognition vs. Diplomatic Neutrality Tradition

Since Bolsonaro took office in 2018, Brazilian diplomacy took a different path from what it has been historically taking. His first Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araújo, did not come from the high rank of Brazilian diplomacy, and never served as an ambassador. However, Araújo was a career diplomat who was openly ideologically aligned with Donald Trump¹ and Bolsonaro. When taking office, Araújo put together a team of less experienced professionals and delegated to them the function of formulating a FP restructuring plan (Leitão 2020). Eventually, the structure of the Brazilian foreign service and this ideological turn led to a Brazilian response to the war against Ukraine that is less responsible and less aligned with the international community, even if historically Brazil has favoured neutrality. Neutrality can be understood as an institution, as it provides a framework for rational discourse between aggressors and third-party states (Austin 1998).

There are two main explanations for Brazilian neutrality position. The first is the economic interest of a major interest group in Brazil, often referred to as the “beef coalition”, the Brazilian agrobusiness. According to Austin, states might use neutrality “to maintain or expand commerce with belligerents and other states during times of conflict” (Austin 1998, 39). Brazilian agrobusiness is highly dependent on Russia fertilisers. Russia supplies around 25% of the fertilisers necessary for food growth in Brazil (Carrança 2022). The agrobusiness fears that diplomatic decisions could affect fertiliser supply. Bolsonaro argued that adopting a position other than neutral would mean “severe damage to agriculture” and food supply (Bolsonaro in Teófilo 2022).

The second explanation for Brazil’s neutral position in the war against Ukraine is related to how Brazilian diplomacy has historically been built on the self-conceptualisation of its identity based on neutrality and impartiality (Lopes and Valente 2016). In the context of Brazil, neutrality is explained by a former career diplomat as being a situation in which a “state does not get involved in hostilities and chooses not to support any side (...) cor-

1 He published in 2017 an article entitled “Trump and the West” in which he praises Donald Trump for having “a vision of the West not based on capitalism and liberal democracy, but on the recovery of the symbolic past, history and culture of Western nations” (Araújo 2017). Araújo was also critical about the relevance of international organizations such as the UN.

responds to Brazil's position in the last 200 years" (Portela in Cavalcante 2022). The idea of neutrality is often sustained by referencing art. 4 of the 1988 constitution that outlines the guiding principles of Brazilian foreign policy, which includes pacific resolution of conflicts and promotion of peace.

However, during Lula's presidencies between 2003 and 2010, Brazil tried to (re)imagine its identity as an international player in which the country plays a central role in global affairs. Brazilian identity as a thriving player globally has been manifested in the reference to being "the country of the future" and a member of the BRICS bloc. The degree to which the BRICS bloc could give Brazil or other emerging powers the centrality in the international level they aspired to is questionable, and often considered "hyped", or exaggerated (Acharya 2014).

Constructivists in IR will point out that states act based on their identities and are particularly interested in explaining what factors lead to a rethinking of "one's idea of self and others" (Wendt 1992, 42). Constructivists will also claim that state decisions are also guided by "collective expectations about the appropriate behaviour for a given identity" (Jepperson et al. 1996). It is in this interplay between how Brazilian's identity has been shaped around the idea of neutrality and the expected behaviour of Brazil as a liberal emergent power that explains the country's position in relation to the war against Ukraine and how it could use the technique of, at least partially, "altercasting" (Wendt 1992) – the attempt to consciously change its neutrality identity – in this case.

Brazil's quest for global agency is not new and can be explained, for example, by looking at the place it has been aspiring to have within the United Nations system for decades. Since the 1990s, a central foreign policy objective of Brazil has been of ensuring that it gets a permanent seat at the UNSC (Brigido 2010). Lula expressed this ambition on several occasions in the past (Agência Estado 2007; Coelho 2009; Dietrich 2015). In 2007, the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Celso Amorim argued that with the coordination of the four countries aspiring a permanent seat that became known as the G-4 (Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan), the discussion on the reform left "the field of affirmations and discourse and begins to be a negotiation process" (Agência Estado 2007). This optimism was not translated into results, and the reform of the UNSC was not a top priority for the UN. On February 2022, however, it became clear that the UNSC cannot effectively exercise its mandate as the main organ responsible for the maintenance of peace and security without a reform. The discussion on the reform of the UNSC returned to the table – as it was stated by the American president, Joe Biden in his speech at the 77th session of the UN General Assembly.

During Bolsonaro's government, the idea of neutrality was discursively articulated in terms of the rejection of multilateralism and the downplaying of the role of international organizations and the principles of the liberal order, epitomized by Araújo's discourse in defence of "national sovereignty" over "the totalitarianism" of the international liberal

order (Araújo in Chrispim 2020). Brazilian quest for agency in the international stage was also set aside alongside with this rejection of multilateralism and focus on the nation.

Hence, since 2018, Brazilian diplomacy has been divided between what the presidency aims and what career diplomats working on the background aspire, which align more to the traditional positions of Brazilian diplomacy as outlined previously. Recently, a journalistic investigation pointed out the existence of “a clandestine network” that was created at the MFA to contain Bolsonarist foreign policy and whose objective was to preserve Brazilian credibility in the international scenario (Chade 2022).

The problem is that neutrality (either in more moderate terms, or more radical as under Bolsonaro’s government) clashes with the agency, that kept being sustained by career diplomats even during Bolsonaro’s government. Noticing this ambiguity between global agency goals and neutrality, and in an attempt to present a consistent discourse on Brazil’s position on the war against Ukraine, Bolsonaro’s second minister of foreign affairs, Carlos França, a career diplomat, tried to change the official discourse by saying that the position of Brazil on the war against Ukraine is *not* neutral, but it is an *equilibrium* position that he equated with *impartiality*. In an interview on February 28, he argued that

“Our position is one of equilibrium. It is not one of neutrality. I think that when the president [Jair Bolsonaro] spoke of neutrality, he was thinking of impartiality. I think our position is a position of equilibrium, a position dedicated to the search for dialogue and reconciliation. This is our strength.” (França in Klava 2022)

However, the outcome in terms of policy implication remains the same: Brazil is not choosing sides. Hence, it becomes difficult to reconcile the position of Brazil as a relevant player with its historical tradition of diplomatic neutrality. In other words, in the 21st century, major players in IR are expected to take sides and express straightforward positions; there is no place for neutrality in great (even in regional) power politics. Austin (1998, 39) also points out that “states that flaunt neutrality norms run the risk of losing status as law-abiding members of the international community, and must be prepared to upset the status quo.”

Back to the Future: Lula da Silva Election and Prospects for the Future

The election of Lula da Silva inevitably will mean a return to the narrative that Brazil is the country of the future and has what it takes to be recognized as a relevant player not only regionally, but also globally. Lula’s decision on who will lead the MFA together with the factors already mentioned in this analysis can give us indications of the direction Brazil could go in relation to the war against Ukraine. On December 9, Lula announced that the career diplomat Mauro Vieira with vast experience in LA, the US and the UN will be his Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Lula's appointment of Vieira for the MFA, someone who worked in Europe and understands the context of the war against Ukraine², and someone who served in the US and the UN, suggests there will be no clear antagonism to Western positions regarding the war against Ukraine coming from Brazil. Furthermore, during Lula's first two terms as president, the US - Brazil relationship was led by a form of "strategic dialogue" (Pecequillo 2010) in which there was constructive dialogue with the US, and Brazil served as an interlocutor between the US and LA, increasing, in this way, Brazil's agency at the global level. It is difficult to imagine a Brazil under the leadership of Lula that will not, at least partially, be committed to the norms and values of the liberal order to which Russia opposes, because not doing so would affect Brazil's strategic interests. Therefore, one might expect a Brazil in close cooperation with the U.S. and more aligned with the international community, epitomized by the UN, on matters regarding the war against Ukraine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, due to the clash between what Brazil aims to be, a relevant player at the global level, and neutrality, it could lead the country to take more clear positions regarding the war against Ukraine, regardless of its economic strategic objectives. Brazil will now have the difficult task of balancing its neutrality narrative and being the actor that it aspires to be at the global level under the leadership of President Lula and Minister Vieira.

Lula, although initially vocal about neutrality and echoing the "argument" that the war is the "West's fault", aiming to achieve Brazilian goals at the international level (such as more recognition, and even the possibility of a permanent seat at the UNSC³), has already been showing signs of adopting a more responsible approach. On February, he called the war a "war of Russia against Ukraine" right after meeting Joe Biden, while at the same opportunity, reminding the importance of including other countries to the UNSC to "achieve effective global governance" (Lula 2023).

Most importantly, how Brazilian mainstream narratives are framed matters for the overall LA context as such, since in the past Brazil has served as an interlocutor between the US and LA,⁴ and can act in the same way as an interlocutor between LA and the West regarding the war against Ukraine. By doing so, it would reiterate the narrative that Brazil has what it takes to become recognized as a key global player.

2 There are no publicly available reflections, speeches, interviews of Vieira on the war against Ukraine.

3 Three weeks after Biden's speech in support of a reform of the Council, for the first time since the War in Ukraine started, Brazil voted in favor of a resolution condemning the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory by Russia.

4 Volodymyr Zelensky (February 24, 2023) has also recently acknowledged this is the case when saying he hopes to meet Lula da Silva in person and that Lula can assist him "with a platform for him to communicate with Latin America".

References

- Agência Estado. 2007. “Lula tenta incluir Brasil em conselho da ONU.” *Globo*, June 7, 2007. Accessed December 7, 2022. <https://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Politica/0,,MUL48912-5601,00-LULA+TENTA+INCLUIR+BRASIL+EM+CONSELHO+DA+ONU.html>.
- Araújo, Ernesto. 2017. “Trump e o Ocidente.” *Cadernos de Política Exterior* 3 (6): 323–358.
- Austin, Daniel. 1998. “Realism, Institutions, and Neutrality: Constraining Conflict Through the Force of Norms Commonwealth.” *A Journal of Political Science* 9: 37–56.
- Acharya, Amitav. 2014. *The End of American World Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bloomberg Línea. 2022. “Bolsonaro sobre guerra na Ucrânia: Brasil será neutro e não há massacre.” *Grupo Suno*, February 28. Accessed December 1, 2022. <https://www.suno.com.br/noticias/bolsonaro-guerra-ucrania-brasil-sera-neutro-nao-ha-massacre-na-ucrania/>.
- Brigido, Eveline Vieira. 2010. “O Brasil e a reforma do Conselho de Segurança da ONU: Estratégias da diplomacia brasileira para a obtenção de um assento permanente”. Ph.D. diss., Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS).
- Carrança, Thais. 2022. “Guerra na Ucrânia: por que o Brasil depende tanto dos fertilizantes da Rússia?” *UOL*, March 3. Accessed December 2, 2022. <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/bbc/2022/03/03/por-que-o-brasil-depender-tanto-dos-fertilizantes-da-russia.htm>.
- Cavalcante, Igor. 2022. “Entenda por que o Brasil adota “neutralidade” em conflitos internacionais.” *Diário do Nordeste*, February 28. Accessed December 1, 2022. <https://diariodonordeste.verdesmares.com.br/pontopoder/entenda-por-que-o-brasil-adota-neutralidade-em-conflitos-internacionais-1.3198320>.
- Chade, Jamil. 2022. “Como diplomatas tentaram, de dentro do Itamaraty, conter atos de Bolsonaro.” *UOL*, December 7. Accessed December 7, 2022. <https://noticias.uol.com.br/colunas/jamil-chade/2022/12/07/como-diplomatas-sabotaram-bolsonaro-de-dentro-do-itamaraty.htm>.
- Chrispim, Marin. 2020. “Chanceler critica ONU e multilateralismo diante do Conselho de Segurança.” *Veja*, May 8, 2020. Accessed December 4, 2022. <https://veja.abril.com.br/mundo/chanceler-critica-onu-e-multilateralismo-diante-do-conselho-de-seguranca/>.
- Coelho, Luciana. 2009. “Lula volta a falar em cadeira no conselho da ONU.” *Folha de São Paulo*, October 5. Accessed December 2, 2022. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/brasil/fc0510200916.htm>.
- Dietrich, Jorge Felipe Alves. 2015. “O Brasil e a Campanha por uma Cadeira Permanente da ONU: Análise dos Discursos nos Governos de Fernando Henrique Cardoso e Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.” *Novas Fronteiras* 2 (1): 32–44.

- Jepperson, L. Ronald, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein. 1996. "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security." In *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, edited by Peter J. Katzenstein, 33-75. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kazharski, Aliaksei. 2023. "Do Ostriches Live in Central Europe? Normalizing the Russian Attack on Ukraine in the Visegrad Four." *Journal of Regional Security* 18 (1): 39–48, DOI: 10.5937/jrs18-43201.
- Klava, Nilso. 2022. "Ministro diz que posição do Brasil é 'de equilíbrio e não de neutralidade' em relação ao conflito na Ucrânia." *Globo News*, February 28. Accessed December 1, 2022. <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2022/02/28/ministro-diz-que-posicao-do-brasil-e-de-equilibrio-e-nao-de-neutralidade-em-relacao-ao-conflito-na-ucrania.ghtml>.
- Lopes, Dawisson Belém and Mario Schettino Valente. 2016. "A Construção Social dos Princípios Conformadores e das Normas Programáticas de Política Externa Brasileira na Constituição Federal de 1988." *Dados* 59 (4): 995–1054.
- Leitão, Matheus. 2020. "O jogo dos vários erros da política externa de Ernesto Araújo." *Veja*, June 22. Accessed December 2, 2022. <https://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/matheus-leitao/o-jogo-dos-varios-erros-da-politica-externa-de-ernesto-araujo/>.
- Lula, da Silva. 2023. "Após encontrar Biden, Lula diz que Brasil "volta ao cenário mundial" e que irá à África." *CNN Brazil*, February 11. Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tY3hRRkX6cE>.
- Nugent, Ciara. 2022. "Lula Talks to TIME About Ukraine, Bolsonaro, and Brazil's Fragile Democracy." *Time*, May 4. Accessed December 2, 2022. <https://time.com/6173232/lula-da-silva-transcript/>.
- Mearsheimer, John. 2014. "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs*, August 18. Accessed December 4, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.
- Mearsheimer, John. 2022. "Why the West is Partially Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis." *The Economist*, March 19. Accessed December 4, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>.
- Pecequillo, Cristina Soreanu. 2010. "A New Strategic Dialogue: Brazil-US relations in Lula's presidency (2003–2010)." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 53 (spe): 132–150.
- Teófilo, Sarah. 2022. "Bolsonaro diz que Brasil será neutro em relação a conflito na Ucrânia. R7." *R7*, February 27. Accessed December 1, 2022. <https://noticias.r7.com/brasil/bolsonaro-diz-que-brasil-sera-neutro-em-relacao-a-conflito-na-ucrania-06072022>.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46 (2): 391–425.

Zelensky, Volodymyr. 2023. "Zelensky responde ao SBT que convidou Lula para viajar à Ucrânia." *SBT News*, February 24. Accessed March 1, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMOyxAxf-JM>.