

## ARTICLE

## Democratization and Graduation Dilemmas Faced by Regional Powers in the Global South: A comparative Study of Brazil and South Africa\*

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This article aims to understand how democratization processes have influenced the foreign policy of regional powers in the Global South. Our theoretical model brings together the concepts of 'regional power' and 'graduation dilemma'. It is used for a comparative study of Brazil and South Africa's foreign policy in two stages: 01. 'prestige diplomacy' with a focus on human rights in the 1990s; and 02. global projection in the 2000s. We employ a comparative methodology that uses process tracing to build an analytical grid in order to reveal the particularities of the causal mechanisms in the historical trajectories of the two countries. Prestige diplomacy was successful for both Brazil and South Africa in the 1990s and both sought to play international leadership roles in the 2000s. Nonetheless, their responses to the graduation dilemmas were different, especially in relation to their respective regions. South Africa engaged more actively in crisis mediation processes and peace operations in its region; Brazil had a more inconsistent participation in regional crises and frequently retreated from regional alliances when seeking to increase its international status, which generated friction with its neighbors.

**Keywords:** Regional powers; graduation dilemmas; democratization; comparative foreign policy; Global South.

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<http://doi.org/10.1590/1981-3821202200020002>

For data replication, see: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/D8FIPL>

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\*Funding information: Coordination of Superior Level Staff Improvement (Capes). Processo BEX 7470/14-2; National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), Project N<sup>o</sup> 423099/2018-3.

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of Brazil and South Africa to understand the international integration of regional powers from the Global South with recent democratization processes and the graduation dilemmas that arise in the search for an international leadership role. Our research starts out from the premise that the evolution of the process of democratization, and especially the international perception of this phenomenon, opens space for a search for international prominence.

In the next section, we present our conceptual model that employs the concepts of regional powers, democratization and graduation dilemmas in two stages applied to the period of our comparative analysis of the foreign policies of Brazil and South Africa. The theoretical framework known as the 'graduation dilemma' (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017) is essential for the construction of the intellectual argument of this article. The theory is designed for the analysis of second-tier States and non-nuclear powers, where the expectations of domestic and international audiences are often different and even contradictory. Such countries include Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Turkey (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 586). The definition of graduation seeks to explain the foreign policy strategy of countries that seek to improve their international status. Graduation is not a linear trajectory or a result – it is a historical process of change in the international hierarchy and of scale and status in different socio-political spaces (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 590).

In the first stage of the model, applied in the 'democratization processes and prestige diplomacies of Brazil and South Africa' section, international graduation relates to the development of a 'prestige diplomacy' that is translated into an effort to gain diplomatic credentials after government by authoritarian regimes. During the 1990s, to differing degrees, Brazil and South Africa sought to legitimize their democratization processes internationally. In this sense, the construction of prestige vis-à-vis the international community is an important strategy for creating a pathway to an international leadership role.

In a second phase of the application of the model, 'Graduate Dilemmas Faced by Brazil and South Africa', Brazil and South Africa's prominence projects enjoyed greater scope for autonomy in view of the advance of democratization and

the favorable geopolitical and economic conditions of the international system. Based on narratives from the Global South, Brazil and South Africa adopted a more critical stance in multilateral agendas with a clear sense of international graduation in the global power geometry. In the 2000s, Brazil and South Africa formulated reformist foreign policies vis-à-vis various international agendas, while at the same time seeking to consolidate their regional leadership roles.

Brazil and South Africa are fundamental actors in their regions and face major graduation dilemmas. Is it a necessary condition for Brazil and South Africa to affirm their status as regional powers and assume leadership with all the incumbent risks? Must they obtain recognition on the part of their neighbors of their regional power status as a necessary condition for eventual recognition as a global player? The choice between 'going global' with the region and doing so without it is a central international graduation dilemma for Brazil and South Africa (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017) and will be the guiding thread of the comparative analysis in this article.

This article makes use of process tracing in its comparative qualitative analysis. A detailed description is essential for process tracing in order to facilitate analysis of the trajectories of change and causality (MAHONEY, 2012). A key strategy for the causal inference tracked in the process is the unfolding of events and situations in time. It is, therefore, an analytical tool to identify descriptive and causal inferences from evidence – often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena (COLLIER, 2011, p. 824). The evolution of democratization processes is one of the causal mechanisms of the result, i.e., international (non) graduation, the interest being to understand this causal mechanism in the cases of Brazil and South Africa. This is not, therefore, a probabilistic and exclusive approach to the results of the search for international prominence, given the wide diversity of variables that can influence the results in addition to democratization processes.

Our sources are the literature on Brazilian and South African foreign policies, with emphasis on human rights issues, conflict mediation and peace operations, as well as the conceptual debates in the field of International Relations on regional powers, democratization and Foreign Policy Analysis. We undertook

semi-structured interviews with academics in Brazil and South Africa<sup>1</sup>. In the following section we present the conceptual model that relates the concepts of regional powers and graduation dilemmas.

### **Conceptual model: regional powers of the Global South, democratization processes and graduation dilemmas**

Our argument is based on a premise described in the literature on regional powers: the search for a leadership role in the international system (ACHARYA, 2007; HURREL, 2007; NEL and NOLTE, 2010). Regional powers are generally conceived of as States that adopt a benevolent and cooperative attitude towards their neighbors – while not excluding unilateral or military acts. In other words: the definition does not presuppose this behavior. Regional powers have a strong influence on regional interactions and the degree to which these are characterized by cooperation, conflict and institutionalization (DESTRADI, 2010). Therefore, power asymmetry in relation to their regional contexts is also relevant in the categorization of regional powers, taking into account factors such as demographic weight, economy, military capacity, per capita income, etc. Regional powers should represent not only their own interests in international issues, but also the interests of their regions, especially when these are not sufficiently represented on the global stage (NEL and NOLTE, 2010, p. 877).

The status of regional power can give a country the credentials it needs to become a global power and an international leader. The difficulty inherent in this classification lies in the fact that such status derives not only from the material resources of power but also from the perceptions of regional and global hierarchies (NOLTE, 2010, p. 892). The role of regional power is not only one of leadership but also implies bearing costs, providing public goods and mediating regional conflicts. It is worth noting that being a regional power today does not imply being a regional power tomorrow and vice-versa.

Our theoretical argument is therefore based on the premise described in the literature on ‘regional powers’. This article delimits the applicability of this concept to certain situational and geopolitical aspects. Firstly, our research interest is

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<sup>1</sup>Part of the interviews were held by means of fieldwork in South Africa at the University of Pretoria between January and July 2015 with financing from CAPES.

regional powers that in an international power geometry are placed in the Global South, mainly because of the dependence of their international trajectories. Secondly, these powers have undergone recent democratization processes in an international context in which good governance practices became more relevant since the end of the Cold War. There is a clear effort to utilize foreign policy to legitimize their democratization processes internationally.

The conceptual model is applied in two steps. Reaching a new stage of graduation in the stratification of international power is a political objective that stems from the condition of being regional power. In the specification of the model, the capacity for international graduation depends on the democratization processes and the way they are perceived internationally. Regional powers in the Global South that can present important advances in their democratization processes that are able to boost their global projection.

Democratization processes became an area of interest to the social sciences at the end of the Cold War<sup>2</sup>. Some emerging actors adapt their entry into the international scene as part of their political transition, which sees human rights becoming more important in their foreign policies. These processes are even more intense and contradictory in the case of regional powers in the Global South, as in the cases of Brazil and South Africa. The defense of multilateralism and the asymmetry of power create demands for political, economic and social leadership at the regional level.

This is the second step of the model, in which the effort to become an international leader takes on a degree of autonomy and can give rise to critical foreign policy narratives. The same historical trajectory that allows for international relations to be described in broadly North versus South terms can be re-purposed in the production of 'Global South' narratives. Where material power in the form of international economic competitiveness and military capability is limited, international graduation strategies are linked to other expressions of power. Playing a role in regional crises, acting as a mediator and participating in peace-keeping operations are indicators of this greater international projection,

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<sup>2</sup>This was known as the third wave of democratization. See: Huntington (1991). *Studies in Latin America* focus on the transition to and the consolidation of democracy. See: Karl and Schmitter (1991); Munck and Leff (1997); O'Donnell and Whitehead (1986).

according to literature on regional powers, and are compared in the second stage of application of the comparative model.

This study associates foreign policy with democratization processes and international integration projects. This produces a specific profile that can be verified in such areas as multilateralism, peaceful resolution of disputes, participation in mediation processes and peace operations. This is the empirical dimension of the comparative study.

Regional powers in the Global South are perceived as agents of change in the international system. But what is the exact nature of the change that they seek? The search for recognition focuses on multilateralism and non-indifference vis-à-vis the needs of development, which are goals linked to the fight against humiliation (BADIE, 2019). The prophecy set out in *The Rise of 'the Rest'* (AMSDEN, 2001) is coming true the 21st century through new coalitions, especially the BRICS, which challenge the club of developed nations<sup>3</sup>.

Developing countries achieve the status of regional powers by having a preponderance of material and ideational power in their regions, which leads to their playing a relevant role in global governance. They join forces to promote a reform agenda in the international system and strengthen their position in North-South dialog (NEL, 2010, p. 953). The capacity to project interests and values across their immediate borders and to achieve some degree of cohesion in their respective regions determines the provision of public goods in their respective regions (NEL, 2010, p. 955). These distinct strategies are symptoms of the tensions between the types of roles that powers envisage in their global strategies and in their roles as leaders in their regions. There are dilemmas inherent in seeking an international leadership role based on a regional leadership role, if this is present.

The 'graduation dilemma' model (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017) provides important analytical insights for the issues discussed in this article. How to build leadership in international relations? Considering regional engagement to

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<sup>3</sup>The term BRICS was coined by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill in a 2001 publication in which he claimed that Brazil, Russia, India and China would be the world's leading economies by 2040. Later, starting from 2009, the BRICS started to hold annual summits. In 2011, South Africa was invited to join the group.

what extent? The model offers a reading of the dynamics of foreign policy and engages with the debate on regional powers.

The first dilemma arises from the relationship between global leadership and regional leadership. To what extent does graduation at the global power level imply an equivalent process at the regional level? While neighbors recognize that the existence of regional powers brings potential benefits (such as the production of collective goods or the internalization of security costs), this recognition is accompanied by a fear of domination and coercive hegemonic practices. The dilemma of being a regional power lies in the necessity of finding a balance (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 599). Another relevant premise is to consider the material asymmetry of the regional context in which the countries find themselves.

Brazil and South Africa are regional powers in democratization processes, with limited power resources that renounced the development of nuclear weapons as part of prestige diplomacy in the 1990s. Nonetheless, they enjoy importance within their regional systems, which they leverage in international negotiations on a variety of agendas; they also have ambitions to reform multilateral bodies. The complexities of their foreign policy formulation are affected by the expectations created by their focus on multilateralism, the construction of regional alliances and a willingness to consolidate their regional leadership roles. And what if the necessary costs contradict the expectations created in the democratization processes? This is an exponential international graduation dilemma faced by countries with this profile.

The renunciation of their nuclear weapons programs in the wake of democratization added even more symbolic value to their foreign policy, given that possession of weapons of mass destruction would create deterrence capacity that could be equated with veto power. Furthermore, non-nuclear countries must rely on peaceful means to fulfill their international ambitions, according to the graduation dilemma model (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 591). For these countries, using the theme of human rights is a way of offsetting their relative inferiority in respect of other means, such as military or economic power. The responses to the dilemmas created by this foreign policy can appear as inconsistencies and contradictions and this can weaken the countries' graduation

processes and, by extension, their ascension to global leadership roles. Considering Brazil and South Africa's shared trajectories as non-nuclear regional powers from the Global South with recent democratization processes, what consistency do we find in their responses to the dilemmas of foreign policy, and to what extent is this reflected in their graduation in the international scenario?

This comparison allows us to identify opportunities for international projection with recent and incomplete democratization processes and to consider how these opportunities are presented in historical processes.

### **Brazil and South Africa's democratization processes and prestige diplomacy**

One of the concepts underlying this research is the idea that democracy is a process, a construction, subject to advances and retreats. The return to a constitution, rule of law and civil government, being the last stage of contemporary political transitions, does not mean that democratic consolidation has been achieved (PINHEIRO, 1998). No country is immune to the contradictions innate to democratic construction; there is no 'telos' – there is a process. This is an analytical perspective arrived at by Guillermo O'Donnell (1988) and explored by the literature that studies the relationship between new political coalitions in a democratic context and the old bases of authoritarian support, as well as their effects on transitional justice processes (BERNARDI, 2016; HUNTINGTON, 1991; ZALLAQUETT, 1992).

Both countries had to make great efforts to reverse their terrible international images resulting from human rights violations by the apartheid regime in South Africa (1948-1994) and the military regime in Brazil (1964-1985). That is why their democratization processes shed light on the area of human rights, which has taken on greater prominence for Brazil and South Africa in their domestic and foreign policy agendas. Getting closer to the world through a shift toward the defense of human rights was a fundamental step toward achieving international credibility, as per the 'Lock In' mechanisms<sup>4</sup>, whereby a country's democratization

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<sup>4</sup>According to the literature, one of the indicators of democratization that has a direct interface with the construction of international prestige is accession to international human rights treaties and acceptance of the legal competence of the international courts. See: Hafner-Burton et al., 2008; Moravcsik, 2000; Manfield and Pevehouse, 2006.

process encourages it to increase its participation in international agreements in the field of human rights.

Of course, the intensity of international expectations differed by country, since in the South African case international mobilization against apartheid was on a greater scale to such opprobrium as was directed against the Brazilian military regime. Renouncing the development of nuclear weapons was also an important way<sup>5</sup> of distinguishing Brazil and South Africa's new governments from their previous regimes of exception and their ambitions to develop nuclear programs for military purposes (FIG, 1999).

As part of their democratization processes, Brazil and South Africa signed a large number of international human rights treaties<sup>6</sup>. This was a symbolic element in the acceptance of their democratic credentials, a clear demonstration of goodwill and the legitimization of a new international presence that is shaped by respect for the fundamental rights of their citizens. The constitutions promulgated in 1988 in Brazil and 1996 in South Africa reinforced the discursive centrality of human rights in the reconstruction of the social and political order. It should be emphasized, however, that the nature of the democratization process in each country produced distinct dynamics of adherence to international human rights mechanisms.

Human rights were a more important theme for South Africa than for Brazil. South Africa's efforts to achieve full transitional justice with punishment of violations by various actors (and not only public agents) is proof of the centrality of human rights in its political transition. The global reach of the South African case and the expectations created allowed for a direct association with human rights in the country's foreign policy. The 'Lock In' strategy was central to South Africa's foreign policy, mainly due to the degree of international isolation of the apartheid regime. The historic specificity of South Africa's transition created an atmosphere of great optimism there and around the world. The 'South African miracle' of a peaceful transition in a politically polarized and violent environment forged a scenario that proved much more difficult to achieve in reality.

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<sup>5</sup>South Africa signed the TNP in 1991 and Brazil signed it in 1998.

<sup>6</sup>For the dates on which each country signed the human rights treaties, see <<http://indicators.ohchr.org/>>. Accessed on April, 21, 2020.

Mandela's globally recognized moral leadership catalyzed the almost naïve international perception that South Africa would be a new bastion of respect for human rights. This expectation was in part the result of a mistaken reading of the South African transition, a perception that was catalyzed by the global popularity of the campaign against apartheid and its place as a symbol of transnational advocacy networks in the civil societies of liberal democracies (BRAGA, 2011).

The historical singularity of South Africa, the symbolism of Nelson Mandela as internationally acclaimed leader, the great optimism about human rights in the post-Cold War international environment, the greater functionality of the UN after the bipolar era – all of these helped create the 'origin myths' of South Africa's foreign policy (BRAGA, 2017). These myths were produced from expectations that South Africa would be an implacable defender of human rights throughout the international system.

Mandela was critical of governments that violated human rights in the region. This caused a degree of discomfort, especially considering the recent history of apartheid and its unilateral and militarist foreign policy in Africa. Sanctions against Nigeria in 1995 and intervention in Lesotho in 1998 were emblematic, as they resulted in strong reactions from African countries. The adoption of unilateral sanctions against the regime of General Abacha in Nigeria occurred after the execution of human rights activists<sup>7</sup>, but was rejected by African leaders in the African Union. The military intervention in Lesotho to re-establish its constitutional order was seen as reviving the militarism of apartheid. South Africa's ability to use its power to defend a liberal internationalism linked to human rights has been severely constrained by suspicions of its ambitions to become a regional hegemon by implementing a Western agenda (SOUTHALL, 2006, pp. 04-06). The role of South Africa was over estimated, both because of its material limitations and the political peculiarities of its transition, but also because of the geopolitical role it had taken on in the region.

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<sup>7</sup>On November 10, 1995, Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight activists were hanged. They were protesting non-violently against the pollution caused by oil companies in the Niger delta. Ken Saro-Wiwa led the Ogoni People's Survival movement (MOSOP), which denounced Shell-led 'ecological war on the part of oil multinationals' in the Niger Delta. He won the Alternative Nobel Prize in 1994.

The fact that the political transition in Brazil was negotiated between the military and political elites led to another dynamic. During the transitional period, the relationship with the military was a complex one and the political elite from the dictatorship still had influence in the transition government. There was no consensus about the importance of human rights, which were initially seen as a rhetorical instrument. They were not a central element of the political opening, as revealed by the nature of the democratization process. Brazil opted for a deal between elites and non-punishment of public agents for crimes committed during the military dictatorship with the Amnesty Law of 1979. The phrase the 'slow road to Brazilian democratization' (SKIDMORE, 1988) reveals the conciliatory and non-investigatory nature of the Brazilian political transition, especially with the amnesty for public agents responsible for human rights violations and the absence of a transitional justice process. In view of the relationship between the new political coalition and the old support base for the dictatorship, there was no real commitment on the part of elites to the theme of human rights (HUNTINGTON, 1991; ZALLAQUETT, 1992). Bernardi (2016) cites factors beyond the alliance between members of the elite, such as the resistance of senior judges to interference from international human-rights courts and the difficulties for civil society of mobilizing to create pressure for Brazilian participation in human-rights international instruments.

Nonetheless, President José Sarney's speech at the UN General Assembly in 1985 (CÔRREA, 2012), in which he admitted that Brazil had a dreadful history in the area of human rights, represented a change from the policies of denial that had characterized Brazilian diplomacy during the military regime. The change of discourse was an initial step, if an insufficient one, towards human rights being a key component of Brazil's foreign policy narrative. This movement occurred in a context of the recuperation of the country's diplomatic credentials at the beginning of the democratization process.

The West's 'victory' at the end of the Cold War fomented the belief in the superiority of liberal democracy and the realization of its ideals, such as human rights. Efforts to renew Brazil's diplomatic credentials, a work in progress since the Sarney government, placed the neoliberal agenda alongside Brazil's participation in the international human rights regime. During the Collor government, transparency

substituted the policy of denial of human rights violations that prevailed during the military regime and was still present in the first civilian government's defensive approach (PINHEIRO, 2001, p. 08). The increased prominence of human rights within the narrative of 'Western modernization' in the post-Cold War period and greater participation on the part of Brazilian NGOs favored a new perception by political and diplomatic elites of the link between influence in multilateral institutions and a more proactive and transparent foreign policy in terms of human rights.

The military regime in Brazil was not as internationally isolated as the South African apartheid regime was. Criticism of the Brazilian military regime was limited to US President Jimmy Carter's campaign for human rights in the second half of the 1970s and did not mobilize a transnational advocacy network, as was the case with antiapartheid activism (BRAGA, 2011; CÔRTEZ, 2010). Accession to the international human rights regime ('Lock In') was therefore slow and gradual due to the nature of the negotiated transition process, with its broad amnesty and precarious transitional justice, and did not come with as many international expectations as South Africa<sup>8</sup>.

A key difference between Brazilian and South African foreign policies after the beginning of the democratization process in Brazil and the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa lies in the fact that, despite the political-institutional instability of the Brazilian political scenario, after two decades of military dictatorship, Brazilian diplomacy had consistent institutional foundations, thanks to the traditions of its diplomatic corps. South Africa went through a deep institutional reform process. Regime change was characterized by more foreign policy continuity in Brazil than South Africa. Despite this difference, the convergence between the historical values of Brazilian diplomacy and those that have been prioritized in the construction of 'New South Africa' is relevant, as is the emphasis on the peaceful settlement of international disputes through multilateral

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<sup>8</sup>Both countries (Brazil, on December 10, 2001, and South Africa on July 17, 2003) signed the Standing Invitation for UN special thematic procedures, which allowed rapporteur and working group visits. See at <<http://spinternet.ohchr.org/Layouts/SpecialProceduresInternet/StandingInvitations.aspx>>. Accessed on June, 15, 2020.

mechanisms; reformist diplomacies in the main institutions of global governance; and participation in peace operations.

The Mandela government (1994-1999) and the Cardoso government (1995-2002) implanted a series of economic reforms that catered to the neoliberal agendas of international financial institutions sponsored by Western powers. Thus, the 1990s symbolized not only the end of the Cold War but also the hegemony of the neoliberal model and its widespread implementation as a panacea for the structural crises of developing countries. This 'one track mind' way of thinking, led by the USA and reproduced in international financial institutions, became, in its diplomatic dimension, the symbol of good governance and respect for human rights. There is, therefore, a certain parallelism between South Africa and Brazil in respect of the 'prestige diplomacies' that they developed within international organizations.

The lack of social results, low economic growth, high unemployment and inequality, fragmented the neoliberal consensus, which led to Brazil and South Africa each carrying out its own revision of the international integration that had prevailed in the 1990s. The formation of South-South partnerships and the growing leadership roles of Global South countries transformed the geopolitical dynamic of the international system in the 21st century. Innovative initiatives, such as the IBSA Forum<sup>9</sup>, the BRICS and the G20<sup>10</sup> at the WTO are effective results of connections based on Southern narratives that question the Western monopolization of major international institutions, discussed in the next section as the second step in the application of the comparative model.

### **Brazil and South Africa's 'Graduation Dilemmas'**

The search for an international leadership role has become more intense and autonomous than in the 1990s. Brazil and South Africa's international projects remained rooted in democratization, respect for human rights, the defense of multilateralism and the peaceful settlement of international disputes, but with

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<sup>9</sup>The India, Brazil and South Africa Dialog Forum (IBSA) was created in 2003 and brought together three multicultural democracies from the developing world. The IBSA operates in three main areas: political coordination, sectoral cooperation and the IBAS Fund. The last IBAS Summit was held in 2011 in Pretoria.

<sup>10</sup>The G20 is a group that was created on August 20, 2003, at the 5th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization in Cancún. The group is made up of developing countries and aims at convergence in terms of the agriculture agenda.

greater motivation, demanding spaces for power and norm creation. Due to this more positive participation on the international scene, the graduation dilemmas began to pile up.

International perceptions of the progress of Brazil and South Africa's democratization processes, combined with the relative success of previous governments' prestige diplomacies, had opened the door to more ambitious international graduation projects. While democratization processes may not be central to foreign policy narratives, as we will see in this section, the search for a leadership role is linked to international recognition of the success of these processes (without discarding the possibility of subsequent setbacks, as we will see in the final considerations of this article). The search for a global leadership role creates graduation dilemmas, especially in terms of the regional global nexus. The observation of these dilemmas is only possible because of the existence of a graduation project; they are intimately associated to the progress of democratization processes. This chain of events is identified using process tracing.

Brazil and South Africa are fundamental players in this new configuration of power in which a plurality of narratives from the Global South retrieve and adapt the third-world lexicon in the international system. Brazil and South Africa's foreign policy projects of reforming global governance and building variable coalitions provided greater scope for maneuver in the international arena. This is a portrait of the affirmation of the two countries as protagonists in the 21st century international system. The governments of Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008) and Lula da Silva (2003-2010) reoriented foreign policy through the prism of the geopolitical vision of the Global South.

While scaling up foreign policy strategies, largely because of the progress in their democratization processes and the re-conquest of their diplomatic credentials, Brazil and South Africa become more exposed to inconsistencies in their international actions. Regional powers constantly face the dilemma between recognition by Western powers, which entails the risk of a loss of trust in the region, and regional support, which entails the risk of Western disapproval (ALDEN and VIEIRA, 2005, p. 1091).

During the Lula da Silva governments (2003-2010), Brazil's foreign policy was strongly regionally focused, with Brazil becoming the pivot for new integration

initiatives such as the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA)<sup>11</sup> and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Some of these initiatives revealed Brazil's intention of providing regional public goods, such as the creation of the Fund for the Social Convergence of Mercosur (FOCEM)<sup>12</sup>. Other examples include cooperative solutions to problems that involved Brazilian material interests, such as the matter of the Itaipu hydroelectric plant, where Brazil agreed to pay three times more for the energy produced by the dam than Paraguay would (PAULA, 2013), and the locating of Petrobrás refineries in Bolivia, where Brazil accepted Bolivian conditions (CEPIK and CARRA, 2006). These were cases where Brazil sought to position itself as a paymaster (MATTLI, 1999; VIGEVANI et al., 2008) by shouldering the burden of regional leadership on specific issues.

However, regional perceptions and domestic elite resistance to Brazil shouldering these costs never favored Brazilian regional affirmation. The ideological dimension of the power status was subject to regional geopolitical and democratic instability. For instance, while Brazil was an important actor in mediating the political crisis in Venezuela at the beginning of the Lula government, by taking on the leadership of the Group of Friends of Venezuela in 2003 (AMORIM, 2011; SPEKTOR, 2014), during the 'paper factory crisis' between Uruguay and Argentina, Brazil was called upon to mediate but opted to maintain its distance in the name of the principle of non-intervention. A case was brought by Argentina at the International Court of Justice in 2006 and had a major impact on the credibility of Mercosur (ESPIELL, 2007).

Despite bringing together material capacities in its region, Brazil did not manage to translate this into support from its neighbors for global projects. Brazil managed to drum up more support outside of the region than in it, especially in Africa (HIRST, 2017). Opposition from Argentina, its main regional partner, to Brazil's demand for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, was the most forceful expression of the disconnection between Brazil's leadership project and the

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<sup>11</sup>This was subsequently transformed into COSIPLAN, an organ of UNASUR.

<sup>12</sup>The aim of FOCEM is "to finance programs to promote structural convergence, develop competitiveness and promote social cohesion, in particular on the part of smaller economies and less developed regions; to support the functioning of the institutional structure and to strengthen the integration process" (MERCOSUR, 2020).

region. Brazil argued that it should be a permanent Security Council member to represent South America but was not supported by other countries in the region. In 2005, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the UN, more vigorous debates on reform of the organization took place at the General Assembly under Secretary-General Kofi Annan. A proposal supported by the G-4 (Brazil, India, Germany and Japan) was opposed by the 'Union for Consensus' grouping, which included Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, among other countries (CERVO and BUENO, 2008; VIGEVANI and CEPALUNI, 2007).

The 2005 candidacy of an Uruguayan diplomat, Carlos Pérez del Castillo, for Director-General of the WTO, competed with the candidacy of the Brazilian diplomat Luiz Felipe de Seixas Correa – an empirical example of the difficulties of the Brazilian leadership. Argentina supported the Uruguayan candidate. The result was that both South American candidates lost to the French candidate, Pascal Lamy (MALAMUD, 2011, p. 09).

South African diplomacy performed better at the regional level given new multilateral mechanisms in Africa. With the election of Thabo Mbeki in 1999, South Africa took on a key role in conflict mediation and reconstruction processes through regional institutions, especially the reconfigured African Union (AU), and was engaged in dozens of African countries (NEUWKERK, 2012, p. 86).

The African agenda enjoyed a 'golden age' (LANDSBERG, 2012). Multilateralism represented a major shift from the Mandela government, whose unilateralism in African crises led to resistance from other countries in the region. Mbeki turned multilateralism into the main vehicle for pan-African ambitions (SOUTHALL, 2006, p. 04), this being fundamental to the institutionalization of regional mechanisms that enhance multilateral conflict resolution.

The case of South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy' vis-à-vis Zimbabwe is the most emblematic and controversial example of the prioritization of Pan-Africanism at the expense of human rights. 'Quiet diplomacy' was much discussed in the public debate about South African foreign policy, which was generally critical of South Africa for its accommodating stance in regard to the dictator Robert Mugabe (COMPAGNON,

2011; ICG, 2001; SACHIKONYE, 2011)<sup>13</sup>. Other important mediation processes and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in which South Africa participated deserve mention but will not be detailed here because of limitations of the research agenda. Some examples are the cases of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Sudan, Eswatini, the Central African Republic, Mali and Somalia (TONHEIM and SWART, 2015). Regardless of the results achieved in mediation processes, the geopolitical context demanded that South Africa perform an active role as mediator and negotiator in various African conflicts. Negotiations within the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) during the South African transition provided the country with the credentials to deal with groups in conflict (MITI, 2012, p. 40).

The strategic importance of Africa in South Africa's international integration project gained clearer outlines with the institutional innovations led by President Mbeki, mainly by institutionalizing pan-African perspectives with the reformulation of the AU and the creation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). South Africa's concern to avoid awakening regional mistrust of apparently imperialist strategies was one of the main factors behind its construction of regional alliances and institutional consolidation. Pretoria began to regard its political and economic destiny as inextricably linked to that of the entire African continent (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 594).

In the cases of Brazil and South Africa, appearing too strong can incite fears and evoke the diplomatic history of apartheid and the military regime; just as it can lead to demands from neighbors. The Brazilian strategy of international leadership has at times seen it cut off from the region, while South Africa's foreign policy has made Africa a central factor in its search for a leading role.

An example that illustrated the distinction well was Brazil's campaign for the reform of the Security Council, one of the great diplomatic efforts of the Lula administration. Brazil was unable to drum up a consensus in its region, a totally distinct position from South Africa. Pretoria did not campaign for a permanent seat on the Security Council and followed the African Union proposal which avoided defining which countries would occupy the permanent seats for the African

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<sup>13</sup>Robert Mugabe was forced to resign by Zimbabwe's military leadership in November 2017. Direct elections to the Presidency were held in 2018 and won by Emmerson Mnangagwa of the ruling Zanu-PF party. Robert Mugabe died in 2019.

continent. The South African regional position was put ahead of national ambitions. Janis van der Westhuizen gets to the heart of the matter: “whilst Brasilia considers itself a regional power and occasionally also speaks for South America, its international identity is not as profoundly tied to its commitment to speak for its region as is the case for South Africa, given the latter’s deep roots in the pan-Africanist politics of liberation” (WESTHUIZEN, 2016, p. 240).

South Africa has managed to balance a reformist approach encompassing the Global South with a pan-African strategy. This is a response to a graduation dilemma. In Brazil’s case, reformist projects drawn up without a regional consensus having been built lead to a regional perception of a domination strategy. According to the graduation dilemma model: “in the first case, the Southern perspective would foster regional integration and lead to graduation; in the second, it would result in superficial ties of interaction, and thus might lead to regional domination” (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 594). While neighboring countries recognize that the existence of regional powers brings potential benefits (such as the production of collective goods or the internalization of security costs), this recognition is accompanied by a fear of domination and coercive hegemonic practices.

It should be noted that the degree of regional asymmetry in the Brazilian case is more pronounced, given the size of the Brazilian economy compared to those of its South American neighbors. In the South African case, regional leadership across the continent is a contested prize, if one considers competition from other regional powers, such as Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and even Angola, if one considers military capacity. South African leadership is more limited to southern Africa, for this is the country’s immediate area of influence, where South Africa presents itself as the region’s main economy – the significant flow of immigrants from southern African countries to South Africa proves its economic importance. Still, its political relevance across Africa is very significant. South Africa’s role as a mediator has cemented its place in the region. South Africa “had carved itself a vital role in rule making and norm creation in the Great Lakes region; and now plays a key role as interlocutor between the Southern African and Eastern African sub-regions” (NIEUWKERK, 2012, p. 93).

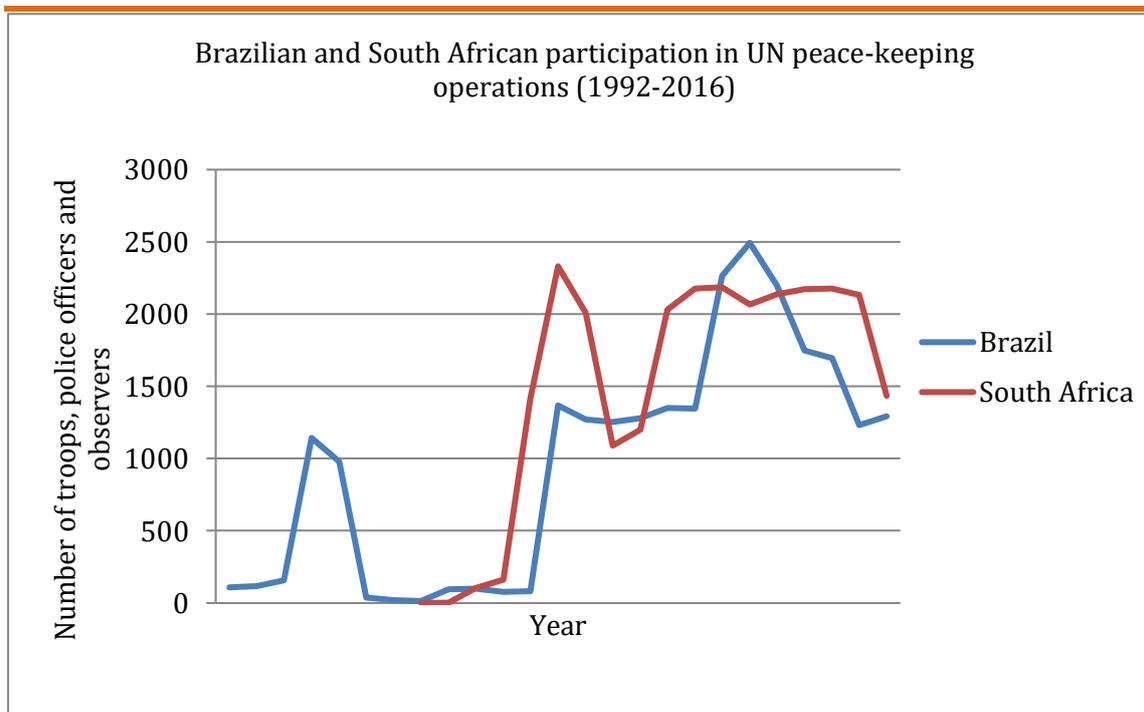
This role expresses the legacy of the South African political transition and its effects on foreign policy. The human rights agenda was aligned with Pan-Africanism and inspired South Africa's dispute-settlement model. South African diplomacy for the region was inspired by the legacy of its democratic transition, with its prioritization of constructive engagement and dialog (as in the CODESA negotiations and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). This differed from the sanctions policy tested by Mandela in 1995. President Mbeki's policy of "African solutions to African problems" is seen as the South African standard for conflict resolution, through the training of local negotiators to participate in an "all-inclusive negotiation process" (MITI, 2012, p. 40). Anthoni van Nieuwkerk described South Africa's role in African conflict mediation thus: "whenever there is a crisis somewhere in Africa, the phone rings in Pretoria" (NIEWKERK, 2015). Participation in UN missions can reveal many constitutive elements of regional powers' international projects. In the 2000s, Brazil and South Africa's foreign policies were characterized by increasing autonomy; increased participation in peace operations make evident a search for international leadership. Graph 01 depicts this evolution, of notable importance during the Lula and Mbeki governments.

The participation of Brazil and South Africa in regional crises (including peace-keeping operations) is a theme that reveals the potential and limitations of regional leadership. Mediation in regional conflicts is one of the important elements in the conceptual debate on regional powers (NOLTE, 2010). Case studies also point to this: the regional-global nexus is more strategic for South African foreign policy.

South Africa regularly mediates crises on the African continent, much more regularly and consistently than Brazil, whose participation in mediation processes in regional crises is occasional (LIMA and HIRST, 2006). South Africa enjoys regional recognition as a crisis-mediator country, mainly due to the legacy of its democratic transition, which is internationally recognized as having prevented a civil war. Since the political transition, South African diplomacy has participated as a crisis mediator in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, the Ivory Coast, Sudan, Eswatini, the Central African Republic, Mali and Somalia – with varying results, it is worth noting. The country's active role in peace operations in Africa is facilitated by its credibility. By contrast Brazil's uneven role in conflict

mediation (as in the mismatch between the Venezuela crisis in 2003 and the paper crisis in 2005) shows that it has no consolidated experience in the field, which is reflected in the global-regional nexus (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 599).

**Graph 01.** Comparative evolution of military participation in peace-keeping operations



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Ranking of Military and Police Contributions to UN Operations<sup>14</sup>.

Brazil has more material capacity for international projection than South Africa, given the greater regional asymmetries. When Brazil gives up regional strategy, however, its neighbors start asking questions, which undermines its international role. This is another graduation dilemma, a more expressive one in the case of Brazil, as the country engages in a range of actions that overshadow its regional role. Regional leadership can be interpreted as a logic of regional domination if the country in question only mobilizes the region to meet its international needs. In addition, in the case of Brazil, the US presence in the region creates another dilemma as regards challenging a hemispheric power that is a global superpower (MILANI, PINHEIRO and LIMA, 2017, p. 599). In short, Pan-African solidarity is more important for South Africa than Pan-American solidarity

<sup>14</sup>Available at <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>>.

is for Brazil (WESTHUIZEN, 2016, p. 240). For South Africa, the region is essential for international leadership; for Brazil, not always.

### **Final considerations**

This article sought to understand how foreign policy is mobilized in the face of intense challenges posed to regional powers of the Global South that have recently undergone democratization processes. The cases of Brazil and South Africa reveal the complexity of the dilemmas created for countries with this trajectory. The comparison of their foreign policies was defined by these important specificities. In the first stage of the application of the model, the empirical focus was 'prestige diplomacy' and the premise set forth in the literature on the human rights 'Lock In' mechanism employed by Brazil and South Africa to legitimize their democratization processes internationally. When Brazil and South Africa are able to express more ambitious power projects for greater global recognition of their democracies and the systemic conjuncture is favorable, the focus of comparison is on the graduation dilemmas that are expressed mainly in the relationship between the global project and regional issues.

The two countries' international engagement profiles are similar and based on multilateralism, human rights and the peaceful resolution of disputes. This does not mean that the causal mechanisms identified in the event chain (process tracing) produce identical profiles. In moments of increased international projection, these singularities produce dilemmas on distinct scales. Engagement with the region reveals how these graduation dilemmas manifest themselves in foreign policy; the ability to respond to them will remain an important indicator for foreign policy studies.

The current political and economic crises in Brazil and South Africa reinforce the understanding of non-probabilistic causality in terms of this research. The intensity of the democratic setbacks through which countries pass reveals the instability of democratization processes that can go into reverse. In the case of South Africa, the economic crisis and the 2018 resignation of Jacob Zuma affected its regional projection. In the Brazilian case, the role of Brazil as a regional power and

its search for international prominence have been fatally damaged by the radical changes of course undertaken by the Bolsonaro government (2019-)<sup>15</sup>.

The break from the foreign policy narrative produced over the period from democratization to the impeachment of President Rousseff is the result of the fragility of the Brazilian democratization process and the precariousness of transitional justice, among other factors. This reveals and confirms the fragility of the legal and empirical affirmation of human rights in Brazil. In the international human rights regime, Brazil reversed the multilateral position that it had built up in the wake of democratization, especially in its votes in the Human Rights Council (HRC)<sup>16</sup>. The Bolsonaro government's disruptive foreign policy (SPEKTOR, 2019), is marked by rejection of the constitutional principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, as can be seen in its support for institutional rupture processes in the cases of Venezuela and Bolivia, and its explicit support for presidential candidates in elections in strategic allied countries, such as its support for Mauricio Macri and Donald Trump, who were defeated in elections in Argentina and the US, respectively. The absence of Brazil in Colombia's pacification process and its breaking off of diplomatic relations with Venezuela confirm the inability of the Bolsonaro government to engage in diplomatic dialog and the associated atrophy of Brazil's political capital in the region. Institutionally, the announcement of Brazil's exit from UNASUR reveals the hollowing-out of regional integration efforts. International isolation and the absence of political graduation objectives are symptomatic. Without an ambition to a global leadership role, the graduation dilemmas fade out.

Translated by Fraser Robinson  
Submitted on June 16, 2020  
Accepted on August 09, 2021

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<sup>15</sup>See SPEKTOR (2019).

<sup>16</sup>E.g., in a vote at the 41st Session of the HRC on the issue of sex education, Brazil supported Pakistan's proposal to exclude the recommendation of 'ensuring universal access to comprehensive evidence-based sexuality education'. Resolution A/HRC/41/L.26. Available at <[https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/41/L.26](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/41/L.26)>. Accessed on March, 03, 2021. In a resolution voted on in the 41st session of the HRC, against child and forced marriage, Brazil voted in favor of an amendment proposed by Egypt and Iraq to exclude from the text a reference 'to the right to sexual and reproductive health'. Resolution A/HRC/41/L.8/Rev.1. Available at <[https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/41/L.8/Rev.1](https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/41/L.8/Rev.1)>. Accessed on March, 31, 2021.

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