Conceptualizing Autonomy in Latin American Foreign Policy: Case Study of Brazil under the PT government (2003-2016)

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to conceptualize the meaning of autonomy as a practice of foreign policy. It firstly considers the historical development of this purely Latin American contribution to the theories of international relations, and posteriorly offers specific theoretical framework of autonomy that combines perspectives of realism, interdependency and structuralism. By considering the problematic of international insertion of peripheral countries, the autonomous behavior of Brazil during the Workers Party government (2003-2016) is analyzed as a specific case study. The behavior of distinct variables identified in the theoretical framework is offered as an explanation for changing degrees of autonomy exercised by Brazil during the period considered. Towards the end of the article, impediments that Brazil encounters on its path towards becoming a world power are put into perspective, concluding how this country, for depending on too many factors that are outside of its control, is only a pendulum power.

Keywords: autonomy, Brazil, dependency, foreign policy, Partido dos Trabalhadores
Introduction

The concept of autonomy, just like many other concepts developed and used in the studies of international relations (IR), is characterized by wide range of possible interpretations. Thus historically, but even more so geographically, it has been used in various forms. Considering the development of Westphalian system of sovereign states, autonomy essentially implied the impossibility of foreign forces to exert any type of authority inside the limits of a sovereign state (Krasner 1999). However, and due to the mere fact that historically very few states have enjoyed something that could be called total domestic autonomy, many authors would still argue that Westphalian sovereignty has always been a myth. It should be clear, and especially so if observed from the perspective of the Third World, that certain states are more sovereign than others.

In a nutshell, for Latin American academics, autonomy is a notion that refers to the conduct of foreign policy free from constraints imposed by more powerful countries. As a result of historical reality (filled with obstacles with regards to autonomist insertion in the international arena), and not simply as a fruit of academic speculation, autonomy for these states became an essential concept in the circles of theories of international relations.

The debate in academic circles is never ending. Besides Latin-American academics, who are usually the ones to underline the impossibility of reaching consensus in the IR discipline, some notable academics coming from the ‘North’ have also called for attention when dealing with “concepts that are essentially contestable because they have political implications” (Brown & Arnley 2005: 11). In this work, we assert that the study of IR not only needs, but also requires multi-level analysis, which incorporates different approaches by taking into account various aspects of the functioning of our global society. Thus, it is indispensable to consider, beside political perspectives, also those of economics and other social sciences in order to get a more comprehensive interpretation.

Consequently, this paper aims to contribute to the mentioned ongoing debate. More specifically, it aims to create a new theoretical framework for assessing autonomy, which could possibly be applied to other countries whose position is vaguely identifiable in the international system. Besides, the study offers a distinct formulation of the concept of autonomy, avoiding absolutist views and instead it considers it as a question of degree. Lastly, the work is a valuable attempt to analyze a truly Latin American issue through European lenses, using theories developed in the southern part of Americas.

Furthermore, this work concentrates on specific case study – that of Brazil during the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) government. The research questions is the following: Which factors in particular have strongly influenced the varying levels of Brazil’s autonomy during PT
government and how? Likewise, the article infers upon the ongoing intrigue by answering what kind of power is Brazil.

Finally, the work consists of five sections. The first part explains the historical debates developed around the concept of autonomy. Second part exposes our own theoretical framework for autonomous action in the international arena, which is constructed by combining the perspectives of realism, interdependency and structuralism. In third part the methodology of investigation is explained. In fourth section the specific case study of Brazil under the PT government is analyzed. The article ends by offering certain conclusions around the levels of autonomy enjoyed during the PT rule, it answers what kind of power is Brazil, and it offers some recommendations for posterior research.

**Literature Review**

The notion that autonomy and its practice is analyzed through different lenses depending on the background of academics analyzing the international system can be clearly understood by juxtaposing the predominant realist vision on autonomy with the Latin American one. The kind of logic that stems from works of Hans J. Morgenthau (1986) and is also clearly projected in other neorealist works like that of Waltz (1979) represents views predominant in powerful countries. Thus, realists view the system as a structure dominated by anarchy. In this system, autonomy is a question only pertinent to great powers and the most powerful, as they are considered as the only ones that possess the autonomist capacity (Waltz 1979).

On the other hand, pioneering works of Latin American academics on autonomy were closely related to problems that were historically plaguing the region—specifically that of economic (under) development. The ECLAC (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and Caribbean) circles based their theories on structural perspective, sustaining how characteristics of the international system were, to a great extent, determinants of the external behavior of the region. According to this current, peripheral countries faced restricted options in terms of international insertion and foreign policy, being very vulnerable and easily absorbable by the centers that control the dynamics of the system (Prebisch 1949). In this way, Latin-American structuralism, even though initially intended to study Latin American economies, was eventually extended to deal with questions of insertion of these economies in the world system, and is thus related to problematic of autonomy and dependency.

Second major development in Latin American thought concerning autonomy was made by the so called “dependency school”. In their book “Dependency and Development in Latin America”, Cardoso and Faletto (1969) concentrated on the way of integration of national
economies into the international markets, concluding how “dependency is not simply an exploitation and coaction, but there exists a community of interests between the dominant local and external groups” (Bernal-Meza 2005: 95). In this sense, these authors were the first to consider interconnection between the internal and external factors of dependency (or lack of autonomy).

Next in line, Juan Carlos Puig (1984) and Helio Jaguaribe (1985), while being largely influenced by the North-American perspectives, created theories that fit into the realist world-view of IR. Here, ideas of a zero-sum game in international politics, questions of power dispute, and stratification of international system depending on power capacities became essential for their interpretations. Nevertheless, they differed from realists in that they rejected the notion that asserts how international system is dominated by anarchy. Instead, these authors claimed that there exists a well-established international hierarchy of vertical order. Besides, unlike North American realists, both Jaguaribe and Puig understood autonomy as a variable changing in time and modifiable - thus relevant for national concerns of any country, and not only of the most powerful. Additionally, these authors are also credited for developing concepts of autonomist practice, national viability, international permissibility and technical-business autonomy.

Furthermore, Fernando Cepada (1986), by mostly concentrating on the experience of Venezuela, perceived how the root of autonomy can be found in specific material attributes. This author declared that “possibilities of autonomy surge with possibilities of support” (Cepeda 1986: 77). Thus, Cepada noticed a correlation between economics and international politics, declaring how the economic base is the main factor that determines whether aspiration for autonomy in foreign policy will remain only theoretical or would be effectively consolidated.

Nevertheless, at the beginnings of the 1990s new circumstances marked by the end of the Cold War, increasing globalization, and novelties of democratization and integration in the Southern Cone, resulted in revaluation of the concept of autonomy. Consequently, a concept of relational autonomy gained relevance. Essentially, it asserted how being autonomous and being dependent stopped presenting two contradictory notions because in an ever more interconnected world states could never be completely free from the influence of others (Russell and Tokatlian 2002).

At the same time and especially encouraged by the changing international climate, some even more derogative visions of autonomy emerged. According to adherents of peripheral realism (Escude, 1992), autonomy stopped being considered as the liberty of action. Here, according to Escude the liberty of action of almost any medium state is exorbitant, even reaching the limit of self-destruction, and as such it does not serve as a definition of autonomy. This current of thought encouraged thorough considerations of costs and benefits of any action undertaken in the
international arena, and essentially recommended strategy of bandwagoning (with the United States (US)) as the best one to pursue at the time.

Nevertheless, despite mentioned challenges, more traditional views of autonomy still offered resistance, principally by undergoing certain degree of remodeling. Most importantly, Manuel Carillo Volcan (1999) argued that despite living in an interdependent world there are very few cases where interdependency is symmetrical, meaning that living in an interdependent world does not mean the same for every country. For Volcan, “autonomy in relation of interdependency is restricted by interaction, in which the capacity of each player to adapt itself to the situation in which interdependency affects it is proportional to autonomy it possesses” (Carrillo Volcan 1999: 16).

Most recently, Bernal-Meza takes a systemic view of autonomic possibilities of action. Being influenced by world-system theorists like Wallerstein, but also by Latin-American authors like Puig, Bernal-Meza (2005) notes how human groups always enjoy a space – extended or limited – inside of which they develop. “They operate, it is clear, inside of a context – both internal and external, material and sociological – from which they derive various limitations for their actions and the state is not an exception” (Puig 1987: 31). Due to the fact that most Latin American countries cannot develop as an independent nodes of the system by themselves, works of this author are specifically concentrated around the question of regional integration. Thus, Meza notes how “the best road to overcome underdevelopment and to climb the systemic stratification is integration, not the individualistic alternative” (Bernal-Meza 2013: 46). Likewise, and by following similar line of thought, Miryam Colacrai (2009: 383) coins the notion of “regional autonomy”.

**Theoretical Framework**

Essentially, the possibility of practicing a desired action is directly conditioned by the degree of autonomy, which has to be exercised inside of the system characterized by high levels of interdependency. However, for being characterized by power asymmetries, interdependence does not imply the absence of dependence, but rather relations of power. The overarching system inside of which countries operate, and seek fulfillment of their national goals, like development or autonomy, is predominantly established and shaped by the economic relations among the states. Basically, no nation has developed independently of the context of the world market (Wallerstein 2000). Since the system is strongly influenced by economic aspects, autonomy cannot be only a question of will, but it rather also has to be a question of ability. The only real autonomous action, even if strongly determined by political will, must be sustained by material support, because it will be of short life if there are no resources to back it up.
This article considers autonomy as a property and desire of any and every country, which differs from the notion that sees autonomy as something that countries either possess or not. In our point of view, autonomy is a question of degree. Therefore, we should not ask whether a particular country possesses autonomy or not, but rather by how much of autonomy it disposes with. In sum, we propose six distinct variables that interact with each other, and establish possibilities and actual levels of autonomy for different countries.

Firstly, base factors are considered necessary to understand country’s position in the system in terms of geography, history, culture, international values, military strength, population size, and resource wealth. Essentially, base factors determine a character of country’s involvement in the international community and set the range of possible pathways it can undertake in its international behavior. Besides, they also influence creation of specific ideas or world-views that determine country’s vision of the system and its place in it.

Next variable is the international system. It is considered to be an independent variable, out of control for many countries. Considered a big abstract interpretation, it represents the order of the day in the world and is influenced by various factors. Essentially, it sets an external framework that establishes certain conditions of international permissibility for any country (Jaguaribe 1985). Even if it does not act directly upon the states, it marks limitations and possibilities of actions. Thus, leaders of various countries cannot avoid taking into account systemic options when evaluating possibilities of external and internal action. As the system is composed of various countries, some will exercise more and some no control over the system. In this sense, big powers of each historical period are those that matter the most. These “repartidores supremos” (supreme distributors) or even some “repartidores regionales” (regional distributors) –

Diagram 1.
for their central positions in the functioning of international system - impose to a great extent options of potency or dependency on the world or regional scale (Puig 1984: 75).

Moving from external to internal factors we firstly consider national elites. Here, it is important to understand how groups that integrate the most-inner circles of national decision-making (largely those at the top of the national power pyramid) define the national interest, and thus also place their views into the foreign policy. As such, the concept of national interest results from the struggle of various partial interests. It is in these circles, whether concentrated or dispersed in power, where Puig’s autonomic practice can effectively be constructed. Consequently, the lack of autonomist practice, or acceptance of dependency, is usually not imposed in a coercive form to a particular state, but has to be assumed by the local political elites (Jaguaribe 1985).

Moreover, the technological-business autonomy is the one that sets the material bases of autonomy in our world. Material support is indispensable for continuous exercise of autonomy. Even though economy was usually considered as low politics in international relations, British economist Ralph Hawtrey demonstrated in his work “Economic Aspect of Sovereignty” (1952) how “the relationship of economic affairs and national security, at least over long term, is reciprocal, as the unequal distribution of economic gains will certainly lead to change in the international balance of economic and military power, and will thus inevitably affect national security” (Gilipin 2001: 80). In this sense, countries that simply react to changes stimulated from other geographic areas do not possess this technological-business autonomy, and thus turn more dependent on the poles of dynamic expansion. Essentially, autonomy of business-technological type fulfills the requirements of executive character, that are of functional order and that can be influenced and changed by the effort of internal factors (Jaguaribe 1985).

Additionally, diversifiers of dependency refer to factors that allow concentration or diversification of both economic and political relations with few or many poles in the system. The fewer international connections a specific country has, the fewer options it possesses to act in the international arena, making itself more dependent on certain global poles of power.

Likewise, among multipliers of autonomy three are essential, and these are regional integration, national social cohesion, and potency of soft power in particular historical era. With respect to question of regional integration, the basic notion of multiplying autonomy is concentrated on questions of increasing regional polarization in the world (Puntigliano 2013; Bernal-Meza & Masera 2008), on economic benefits of integration (Balassa, 1980), and on political benefits of integration (Bernal-Meza 2000; Jaguaribe 1985; Puig 1984; Gilipin 2001). Also, soft power acts (Nye 2004) as a multiplier as it allows the country to gain higher importance in the international arena due to the fact that so many want to mirror its behavior, or simply want to
follow its lead. Finally, high levels of social cohesion act as multiplier of the efficiency of resources. Societies of northern Europe, like Finland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway are considered to be the archetypes of successful social cohesion, and their international presence is much more significant and influential that the base factors of these countries would suggest.

Methodology and Data Collection

1) Qualitative research: We used the available secondary sources (specific publications, journal articles, books) in order to understand the state of the question, construct a theoretical framework and through induction and analogy reach conclusions about the questions posed in this work.

2) Empirical Research: We will use internationally available data (World Bank, Latinobarometro, Trademap, CEPAL, OECD, CIA) in order to assess the behavior of specific variables, such as trade flows, production specialization, poverty, education etc.

3) Analysis of news media and political discourse: We looked at news stories (Mercopress, BBC Mundo, Pagina 12, El Mostrador, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, The Economist, Al Jazeera, El Pais) in order to get necessary information that provides context to be analyzed.

Analysis of a case study: Brazil during PT

Brazil’s possibilities of action in the international arena are directly related to what we denominate as base factors. Its enormous size, large population, wealth of natural resources, and volume of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) indisputably place it on the map of potential global powers. However, its particular historical development, paired with restrictions that geography imposes in the Inter-American system, has significantly affected the possibilities of its international behavior. Nevertheless, Brazil still stands as the only country in the Western Hemisphere fulfilling conditions to act as rival to United States- the only hegemon in the region and undisputed world superpower (Bandeira 2011). Despite its unfulfilled dreams of greatness, Brazil, conscious of its size and potential, has historically considered itself a contender to position of global power, and has been governed by a prophetic sense with regards to its future (Mejia, 2012). Military has never been a central focus of Brazil, probably due to its relatively pacified neighborhood. Rather, its diplomacy has focused on pacific discourse and juridicism, making itself grotian (Lafer 2000). Still, economic problems of development and poverty, its historical obstacles, strongly shaped its perceptions of the international system and the role it aspired to assume in it, making autonomy and development into central historical concerns of its foreign policy.
During large part of PT’s time in power, the international system was characterized by high levels of international permissibility. Here, there are three central factors to take in consideration when talking about permissibility of the international system. First one came in form of political crisis - the illegality of the US-led invasion of Iraq led to growing dissatisfaction with the country’s unilateralism, making its global leadership less attractive to other states. Secondly, the growing importance of emerging economies - more specifically of Asia and most specifically of China – came to offer unprecedented opportunities for many countries, especially in form of material attributes of autonomy. Lastly, triumph of leftist governments in South America, historically more reluctant to follow unquestionably Washington’s lead, further consolidated opposition to ‘Washington Consensus’ in the region. All these factors made previously established balances of power more unstable and uncertain, creating the perception that the heyday of US hegemony is over. Taking Huntington’s term (1999), the new order in the international arena came to be defined as uni-multipolar, implying an atmosphere more favorable to multi-polarity. In South American region especially, as the possibilities of US leadership became restrained, more space was opened up for Brazil.

Moreover, the election of PT and its arrival to power could not be seen as neutral factor in terms of Brazil’s foreign policy. PT got to power mainly thanks to powerful voter’s base found among working class, poorer sectors of Brazilian interior, and some left leaning middle classes (Llana 2008). Also, it was the first party in the history of Brazil to win elections thanks to large grassroots support base. This has, without a doubt, played an important role in defining world-views and ideas about the international system in which Brazil was inserting itself. The unprecedented victory of the ‘underdog’ in Brazilian politics made the democratization of international relations a defining point of Brazil’s insertion in the world. More precisely, the internal process of democratization was transposed in the international arena where Brazil came to demand a more open international system. Effectively, PT’s national elites, taking advantage of systemic conditions of high international permissibility, took autonomous stance and more independent action in the international arena.

Furthermore, taking advantage of the already mentioned new currents, PT national elites started diversifying its economic and political relations, thus decreasing Brazil’s dependence and vulnerability with regard to its international connections (see graphs no.1 and no.2). On the political level, PT made a move of soft distancing from the United States and the West in general, undertaking an important shift in foreign policy orientation with regard to previous administrations. With this in mind, Brazil started looking towards the ‘Third World’ and the emerging powers.
Rapprochement with the first was important for the assertion of Brazil’s role as the leading spokesman of the global South, giving it a more developmentalist outlook. Additionally, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), taking the role of “executive committee of emerging markets” (Turzi 2011: 102) served as a possible leverage that would eventually make Brazil into a recognized international actor and would allow it to enter the exclusive club of the rule makers that shape the international order. From the economic perspective, the diversification of trade partners led to a new economic geography with emphasis placed on other developing countries (see graphs no.1 and no.2). The greatest change here was the impact produced by China’s economic growth. Initially an insignificant commercial partner of the Southern Giant, China
became the largest exporting market for Brazil’s products by 2009, replacing more than a century long dominance of the United States (TradeMap 2016). The economic importance of other regions, especially increasing exchanges with Latin America in general, and with Argentina in particular, were unprecedented in the history of Brazil. As Amorim (2010) noted, the fact that Brazilian exports no longer hinged primarily on the performance of global economic centers implied that the country was less exposed to harmful impact of the financial crisis of 2008-2009.

However, the other effect created by these changes was excessive reliance on China. During the period considered, growth of Chinese economy became a defining factor impacting Brazil’s economic performance. Coming as undesired side effect, new trade relations eventually seem to have led to re-primarization of Brazilian economy (see graph no.3). In this sense, Brazil’s hailed diversification success during the PT turned rather questionable.

Additionally, the incredible compatibility of foreign policies in the region during the PT’s administration served as an important multiplier of Brazilian autonomy in the world. This new policy, based on the “recuperation of Latin identity of Brazil”, meant, even if only for a limited time, a significant expansion of its respective area of international permissibility. PT undertook a project of ‘region construction’, where it specifically imagined and consequently made South America into its priority political area. In this sense, Mercosur (Southern Common Market) would acquire a significance of strategic alliance, strengthening negotiating position and multiplying sources of autonomous action vis-à-vis the United States (Bandeira 2011). Such regional
coordination made its most significant achievement by making Mercosur dividing line of Inter-American System, and at the same time serving as negotiating platform which finally impeded the creation of FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), leading instead to the so-called “Buenos Aires Consensus”. In this sense, creation of UNSUR (Union of South American Nations) in 2008 would represent the highest achievement of South American regional project.

Unfortunately for PT, despite various important accomplishments, regional project was very loosely institutionalized and as such did not have possibilities for long-term success. As Dabene (2009) well perceived, regional integration in South America eventually evolved into opportunities for presidential summity. As such, it could only provide forums for ad-hoc crisis resolution or interpersonal negotiations, but would not turn into regime that governs interstate relations or binds the actions of their member states (Dabene 2009). In this sense, even Mercosur, a central reference for any kind of region building was left in a less coherent and effective state than it was in the 1990s. This “consensus regionalism” was overly dependent on fully harmonious symbiosis of regional governments and thus unstable. And even if PT was fortunate enough to coexist with regional partners sympathetic to its world-views, the process would be reverted once this condition changed.

Besides regional integration, another important multiplier of Brazil’s autonomy was its increasing soft power. Thanks to the newfound economic growth and incredible international activism of PT administration, all coupled with the charisma of President Lula, Brazil of PT exercised such ‘attractiveness of model’, further expanding its possibilities of autonomous action. Here, decreasing prestige of the US also played an important role, as it opened up more space for Brazil in the Americas and the world, where international action of PT would come to embody desires of international ethical responsibility. In this sense, its successful internal social and political dynamics provided it with greater international credibility, legitimacy and moral supremacy, allowing it to speak with more authority abroad.

Besides, and not less importantly, the apparent success of the Brazilian model to solve social problems and put economic issues in order was so powerful in its image that it established itself as the viable alternative to the Chilean model – which went unchallenged for decades in the region. In this sense, the concept of BRICS served as a strong brand and sort of a trademark that only further pumped the image of Brazil in the world, as it evoked ideas of rising change, magnitude, future and zeitgeist of global restructuring (Turzi 2011). The approval of Brazil’s bid to host both the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics was a clear affirmation of this positive perception of Brazil in the world at that specific moment. Likewise, creation of G20 (Group of 20), G4 (Group of 4), IBSA (India Brazil South Africa), CSN (South American...
Community of Nations), UNASUR or CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) are direct outcomes of this foreign policy of prestige, which resulted in Brazil’s international positioning congruent with its historical aspirations. However, as soft power is only soft, meaning that it depends excessively on perceptions rather than concrete facts, Brazil would soon discover limits of foreign policy built on soft power. One can only refer to the front page of Economist (see below) to see the boom and bust of Brazilian soft power.

In the meantime, social cohesion, a historical issue for country that in 1888 became the last in the Americas to abolish slavery, was not significantly improved during the PT rule. Even though PT rhetoric was emphasizing a more united Brazil, and was likewise coupled with cash transfer programs and more generally supported by economic growth, it is rather difficult to find evidence of improved institutional trust and feelings of belonging (Latinobarometro 2016). Moreover, recently intensified political dynamics in the country have been marked by increasing social polarization, and by the existence of various ‘societies’ inside of its national borders, where people do not feel like they share one common project or belong to the same reality. All these problems, persistent through times, would only intensify - as they did historically - with the arrival of economic, political and social crisis.

Picture 1. Two Front Pages of The Economist.


Furthermore, when thinking about continuity versus change in foreign policy the article has underlined that control of technology and economic processes related to development of Brazil has been the most continuous factor in policy of any government. Nevertheless, there have
been some specificities particular to the rule of PT. Investment in R&D (Research and Development) has been on the increase during PT era, contributing additional 31.3 billion USD (US Dollars) to the budget in 2012 with respect to one in 2003 (World Bank 2016). However, even with this sum Brazil still lags significantly behind other advanced economies and China. Another major factors essential for the exercise of technological-business autonomy – those of education and human capital (PISA results) - have not been significantly altered (OECD 2014). Generally speaking, population of Brazil is still very uneducated, a finding supported by the studies conducted by OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) and PISA (Program for International Student Assessment). Fortunately for PT, the booming of country’s economy, which reached record levels of exports, provided enough financial support for the exercise of autonomy during the big part of PT’s mandate.

The real problems for the PT came when the tectonic plates of international system moved once again. First and foremost, the slowdown of Chinese economy, whose growth rates reached lowest levels in decades, represented a detrimental blow to the Southern Giant. Further collapse of Brazilian economy led to low or inexistente growth rates, measuring GDP decline of 3.85 percent in 2015 (World Bank 2016). The resulting loss of material support for autonomy was crucial for the unfolding scenario, and the economic crisis eventually led to the political one. It was at this time that Brazil’s model, famed for a whole decade, turned into ashes. Consequently, affected by the corruption scandal in Petrobras – the archetype of Brazilian rise, and by downgrading of Brazil’s debt to junk status, the image of Brazil in the world abruptly shattered into pieces and has caused a demise of its soft power. It was at this moment that limits of autonomy without technological-business bases became obvious. This signaled the end of yet another exteriorly-led growth cycle in Brazil. In addition, being the models of growth of neighboring countries even less technologically autonomous, Chinese cough led to Latin American pneumonia, shifting the governments in power, and creating a regional atmosphere very suspicious of the PT leadership, being the arrival of Macri the signal of change. This has in effect led to unraveling of weaknesses of “consensus regionalism” in South America and has once again revealed the inexistence of solid regional integration. Similarly, rising economic issues in the region further impaired Brazilian economic health. At the same time, third systemic effect occurred - the once again changing image of the US in the world. Here, moderate diplomatic style brought about by the President Obama, coupled with the economic recovery from Great Recession, solidified the US as a credible global leader. Thus, as the attractiveness of the ‘Brazilian model’ was waning, governments of the region considered their first best alternative - Washington. In this newly created scenario, countries of the region seemed eager to once again play the well-known bandwagoning strategy. Recent
advancement of the Pacific Alliance (AP) and Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), Uruguay’s desire to sign a FTA (Free Trade Agreement) with the US, Cuba’s exit from the Brazilian orbit, and the declining importance of Mercosur all played into this new narrative of shifting relations in the Western hemisphere. In such scenario, historically unresolved issues of social cohesion and the lack of autonomous economic development resurfaced again, and continued to act as an impediment for international projections of Brazil. These circumstances were too much to handle for the now changed PT national elites, which without Lula lost a big part of their appeal and became just one of the many untrustworthy political elites.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

The main purpose of this work was to grasp better the problems of international insertion of Brazil during two PT governments, or more generally, to address the exercise of autonomy of a peripheral country in the international arena. By constructing a theoretical framework, the article aspired to expose and underline various factors that we consider indispensable for understanding various degrees of autonomy that this country may exercise at any point in time.

The main concept this paper deals with – that of autonomy - is analyzed through the lenses of the interdependent world. However, interdependency, for being asymmetrical, implies power relations inside the international system. System itself is of major importance as it delimits a particular context inside of which various states operate and from which they derive various limitations for their action. Even if it does not act directly upon the states, it imposes constraints and provides possibilities of action, thus setting the degree of international permissibility. Autonomy is understood as the possibility of carrying out a desired action. State’s national elites craft foreign policy within the international system, and it is mostly up to them whether to aspire to autonomist practice or not. Nevertheless, autonomous action, even if being a political decision, must be sustained by material support. In this world system, the economic factors are of major importance, but still not the only ones to determine the attainable levels of autonomy. Essentially, they provide the material base - the strongest one being that of technological-business type – without which any conception of autonomy is impossible. But autonomy is not solely dependent on the economic performance of the country. It is a rather complex notion, whose levels correspond to functioning of various variables that influence its possibilities and realities, making it a question of degree, all of which was demonstrated in the analytical part where the case study of PT rule was examined.

The research shows that the levels of autonomy exercised by PT national elites were one of the highest in Brazil’s history. This was a result of changes in certain factors that the article has
identified as having influence on the level of autonomy. Thus, reasons for these unprecedented levels of autonomy can be found in relatively higher permissibility of the international system, existence of elites functional to autonomous goals, high levels of harmonization of regional foreign policies, new options for diversification of international commerce, new political connections, high economic growth and perceived success of internal politics and economics that increased the soft power and made Brazil a model to follow.

Nevertheless, during this process of changing international positioning, re-primarization of economy and excessive dependence on exports to China appeared as undesirable side effects. In the meantime, no serious effort was made or change noted with respect to business-technological bases of autonomy and social cohesion. Essentially, the high tide produced by Chinese demand overshadowed these issues and left them unaddressed.

Moreover, the findings that we have obtained during the research make us conclude that Brazil is a pendulum power. Its international autonomy, and thus international standing, depends on the behavior of factors described in this paper, which when conducive to Brazil’s foreign policy serve as a trampoline that elevate this country to the status of global power. From one side, its base factors will continue to position it as an important international player that, being aware of its potential, always aspires for change. In the times of higher international permissibility, if paired with economic growth, its power attributes will accentuate. However, country’s inability to acquire higher levels of technological-business autonomy, the only one that fulfils requirements of executive character, will continue to seriously impede its autonomous international projections. Besides, factor of social cohesion, overly influenced by poverty and inequality, even if not as detrimental as some other factors, will become essential obstacle for its international standing in times of crisis. In a notch, and following Ferrer (1996), if Brazil desires to reach the first world and thus turn itself into a major power, it will have to keep transforming its comparative advantage in function of the dynamic changes in the world market, thus finding its true technological-business autonomy. In the meantime, while it fails to do so, it will only stay a pendulum power, whose international projections will be strongly influenced by the factors it can hardly control.

Lastly, the main advantage of this thesis, its holistic approach, is also its main limitation. The reason is the difficulty of fully assessing each and every factor we consider important for measuring the autonomy. However, this holistic technique is understood as indispensable for understanding of a country one investigates. In the best case scenario, an inter-disciplinary approach, undertook by researches from different academic disciplines would be considered as most appropriate. Besides, this research also serves as an invitation to all scientists of international relations to focus more on developing different theories of international involvement and
international action for different countries. The fact that hopefully many will now accept is that not every country is the same, and thus many dominant theories of international relations, despite definitely explaining many important phenomena in our world, can still fail to properly account for realities different from those present in the countries where they were produced. Rather than a strong critique to mainstream views of the functioning of our world, this work aspires to serve as an invitation for expansion of a dialogue among different perspectives of international relations, be it from those that specifically specialize in one discipline, or be it from those that attempt a more inter-disciplinary approach. A more integrated approach is definitely needed due to the huge complexity of the world we live in, and due to various distinct realities present in various parts of our world. Due to limitations that our geographical, social, cultural and psychological environments impose on us, only one singular theory will never be able to account for all the distinct complexities and problems that may be irrelevant for some and major for others.
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