



Revista Brasileira de  
Política Internacional

ISSN 1983-3121

<http://www.scielo.br/rbpi>

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# Status and Brazil's role as a peace mediator - lessons of the foreign perceptions of the failed Tehran deal

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202300114>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 66(1): e014, 2023

## Abstract

This paper delves into Brazil's attempt to mediate global conflicts to enhance its international status, focusing on the case of the Tehran Declaration. Drawing on interviews with the foreign policy community of the United Nations Security Council's permanent members (P5), the study underscores the perception of major powers regarding Brazil's mediation attempts. The findings suggest that while Brazil's mediation could enhance its prestige, it is viewed as lacking significant influence in high-stake global security conflicts. The Tehran deal episode exemplifies Brazil's overextension. These perceptions may provide lessons for the Brazilian attempt to mediate the war in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** status; Brazil; Mediation; Iran Nuclear deal.

Received: August 11, 2023

Accepted: October 20, 2023

## Introduction

Brazil has lived under a deep political polarisation since the early 2010s, but one point seemed to unite the far right and the left: a reluctance to take sides regarding the war in Ukraine and the interest in playing an important role in negotiating an end to the conflict. Both presidents, Jair Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva spoke of peace, avoided taking sides, and criticised sanctions and other punishments of Russia – despite having different reasonings<sup>1</sup> for that position.

After the invasion, Bolsonaro's Brazil maintained a certain ambiguity regarding the war. The country voted against the attack

<sup>1</sup> For Bolsonaro, neutrality was articulated in terms of rejecting multilateralism. This stance resonated with his broader foreign policy approach (Casarões and Farias 2022). For Lula, it was more related to maintaining a multipolar approach independent from the West. For both, economic interests and (possibly mainly) Brazil's tradition of diplomatic neutrality underpinned their shared view on the matter (Tabosa 2023)

at the UN General Assembly but did not support sanctions against Russia (Gielow 2022; Marins 2023). Even within this ambiguity, however, there were attempts to put Brazil in the centre of the discussions about peace. Carlos França, then Foreign Minister, suggested to US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken that “Brazil could be a mediator and a facilitator” (Duran 2022). Bolsonaro said he knew how the war could be “resolved”. Aligning became an important subject during the 2022 presidential election in Brazil (“Como a guerra na Ucrânia pode influenciar as eleições no Brasil.” 2022; Klein 2022). Even before he was elected president, Lula criticised the conflict, affirmed the need for peace, and blamed both Zelensky and Putin for the war (Nugent 2022; Spaulonci et al. 2022). During the presidential campaign, Lula stated that Brazil’s only involvement would be in an attempt at a peaceful solution to the conflict (Spaulonci et al. 2022). After his inauguration for a third term as president, Lula continued to defend neutrality and put forward the idea of mediating an end to the conflict (“Veja o que Lula já disse sobre a guerra da Ucrânia.” 2023). Just two months after taking office, Lula proposed to US President Joe Biden the creation of a multilateral arrangement to negotiate the end of the war in Ukraine that he called a “Peace Club” (Balza 2023). During his first six months in office, Lula spent much time seeking to boost Brazilian prospects as a mediator (Heine 2023).

Brazil’s attempt to be a mediator for peace is one of a few traces of continuation seen in the foreign policies of the two political rivals and polar opposites who held the Presidency. In fact, the search for peaceful conflict resolution is a constitutive element of Brazil’s diplomacy. It has long been seen as a part of Brazil’s ambition to achieve high international status (Kenkel et al. 2020).

However, the recent history of attempting to put the country as a reliable mediator of critical conflicts offers essential lessons, since great powers and the parties involved in war and peace negotiations need to recognise such a role for a country like Brazil to play. The most prominent case is when Brazil tried to broker a nuclear deal between Iran and the West in 2010.

There is a growing literature on status-seeking and emerging power (Carvalho et al. 2020; Paul et al. 2014; Renshon 2017) and equally on mediation in general (Duursma 2014). But studies coupling emerging powers and conflict management are still lacking (Parlar Dal 2018). This paper seeks to contribute to that agenda, focusing on mediation and status-seeking regarding Brazil. Based on a theoretical framework of status in international relations, this paper analyses how Brazil’s attempt to mediate the Tehran deal was perceived from abroad to understand the country’s role in other high-level global negotiations.

Drawn from a reflexive thematic analysis of primary data from interviews with the foreign policy community (FPC) of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (P5), the paper argues that the perception of great powers is that Brazil does not have a significant role in matters of global security. More precisely, P5 policymakers do not see Brazil as a reliable mediator for peace in international conflicts of substantial proportions and outside its region. The analysis focuses on the interviewees’ perceptions of the country’s attempt to broker nuclear negotiations with Iran in 2010. It reveals the general perception among the great powers that Brazil does not have enough hard power to have a strong voice in the “big game” issues of international

security. This emphasises the topic's importance and facilitates an intricate exploration of major powers' perspectives on Brazil's endeavours.

The paper comprises four sections. It introduces status in international relations and mediation's role in state prestige. It briefly outlines Brazil's historical mediation efforts, including the failure of the Tehran Declaration. The following section examines how Brazil's mediation in Iran nuclear negotiations was seen as overextension of its foreign policy, as if the country was trying to do something that was beyond its ability to influence international matters. It concludes by discussing the implications of the case and evaluates lessons for the tentative to mediate the Ukrainian war.

## The need for recognition - Status in international relations

This paper draws from a theoretical framework of status in international relations to analyse the country's bid to mediate a nuclear deal between Iran and the West. Status refers to the rank or standing in the hierarchy of a group. Within international relations, it concerns a state's position within a hierarchy of nations and consists of collective beliefs about its standing. Valued attributes determine status in IR but is only recognised intersubjectively by voluntary deference. It refers to the way nations are differentiated and ranked according to their perceived characteristics and capabilities (Clunan 2014; Götz 2020; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Wohlforth 2014; Paul et al. 2014).

The analysis of status in IR has recently found its place within the mainstream academic field, but the concept has long been present in established scholarship. Its use is based on the idea that states' behaviour is motivated by their interest in their international standing. And it leads to studying the motivations of leaders in pursuing agendas that are not entirely explained by other IR theories and discussing how the search for prestige can explain actions, reactions and even conflicts between nations (Carvalho 2020; Clunan 2014; Dafoe et al 2014; Carvalho et al. 2020; Paul et al. 2014; Renshon 2017).

In this pursuit, status-seeking countries want to acquire symbolic equality regarding the selected club of great powers. Among other things, being part of this club permits countries to have more significant roles in relevant world political matters since "great-power privileges are essentially rulemaking privileges" (Mukherjee 2022, 47).

Material capabilities are an important factor of international status. They often correlate with high status. But they are not the sole source (Mukherjee 2022, 37). Valued attributes regarding status can also be independent of those material elements. Concerning conflict resolution, countries lacking expressive material power can still aspire to reach high prestige as peacemakers and succeed in that goal. In the theoretical literature on status-seeking, providing conflict resolution as a strategy is increasingly seen as one crucial approach within a broader toolbox. For instance, Norway experienced significant benefits when it emerged as a prominent mediator in international

conflicts following the Oslo Accords (Carvalho and Neumann 2014). Among middle powers in the Global South, Turkey appears to stand out in this regard (Mehmetcik and Belder 2021; Kutlay and Öniş 2021).

There is a predisposition of emerging powers to participate in conflict management events. In part, those states do that for status-seeking purposes. As an author has affirmed, “[a]lmost all rising powers pursue status seeking behaviours in the realm of peacebuilding, and this may affect the outcomes of their relations with major powers” (Parlar Dal 2018, 2210).

Even though Brazil does not have expressive military capacity compared to Western powers, it seeks to build credentials in the international agenda of security and peace resolutions. Brazil does that through its participation in multilateral forums, such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (Motta and Succi Junior 2023). The attempt to mediate conflict, peace operations, and humanitarian intervention are essential elements of Brazil’s foreign policy ambition of achieving high status as an emerging power (Kenkel et al. 2020). It can be understood as part of one of the main motivations of Brazilian Foreign Policy (BFP), which is to increase the level of prestige and the standing of the state in the stratified international society (Mares and Trinkunas 2016; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Stolte 2015; Ricupero 2017; Rohter 2012; Lafer 2000; Milani et al. 2017; Buarque 2013; Souza 2008; Motta and Succi Junior 2023; Uziel 2015).

Concerning international security politics, Brazil seems to adopt a hybrid approach: it seeks to position itself as “a bridge or a broker between the West and the South” (Carvalho 2020, 21). Brazil does that by trying to combine Western understanding, such as the idea of doing something even in an internal crisis, with non-Western ones, such as the more “sovereignist” interpretations of non-intervention. In this way, the country wishes to reach the great powers’ club as a kind of Southern great power (Carvalho 2020, 28).

The theoretical framework of status in IR, however, makes it clear that mere aspiration for status is not enough. The level of prestige of a nation depends on how it is perceived by other members of the international society (Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Clunan 2014; Renshon 2017; MacDonald and Parent 2021; Paul et al. 2014). Emerging powers are particularly keen on the way great powers perceive them. Failure to be perceived as a symbolic equal member of this select club hinders aspiring nations’ goal of having significant roles in matters usually reserved for the great powers (Mukherjee 2022, 46). Although the ambition has marked Brazil’s international agenda for status, the country was not able to achieve recognition as one of the major powers of the world, even when it was seen as being on the rise between the late 1990s and early 2000s (Carvalho et al. 2020; Mares and Trinkunas 2016; Rohter 2012; Ricupero 2017).

The analysis presented here is based on a small excerpt of a broader qualitative research about the international status of Brazil developed by conducting 94 semi-structured interviews with the FPC of the P5. By FPC, this study refers to a universe of individuals involved in foreign policymaking or who significantly contribute to forming opinions regarding foreign relations in the

countries analysed here. The group includes politicians, diplomats, interest group members, think tanks and NGO leaders, academics, journalists and businesspeople involved in the international sphere (Carvalho 2020). As the original study focused on Brazil's status in a broader sense, offering anonymity to the interviewees was important in order to allow them to speak freely about their perceptions of the country and its role in the world. This universe of interviewees was formed of 32 academics, researchers and professors, 28 members of international think tanks, 15 diplomats (including 10 former ambassadors to Brazil), 13 journalists, 4 businesspeople and 2 politicians. Most of the interviewees in this study, however, could represent more than one area of work. Some are academics and also work in think tanks, others are diplomats who also work as journalists, some are from think tanks but also deal with business.

The paper is based on a reflexive thematic analysis of 60 interviews with respondents from the P5, 12 from each of these countries. The data was treated as being a general representation of the FPC of the P5, and although the interviews are varied and offered very different and interesting points of view, which were not explored further here for a lack of space and time to develop a more careful analysis.

The interviews were conducted between March 2018 and July 2019. For the original research, the focus of the analysis was the status of Brazil, trying to understand what the FPC of the P5 perceived as being Brazil's standing in the global hierarchy and its attempts to increase its prestige. The interviewees were asked to give their own opinions about Brazil's status and role in international relations considering the period between the democratisation of the country, in 1989, and the end of 2014. The semi-structured interviews followed a systematically designed protocol formed of 8 questions and other possible follow ups used to assess the views about Brazil's status. Although the protocol did not include any specific question about the Tehran Deal, the country's mediator role was a prevalent code developed throughout the analysis of the data. The negotiations with Iran were voluntarily presented by 14 of the interviewees as an important example of Brazil's attempt to increase its status. This excerpt of the full dataset which focuses on Brazil's mediator role and the attempt to negotiate between the West and Iran has become the subject of analysis of this article.

## Brazil's status-seeking mediation

Brazil's engagement as a peace broker in international crises is not new. The country began participating as a third party during the early Republican period, when it, alongside Argentina and Chile, mediated the conflict between the United States and Mexico in 1913 (Berkowitz 2010). Later, during Getúlio Varga's administration, Brazil assisted its neighbouring countries in resolving disputes, including skirmishes between Colombia and Peru over the region of Leticia in 1933 and the conflict between Paraguay and Bolivia in the Chaco War in 1934 (Cervo and Bueno 2011, 259-261).

Despite Brazil's active engagement in mediations throughout the Twentieth century, these initiatives were not part of a conscious strategy to enhance the country's international status – at least not directly. Instead, other actions during that period aligned more clearly with Brazil's ambitions, such as the campaign to secure a permanent seat on the League of Nations' executive board (Garcia 1994) and the pursuit of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (Garcia 2012).

Lula's reinvigorated campaign for international status and a permanent seat at the UNSC seemed to alter Brazil's foreign policy approach to international crises. Since then, the country appeared more inclined to assume a proactive stance in intra and interstate conflicts, aligning with its quest for status. For instance, Brazil increased its investment in peacekeeping operations, with its prominent role in the Haiti Mission (MINUSTAH) being a significant case. A scholar stated that there was a "proud undercurrent of national promotion in the Brazilian approach to MINUSTAH" (Kenkel 2010, 657).

More importantly, for this paper, Brazil also aimed to have a voice in high-stakes crises, such as those in Libya and Syria. This was especially evident when Brazil introduced the concept of Responsibility while Protecting (RwP) following the NATO intervention in Libya. The purpose of RwP was to establish accountability standards within the framework of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Through RwP, Brazil sought to play a significant role in shaping norms related to critical security issues and also serve as a representative of the Global South, which strongly criticised the military operation and the use of R2P (Ribeiro et al. 2021).

In terms of mediation, Brazil's most notable initiative in line with its pursuit of status was its endeavour to facilitate an agreement between Iran and the West. Previously, the country had primarily engaged in mediation within Latin America (Kenkel 2010, 653). However, with this proposal, Lula's government aimed to showcase the country's emergence as a significant global power. Nevertheless, the rejection of the proposal also conveyed a message from the influential powers involved, including Global South actors like China.

## The failed Tehran Declaration

Brazil was frustrated in its quest to increase its status by mediating international disputes during the negotiations with Iran in 2010. Brazil and Turkey tried to broker a deal between Tehran and the West during the escalating tensions because of the Iranian nuclear programme. They went as far as announcing that a deal had been reached, only to be let down by the P5+1, a group formed by the five countries of the UNSC and Germany.

Negotiating a nuclear deal between Iran and the West presented Brazil with an opportunity to enhance its global influence, aiming to secure a more significant role in the international arena (Bastos 2016; Carvalho 2020; Chagas-Bastos 2017; Kassenova 2015; Lampreia 2014; Ricupero 2017). Within the framework of status in IR, Brazil's effort to mediate the Iran deal exemplifies

the strategic application to amplify its prestige. It means enhancing a state's soft power through diplomatic mediation and assuming a prominent role in international organisations to achieve international recognition. However, the ability to make a difference in an important negotiation such as the one with Iran is a status marker only powerful states have (Larson and Shevchenko 2019). While it is plausible to contend that major powers' foreign policy circles acknowledge Brazil's potential in international peace mediation, this brand of diplomatic negotiation starkly underscores Brazil's persistent endeavour to project itself as a consequential global actor,

According to Amorim (2010), the objective of Brazil's and Turkey's negotiations with Iran was to build confidence between Iran and the international community regarding its nuclear programme. The former Brazilian minister of Foreign Relations argues that the two countries were successful in doing so because both have good relations with Iran, both are non-nuclear states, thus enjoying far greater legitimacy before the eyes of the Iranian authorities as far as efforts directed at non-proliferation are concerned and did not assume upfront that the Iranian nuclear programme had necessarily non-peaceful uses. The agreement was not accepted by the West, Amorim continues, because they were expecting the deal to fail, and because the P5+1 changed their minds about the deal during the negotiations. Amorim (2010) reinforces that then US president Barack Obama sent Lula a letter three weeks before the Brazilian's trip to Tehran affirming the points he considered essential for an agreement, and that all of them were included in the Declaration. Amorim also mentions a possible reason dealing with the increased status of Brazil and Turkey with the deal. "Some of the P5 may not have liked to see two emerging nations like Brazil and Turkey playing a pivotal role in a crucial question concerning peace and security in the Middle East, especially in one where they themselves had failed" (Amorim 2010, 224).

It is possible to argue that there were also communication failures during the negotiations, as Brazil felt its efforts were being supported by Obama, who was in contact with Lula, while others within the US government, such as secretary of State Hillary Clinton and secretary of Defence Robert Gates, were strongly against any deals with Iran (Oliveira and Santos 2018). Brazil's attempt to get involved with matters of Middle Eastern politics was seen as a negative step by Washington DC., which was suspicious of Brazil's support for the Iranian nuclear program, with the US ambassador to Brazil calling Brazil's diplomacy in the Middle East "clumsy," and alleged that Brazil's official statements were normally unhelpful (Oliveira and Santos 2018; Amorim 2010).

Brazil's engagement was just a small part of a long and disputed process between Tehran and the West. While Brazil and Turkey negotiated with Iran, the US, France and the UK convinced the UNSC to impose sanctions on Iran, leading to a better deal for the West. Thus, the UNSC approved a resolution with more sanctions with a victory of 12 votes against 2 Brazil and Turkey (Lampreia 2014).

The literature on Brazil's part in the Tehran Declaration clearly shows that while the country believed it was projecting itself, the other states acted as if not recognising this role. The US and other Western states saw Brazil as closer to the interests of Iran than theirs and were not happy

with the deal reached (Lampreia 2014). For Washington, Brazilian participation was a hindrance more than an advance (Rohter 2012). According to Kaplan (2013), the diplomatic manoeuvres of Brazil and Turkey were perceived as an attempt to help Iran evade economic sanctions and gain time to develop a nuclear bomb. The P5+1 were displeased with Brazil's meddling, and the US signalled its displeasure with Brazil's diplomatic gambit on Iran by refusing to hold a state dinner for Dilma Rousseff in Washington (Larson and Shevchenko 2019).

Three years after the Brazilian attempt to broker the deal, the West finally agreed with Tehran in 2013. The deal reached with Iran in Geneva went much further than the Tehran Declaration from 2010, and that was seen as the result of the sanctions, which forced Iran to accept the impositions of the West (Lampreia 2014).

The initiative left a contradictory legacy. While it failed to achieve its primary goal and strained Brazil-US relations, it also sparked curiosity about Brazil's ambitions and potential (Kassenova 2015). For Lampreia (2014), the failed attempt showed Brazil's insufficient influence for a systemic impact on global affairs. The negotiation's collapse serves as a prime indicator of Brazil's unfulfilled aspirations for elevated international standing (Carvalho et al. 2020). Brazil's efforts to be a broker may have paradoxically weakened its case for recognition as a great power (Carvalho 2020).

Ricupero (2017), however, argues that despite all the caveats and the final frustration, the performance of Lula and Celso Amorim positively impressed analysts and international opinion. According to the Brazilian diplomat, some defeats proved more fruitful than certain victories; the Tehran deal's mediation failure significantly contributed to Brazil's heightened diplomatic prestige during that period.

Despite prior negative feedback, in 2023 Lula initiated his third term determined to mediate the Ukrainian war. Brazil's proactive role in this mediation may appear unconventional to major powers sceptical of the country's relevance to the European conflict. Nonetheless, the nation managed to capture the attention of crucial disputants. This can be attributed to Brazil's deliberate choice of not aligning with either side in the war, practising what is termed "active non-alignment.". This new approach differentiates from traditional non-alignment because it is happening in an era in which developing nations are in a much stronger position than in the past (Heine 2023; Fortín et al. 2023).

The following section will analyse how great powers perceive Brazil's efforts in the negotiations with Iran. It draws from interviews about the country's international status to understand Brazil's level of prestige and the recognition it has achieved while trying to play a major role in international politics, such as in its failed attempt to be a significant actor in the Tehran deal.

## Out of its league - Perceptions of the P5

Brazil's attempt to lead (along with Turkey) the negotiations and broker a deal between Iran and the West was perceived as an overextension of the country's ability and international role from the

perspective of great powers. While the P5 was all involved in dealing with Iran and even invited Germany to be a part of the talks to end Tehran's nuclear capabilities, these great powers never fully recognised that Brazil had a role to play in the discussions and saw the country as trying to act out of its league.

The systematic analysis of the interviews with the FPC of the P5 led to the development of a critical theme about Brazil's limitations in the international arena. According to the perceptions from the great powers: "Brazil is not relevant in international security issues". This theme reveals important perceptions about the limits to Brazil's actions in international politics and its role in the global order. It was developed from codes in 36 of the 60 interviews. It is linked to 175 different references to the same general idea.

The main idea retrieved from the interviews is that Brazil does not have enough hard power, which is still the primary source of global relevance, to have a strong voice in the "big game" international security issues. The foreign policy community of the P5 sees Brazil as a peaceful country that does not have hard power. Even if the state does have some hard power capacity, it is not enough, and the country is far away from major threats and disputes, does not need hard power and does not seek hard power. This shows that the country's voice may have limits. As an interviewee states:

"[Brazil] is not a military giant, and it is not exactly a political giant either. For Brazil to be a political giant and have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, for example, it would be necessary to have a base for this power. And Brazil still has many difficulties"<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the country is perceived as peaceful and isolated from conflicts, does not threaten anyone and is not under any external threat, so it does not need hard power. Because of that, however, Brazil is not perceived as being relevant in international security issues. It cannot influence these global issues and is not taken seriously enough. This happens even if the country does have some attributes related to hard power, such as population and territory.

Part of becoming a major power is touching all those buttons. "You need the military force to be credible to defend the country, you have the economic strength that underlines that, and you can become a major trading partner around the world with the strength of the natural resources that you have. And with that comes the political influence"<sup>3</sup>.

From the perspective of great powers, without hard power and without the resources to matter in security issues, Brazil exaggerated its reach and acted unrealistic to try to show international weight, such as when it attempted to broker the Tehran deal. The interviewees argue that the country did not have a stake in the negotiations with Iran and had no role to play in that situation. Even if there can be some recognition for the interest of Brazil in reaching a positive outcome, which could be applauded, Brazil had no legitimacy to matter in the deal.

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous interview with a French think tank director, interviewed by author, January 30, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous interview with a British diplomat, interviewed by author, December 12, 2018.

“None of the players on Iran - not the Europeans, not Russia, not the United States -, would find Brazil very helpful, to be frank. That is the point. That would be very difficult. In some ways, Brazil doesn't have the stake in this issue in the same way the Europeans do, or Russia has, and the United States have because it is the big superpower. Or indeed China. People would ask why should Brazil, particularly, be involved and not lots of other countries that are sizeable, some of them with a bigger interest there, like Turkey, for example? That is a difficult one”<sup>4</sup>.

This assessment is the result of a sub-theme developed from the data of the interviews that deals precisely with the case above: ‘Brazil exaggerated in an attempt to broker an Iran deal, which was out of its reach’. This is a very important sub-theme because it is one of the few that focuses on one specific case that summarises the lack of influence of Brazil on global security and explains the state's aspirations for an international voice and the limits to its reach.

This sub-theme was present in 14 of the files with interviews and is linked to 35 references in the interviews. It was developed from 13 different codes, of which the most prevalent were: “Brazil did not have a stake in the Iran deal”, “Brazil could not deliver the Iran deal”, “Brazil's attempts in Iran were unrealistic”, “Brazil's attempt to meddle in the Middle East and Iran was an adventure to project the country”, “Brazil attempt to broker Iran deal was to be applauded”, “Brazil overplayed its hand in Iran.” Some of these views are discussed below with a focus on the content of what was discussed during the interviews.

According to respondents in this research, the attempt to broker the Tehran deal was an overextension of the state's capacity. It would not be able to deliver a solution to that serious an international security issue, as explained by a former French ambassador to Brazil: “At that time, it was seen as an overextension. Brazil could be a regional actor, be an actor in Africa, but there are areas in which major players do not want involvement from other countries, as in the case of Iran”<sup>5</sup>.

For him, it was not a legitimate question for Brazil to get involved because it was in a different region and involved actors with a lot of hard power and wanting things to go their way, and not to accept the intervention of other players.

“Brazil had nothing to do there, as it was not Brazil's zone of responsibility. Brazil had no experience with this zone, which is highly explosive, and extremely sensitive. So it felt like a bit of an adventure. It was to mark the country's entrance among the great powers, as it was said in the past, in the concert of nations, of nations that matter in international politics and which never involved Latin America. Any country in Latin America. Because Latin America has always been on the periphery”<sup>6</sup>.

The overextension of the capability of Brazil in international disputes was also mentioned by an American respondent who argued that Brazil did not have enough weight to influence the

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous interview with a British diplomat, interviewed by author, April 25, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous interview with a French diplomat, interviewed by author, April 11, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with French diplomat, 2019

negotiations and could not offer anything that would interest the involved players. “Brazil does not have the economic weight or the geopolitical muscle to convince any players to do anything differently. It can only be a friendly hand trying to help, but that is not what is needed”<sup>7</sup>.

“It was acting beyond its level of knowledge and its real weight. But it was out of an instinct of ‘come on, Brazil can be an alternative force to the big powers that are very conflictual, and Brazil can be a peacemaker’. But the feeling in Washington was that *Brazil was out of its league* and could not really help solve that problem. That is the Washington perception, that Brazil’s ambitions were unrealistic”<sup>8</sup> (our emphasis).

The perception was also shared in the UK, where one respondent explained that the big powers are only the United States, China and Russia, and maybe Europe, and that Brazil does not have the same international weight as any of those, so it could not on its own change the destination of the Iran deal<sup>9</sup>. A former British ambassador to Brazil argued that the great powers involved in the negotiations did not believe Brazil was being helpful and that the country did not have any stakes in that issue<sup>10</sup>. According to another former British ambassador to Brazil:

“The perception was that on the Iran issue Brazil and Turkey (...) overplayed their hand. I think they didn’t do their diplomatic homework enough. They didn’t have the Americans on board. It was bound to be something which the Americans would take pretty seriously and if they didn’t like it, it would not go anywhere (...). They felt that maybe the time was rife, they and Turkey were in the Security Council at the time and they had a sort of big connection with the Iranians, but I think it is possible that they overplayed their hands”<sup>11</sup>.

These comments are examples that show that there is a connection between the lack of relevance of Brazil in international security issues that the respondents perceive and one specific case in which Brazil was not able to make a difference. This shows that attempts to project the state as an important player in global politics are limited by the perception found in the powerful states that Brazil is just a pawn. Understanding this could help Brazil develop better strategies in its work to project the state, pursuing means that might improve the chances of being recognised. As discussed above, Brazil is perceived to have clear hard power limitations, which could make it hard to achieve the prestige it wants.

One interviewee from France argued that Brazil’s problem was that it believed the matter at hand in the negotiations with Iran to be a technical problem and wanted to propose a means to control enriched uranium. “But that wasn’t it”<sup>12</sup>, he explained.

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous interview with an American think tank director, interviewed by author, March 28, 2019

<sup>8</sup> Interview with American think tank director, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous interview with a British academic, interviewed by author, March 14, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with British diplomat, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous interview with a British diplomat, interviewed by author, April 26, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous interview with a French academic, interviewed by author, May 14, 2018.

“It was not just about Iran’s uranium. The negotiation was about Iran’s place in the Middle East, the relationship with the United States, the France-US relationship, the position of China, Germany, all of that. So it’s likely that when Brazil told Obama it was going to negotiate, of course Obama was going to say go ahead. It didn’t cost anything (...) But if you reach an agreement and before asking the big ones if they accept the agreement and if it fits with the rest of the policy they think, Brazil will meet Ahmadinejad and Erdogan and say that it solved the problem”<sup>13</sup>.

A former British ambassador to Brazil argued that the country’s attempt to mediate the Tehran deal should be applauded, but that Brazil was not perceived as being able to deliver the results expected by the great powers<sup>14</sup>. A French respondent argued that the failed negotiation of the Tehran deal was a painful moment for Brazilian diplomats because it was exactly what could be expected from Brazil, that the country would assume responsibility in international relations for trying to carry forward a negotiation where the great powers seemed unable to reach a deal.

“It was an extremely painful moment for Brazilian diplomats, because it was exactly what could be expected from Brazil. In other words, it assumes responsibility in international relations for trying to carry out negotiations where the great powers have failed. But it did not work. I think this was very painful, because diplomats realised that it is not simple. What happened was ugly, because the Americans encouraged Brazil, and then said no to the agreement presented. Brazil has shown its ability to be a real player in international relations, acting independently and working with the countries of the Global South to try to reduce international tensions, but this has not been achieved. If the negotiation had worked, Brazil would have tried to participate in other negotiations, such as in Israel and Palestine, but it did not work out. But Brazil took a hit on the head, and they told it that it was not its role. Effectively, the ability to move negotiations forward is an attribute of power. But what’s a shame for Brazil is that it doesn’t have a very long history in this”<sup>15</sup>.

One interesting aspect is that these subjects were more prevalent in interviews with sources from the US, UK and France than from China and Russia. This is even more relevant when considering the renewed attempts Brazil has developed to mediate international conflict in the war in Ukraine, which involves, even more directly and antagonistically, the West and Russia.

Apart from the particular case, some interviewees also made interestingly broader comments with regard to the role of Brazil as a mediator and its quest for international status. The mediation subject was particularly present among interviewees from France: “Brazil has built a role, at least until now, as a peaceful country, mediator of conflicts, and that seeks to favour the development of peace in the world”<sup>16</sup>. “Brazil tried to position itself as being able to mediate between the

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with French academic, 2018

<sup>14</sup> Interview with British diplomat, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with French think tank director, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous interview with a French academic, interviewed by author, January 16, 2019

countries of the North and the countries of the South”<sup>17</sup>. Another French respondent argued Brazil can make good use of the resources that it has in its diversity. “When you see the dialogue that exists within the country itself (...). In most cases, these people wonder why its ability to dialogue, intercommunicate, is no longer used by diplomacy professionals. These are resources that must be mobilised”<sup>18</sup>.

One interviewee from the United Kingdom explained that Brazil’s mediation role can be framed within the country’s pacifism as a structural principle of Brazilian foreign policy. “Brazil has no specific external enemies. All ten countries that are neighbours of Brazil, Brazil has a relationship of peace and friendship with them”, he said. “Brazil acted as a mediator in military conflicts in South America. This mediator position is very important for Brazil because Brazil has always been a key figure in conflict resolution”<sup>19</sup>. This summarises how Brazilian role as a mediator is perceived.

These findings show that there are discrepancies between internal and external perceptions of Brazil’s international agenda and its role in the international system. While the scholarship about Brazilian foreign policy clearly shows that the country aspires to increase its status and uses mediation of international disputes to pursue that, the interviews analysed in this article provide a different interpretation by those looking at Brazil from the outside and the perspective of high-status states.

The interviewees in our study have underscored their belief in the continued predominance of hard power as the paramount determinant in ascribing state status, thereby marginalising emerging powers that do not have significant power surplus. These approaches overlook the significance of other relevant material and non-material factors that tend to contribute to a state’s prestige in international politics beyond military might.

For instance, in the realm of material factors that are non-military in nature, Brazil stands out with its remarkable territorial expanse, encompassing approximately 44% of South American territory, and its status as the world’s seventh most populous nation. Additionally, Brazil ranks among the top twelve economies globally, asserting its economic significance. Moreover, Brazil emerges as a formidable agricultural and ecological power, boasting a 12% share of the world’s freshwater resources and hosting the world’s largest rainforest. Even when examined through the lens of realist theory, these facets undeniably contribute to a nation’s prominence on the international stage (Mearsheimer 2001).

Furthermore, Brazil is known for having developed a diplomatic network over the course of several decades. Hailing from its idiosyncratic identity (Lafer, 2000) - a Western multiethnic nation from the South – Brazil stands out as one of the few emerging powers that has adeptly navigated the complexities of diplomacy between the North and the South.

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<sup>17</sup> Anonymous interview with a French academic, interviewed by author, March 8, 2019

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous interview with a French economist, interviewed by author, February 5, 2019

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous interview with a British journalist, interviewed by author, December 14, 2018

While these material and non-material aspects by themselves may not directly impact the country's position in international security matters, they unequivocally demonstrate that Brazil is no inconsequential player on the global stage. This reinforces the idea that status recognition is not only a matter of having *versus* not having certain objective means. As stated before, Nordic countries have acquired high status as peacemakers even though lacking hard power means comparing to great powers.

A significant shortcoming in the interpretation that solely emphasises hard power lies in the potential for status to become a self-fulfilling prophecy or to foster a circular line of thinking. In this perspective, states with established high status may be disinclined to acknowledge a particular status solely because it lacks formal recognition as such.

Even if states with the highest levels of prestige continue to compete with one another, they are also interested in maintaining the status quo, avoiding new actors' rise to share the benefits and privileges of their high status. So there are incentives for elites in the P5 to reject other state's aspirations to play relevant roles in mediations. The study of international status admits interpreting the interviewees' perception as biased by their attempts to increase the status of their state and to think of Brazil as the 'other' that could be put down.

Scholars have argued that high-status states can be willing to accommodate status demands if they can exchange recognition for political, economic, or institutional gains (Larson and Shevchenko, 2019; MacDonald and Parent, 2021). Status is only 'voluntarily' conferred as part of a process of social exchange in which a state may defer to the status of another to receive help in accomplishing their own goals (Anderson et al., 2015). It is important to consider the behaviour of those states with high status and the possible incentives they might have to recognise, or not, any other state as an important global player in particular matters.

## Conclusion - Lessons from a negative experience

This paper advances mediation scholarship and explores Brazil's bid for enhanced international status through prominent peace negotiation roles. Drawing on a status-based theoretical framework in international relations, it underscores the significance of credible mediation, necessitating recognition from great powers and involved parties to wield influence in conflicts. Its findings propose that Brazil's bid to have an important role in negotiations have not been accepted, which was evident in the case of the Tehran Deal, making it unlikely that a new attempt such in the case of the war in Ukraine would be of any consequence.

Great powers are reluctant to grant Brazil the role of mediating significant global security conflicts, curbing the country's capacity to be a substantial player in negotiations like the ongoing Ukraine war. As highlighted by the Iran nuclear deal episode, Brazil's actions were perceived as exceeding its influence in international security, lacking the recognition necessary to effect change.

These perceptions matter as they mirror Brazil's international status. To be accepted as a legitimate conflict negotiator, Brazil must be acknowledged as such by established great powers. However, this study indicates that Brazil's status falls short of major player recognition, undermining its mediation efforts.

While mediation offers a path for Brazil to enhance its status, interviewees mainly view this role regionally or within North-South disputes, rather than distant conflicts. Generally, Brazil is not regarded as a pivotal player in international security, despite its diplomatic competence.

This perception about the "overextension" of Brazil's actions when trying to meddle in the Tehran Deal offers an important lesson for the country's foreign policy in the early 2020s. Even if governments of different sides of the current polarisation in the country's politics have a similar approach when trying to project Brazil as a mediator to increase the country's level of prestige, its current status is not recognised as a significant player that can act like that. As such, Brazil's efforts tend to fall on deaf ears and not to make a difference. Expanding the country's energy in attempting to negotiate peace between Russia, Ukraine, and NATO tend to be an empty effort, as the government will likely not have any influence in the war.

As noticed in this article, Brazil assumes a hybrid stance in international matters, seeking to position itself as a mediator between the West and the South (Carvalho 2020). It intends to combine Western approaches with non-Western ones. As in the failed Tehran deal, Brazil again tried to function as a hybrid power regarding the Ukraine war. Both Bolsonaro and Lula sought to place Brazil as the supposed middle ground between the Westerns and the non-Westerns. This kind of approach proved again to be inefficient. It seems that, about high-stakes international crises, the country needs to revise its strategies urgently.

This does not mean that these perceptions of the P5 should be deterministic about who can play significant roles in mediation of conflicts and other matters in world politics. Even if the FPC of the P5 does not believe Brazil could be a mediator in cases like the Tehran Deal, there should still be means for countries to play a part in these global matters.

Moreover, perceptions must not be taken uncritically, as denying certain status can also be seen as a means of maintaining the status quo in favour of the rejecter. By admitting newcomers, there is a reduction of the relative prestige of the group as a whole since what differentiates a selected group is, among other things, its reduced size. Sharing the VIP status means diminishing the members' relevance concerning the rest.

While it is important to recognise that the views are embedded in a dispute for the so-called international pecking order, and they can be biased towards the interests of the states each of them represents, the beliefs of the FPC of a state are fundamental to the political decisions taken by its leaders. Although perception is not everything, it is still critical for status-seeking states. Ultimately, status rank is something that is conferred or denied by peers (Mukherjee, 2022, 32). Thus, policymakers in status-seekers such as Brazil must carefully consider them. Understanding how Brazil is perceived by these elites who are part of the decision-making groups in the P5 is

fundamental to developing better strategies. By assessing what external parties think, the country will be able to improve its strategies to elevate its ground.

While it is essential to acknowledge that these perspectives are rooted in a broader contest for the elusive international hierarchical positioning, and they may exhibit inherent biases aligned with the interests of the respective states they represent, the convictions of a state's FPC hold paramount significance in shaping the political choices made by their leaders. It is imperative to note that while perception does not encompass the entirety of the diplomatic landscape, it remains a crucial factor for states aspiring to enhance their status. In the grand scheme of things, ranking a state's status is a judgment rendered by its peers, as articulated by Mukherjee (2022, 32). Hence, policymakers within status-seeking nations like Brazil must consider these assessments meticulously. A comprehensive understanding of how Brazil is viewed by the influential members of the decision-making circles within the P5 is indispensable for formulating more effective strategies. Through the evaluation of external parties' perspectives, the country can refine its approaches to elevate its global standing.

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