

## Between Dependence and Autonomy: Understanding the Power Dynamics in Brazil–China Relations

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### Introduction

Driven by China's increasing global influence and strongly encouraged by Lula da Silva's and Dilma Rousseff's administrations, China–Brazil relations deepened significantly in the 21st century. Besides massively strengthening their economic ties, the two countries explored new areas of cooperation, including energy, science and technology. In political terms, their partnership has become one of the main axes of the current evolving world order, especially due to their joint work within the BRICS and within international organisations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

An assessment of the main characteristics and drivers of the relationship tends to follow two disparate directions. On the one hand, the official discourse presents Brazil and China as equal partners whose relations are necessarily harmonious owing to the complementarity of their national economies and the shared interests in international relations. This narrative is used by both sides. Chinese authorities recurrently describe the relationship with developing countries, in general, and with Brazil, in particular, as 'win–win' cooperation.<sup>1</sup> For Brazilian authorities, as clearly indicated by former Foreign Minister, Celso Amorim, Brazil–China relations "are founded on the common perception that the two countries are natural partners, enjoying complementarity in economic terms and sharing a common vision about the world" (MRE-Brasil 2004). Several researchers concur with this view, namely, Shang (2003), Pomar (2004), Jiang (2009), Niu (2010), Jaguaribe (2011) and Tang (2013).

On the other hand, there are several approaches that characterise the bilateral relationship as highly unequal and asymmetrical. According to this view, Brazil is greatly dependent on China and, while Beijing has clear goals within this relationship, Brasilia lacks a strategy in this regard (Acioly et al. 2011, 16; Cunha 2011, 26; Spektor 2011; 2015). Hence, the perception is that Brazil is necessarily subordinated to China's will and control, being unable to affect the outcomes of the bilateral relationship. For some, this asymmetry indicates that the relationship between Brazil and China has become neocolonial (Fonseca in Pomfret 2010).

However, each of these disparate approaches can only partially capture the nature of this relationship which, due to the considerable amplification of exchanges, has become not only more intense, but also more complex. This means that what is missing is a more nuanced, systematic and rigorous understanding of the power dynamics in China–Brazil relations in the 21st century. In this sense, this article seeks to fill this gap by examining in a sustained way the various expressions of power in the relationship on three different levels: bilateral, regional and global. By doing this, the article aims to contribute to a better understanding of how outcomes in the bilateral relationship were produced and how actors were differentially enabled and constrained in this context.

### Analytical framework: the concept of power

Power is one of the most debated and contested concepts in the social sciences. The literature is, therefore, rich in definitions. The most recurrent one treats power as the ability of one state to use its resources to get another state to do what it otherwise would not do.

<sup>1</sup> The government of China presented the main guidelines for its policy towards developing countries in different policy papers. In 2006, the

government issued the 'China's African Policy Paper' and in 2008 it published 'China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean'.

However, this definition focuses solely on material resources and is essentially relational (one's power over another). Therefore, in the article I rely on the conceptualisation of power developed by Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, which considers in addition the way structures and processes constrain and enable actors' actions. According to these American scholars, "power is the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their own circumstances and fate" (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 3).

In order to better understand the mechanisms of power, it is necessary to break down the definition into its main components. A power relationship implies, first of all, the existence of a purposeful agent that seeks to determine (choose/decide about) its fate. Here fate implies an outcome, which may be individual or collective. When it comes to groups, the collective bidding decision (purposeful action) is about the allocation of values to society (welfare, security, among others), that is, who gets what, when, how. The crucial element of a power relationship is the ability (room/autonomy) of the actor to decide or influence the decision regarding the outcome. This ability is determined by the actor's own resources (ideas, institutions, initiative, information, capital) or by the structures that the actor is part of, which may be material or ideational. These structures regulate who makes and should make the decisions. In the next section, I apply this conceptual framework in order to understand in what respects Brazil and China were able to determine their fate and circumstances within the bilateral relationship, and how that ability was limited or enhanced through social relations with one another or with others. This assessment will shed light on the role of power in Brazil–China relations.

### **Power dynamics in Brazil–China relations**

Brazil and China stand in very different positions when it comes to their economic, military and political capacities. Being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UN/SC), a nuclear power and the second largest economy in the world, China's influence is undoubtedly greater than Brazil's. This power discrepancy is naturally reflected in the economic relations between the two countries. While China is currently Brazil's top trading partner, the Brazilian market is only the eighth most important for China (International Trade Center n.d). Furthermore, the terms of trade are detrimental to Brazil since it mainly exports commodities

while importing manufactured goods (Frischtak and Soares 2013, 30). Given the differences in size and structure between the two economies, the risk that this type of trade deepens and forces a regressive specialisation on Brazil's economy is high. On the bright side, Brazil has consecutively benefited from large trade surpluses with China and, in specific sectors such as poultry, soybeans and iron ore, the country is one of China's most important suppliers, accounting respectively for 75%, 49% and 20% of the Asian country's imports in 2015 (International Trade Center n.d.).

Thus, while the two countries are economically interdependent, they are visibly asymmetric in their capacities. How does this translate to the exercise of power and the ability to decide about outcomes in the bilateral relationship? Firstly, an analysis of Brazil–China relations shows that, when strong disagreements between the two countries arose, Brazil's ability to influence the final result was limited (Cardoso 2015). The exception to this was the dispute over China's market economy status. Here, despite Beijing's constant pressure, Brasilia has avoided granting this status to China's economy. For China, this is an essential issue since Brazil's acceptance could be an incentive for other countries in South America to behave similarly.<sup>2</sup> However, given Brasilia's reluctance in this matter, this has become a point of friction in the bilateral relationship (Cardoso 2013, 46).

Secondly, despite the power asymmetry, there were several instances in which Brazil was able to include topics in the bilateral agenda and sometimes even lead it. This means that China's overwhelming capacities did not automatically translate to a veto power. In fact, some of the major breakthroughs in terms of political cooperation were initiated by Brazil, namely, the formation of the commercial G20 within the WTO in 2003 (Narlikar and Tussie 2004),<sup>3</sup> the creation of the China–Brazil High-Level Coordination and Cooperation Committee (COSBAN) in 2004 (Biato Junior 2010), and the organisation of the talks in 2006 which would lead, three years later, to the formal launch of the BRICs initiative (Amorim 2016). There are two factors driving Brazil's proactive role within the bilateral relationship. First, as the junior partner, Brazil has had to make more effort in deepening the relationship. Second, owing to its traditional risk aversion in international relations, China has been careful not to initiate processes that could strongly upset its relations with the USA.

Beyond the bilateral level, power dynamics in Brazil–China

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed description of the dispute between China and Brazil regarding the market economy status, see Cardoso, Daniel. "China-Brazil: A Strategic Partnership in an Evolving World Order." *East Asia* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 35–51.

<sup>3</sup> This coalition of developing countries led by Brazil and India was formed during the second ministerial conference of the Doha Trade-Negotiation Round, which took place in 2003.

relations also played out at the regional and global levels. Here it is important to take into consideration the role of an important external actor, the USA. This triangle China–Brazil–USA is essential to understand the changes in power configurations both in Latin America and in the international system. Despite Chinese leaders’ continuing reassurances that their interests in “America’s backyard” (Wu 2009, 3) were purely economic, the fact that China became an important partner for Brazil had clear political effects. First, by offering an alternative, China made it possible for Brazil to reduce its exposure to and dependence on the USA in terms of funding and technology. For example, Chinese investment was the key to allowing Brazilian authorities to move forward with development strategies in the oil sector that had, from the outset, been opposed by US administrations and companies (US Consulate in Rio de Janeiro 2009).

Second, growing ties with China offered Brazil the possibility to actively counter US influence, not only in the region, but also in international organisations (Armony and Strauss 2012, 7). Regionally, empowered by growing ties with China, Brazil and other Latin American countries were able to strongly develop their mutual institutional ties, paving the way for the establishment of institutions that excluded the USA, such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUL). In global terms, cooperation between China and Brazil has been an essential element of the growing contestation by emerging powers of American hegemony and the Western-led global order consisting of the international institutions created after World War II such as the United Nations (UN), GATT/WTO, and IMF/World Bank. Emerging powers criticise the way these organisations favour developed countries at the expense of other countries, especially when it comes to voting rules and leadership choice (Stuenkel 2013). Besides criticising the mechanisms of these organisations, these countries have created their own organisations to join efforts at the international stage, the most important ones being the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) and the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank).

## Conclusion

This brief analysis of the power dynamics in China–Brazil relations contributed to consolidating an understanding of the relationship’s nature on three different levels. On the bilateral level, the analysis showed that despite China’s overwhelming material capacities, Brazilian authorities were able to resist some of Beijing’s impositions and, on several occasions, take the initiative in

introducing issues in the bilateral agenda and even leading it. This means that Brazilian authorities also had the room to influence outcomes within the bilateral relationship, dismissing the idea that the country was entirely subordinated to China’s will.

On the regional and global levels, the analysis revealed that the intensification of the relationship with China offered Brazil the opportunity to counter US influence, therefore contributing to the country’s empowerment both at the regional and global levels. However, this also meant that Brazil became more dependent on China’s backing, especially in terms of funding. To strike the right balance between autonomy and dependence is therefore the major challenge facing Brazilian and Chinese authorities in the years to come.

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