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Brazil-USA Relations under Jair Bolsonaro

Jair Messias Bolsonaro was the president of Brazil from 2019 to 2023, and he is regarded as one of the most pro-American presidents in Brazilian history. Due to similar political rhetoric, J. Bolsonaro was often compared to Donald John Trump. During his administration, Brazilian foreign policy was orientated towards improving bilateral relations with the USA. In this article, I used neoclassical realism theory to examine the dynamics of Brazil-USA relations during J. Bolsonaro's presidency and how his ideological proximity to D. Trump affected relations between these two states. I also took into consideration the systemic factor that the USA is the strongest state in the American continents, and from this, I constructed the argument that the USA's superiority in power against all countries in the Western Hemisphere forced J. Bolsonaro to maintain dialogue even with ideology different Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. administration (2021-2025).

Keywords

Brazil, USA, bilateral relations, foreign policy, Latin America

Introduction

Jair Messias Bolsonaro served as the president of Brazil from 2019 to 2023. Due to his controversial rhetoric regarding sexual minorities, migrants, and progressive cultural norms, he has often been compared to the president of the United States of America, Donald John Trump (2017–2021; 2025–present). Many political commentators and scholars described him as a “tropical Trump” or a Brazilian version of Trump. Bolsonaro himself frequently drew parallels between his own political

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stance and that of Trump, emphasizing their ideological alignment. He also repeatedly stressed that he was the most pro-American politician in Brazilian history (Cesarino, 2022). Looking back at J. Bolsonaro's presidency, Brazil faced a wide range of long-standing problems, including high crime rates, persistent social inequality, and widespread corruption in state-owned companies such as Petrobras. His administration also had to confront the severe challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, from which Brazil suffered significantly. In foreign policy, J. Bolsonaro strongly supported D. Trump's positions and the USA's stance on various global issues. Early in his presidency, he followed D. Trump's logic by announcing plans to move the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In 2020, he also expressed support for the USA after the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. However, following D. Trump's defeat in the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, J. Bolsonaro had to seek new points of synergy with Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. (2021–2025). Unlike his predecessor, J. Biden held markedly different ideological views, and his administration repeatedly criticized Brazil over deforestation in the Amazon and the country's scepticism regarding the effects of climate change (Zilla, 2022).

J. Bolsonaro lost the 2022 presidential election and, similar to D. Trump in 2020, raised allegations of possible electoral fraud. In early 2023, Brazil even experienced its own version of the Capitol riots. While D. Trump made a political comeback in 2024 by winning the U.S. presidential election, J. Bolsonaro was banned by the Brazilian Supreme Court from running for office until 2030. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro and his allies hope that the Brazilian electoral court will lift this ban, allowing him to participate in the 2026 presidential elections. If this scenario unfolds, there is a strong possibility that D. Trump and J. Bolsonaro could once again engage directly in political interactions (Nicas, 2025).

Regarding academic works that have analyzed Brazilian foreign policy under J. Bolsonaro and Brazil–USA relations during this period, it is worth noting that much of the scholarly literature has focused on Bolsonaro's public communication and ideological attitudes, often comparing them with those of D. Trump. These studies typically highlight key ideological similarities between the two politicians, such as conservative social views and populist rhetoric. During the COVID-19 pandemic, academic interest increased in examining how leaders of this type responded to crises and the rhetoric they

employed. For example, in an article by Julio Lopez, J. Bolsonaro was compared not only to D. Trump but also to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and other similar heads of state. Such studies emphasize common traits among these leaders, including their disregard for minority rights, scepticism toward scientific evidence, and frequent criticism of the media (Natalino et al., 2024).

Regarding academic articles on Brazilian foreign policy during the J. Bolsonaro administration, most analyses approach the subject through the lens of liberal theories, emphasizing the role of ideological populism in shaping foreign policy choices. Some scholars, such as Karina de Araujo Oliveira da Silva, have compared J. Bolsonaro's foreign policy with that of his predecessors, particularly Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011) and Dilma Vana Rousseff (2011–2016) (Bandeira de Mello & Saraiva, 2024). These comparisons highlight Bolsonaro's presidency as a divergence from Brazil's traditional foreign policy, which had focused on regional integration and the strengthening of ties with other emerging powers such as China, Russia, and India (Bandeira de Mello & Saraiva, 2024). By contrast, the Bolsonaro administration adopted a markedly negative stance toward international organizations and refrained from playing an active role in regional bodies such as MERCOSUR. Instead, it prioritized bilateral relations with the USA, Israel, and other ideologically aligned states such as Hungary, Italy, Colombia, and Chile. At the same time, left-leaning governments, such as those of Venezuela and Cuba, were strongly criticized in an effort to underscore the administration's anti-socialist orientation (Saraiva et al., 2024). The literature addressing the influence of domestic political groups on Bolsonaro's policies often underscores the role of the military and its affiliated networks, as well as the agribusiness sector, in shaping both domestic and foreign policy directions.

When reviewing academic studies on Brazil–USA relations during the J. Bolsonaro administration, it becomes evident that most authors have concentrated on the ideological proximity between the former Brazilian president and D. Trump, particularly the similarities in their political communication. However, relatively few works have examined how these factors directly influenced bilateral relations between the two states. This article seeks to address this gap by assessing the extent to which the alignment of political and ideological views between the two leaders shaped Brazil–USA ties, especially in key areas such as security and economic cooperation. To this end, I employ neoclassical realism as the theoretical framework, since it

emphasizes two dimensions that influence a state's foreign policy. The first concerns domestic factors, such as internal stability, the ideological orientation of political leadership, and the role of interest groups. The second refers to the dynamics of the international system, which exert pressure on all states. The central theoretical argument advanced in this article is that the ideological proximity between J. Bolsonaro and D. Trump functioned as a domestic factor that encouraged Brazil to pursue closer relations with the USA, while systemic dynamics—particularly the USA's role as a leading global power—compelled J. Bolsonaro to maintain dialogue even with the ideologically distinct J. Biden administration. From these considerations, I raise the problem that ideological proximity between leaders does not necessarily translate into closer bilateral relations, particularly when states lack strong pragmatic interests, which are emphasized as essential by the realist school of thought. In such cases, even when leaders share similar ideological orientations, the relationship may not deepen if the states are not vitally dependent on one another. Furthermore, the assessment of bilateral relations is highly contingent on the specific area of cooperation under examination. For instance, relations may improve in one domain while simultaneously deteriorating in another, which complicates the overall evaluation of bilateral dynamics.

With this article, I aim to enhance the understanding of Brazil–USA relations by examining both the importance and the limitations of presidential preferences in the formulation of foreign policy. Since the article focuses primarily on the 'hard' factors of bilateral relations, neoclassical realism provides a more suitable theoretical framework. This approach allows for the inclusion of the ideological factor—particularly the alignment between J. Bolsonaro and D. Trump, which has already been explored extensively by other authors—while also incorporating the systemic dynamics of the international order into the analysis.

In order to analyse bilateral ties between the two states during J. Bolsonaro's presidency, I set out three main objectives:

- 1) To examine political cooperation between Brazil and the USA during J. Bolsonaro's presidency.
- 2) To analyse bilateral trade flows before and after J. Bolsonaro's presidency.
- 3) To examine arms acquisitions and joint military exercises before and after J. Bolsonaro's presidency.

Regarding the structure of this article, the first section examines the theoretical aspects of neoclassical realism, followed by the

methodology applied in the empirical analysis. Next, a brief historical overview of bilateral relations is presented. The empirical section then addresses the political dynamics of the period, bilateral trade flows, and military cooperation. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of the main findings.

1. Neoclassical Realism

One of the main contributors to the development of this theory was Gideon Rose, who in his article “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy” outlined the ideas that would later form the basis of neoclassical realism. The theory accepts the neorealist view of polarity in the international system and acknowledges that states must respond to the dynamics of the global order. However, unlike strict neorealism, it also recognizes that domestic political factors influence a country’s behavior in the international arena. For this reason, neoclassical realism can be seen as an attempt to combine elements of classical realism with those of neorealism (Rose, 1998).

Neoclassical realism seeks to explain why states in similar structural conditions may adopt different foreign policy strategies, even when facing comparable pressures from the international system. One explanation lies in the fact that domestic elites and foreign policy decision-makers often struggle to interpret external threats accurately, which can result in misbalancing within the international system. This stands in contrast to the logic of neorealism, which assumes that all actors are rational and therefore respond in similar ways to external threats. While neoclassical realism acknowledges a broad range of domestic political factors that shape foreign policy choices, the literature most commonly emphasizes the attitudes of leaders and decision-makers toward threats, their ability to process and interpret information, their relationship with the public, their personal ideological preferences, and the overall internal stability of the state (Ripsman et al., 2016).

According to neoclassical realism, national leaders are understood as public officials responsible for shaping foreign and security policy, including presidents, prime ministers, ministers, or, in the case of non-democratic regimes, dictators. A key factor in this theory is the capacity of decision-makers to process information about external threats and opportunities for cooperation. In addition, their ideological orientations, cultural preferences, and the historical

experiences of the state may significantly influence the choices made in foreign and security policymaking (Lobell et al., 2009).

The influence of domestic political factors and interest groups on foreign policy decision-makers is not absolute but rather conditional on the dynamics of the international system. In periods when the state does not face significant external threats, or when such threats are relatively minor, interest groups tend to exert greater influence over foreign policy, as decision-makers have broader room for manoeuvre in shaping strategies. By contrast, when the state encounters serious or existential threats, the impact of domestic actors is considerably reduced, since in an insecure environment foreign policy leaders cannot afford strategic miscalculations (Kaarbo, 2015).

In applying neoclassical realism to the analysis of Brazil–USA relations, it can be argued that Brazil occupies a relatively stable geopolitical space, at least regionally. Compared to its neighbours, Brazil possesses greater resources and faces no significant territorial conflicts, which reduces immediate external threats and grants it greater flexibility in its foreign policy choices. The United States may be considered the only state in the Americas capable of posing a potential strategic challenge to Brazil. From a neoclassical realist perspective, this asymmetry in power can incentivize Brazil to pursue opportunities for cooperation with Washington. At the same time, the domestic political environment is equally relevant. According to this theoretical framework, leaders' ideological proximity and personal preferences play an important role in shaping foreign policy. On this basis, I argue that Jair Bolsonaro's ideological alignment with Donald Trump further encouraged Brazil to seek closer cooperation with the United States.

In summary, neoclassical realism seeks to combine neorealist assumptions about the international system with domestic political factors to explain how and on what principles states formulate their foreign policy. As outlined earlier, the theoretical argument advanced in this article is that the ideological proximity between Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro functioned as a domestic factor encouraging the deepening of bilateral relations. However, with the election of Joseph Biden, the relevance of domestic ideological alignment diminished, and systemic dynamics of the international order became the primary driver compelling Bolsonaro to maintain dialogue with the new administration. It may even be argued that ideological differences acted as an obstacle rather than a facilitator when Bolsonaro sought opportunities for cooperation with the Biden administration.

2. Methodology

This paper examines Brazil–USA relations in the political, economic, and military spheres during the J. Bolsonaro administration (2019–2023). These areas were selected because they align with the framework of neoclassical realism, which emphasizes hard factors such as military power and the economic capacity of the state. While cooperation in cultural and social fields falls outside the primary scope of this theory, it is worth noting that applying a different theoretical lens might reveal additional dynamics in Brazil–USA relations, which could serve as a valuable complement to this research. A quantitative methodology is employed in this article. The analysis of political relations between Brazil and the USA considers the number of bilateral meetings J. Bolsonaro held with his American counterparts, as well as the number of agreements signed during these encounters. Bilateral meetings were chosen because, in both the USA and Brazil, presidential institutions hold extensive powers in foreign policy, and the personalities of the presidents, along with their initiative in setting priorities, play a significant role. Tracking presidential meetings makes it possible to assess the political impact of the change of administrations in the USA and to identify with which president J. Bolsonaro engaged more frequently, since a higher number of meetings can be assumed to reflect closer political relations. Data on these meetings were collected and systematized from the official website of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, supplemented with information from the White House portal (see Table No. 1). It should be noted that this study emphasizes the number of agreements signed rather than their content; therefore, further qualitative analysis of the agreements themselves would provide a useful complement. Similarly, this article focuses exclusively on presidential meetings, while additional research examining ministerial- or lower-level interactions could enrich the broader picture of bilateral political relations. For the analysis of Brazil–USA economic cooperation during the J. Bolsonaro administration, bilateral trade statistics were obtained from the United States Census Bureau, while data on Brazilian GDP dynamics were drawn from the World Bank databases. To better capture the evolution of the economic relationship, the study period was extended to cover 2015–2024. This allows for an examination of trade dynamics both in the four years preceding J. Bolsonaro’s presidency and in the two years following it (see Tables

No. 2 and 3). In terms of military cooperation, it is important to note that in 2019 D. Trump granted Brazil “Major Non-NATO Ally” status, which facilitated easier access to U.S. weapons. For this reason, the analysis of military cooperation focuses on the volume and types of military equipment Brazil purchased from the USA. As with the economic analysis, the period from 2015 to 2024 was selected in order to illustrate longer-term dynamics and to assess whether the “Major Non-NATO Ally” designation had a measurable impact. The primary data sources for this section are the SIPRI database and information from the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency. In addition, the organization and frequency of joint military exercises are examined using data from the U.S. Southern Command (see Tables No. 4 and 5).

3. Historical Overview

Brazil declared its independence from the Portuguese Empire in 1822, and the USA was among the first countries to recognize it in 1824. This recognition laid the groundwork for the development of economic, diplomatic, and political initiatives between the two states. However, it was not until the early 20th century that bilateral relations became more formalized, with the United States opening its embassy in Brazil in 1905 and Brazil establishing its own embassy in Washington in 1910. Despite these steps, Brazil–USA relations for much of the subsequent period remained relatively limited (Crandall, 2011).

During World War II, Brazil and the United States began to cooperate more actively. In 1942, Brazil officially entered the conflict, becoming the only Latin American country to deploy troops alongside the U.S. Army in Italy. In return, the United States provided Brazil with both financial and military assistance. This included approximately 45 million USD in economic aid, which enabled the Vargas government to modernize the country’s infrastructure and industry, as well as significant support to upgrade Brazil’s armed forces (McCann, 2018).

After the Second World War, the United States shifted its strategic focus toward Asia and Europe, which led to a decline in its engagement with Latin American countries, including Brazil, despite Brazil’s status as one of Washington’s most important regional partners during the war. In 1945, a coup removed Getúlio Vargas from power, and democracy was restored. Eurico Dutra became the country’s

first post-coup president, and under his leadership Brazil supported the creation of international organizations promoted by the United States, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) (Crandall & Crandall, 2021).

Brazil's democratic period ended in 1964, after which the country was ruled by a military regime supported by the United States. In this respect, Brazil was not unique, as the United States also backed military governments in several other Latin American countries. At the beginning of the military regime, bilateral relations improved, and in 1965 the two countries even cooperated in the invasion of the Dominican Republic. However, despite Washington's support being crucial for the Brazilian junta in consolidating power, relations began to deteriorate in the 1970s. The main source of tension was Brazil's nuclear program, through which the government sought to develop nuclear energy as a means of diversifying its energy sector (Patti, 2021).

During the Ronald Reagan administration, Brazil and the United States normalized their relations, and in 1985 Washington supported Brazil's transition back to democracy. In the 1990s, bilateral ties did not differ significantly from the broader regional context: Brazil, like many Latin American states, adopted neoliberal economic reforms and cooperated with the United States in managing the Brazilian economic crisis of 1998. In the 2000s, the political landscape of the region shifted with the rise of leftist and radical-left leaders who often expressed anti-American sentiments. While Brazil under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva did not follow Venezuela's confrontational approach, it nevertheless opposed U.S. initiatives such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which aimed to establish a hemispheric free trade zone. Instead, Brazil played a leading role in creating UNASUR, an institution designed to strengthen South American integration and limit U.S. influence in the region. Relations were further strained in 2013 when revelations surfaced that the United States had spied on Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, significantly undermining trust and cooperation between the two states (De Castro et al., 2014).

In conclusion, the period of the Second World War arguably marked the peak of Brazil-USA relations, as both states shared strong pragmatic interests. Outside of this exceptional context, however, bilateral ties have largely reflected the broader patterns of U.S. policy toward Latin America rather than a uniquely privileged partnership.

4. Political Ties under Jair Bolsonaro 2019-2023

As noted earlier, this article examines two main aspects: the number of meetings held and the number of agreements signed during the research period. In addition, the factor of ideological proximity will be considered, alongside an analysis of how the dynamics of political relations shifted following the inauguration of J. Biden as President of the USA.

Table 1. **Bilateral meetings of Brazil-USA heads of state 2019-2023**

Meetings with the head of state of USA	Number of agreements signed	Areas of cooperation these agreements have been signed
First meeting with D. Trump 2019-03-19	4. ²	Space, technology, environment, security.
Second meeting with D. Trump 2019-07-28	-	-
Third meeting with D. Trump 2019-09-23	-	-
Fourth meeting with D. Trump 2020-03-07	-	-
First meeting with J. Biden 2022-07-09	-	-
Total: 5	Total: 4	Overall: Space, technology, environment, security.

Source: Composed by the author using information from Gov. Br (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2015). Additional information was taken from The White House (2019).

J. Bolsonaro made his first official visit as head of state to the USA, signaling that strengthening ties with Washington was a central priority of his foreign policy. During this meeting, he secured U.S. support for Brazil's bid to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The USA also pledged to resume negotiations on reducing trade tariffs, and the Brazilian Space Agency signed an agreement with NASA to cooperate on satellite development. Following this visit, the two countries established the Strategic Partnership Dialogue, aimed at enhancing bilateral economic, political, military, and cultural ties. The first presidential meeting also resulted in the creation of a fund dedicated to protecting the Amazon rainforest and biodiversity.

By contrast, the second and third meetings were largely symbolic. Bolsonaro met Trump briefly on the sidelines of the G20 Osaka Summit

² But there can be more due to limited information it wasn't possible to find concrete number.

and again following the United Nations General Assembly. Given their short duration, it was unsurprising that these meetings did not produce any signed agreements.

In 2020, D. Trump and J. Bolsonaro met for the fourth time. Following this visit, the two presidents issued a joint declaration in which the United States and Brazil expressed their support for Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó (Reis da Silva & Pérez, 2019). The declaration also emphasized the commitment of both countries to seek further opportunities to strengthen bilateral trade relations. It is important to note that at the beginning of Bolsonaro's presidency, Brazil faced a significant influx of migrants from Venezuela. Between 2016 and 2018, an estimated 200,000–250,000 Venezuelans entered Brazil. This issue remained politically salient throughout Bolsonaro's presidency, as by 2023 the number of Venezuelan migrants in Brazil had reached approximately 500,000 (Acaps, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, Venezuela can be viewed as a systemic factor that compelled Brazil and the United States to cooperate. Both Bolsonaro and Trump regarded migration flows as a threat to state security. Thus, from Brazil's perspective, it was rational to support the U.S. stance toward Venezuela, which was based on sanctions and political pressure on Nicolás Maduro Moros with the aim of achieving regime change (Mulder, 2023).

Although there were political intentions to negotiate a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) between the United States and Brazil, such an agreement was not achieved. Nevertheless, in 2020 both countries signed a Protocol on Trade Rules and Transparency, which addressed issues related to foreign direct investment and aimed to improve the Brazilian investment climate. Both sides also argued that this agreement could eventually pave the way toward a future FTA (US Department of State, 2024).

In the same year, J. Biden defeated D. Trump in the U.S. presidential election. The Bolsonaro administration was initially slow to congratulate the new head of state and appeared inclined to support Trump's claims that the election had been fraudulent and required a recount. Eventually, however, Bolsonaro's government formally congratulated Biden on his victory. The new U.S. administration placed greater emphasis on environmental protection and human rights, which led to increased criticism of Brazil for its insufficient efforts to curb deforestation in the Amazon (Vireira, 2022).

As a result of these actions, President Biden was reluctant to

pursue further negotiations on a free trade agreement. The decline in political relations was clearly illustrated during their meeting on the sidelines of the 9th Summit of the Americas in 2022, where the two presidents discussed general issues such as climate change, the protection of the Amazon rainforest, and international political developments, but no joint declarations or agreements were signed. The Biden administration also viewed Bolsonaro's repeated claims of potential problems in Brazil's electoral system particularly negatively. In the run-up to the 2022 presidential elections, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Brazil and emphasized that the electoral process must remain transparent (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

From the collected data, a clear trend emerges: J. Bolsonaro met with D. Trump four times during the research period, but with J. Biden only once. This suggests that ideological proximity and personal sympathies encouraged Bolsonaro and Trump to engage in dialogue aimed at strengthening bilateral relations. However, considering the limited number of agreements signed during these meetings, it can be argued that close personal ties between the two leaders did not translate into substantially closer bilateral relations. From a theoretical perspective, the ideological preferences of the presidents of Brazil and the USA appear to have influenced bilateral dynamics. After the change of administration in Washington, Bolsonaro—who had strongly aligned himself with Trump—struggled to reorient his approach and to build a stronger political relationship with Biden. This difficulty is reflected in the fact that Bolsonaro held significantly more meetings with Trump. Nevertheless, despite the cooler relations, Bolsonaro did meet with Biden once. This can be explained through the theoretical lens of neoclassical realism: as the most powerful state in the Western Hemisphere, the USA compels less powerful actors such as Brazil to maintain at least minimal engagement, even when their leaders are divided by ideological differences.

In summary, Bolsonaro met with U.S. leaders five times during his presidency—four times with D. Trump and only once with J. Biden. This pattern illustrates Bolsonaro's prioritization of the ideologically aligned Trump administration. However, the limited number of agreements signed suggests that ideological proximity alone does not guarantee stronger bilateral relations. After Biden assumed office, political relations stagnated, as reflected in the sharp decline in high-level meetings. Whereas in the first two years of his presidency Bolsonaro met Trump four times, in the latter half of his term he met Biden only once—and notably, this was not even a formal meeting at the White House.

4.1. Economic Ties from 2015 to 2024

The analysis of economic cooperation between the two countries will focus on bilateral trade data, specifically the value of exports and the composition of exported products. The main objective of this section is to assess the extent to which J. Bolsonaro's presidency influenced trade relations between Brazil and the USA.

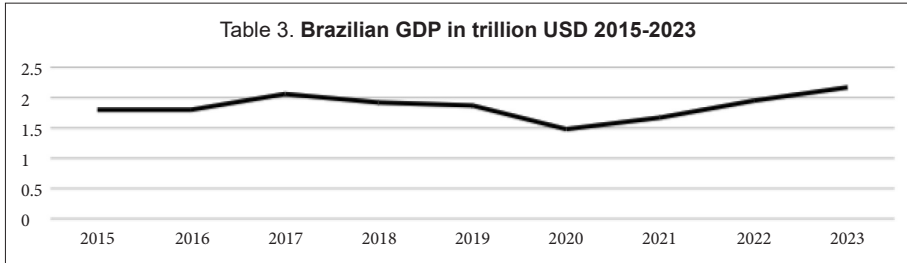


Source: Composed by the author using information from the *United States census bureau (2025)*.

Until the beginning of J. Bolsonaro's presidency, bilateral trade was increasing gradually but steadily. During his administration, in 2019, export values largely maintained their pre-existing trajectory; however, in 2020 they declined, before recovering in subsequent years and resuming an upward trend. Following the end of J. Bolsonaro's term, U.S. exports to Brazil registered a slight decrease, whereas Brazilian exports to the United States continued to grow. This suggests that Brazil's trade with the U.S. remained relatively unaffected by changes in presidential administrations. In terms of composition, U.S. exports to Brazil primarily consisted of refined petroleum, machinery, and household chemicals, while Brazil's main exports to the U.S. included crude oil, metals, aviation components, and agricultural products such as coffee (The observatory of economic complexity, 2022).

Although export values increased after 2020, it is difficult to directly attribute this growth to the protocol signed in the same year. Nevertheless, it cannot be excluded that this agreement had some influence on bilateral trade dynamics, and therefore it may be argued that the protocol acted as one of several variables potentially contributing to the improvement of economic relations between the two countries. It is also worth noting that during J. Bolsonaro's presidency the two countries failed to conclude a free trade agreement (FTA), which suggests that closer political cooperation—particularly under the D. Trump administration—did not translate into substantially

deeper trade relations. However, given that lower-level economic cooperation agreements were signed, it is not possible to fully dismiss the possibility that political dynamics during this period had at least some effect on bilateral economic ties.



Source: Composed by the author using information from the World Bank (2024).

Since it is doubtful that political factors had a significant impact on bilateral trade, it is useful to consider the overall Brazilian economic situation. For this reason, Brazilian GDP statistics have been included in this article to identify possible correlations between GDP growth and bilateral trade dynamics. A comparison of the data presented in Tables 2 and 3 shows that Brazil's GDP increased from 2015 to 2018, a period that coincided with growth in bilateral trade. However, after 2018 GDP began to decline, reaching its lowest point in 2020—likely due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that despite the declining GDP, bilateral trade volumes continued to grow in 2018 and 2019, with a contraction observed only in 2020. After this year, both Brazil's GDP and bilateral trade volumes resumed growth, suggesting at least some degree of correlation between these two factors (Avelar et al., 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, it could be argued that in this area of cooperation—unlike in the political sphere—ideological proximity played a much less prominent role. To assess economic relations in greater detail, it would therefore be necessary to take into account other domestic political and structural factors. It is also important to note that the USA is Brazil's second most important trading partner, whereas Brazil does not even rank among the USA's top fifteen trading partners. From this perspective, Brazil appears more dependent on trade with the USA than vice versa, which can be interpreted as an international systemic factor that encouraged J. Bolsonaro, at least in the early years of his term, to seek opportunities to strengthen bilateral trade ties. Conversely, the relatively low importance of Brazil in U.S. trade allowed the Biden administration to stall negotiations on a

potential FTA without facing any significant economic consequences domestically (Berg et al., 2022).

To summarize, the examination of bilateral trade data suggests that the trends during the J. Bolsonaro administration did not significantly diverge from the dynamics observed before or after his presidency. This indicates that the president's political preferences played only a limited role in shaping trade relations. A deeper analysis of Brazil's broader economic conditions may therefore provide more concrete insights into the underlying drivers of Brazil–USA trade dynamics.

4.2. Military Cooperation 2015-2024

In this part of the article, military cooperation between Brazil and the USA will be examined. The analysis will first focus on arms acquisition data, followed by an assessment of the number of joint military exercises conducted during the J. Bolsonaro administration.

Table 4. Arms Transfers from 2015 to 2024

Supplier/receiver	Name	Type	Category	Order year	Units	Delivery year
USA to BRA	<i>AAV-7RAM</i>	Armoured personal carrier	Armoured vehicles	2015	46	2016
USA to BRA	<i>Vehicle engine 201-300</i>	Vehicle engine	Engines	2015	4	2016
USA to BRA	<i>M-113</i>	Armoured personal carrier	Armoured vehicles	2016	1	2016
USA to BRA	<i>B-767</i>	Transport aircraft	Aircraft	2017	10	2017
USA to BRA	<i>M-88 AV</i>	Armed recovery vehicle	Armoured vehicles	2015	23	2018
USA to BRA	<i>FAASV</i>	Autonomous land vehicle	Armoured vehicles	2018	40	2018
USA to BRA	<i>M-113</i>	Armoured personal carrier	Armoured vehicles	2018	4	2019
USA to BRA	<i>M-88 AV</i>	Armed response vehicle	Armoured vehicles	2015	≈ 236	2020
USA to BRA	<i>J-52</i>	Turbojet	Engines	2017	≈ 30	2020
USA to BRA	<i>ScanEagle</i>	Unmanned aerial vehicle	Aircraft	2019	6	2021
USA to BRA	<i>M-113</i>	Armoured personal carrier	Armoured vehicles	2020	3	2022
USA to BRA	<i>MaxxPro</i>	Armoured personal carrier	Armoured vehicles	2018	20	2023
BRA to USA	<i>EMB-314</i>	Trainer/combat aircraft	Aircraft	≈ 2020	60	2023

Source: Composed by the author using data from SIPRI (2024).

In 2019, the D. Trump administration granted Brazil the status of “Major Non-NATO Ally,” which provided the country with improved access to US military-industrial products. This designation facilitated opportunities for Brazilian arms-producing companies to develop joint projects with the US defence industry. It also expanded cooperation between the two countries in the areas of military exchanges and information sharing. Brazil thus became the second country in the region to receive this status (SIPRI, 2024).

During the J. Bolsonaro period, Brazil made only two recorded arms purchases from the USA in 2019 and 2020, while the USA, in turn, purchased light aircraft from Brazil. Comparing these trends with the dynamics of the four years prior to Bolsonaro’s presidency, it is worth noting that Brazil made ten arms purchases from the USA before his term, whereas during his presidency only three deals were concluded. It should also be mentioned that SIPRI did not include data on Bolsonaro’s decision to acquire MK-54 lightweight torpedoes and Javelin anti-tank missiles. However, even when taking these purchases into account, Brazil still acquired more weapons from the USA before Bolsonaro’s administration than during it. From this perspective, it can be argued that Brazil did not fully take advantage of the opportunities provided by its “Major Non-NATO Ally” status. Nevertheless, the fact that the USA granted this designation indicates that, at least in principle, both states were willing to deepen their military relations.

From the perspective of neoclassical realism, the limited arms purchases during Bolsonaro’s presidency can be explained by two main factors. First, Brazil faced no significant military threats in Latin America or from other major powers outside the region, reducing the systemic incentives to expand its arsenal. Second, Brazil experienced a period of economic decline during this time, which likely acted as a domestic constraint, limiting the government’s ability to allocate greater resources to the armed forces and to procure additional equipment from the USA (De Rezende et al., 2018).

Table 5. **USA-Brazil Military Exercises 2019-2024**

Year	Name of the exercise
2021	<i>Southern vanguard 22/Core21</i>
2022	<i>Southern vanguard 22/Core 22</i>
2023	<i>Southern vanguard 24/Core 23</i>
2024	<i>Formosa</i>

Source: Composed by the author using information from Southern command.

With regard to military exercises, closer interaction between Brazil and the USA began under the Michel Temer administration (2016–2018). Prior to this period, during the leftist presidencies of L. da Silva and D. Rousseff, Brazil did not organize joint military exercises with the USA. Under Bolsonaro, two joint military exercises were held, and a similar number took place after the end of his term. It is important to note, however, that negotiations on joint military exercises with the USA had already started in 2020, during the final year of D. Trump's presidency. These negotiations were later continued and formalized under J. Biden, with both sides agreeing to extend joint exercises until 2028.

From a theoretical perspective, this development suggests that leftist presidencies functioned as a domestic political constraint that limited Brazil's ability to expand cooperation with the USA in the military sphere. Once Bolsonaro assumed office, this ideological barrier was removed, creating the political conditions necessary for Brazil and the USA to advance cooperation in this field. Perhaps military cooperation was the clearest demonstration of the influence of systemic factors on J. Bolsonaro's foreign policy. Even after the end of his close ideological and personal alignment with D. Trump, Brazil nevertheless chose to expand cooperation with the USA under J. Biden. This can be explained by the recognition that the United States' military superiority represented a valuable opportunity for Brazil, regardless of ideological differences. For this reason, Bolsonaro sought to maintain the best possible relations with Washington in this area.

This example also illustrates the limits of the ideological argument in explaining Brazil–USA relations during Bolsonaro's presidency. While ideological affinity facilitated closer ties under Trump, military cooperation expanded even under Biden, suggesting that systemic factors, rather than domestic ideological alignment, can carry greater weight in shaping bilateral outcomes. Accordingly, further research that considers additional areas of cooperation could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how systemic and domestic factors interact in the bilateral relationship (Warman, 2022).

In conclusion, although the Trump administration granted Brazil "Major Non-NATO Ally" status, the analysis of arms acquisitions shows that Brazil purchased more weapons from the United States prior to Bolsonaro's tenure than after receiving this designation. Nevertheless, when considering joint military exercises, Bolsonaro's administration succeeded in establishing agreements that continued even after the

transition of power in Washington. This suggests that Brazil's interest in maintaining cooperative ties with the most powerful country in the region played an important role in sustaining military relations, even in the absence of strong ideological alignment.

Conclusions

After evaluating political relations, it was found that Bolsonaro met more frequently with Trump than with Biden. In fact, during the first two years of his presidency, Bolsonaro met Trump four times, whereas between 2021 and 2023 he met Biden only once. This trend suggests that shifts in U.S. domestic politics and the change of presidential administration limited Bolsonaro's ability to sustain the close political relationship he had cultivated with Trump. Moreover, the limited number of meetings with Biden indicates that Bolsonaro and his administration struggled to adapt to the new political agenda pursued by Biden. It is also noteworthy that even during the Trump presidency, despite strong ideological proximity, Brazil and the United States signed relatively few cooperation agreements. This highlights that ideological convergence between leaders does not necessarily translate into deeper or more effective bilateral cooperation when strong pragmatic interests are absent. From the perspective of neoclassical realism, this case demonstrates that U.S. domestic political factors—largely independent of Bolsonaro's actions—exerted a significant impact on bilateral relations. For this reason, further research on U.S. policy towards Brazil would provide a valuable extension to the analysis presented in this article.

An analysis of trade volumes shows that the Bolsonaro period did not significantly diverge from the trade dynamics observed both before and after his presidency. This outcome is unsurprising, since—despite Bolsonaro's political intentions—Brazil and the United States did not conclude a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) during his term, which could have provided the basis for a real breakthrough in bilateral trade. Nevertheless, the Bolsonaro administration did manage to secure several lower-level economic agreements, which suggests that political factors were not entirely irrelevant in shaping economic relations. However, to assess the actual impact of these agreements more precisely, a deeper analysis would be needed, including data on specific export products and statistics on U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Brazil. Overall,

the economic aspects examined in this article reinforce the broader finding that ideological proximity, in the absence of strong pragmatic interests, does not necessarily translate into closer bilateral relations. An analysis of military cooperation between the two countries reveals that the granting of “Major Non-NATO Ally” status did not lead Brazil to increase its purchases of U.S. military equipment. However, viewed through the lens of neoclassical realism, the continuation of negotiations on joint military exercises after J. Biden assumed office illustrates that the dynamics of the international system also shaped Brazilian foreign policy under J. Bolsonaro. His administration likely recognized that maintaining close military ties with one of the world’s most powerful states could bring significant benefits, even when that state was led by an ideologically different administration.

It is important to note that this study focused exclusively on Brazil–USA relations during the J. Bolsonaro period and did not address the transformations that have taken place under L. Silva’s third term in office. Future research on bilateral relations during L. Silva’s current presidency would therefore provide a valuable complement to the findings of this article and allow for a comparative analysis of the approaches taken by J. Bolsonaro and L. Silva toward the United States.

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