

Far-right populism and foreign policy identity: Jair Bolsonaro's ultra-conservatism and the new politics of alignment

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No one denies that the rise of far-right populist governments is a political trademark of the past decade. In the early 2000s, almost nobody could have predicted that far-right populist governments would win elections in countries as different as Hungary, India and Turkey. In the event, far-right populists have disrupted long-established patterns of party competition in many contemporary western societies, bringing to the political landscape a type of rhetoric that many thought long gone. There is no doubt that such rhetoric is affecting how foreign policies are enacted and implemented around the world. As Chryssogelos notes, 'populism is no longer considered a phenomenon isolated within domestic politics; world affairs are also largely influenced by it'.¹

In reflecting on our times, this article aims to give answers to three interrelated questions: What are the main foreign policy ideational characteristics of far-right populists? How do far-right populists use their conservative foreign policy identity to establish closer relationships with one another? And how do they operate with ideological rivals? To answer these questions, we use the case of Brazil under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (2018–). For many, Brazil under Bolsonaro has come to epitomize far-right populist government in the Americas even more than the United States under Donald Trump.²

In this context, our approach is to expand the understanding of how far-right populist governments share information, diffuse their world-view and, more importantly, build their international identities through cooperating with one another. We argue that far-right populist governments tend to emphasize an all-encompassing conservative identity-set when dealing with other ultra-conservative governments. This deep conservative identity-set emphasizes three interrelated national role conceptions: (1) an anti-globalist role, composed of narratives in opposition to international institutions; (2) a nationalist role, composed of

* This article is part of the special section in the March 2021 issue of *International Affairs* on 'New directions in foreign policy analysis', guest-edited by Amnon Aran, Klaus Brummer and Karen E. Smith.

¹ Angelos Chryssogelos, 'The people in the "here and now": populism, modernization and the state in Greece', *International Political Science Review* 38: 4 Sept. 2017, pp. 473–87.

² Roberto Simon and Brian Winter, 'Trumpism comes to Brazil', *Foreign Affairs*, 28 Oct. 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/brazil/2018-10-28/trumpism-comes-brazil>; Daniel W. Drezner, 'Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency', *International Affairs* 96: 2, March 2020, pp. 383–400. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 Nov. 2020.)

pro-sovereignty narratives; and (3) an anti-foe role, composed of friend/foe narratives. We call this identity-set ‘thick conservative identity’. However, when these same governments negotiate with ideological adversaries, they tend to use a more nuanced and contradictory conservative identity-set, usually focused on only one national role conception. We call this identity-set ‘thin conservative identity’.

Based on role theory concepts, we argue that the choice between these different approaches is triggered by the anticipated expectations of Significant Others. That is, when negotiating with other far-right governments, the far-right populist leader, whom we will call here ‘Ego’, anticipates the expectations of deep conservatism on the part of the Significant Other) and mimics the Significant Other’s behavioural norms to navigate in the social group of other conservative countries/actors. However, when dealing with ideological rivals, Ego will tone down its conservatism, owing to a disparity of expectations between Ego and Alter, preferring to use instead a milder and contradictory version of conservatism.

We divide the article into three parts. In the first, we review the literature on populism to understand the main characteristics of populists’ foreign policy-making. In this section, we also develop some of the main concepts of role theory to guide the empirical analysis. In the second section, we discuss Jair Bolsonaro’s reorientation of Brazilian foreign policy towards the conservative government of Donald Trump, and also his government’s troubled relationship with China, an ideological rival. The third section presents our conclusions.

Far-right populism and foreign policy

Populism has been widely studied in social science, but its international aspects remain underexplored. As Destradi and Plagemann have rightly argued, populism researchers have mainly focused on issues of theory and conceptualization, while International Relations (IR) scholars have largely elided the phenomenon.³ Many IR studies have continued to treat populism as a monolithic concept, an approach that has had significant consequences, both analytical and practical.⁴ On the contrary, Saull and colleagues maintain that any analysis of populism should take into account an ontology that emphasizes its international aspects, in all its varied dimensions, and how these different international dimensions give consistency to its meaning.⁵

Nevertheless, studies on the internationalized aspects of populism focus excessively on fear of and hostility towards foreigners as domestic aspects of the concept

³ Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, ‘Populism and international relations: (un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics’, *Review of International Studies* 45: 5, Dec. 2019, pp. 711–30; Marlies Glasius, ‘What authoritarianism is ... and is not: a practice perspective’, *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 515–34.

⁴ Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers, ‘Introduction: analysing the nexus between populism and international relations’, in Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers, eds, *Populism and world politics: exploring inter- and transnational dimensions* (Cham: Springer International, 2019), pp. 1–11.

⁵ Richard Saull, Alexander Anievas, Neil Davidson and Adam Fabry, ‘The *longue durée* of the far right: an introduction’, in Richard Saull, Alexander Anievas, Neil Davidson and Adam Fabry, eds, *The longue durée of the far-right: an international historical sociology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–20.

rather than as a source of opportunity for these governments to reach global influence and forge political alignments.⁶ By contrast, we argue that analysing how populist governments build their international identity in relation to both other conservative governments and ideological rivals can help us to understand how these governments turn these domestic aspects of populism into foreign policy tools.

Our approach is fairly new in the literature. There is a handful of recent studies focusing on the personal profiles of populist leaders and their consequences in terms of foreign policy-making.⁷ In one of the few analyses of how populist foreign policies are put into practice, Destradi and Plagemann show that, once in power, populists are not necessarily more belligerent or less willing to engage globally than their non-populist predecessors.⁸ Others have analysed how globalization has influenced the rise of right-wing political parties and their foreign policy.⁹ Only four studies have focused on the choices populist leaders make in terms of identities and roles, and none of these investigates variations within this identity formation.¹⁰

As noted above, we argue that far-right populist governments—a specific form of populist government—tend to emphasize a deep conservative identity-set when negotiating with other ultra-conservative governments. This identity-set, which we call ‘thick conservative identity’, emphasizes three interrelated national role conceptions—anti-globalist, nationalist and anti-foe. However, when these same governments negotiate with ideological adversaries, they tend to use a more palatable and contradictory conservative identity-set which we call ‘thin conservative identity’.

The concepts of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ identity are loosely inspired by Michael Walzer’s influential book *Thick and thin: moral argument at home and abroad*.¹¹ For Walzer, moral terms have minimal and maximal meanings. He speculates that a

⁶ Cas Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Ernesto Laclau, *La razón populista* (Buenos Aires and Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica de España, 2005).

⁷ Ozgur Ozdamar and Erdem Ceydilek, ‘European populist radical right leaders’ foreign policy beliefs: an operational code analysis’, *European Journal of International Relations* 26: 1, May 2019, pp. 137–62; Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, ‘The impact of populist radical right parties on foreign policy: the Northern League as a junior coalition partner in the Berlusconi governments’, *European Political Science Review* 7: 4, Nov. 2015, pp. 525–46; Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, ‘Rethinking populism: politics, mediatisation, and political style’, *Political Studies* 62: 2, May 2013, pp. 381–97; Benjamin de Cleen, ‘Populism and nationalism’, in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy, eds, *The Oxford handbook of populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁸ Destradi and Plagemann, ‘Populism and international relations’.

⁹ Christina Schori Liang, ‘Europe for the Europeans: the foreign and security policy of the populist radical right’, in Christina Schori Liang, ed., *Europe for the Europeans: the foreign and security policy of the populist radical right* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–32; Ian Klinke, ‘Geopolitics and the political right: lessons from Germany’, *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 495–514.

¹⁰ Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, ‘Populism and foreign policy: the case of India’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15: 2, 2019, pp. 283–301; Stengel et al., ‘Introduction’; Thorste Wojcieszewski, ‘Populism, Hindu nationalism, and foreign policy in India: the politics of representing “the people”’, *International Studies Review* 22: 3, 2020, pp. 396–422; Leslie E. Wehner and Cameron G. Thies, ‘The nexus of populism and foreign policy: the case of Latin America’, *International Relations*, publ. online July 2020, pp. 1–21.

¹¹ Michael Walzer, *Thick and thin: moral argument at home and abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

comparison of moral codes might produce ‘a set of standards to which all societies can be held accountable—most likely, rules against murder, deceit, torture, oppression, and tyranny’. These standards would constitute ‘the moral minimum and core of basic rights that are common to all cultures despite their divergent theories’.¹² Consequently, moral disputes often occur when one discusses the maximal standards and their applicability.

How, then, can we establish the relationship between the ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ versions of conservative foreign policies and the broader literature on populism? In other words, what are the moral sources of far-right populist foreign policies? Recent decades have seen a growing interest in the politics of populism, which has been scrutinized closely by academics and pundits alike; and, like many sociological concepts, it has eluded consensus. Stengel and colleagues¹³ have argued that some conceive of populism as a ‘thin-centred’ ideological skeleton;¹⁴ others as a political style,¹⁵ a method of communication,¹⁶ or even a specific form of discourse.¹⁷ Most researchers agree that populism is rather lacking in terms of actual content, and that it is best understood in combination with other concepts or discourses.¹⁸

The literature has tried to narrow the definition of populism by focusing on two interrelated characteristics shared by all populist governments. The first is the narrative separating ‘people’ and ‘elite’. In a seminal work about the discursive elements of the rise of populism, Ernesto Laclau formulated two minimal preconditions for a populist process: (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the ‘people’ from power and the ‘elites’; and (2) a corresponding articulation of demands that would enable the ‘people’ to overcome and replace the ‘elite’.¹⁹

For Wojczewski, a populist discourse is organized around the signifier ‘the people’, which is the nodal point of the discourse and thus the reference for the construction of a collective identity. For her, the populist notion of ‘the people’ can, like ‘the state’ or ‘the nation’, be an ontological referent that is (re)constructed via the discourse of foreign policy.²⁰ The populist leader claims to represent ‘the people’ against the establishment and presents his or her demands as the true expression of the popular will in the international realm. In the same vein, Norris and Inglehart, and Mudde, argue that a populist leader sees the established power-holders as profoundly corrupt and self-interested, betraying the trust of the public, who are regarded as the ‘pure people’.²¹ As Destradi and Plagemann have argued,

¹² Walzer, *Thick and thin*, pp. 9–10.

¹³ Stengel et al., ‘Introduction’.

¹⁴ Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe*.

¹⁵ Moffitt and Tormey, ‘Rethinking populism’, p. 381.

¹⁶ Elena Block and Ralph Negrine, ‘The populist communication style: toward a critical framework’, *International Journal of Communication Systems*, vol. 11, May 2017, pp. 178–97.

¹⁷ Laclau, *La razón populista*; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.

¹⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Laclau, *La razón populista*.

¹⁹ Laclau, *La razón populista*.

²⁰ Thorste Wojczewski, ‘Trump, populism, and American foreign policy’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Aug. 2019, p. 3.

²¹ Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*, p. 66; Cas Mudde, *On extremism and democracy in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 26. The same theme can also be seen in the images presented by Islamic State: see Manni Crone, ‘It’s a man’s world: carnal spectatorship and dissonant masculinities in Islamic State videos’, *Inter-*

populist leaders tend to vilify political competitors, arguing that they ‘might not be part of the proper people, to begin with’.²²

Second, populist leaders carry an important authoritarian component in their narrative. For Norris and Inglehart, these authoritarian values prioritize the importance of (1) security against risks of instability and disorder (‘immigrants are stealing our jobs’); (2) the value of conformity to preserve national traditions (‘LGBTs are changing our families’); and (3) loyalty towards influential leaders who protect the group’s customs and traditions.²³ In such an imaginary, ‘majorities act like mistreated minorities’, and enemy images are kept alive so that ‘governing [is] a permanent campaign’ against the imaginary enemies of the people.²⁴

It is important to emphasize that far-right populism is a specific form of populism. Although all populist governments share the characteristics noted above, Abrahamsen and colleagues, and De Orellana and Michelsen, show that far-right populists belong to an interconnected global movement in which key thinkers have, over several decades, theorized and strategically mobilized cultural resentments, and developed a coherent sociological critique of globalization.²⁵ They share the assumption that liberation from liberal internationalism will herald a ‘natural’ order in which the strength of national identity will be unleashed. Cohesion around a critical vision in which international normative destruction of international liberalism is seen as the solution to globalization makes this reactionary bravado the key conceptual frame uniting far-right populists.

The result of this process is what Francis Fukuyama called ‘resentment politics’.²⁶ The far-right populist leader can translate any economic loss or social threat into loss of identity and status: ‘You have always been a core member of our great nation, and your elite compatriots have been conspiring to hold you down; your country is no longer your own; you are a stranger in your own land.’ The *raison d’être* of far-right populists is to defend nativism: an ideology according to which states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation), and non-native elements are threatening the nation-state’s homogeneity.²⁷

Seen in this context, far-right populists with nativist conceptions would be expected to be sceptical towards international cooperation, and less inclined to support supranational governance arrangements that impinge on ‘the people’s’ self-government.²⁸ However, a careful analysis of actual foreign policies conducted

national Affairs 96: 3, May 2020, pp. 573–91; Elizabeth Pearson, ‘Extremism and toxic masculinity: the man question re-posed’, *International Affairs* 95: 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 1251–70.

²² Destradi and Plegemann, ‘Populism and foreign policy’, p. 4.

²³ Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*, p. 7.

²⁴ Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 42.

²⁵ R. Abrahamsen, J.-F. Drolet, A. Gheciu, K. Narita, S. Vucetic and M. Williams, ‘Confronting the international political sociology of the new right’, *International Political Sociology* 14: 1, Feb. 2020, pp. 94–107; Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, ‘Reactionary internationalism: the philosophy of the new right’, *Review of International Studies*, publ. online July 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000159>.

²⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: the demand for dignity and the politics of resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018), p. 89.

²⁷ Mudde, *On extremism and democracy in Europe*, p. 7.

²⁸ Stengel et al., ‘Introduction’; Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers, ‘Conclusion: populism, foreign policy, and world politics’, in Stengel et al., eds, *Populism and world politics*, pp. 365–75.

by far-right populist governments shows that they do cooperate and are active participants in global affairs.²⁹

Based on these aspects, we argue that there are three sources for conservative national role conceptions. The first—a common thread in the narratives promulgated by far-right populists—is the existence of external or international conspirators, who tend to be identified with international agencies. Populist leaders aim to represent the true (national) ‘people’ against the corrupt (foreign) ‘elites’ controlling international institutions. Diplomacy, in particular, is one of their favourite targets. For populist leaders, diplomacy is an elitist and exclusive community, composed of unelected foreign policy bureaucrats whose primary goal is to advance a political agenda antithetical to the true will of ‘the people’.³⁰

Populism is, indeed, often described as a backlash against the growing perceived influence of ‘international bureaucracies’ and the weakening of the nation-state at the hands of a transnational bureaucratic elite. For populist leaders, international bureaucrats and their organizations represent a ‘globalist’ and ‘multiculturalist’ conspiracy undermining the ‘natural’ proclivities and aspirations of the people. These enemies, moreover, include corresponding figures within the domestic realm. Populist leaders consider it an essential part of their task to fight against externally generated political and economic developments espoused by those of their compatriots who are beholden to a cosmopolitan ideology that ‘betrays’ the ‘interests’ of the people. It is accordingly reasonable to expect populists in power to try to undermine international institutions and global governance mechanisms, as well as their own Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³¹

Second, far-right populists are strong supporters of national sovereignty. As Destradi and Plagemann and Mudde and Kaltwasser have argued,³² populist leaders can be expected to perceive international institutions as limiting their governments’ room for manoeuvre and/or threatening their countries’ (highly prized) national sovereignty. Therefore, it is anticipated that populists will try to sideline such institutions as they do with domestic institutions (legislative, judiciary, etc.). Sharp criticism of an allegedly unresponsive elite and a corresponding demand for the restoration of the sovereignty of the people is a critical feature of modern far-right governments. Moreover, populist leaders use the rubbishing of ‘elitist’ international institutions in the name of national sovereignty as an essential instrument of domestic mobilization.

Third, far-right populists feed on an oppositional image using a Schmittian friend/foe cleavage in international affairs. The authoritarian predilection for security against risks of instability and disorder allows far-right populists to create artificial and conspiratorial enemies to sustain their ‘pro-national’ narrative.³³ The hostility against ‘foreigners’ or against a ‘globalist conspiracy’ that prevents

²⁹ Alexander Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, ‘Regional international organizations as a strategy of autocracy: the Eurasian Economic Union and Russian foreign policy’, *International Affairs* 94: 3, May 2018, pp. 1037–58.

³⁰ Destradi and Plagemann, ‘Populism and international relations’.

³¹ Chrissogelos, ‘The people in the “here and now”’, p. 473; Saull et al., *The longue durée of the far-right*, p. 26.

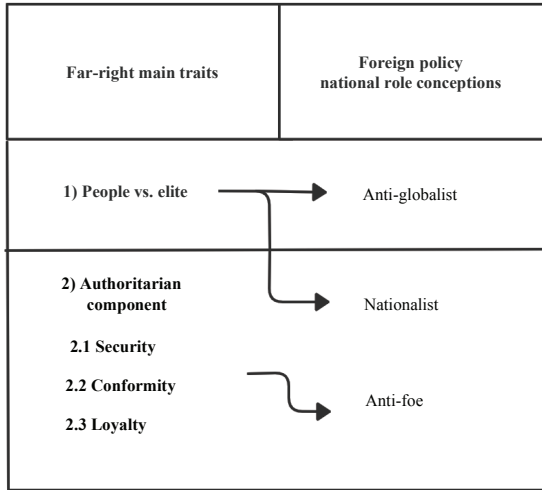
³² Destradi and Plagemann, ‘Populism and international relations’ p. 10; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, p. 6.

³³ Mudde, *On extremism and democracy in Europe*, p. 16.

popular identity from achieving its complete dominance is also directed towards the enemy within, usually the left, in the attempt to divide the population into two camps of ‘us’ and ‘them’.³⁴

Figure 1 summarizes schematically the connection between the main traits of far-right populism and its national role conceptions in foreign policy.

Figure 1: Far-right populism and national role conceptions



As argued above, these national role conceptions are constructed through interaction with the expectations of others, who may be enemies, rivals or allies. In a classic work of role theory, Holsti defined national role conceptions as

policymakers’ own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of functions, if any, their state should perform continually in the international system. It is their image of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward the external environment.³⁵

More recently, Wehner has located the sources of national role conceptions in the ruling narratives adopted by foreign policy elites to understand their present and set blueprints for their future.³⁶

In this sense, role theory uses the concept of the ‘Significant Other’ to understand how states formulate their national role conceptions, bearing in mind the Other’s expectations. Any role conception encompasses both an actor’s self-image and the perception of its social position *vis-à-vis* the Other’s position(s) and expectations.³⁷ A Significant Other can be a state to which one pays particular attention,

³⁴ Francisco Panizza, *Populism and the mirror of democracy* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 3–17.

³⁵ K. J. Holsti, ‘National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy’, *International Studies Quarterly* 14: 3, Sept. 1970, pp. 233–309.

³⁶ Leslie E. Wehner, ‘The narration of roles in foreign policy analysis’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23: 2, 2018, pp. 1–26.

³⁷ Leslie E. Wehner, ‘Inter-role conflict, role strain and role play in Chile’s relationship with Brazil’, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 35: 1, 2016, pp. 64–77.

perhaps as a role model to be emulated; or it can be an actor that shapes the role conception in a more negative manner—that is, ‘the type of actor you do not want to be’.³⁸

In our analysis, far-right governments anticipate Significant Others’ expectations concerning their foreign policy identity formation. That is, when dealing with other conservative governments, Ego anticipates Significant Others’ expectations about itself and mimics their behavioural norms in order to join the social group.³⁹ In the case of far-right bilateral relationships, Ego uses the three national role conceptions—anti-globalism, nationalism and anti-foe belligerence—to align with the Significant Other’s expectations of deep conservatism.

The next section of the article elucidates this ‘anticipation mechanism’ by examining the case of Bolsonaro’s relationship with Trump. We also discuss Bolsonaro’s relationship with an ideological rival—China—and how this mechanism produces a contradictory role-enacting process.

Bolsonaro’s ultra-conservative reorientation

Many academics and commentators see Jair Bolsonaro’s foreign policy as the most controversial in Brazilian history.⁴⁰ Some argue that it has ushered the political style of Donald Trump into Brazil, with similarities between the two leaders of a type and extent never seen before.⁴¹ Although Bolsonaro’s far-right roots can be traced back into the history of Brazilian conservatism, in which many political figures used similar radical rhetoric,⁴² this is the first time that such ideology has found political expression in the country’s foreign policy. In the following paragraphs we will show how this new type of narrative was created and enacted.

Bolsonaro’s relationship with Trump

On the campaign trail in early 2018, Jair Bolsonaro made clear his sympathy for Donald Trump and sought at various moments to draw parallels between himself and the US president.⁴³ Bolsonaro claimed several times that once he was elected Brazil would shift from the previous South–South strategy seen in Lula’s and

³⁸ Vit Beneš and Sebastian Harnisch, ‘Role theory in symbolic interactionism: Czech Republic, Germany, and the EU’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 50: 1, 2015, pp. 146–65.

³⁹ Alastair Johnston, *Social states: China in international institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 23–4.

⁴⁰ Matias Spektor, ‘Diplomacia da ruptura’, in Sérgio Abranches et al., *Democracia em risco: 22 ensaios sobre o Brasil hoje* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019), pp. 263–76; Fabrício Chagas Bastos and Marcela Franzoni, ‘The dumb giant: Brazilian foreign policy under Jair Bolsonaro’, *E-International Relations*, Oct. 2019, <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/10/16/the-dumb-giant-brazilian-foreign-policy-under-jair-bolsonaro/>; Guilherme Casarões and Daniel Flemes, *Brazil first, climate last: Bolsonaro’s foreign policy*, GIGA Focus Latin America (Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Sept. 2019).

⁴¹ Simon and Winter, ‘Trumpism comes to Brazil’; Jon Lee Anderson, ‘Jair Bolsonaro’s southern strategy’, *New Yorker*, 25 March 2019.

⁴² Camila de Oliveira Rocha, ‘Menos Marx, mais Mises’: *uma gênese da nova direita brasileira (2006–2018)*, PhD diss., University of São Paulo, 2019; Maria José de Rezende, ‘A construção de um ideário conservador’, *Tempo social: Revista de Sociologia da USP* 10: 2, Oct. 1998, pp. 159–89.

⁴³ Thais Bilenky, ‘Admirador de Trump, Bolsonaro tenta se aproximar da Casa Branca’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 21 June 2018.

Dilma's administrations to a pro-Trump foreign policy.⁴⁴ The man who was to become foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, also argued in favour of Trump as the political force who could re-establish western centrality in world affairs.⁴⁵ Bolsonaro's most influential foreign affairs adviser during the campaign, Filipe G. Martins, envisioned an alliance between Bolsonaro and Trump that would change Brazil's foreign policy for ever.⁴⁶ Later on, the new ambassador to Washington, Nestor Foster, argued in the Brazilian Senate that the relationship between the two presidents represented 'a turning of the page, signalling a new moment in which Brazil and the United States can allow shared values and principles to merge more firmly and effectively for the realization of the interests of both countries'.⁴⁷

Donald Trump is indeed Bolsonaro's most important Significant Other, a leader whom he aimed to emulate and mirror in many aspects, but most importantly in international affairs. President Trump's foreign policy positions in areas of family values and sovereignty (as set against international law),⁴⁸ as well as his fierce anti-left agenda in Latin America,⁴⁹ captured Bolsonaro's attention and became the main driver of the bilateral relationship. Trump responded favourably to the Brazilian president, applauding his foreign policy on many occasions since the two men first met at the Oval Office, and greeting him enthusiastically as the 'Tropical Trump'.⁵⁰ This most certainly did not change after Trump's loss to Joe Biden in the November 2020 election.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the pursuit of a closer relationship with the dominant power in the western hemisphere is nothing new in the history of Brazilian foreign policy. On the contrary, it dates back to Barão do Rio Branco's tenure as minister of foreign affairs in the early 1900s; since then it has resurfaced during the administrations of Getúlio Vargas (1930–45), Eurico Gaspar Dutra (1945–50), Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco (1964–7) and Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–92). There is a vast literature on the notion of 'alignment' in relation to these governments, showing the differences between them in the levels of alignment with the United States. However, there is considerable agreement across these studies that none of these administrations successfully translated the close relationship with Washington into economic or political benefits for Brazil.⁵²

⁴⁴ Anthony Boadle, 'Governo Bolsonaro deve seguir linha de política externa de Trump', Reuters, 16 Oct. 2018; Danilo Marcondes and Emma Mawdsley, 'South–South in retreat? The transitions from Lula to Rousseff to Temer and Brazilian development cooperation', *International Affairs* 93: 3, May 2017, pp. 681–700.

⁴⁵ Ernesto Araújo, 'Trump and the West', *Cadernos de Política Exterior* 3: 6, 2017, pp. 345–6.

⁴⁶ Filipe G. Martins, 'Quem é Donald Trump? (Parte 1)', *Senso Incomum*, 5 May 2016.

⁴⁷ Nestor Foster, Brazilian Federal Senate, Foreign Relations and National Defense Committee, 13 Feb. 2020.

⁴⁸ Jamil Chade, 'EUA acionam Brasil para implementar agenda ultraconservadora na ONU', *Uol*, 12 Oct. 2019; Patrícia Campos Mello, 'Discursos na ONU mostram sintonia total entre Trump e Bolsonaro', *Folha de São Paulo*, 24 Sept. 2019.

⁴⁹ 'Nos EUA, Bolsonaro critica "defensores da tirania" e ataca "antigo comunismo"', *O Estado de São Paulo*, 17 March 2019.

⁵⁰ Anne Gearan, 'Trump sees a lot to like in Brazil's unapologetically far-right, nationalist leader', *Washington Post*, 19 March 2019.

⁵¹ Emilly Behnke, "'É isso que vocês querem para o Brasil?," diz Bolsonaro ao criticar Biden', *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 4 Nov. 2020.

⁵² Gérson Moura, 'As razões do alinhamento: a política externa Brasileira no pós-guerra, 1946–1950', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, vol. 28, 1985, pp. 37–50; Juan de Lima, 'O pensamento liberal e conservador no Brasil: dinâmicas e repercussões', *Revista Sem Aspas* 3: 1–2, 2014, pp. 109–17; Guilherme Casarões, *O tempo*

That said, Bolsonaro's foreign policy is not a simple strategic realignment with the United States, such as those seen in the past. It is something more complex that involves the rise of far-right and nationalist governments worldwide. It is important to note that, for Bolsonaro, Brazil's foreign policy was more pro-Trump than pro-United States. In other words, his alignment with Trump is aimed at including Brazil in a conservative view of the West, and Trump, as US president, just happened to be particularly in tune with this view. Ernesto Araújo has argued on many occasions that the Bolsonaro administration aims to realign Brazil with any other conservative government that shares the three aspects mentioned above—the belief in a global conspiracy against the true 'people', a similar pro-sovereignty narrative against 'international regimes' and a hostility to common enemies (immigrants, the left, etc.).⁵³ Araújo is also known for having implemented an aggressive conservative agenda within his own foreign policy establishment, the Itamaraty.⁵⁴ For him, traditional Brazilian diplomats represent the globalist conspiracy working against the people.

The first mutual recognition of expectations between Trump and Bolsonaro centred on Venezuela. The construction of a common enemy started with immigration. In early 2018, Bolsonaro gave a controversial interview in which he opposed the Global Compact for Migration, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, and stated that Brazil already had too many economic problems and that 'receiving undesired Venezuelans' would only worsen the situation in Roraima, Brazil's border state with Venezuela. Bolsonaro even suggested that, once elected, he would send Venezuelan immigrants to refugee camps instead of allowing them to receive support under Brazilian social programmes such as the Bolsa Família.⁵⁵ Eventually, he changed his rhetoric and started to embrace their arrival as free people trying to escape from a brutal regime.⁵⁶ This two-faced rhetoric towards Venezuelans—portraying them first as undesired immigrants and then as freedom fighters—is very similar to Trump's statements on the matter.⁵⁷

However, the most important affinity between the two is to be found in their standard rhetoric against the political regime of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. During the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly, both Bolsonaro and Trump argued that the Cuban and Venezuelan types of communist regimes still represented a menace to liberties and democracy in the Americas. They apparently coordinated their speeches, vowing to isolate Maduro and oust him from power.⁵⁸

é o senhor da razão? A política externa de Collor vinte anos depois, PhD diss., University of São Paulo, 2014; Mônica Hirst and Leticia Pinheiro, 'A política externa do Brasil em dois tempos', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, vol. 38, 1995, pp. 5–23.

⁵³ Ernesto Araújo, 'Querer grandeza', *Metapolítica*, vol. 17, 3 Nov. 2018; Ernesto Araújo, 'Mandato popular na política externa', *Gazeta do Povo*, 26 Nov. 2018.

⁵⁴ Daniel Rittner, 'Com guinada ideológica, Araújo abala as', *Valor Econômico*, 23 June 2020.

⁵⁵ Jussara Soares, 'Bolsonaro quer criar campos de refugiados para venezuelanos', *O Globo*, 24 Aug. 2018.

⁵⁶ Jair Bolsonaro, 'Discurso do Presidente da República durante Solenidade de Passagem de Comando da Operação Acolhida', Palácio do Planalto, 16 Jan. 2020.

⁵⁷ Donald J. Trump, 'Remarks by President Trump in a multilateral meeting on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela', New York, 25 Sept. 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-multilateral-meeting-bolivarian-republic-venezuela-new-york-ny/?utm_source=link.

⁵⁸ Jair Bolsonaro, 'Speech by Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro at the opening of the 74th United Nations General Assembly', New York, 24 Sept. 2019; Donald J. Trump, 'Remarks by President Trump to the 74th Session

The Venezuelan regime has important domestic implications for Bolsonaro. As early as March 2018, Bolsonaro and his supporters began to use the Venezuelan case as an example of what would happen to a country where the left remained in power.⁵⁹ As the majority of leftist parties in Brazil maintained their support for Maduro during the campaign, Bolsonaro positioned himself as the only viable alternative for those who ‘would not like to see Brazil become Venezuela.’⁶⁰ After his inauguration, the strategy was to keep associating the Brazilian left with Maduro’s failures and corruption scandals. Bolsonaro put pressure on the Brazilian National Development Bank (BNDES) to scrutinize loans given to Venezuela during the Lula and Dilma administrations looking for evidence of corruption, an investigation that in the event found no such wrongdoing.⁶¹

The Trump administration perceived Brazil under Bolsonaro not only as an ally against old-style communism in Latin America but also as an instrument to use against the growing Chinese influence in the region. As US trade sanctions against Venezuela intensified, Maduro’s regime became increasingly dependent on China for oil imports, investments and loans. The perception in Washington was that if Brazil were to be encouraged to incline towards the United States, this would increase the chances of isolating Maduro.⁶² In Trump’s view, any regime change in Caracas would have a negative impact on China’s plans for Latin America.⁶³

In this sense, Brazil’s new position towards Maduro was warmly welcomed by Trump, who early on in his administration sought to establish a coalition against Maduro. Initially, Brazil resisted political pressure from John Bolton—US national security adviser for most of 2019—for a military intervention against Maduro, preferring to support self-proclaimed president Juan Guaidó and isolate Maduro at the Organization of American States. As the crisis receded, the Trump administration decided to put pressure on Brazil to align with US positions against Venezuela in other international organizations. In September 2019, Trump asked Brazil to introduce a resolution against Venezuela at the UN Human Rights Commission. Bolsonaro’s acquiescence created uproar within the Brazilian diplomatic community, which perceived the cooperation as an act of political submission.⁶⁴

Another example of how a populist and anti-left agenda has taken over Brasília’s position towards Maduro is the expulsion of Venezuelan diplomats from Brazil in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the example of the

of the United Nations General Assembly’, New York, 24 Sept. 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-74th-session-united-nations-general-assembly/?utm_source=link; Donald J. Trump, ‘Remarks by President Trump in State of the Union Address’, Washington DC, 4 Feb. 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-state-union-address-3/>.

⁵⁹ Bilenky, ‘Admirador de Trump’.

⁶⁰ Patrícia Campos Mello, ‘Presidenciáveis divergem em relação à crise na Venezuela’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 30 Sept. 2018.

⁶¹ Danielle Brant and Talita Fernandes, ‘Bolsonaro quer que novo president do BNDES abra caixa-preta do banco’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 17 June 2019.

⁶² Admiral Craig S. Faller, ‘Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command, before the 116th Congress House Armed Services Committee’, Washington DC, 11 March 2020.

⁶³ Karen Deyoung, ‘Trump administration threatens penalties on Russia, China for aiding Venezuela’s government’, *Washington Post*, 6 Aug. 2019.

⁶⁴ Jamil Chade, ‘EUA “solicitaram” ao Brasil apresentar resolução na ONU contra Maduro’, *Uol*, 17 Sept. 2019.

United States, which expelled a few Venezuelan diplomats in 2019, Brazil decided to remove the entire diplomatic staff from the Venezuelan Embassy in Brasília, an act with no precedent in the history of the bilateral relationship that was rewarded with accolades from Washington and local far-right sympathizers.⁶⁵

The second mutual recognition of expectations between Bolsonaro and Trump took the form of their shared rhetoric against international institutions—the anti-globalist narrative. Trump’s abrupt abandonment of multilateral initiatives—the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris climate agreement, etc.—emboldened Bolsonaro’s anti-globalist rhetoric.⁶⁶ Weeks before Bolsonaro’s inauguration, Ernesto Araújo criticized the Global Compact for Migration for attempting a global solution to a problem that ‘each country should have the freedom to deliberate internally’. Any decisions on the issue, he asserted, should be made bilaterally with other countries, never at the multilateral level. For him, the immigration pact was a clear manifestation of ‘globalist’ ideology, harmful to the country’s best interests.⁶⁷

During the new Brazilian regime’s state visit to Washington in March 2019, media reports gave abundant attention to the prominence of Filipe G. Martins, Eduardo Bolsonaro (the president’s son) and Ernesto Araújo—the anti-globalist group within Bolsonaro’s cabinet—in press releases and negotiations. However, it was only during a second and less formal visit to the White House in August–September 2019 that the close relationship between this anti-globalist group and the Trump administration became evident. On this visit, Eduardo Bolsonaro sought Trump’s support for his nomination as Brazilian ambassador in Washington—support that could prompt some members of the Brazilian Senate (which is responsible for approving ambassadors) to withdraw their opposition to his appointment. In an unusual move, Trump agreed to receive the group in the Oval Office to show public backing for the younger Bolsonaro’s candidacy,⁶⁸ although in the event it did not have the desired effect.

The anti-globalism rhetoric was the essence of a speech given by Ernesto Araújo at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held in São Paulo in November 2019. According to Araújo, there is an ‘ideological arc’ in the international system that works against Brazil. He compared the 14-year-old Greta Thunberg to a famished girl weighing 14 pounds in Venezuela, arguing that the UN was happy to allow a well-fed European girl to give a speech about global warming but did nothing for the Venezuelan girl, and that the ‘ideological arc’ sought to embarrass Brazil by questioning its positions simply because the country was now conservative. According to Araújo, Brazil was being boycotted and suffering damage to its international image simply because it was pursuing fair and correct policies. For example, in the case of the Amazon fires, the UN

⁶⁵ Agência Lusa, ‘EUA apoiam decisão do Brasil de “expulsar” diplomatas pró-Maduro’, *Mundo ao Minuto*, 11 March 2020.

⁶⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, ‘The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump’, *International Affairs* 95: 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 61–80.

⁶⁷ Talita Fernandes, ‘Futuro chanceler diz que governo Bolsonaro deixará Pacto Global de Migração’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 10 Dec. 2018.

⁶⁸ ‘Casa Branca divulga imagens de reunião de Eduardo Bolsonaro com Donald Trump’, *Poder 360*, 31 Aug. 2019.

and global media were spreading false information about Brazil, instead of paying attention to more relevant issues such as Venezuela.⁶⁹

Finally, we turn to nationalist and pro-sovereignty rhetoric, which is ubiquitous among Bolsonaro's foreign policy cabinet members. Filipe G. Martins argues that the crucial dilemma of world politics is the struggle between global governance, which legislates to suppress national states, and liberal democracies, which legislate for local people.⁷⁰ Martins and Araújo have both stated that Brazilian diplomacy prioritizes the interests of the people and not those of an international elite.⁷¹ If previously Brazilian diplomacy sought to be accepted and admired in certain diplomatic circles, now it stands against supranational systems that impose ideas on nations.

According to Araújo, Brazil is fighting against a 'supposed' multilateralism that is based on an unequal power relationship. In a speech at the graduation ceremony for new diplomats, Bolsonaro argued that diplomats should seek the creation of a genuinely Brazilian approach in foreign affairs as opposed to one imported from global institutions.⁷² Filipe G. Martins also advocated the creation of a genuinely national intellectual identity that could help Brazil to change its position and to confront the globalist dilemma.⁷³ Trump shows a similar type of nationalist narrative, arguing in a speech at the UN that 'the future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbours, and honour the differences that make each country special and unique.'⁷⁴

In September 2019, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Brazilian Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo signed the US–Brazil Strategic Partnership Dialogue to coordinate joint efforts in global affairs, further consolidating the alignment of the Brazilian regime with Trump's presidency in a project that would summarize the commonalities between the two countries in terms of their stance against international institutions and common adversaries, and in favour of protecting national sovereignty.⁷⁵ From the Brazilian perspective, US support for Brazil's membership of the OECD,⁷⁶ and its elevation of the state as a 'major non-NATO ally',⁷⁷ represented the concrete consolidation of that partnership. In return, the Trump administration received Bolsonaro's support on many issues, such as

⁶⁹ Ernesto Araújo, speech at CPAC Brasil 2019, São Paulo, 12 Oct. 2019, <https://youtu.be/Ke68rS9AIUk>.

⁷⁰ Filipe G. Martins, 'Governança global e autodeterminação popular—Alexandre de Gusmão Foundation', lecture, Brasília, 9 May 2019, <https://youtu.be/ZmV35TmdUAg>.

⁷¹ Martins, 'Governança global e autodeterminação popular'; Ernesto Araújo, 'XVI reunião dos MREs do Grupo de Lima—sessão ampliada', speech, Brasília, 8 Nov. 2019, http://www.funag.gov.br/images/Nova_politica_externa/Grupo_de_Lima.pdf.

⁷² Jair Bolsonaro, 'Cerimônia de formatura da turma do Instituto Rio Branco 2019', speech, Brasília, 3 May 2019, <http://www.institutoriobranco.itamaraty.gov.br/artigos/60-noticias/83-cerimonia-de-formatura-da-turma-aracy-de-carvalho-guimaraes-rosa-2017-2019-do-instituto-rio-branco-brasilia-3-de-maio-de-2019>.

⁷³ Martins, 'Governança global e autodeterminação popular'.

⁷⁴ Trump, 'Remarks by President Trump to the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly'.

⁷⁵ US Department of State, 'US–Brazil Strategic Partnership Dialogue', media note, 16 Sept. 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-brazil-strategic-partnership-dialogue/>.

⁷⁶ Hussein Kalout, 'Para "recompensar" apoio, EUA anunciarão o Brasil como prioridade na OCDE', *Revista Época*, 14 Jan. 2020.

⁷⁷ 'Em almoço fechado, Trump diz querer Brasil como membro pleno da Otan', *Folha de São Paulo*, 20 March 2019.

Iran,⁷⁸ religious freedom,⁷⁹ family values,⁸⁰ the Israeli–Palestinian question,⁸¹ and Cuba,⁸² showing the extent of the Brazilian president’s commitment to establishing a partnership with the United States that went beyond the economic and strategic considerations typical of past alignments.

In sum, the logic behind Brazil’s new stance on international institutions, proclaimed by Ernesto Araújo during the CPAC meeting in 2019, is to fight against an ‘ideological arc’ supported by ‘globalists and their left-wing sympathizers’. The construction of a moral enemy to be fought against, alongside Trump, went beyond any political alignment seen in past administrations, in which economic considerations took precedence over moral arguments. The change was so marked that diplomatic staff sometimes have difficulties in articulating Brazil’s new positions in Geneva or New York.⁸³ This became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Brazilian diplomats struggled to criticize the WHO using anti-globalist arguments while virtually every other country in the world—excepting only Hungary and the United States—gave full support to the organization.⁸⁴

It is important to mention that even after Joe Biden’s victory over Donald Trump in the November 2020 election, Bolsonaro continued to support Trump’s claims for recounting the votes⁸⁵ and even accused Joe Biden of interfering in Brazil’s sovereignty over the Amazon. For Bolsonaro, Joe Biden is a leftist globalist ready to impose sanctions against Brazil’s right to explore the largest tropical forest in the world.⁸⁶ These claims show once more that the alignment with the United States is more centred on conservative values represented by Trump than on geopolitical or economic considerations.

Bolsonaro’s relationship with China

Bolsonaro’s perceptions of China have been highly controversial. For him, China is one of Brazil’s most important ideological rivals. During the campaign, Bolsonaro visited Taiwan and argued that his travelling there, as to Israel and the United States, would give a clear signal of who Brazil’s new allies would be in the event of his electoral victory.⁸⁷ The Chinese Embassy in Brasília promptly responded, saying that the visit violated the principle of ‘One China’ and that any candi-

⁷⁸ Matheus Schuch, ‘Após acompanhar fala de Trump sobre o Irã, Bolsonaro fala que Brasil não pode se omitir’, *Valor Econômico*, 8 Jan. 2020.

⁷⁹ ‘Brasil prepara aliança com EUA por defesa da liberdade religiosa’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 12 Sept. 2019.

⁸⁰ Jamil Chade, ‘EUA acionam Brasil para implementar agenda ultraconservadora na ONU’, *Uol*, 12 Oct. 2019.

⁸¹ Jamil Chade, ‘Bolsonaro rompe tradição diplomática e vota contra palestinos na ONU’, *Uol*, 22 March 2019.

⁸² Patrícia Campos Mello, ‘Brasil cede aos EUA, rompe tradição de 27 anos e não condena embargo a Cuba’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 7 Nov. 2019.

⁸³ Authors’ interview with an international correspondent working in Geneva, 30 Jan. 2020. He noticed Brazilian diplomats uncomfortably articulating the new positions about human rights and other sensitive themes.

⁸⁴ Ana Alves, ‘Sem endosso do Brasil, ONU adota medida que pede cooperação internacional no combate à Covid-19’, *O Globo*, 21 April 2020.

⁸⁵ Felipe Frazão, ‘Bolsonaro dever esperar “quadro concreto” para se pronunciar sobre o resultado das eleições nos EUA’, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 7 Nov. 2020.

⁸⁶ Jake Spring, ‘Brazil’s Bolsonaro slams Biden for “coward threats” over Amazon’, Reuters, 30 Sept. 2020.

⁸⁷ Jair Bolsonaro, ‘Os compromissos de Jair Bolsonaro em Taiwan’, 15 Nov. 2018, YouTube video, Jair Bolsonaro personal account.

date should be careful in choosing his foreign allies.⁸⁸ Bolsonaro portrayed China as a ‘predator that wants to dominate crucial sectors of our economy’.⁸⁹ By the end of 2018, with Bolsonaro’s victory confirmed, the authorities in Beijing were ‘extremely frustrated’ with him and with his views about China.⁹⁰ Moreover, they warned that the economic costs of confrontation could be huge.⁹¹

There was also apparent animosity towards Beijing within the administration. Filipe G. Martins tweeted multiple times about China, calling it ‘a tyranny capable of paling any dystopia of fiction’.⁹² He also elaborated on the importance of Trump and China to Brazil: ‘Just like Trump ... China is perhaps our other partner, which ends up defining our movements.’⁹³ In March 2019, Ernesto Araújo said—in an apparent reference to China—that Brazil would not ‘sell its soul’ to maintain soybean, iron ore exports, and that foreign policy was not just about trade, but also about values.⁹⁴ The exception to this approach was Vice-President Hamilton Mourão, who travelled to China on 19 May 2019, in an attempt to create a more amicable atmosphere between the two countries in the aftermath of Bolsonaro’s visit to Taiwan. However, even he eventually had to backtrack on his favourable position towards Beijing on Bolsonaro’s personal request.⁹⁵

Portraying China as the enemy has political and economic consequences. China is Brazil’s number one trading partner, consuming most of the country’s agricultural and mining exports, and is far more important than the United States to many of Bolsonaro’s constituents. The support of Brazilian farmers, decisive in Bolsonaro’s election victory, could be jeopardized by an aggressive stance against China. Furthermore, as Bolsonaro continued to perceive China as an adversary, even discussing with US authorities during his visit to Washington how to diminish Brazil’s dependence on China,⁹⁶ important constituencies started to complain about anti-China bias in the administration.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, the construction of mutual expectations works in complex ways. The turning-point in Bolsonaro’s stance towards Beijing came about not as a result of domestic pressures, but rather because of the support Bolsonaro received from the Chinese during the Amazon fires crisis of 2019. As the fires in the Amazon region began to get out of control, Bolsonaro’s administration had to deal with growing international criticism from many quarters, but especially

⁸⁸ Evandro Éboli, ‘Viagem de Bolsonaro a Taiwan teria irritado regime comunista chinês’, *Gazeta do Povo*, 9 March 2018.

⁸⁹ Jake Spring, ‘Discurso anti-China de Bolsonaro causa apreensão sobre negócios com o país’, *Reuters*, 10 Oct. 2018.

⁹⁰ Guilherme Magalhães, ‘Aceno de Bolsonaro a Taiwan desanima Pequim, diz alto funcionário do regime chinês’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 5 Nov. 2018.

⁹¹ Jamil Chade, ‘China faz alerta a Bolsonaro e diz que “custo” pode ser grande ao Brasil’, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 31 Oct. 2018.

⁹² Filipe G. Martins, ‘Muitos falam sobre a China como se fosse um país normal e não uma tirania capaz de empalidecer qualquer distopia da ficção’, *Twitter*, 10 July 2018.

⁹³ ‘Brasil e EUA estão próximos de acordo para exportação de aço e alumínio, diz Filipe G. Martins’, *Jovem Pan*, 6 Dec. 2019.

⁹⁴ ‘A novos diplomatas, Araújo diz que país não venderá alma para vender minério de ferro e soja’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 11 March 2019.

⁹⁵ Caio Junqueira, ‘Bolsonaro x militares—cada um no seu quadrado’, *Revista Crusoé*, 5 July 2019.

⁹⁶ ‘Dependência da China foi principal tema de jantar de Bolsonaro nos EUA’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 18 March 2019.

⁹⁷ ‘Ruralistas reclamam de viés anti-China no governo Bolsonaro’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 15 March 2019.

from the French President Emmanuel Macron. For Macron, the Amazon situation was an issue ‘for the whole planet’; he stated starkly that ‘we cannot allow you [Bolsonaro] to destroy everything’, indirectly questioning Brazil’s sovereignty over the region.⁹⁸ Bolsonaro responded with a series of attacks against the French president and argued that ‘globalist conspirators’ were aiming to weaken Brazil’s sovereignty over the Amazon.⁹⁹ In this context, China was one of the few governments that supported Bolsonaro, arguing that Brazil had one of the most efficient environmental laws in the world and that the crisis ‘was a bit fabricated’.¹⁰⁰

This was the first occasion on which the national role conceptions of Brazil and China had coincided. China is known in world politics for being a fierce defender of its national sovereignty, and the Chinese position concerning the Amazon was perceived in Brasília as a bridge-builder from which the relationship could be reconstructed. It was also perceived as taking a position against the intrusion of international institutions into Brazil’s sovereignty and as criticism of environmentalists, in accordance with the anti-globalist views of the administration. In consequence, Bolsonaro made his first declaration of public support of China for its support of Brazil’s sovereignty over the Amazon.¹⁰¹ After that, Bolsonaro started to make public indications of interest in visiting China to improve the strained relationship, and a new term began to surface in Brasília—that of China as a ‘strategic partner’. Brazil should be pragmatic towards China, despite the two countries’ ideological differences.¹⁰²

Nevertheless, the common ground was not extensive enough to bring about a genuine change in Bolsonaro’s view on China. During his visit to Beijing in October 2019, the Chinese and Brazilian leaders gave very different public speeches. While Xi Jinping remembered the historical principles of the bilateral relationship, which include friendship and partnership,¹⁰³ Bolsonaro focused his narrative on trade and business opportunities.¹⁰⁴ In one of the first public comments given upon his arrival, Bolsonaro had already claimed that he was visiting ‘a capitalist country’,¹⁰⁵ and that the sole purpose of his visit was to do business.¹⁰⁶ It was only when Xi Jinping visited Brazil for the BRICS summit in November 2019

⁹⁸ ‘Macron calls Amazon an issue for the whole planet’, Associated Press, 27 Aug. 2019.

⁹⁹ Tim Marcin, ‘Bolsonaro espalha teorias conspiratórias sobre os incêndios na Amazônia’, *ViceNews*, 22 Aug. 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Eliane Oliveira, ‘“Brasil é um dos países mais rigorosos nessas questões ambientais”, afirma diplomata chinês’, *O Globo*, 23 Aug. 2019.

¹⁰¹ Raquel Landim, ‘Bolsonaro agradece isenção da China sobre polêmica ambiental na Amazônia’, *Folha de São Paulo*, 25 Oct. 2019.

¹⁰² Macarena Vidal Liy and Naiara Galarraga Gortázar, ‘Bolsonaro sela sua reconciliação com a China com propostas de investimento’, *El País Brasil*, 25 Oct. 2019; authors’ interview on 23 Feb. 2020 with a public official working in the Ministry of Economics, who argued that ‘Brazil is becoming pragmatic with China’ and that the ‘state visit exemplifies that change in attitude’.

¹⁰³ Wu Xinbo, ‘China in search of a liberal partnership international order’, *International Affairs* 94: 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 995–1018.

¹⁰⁴ Maria Cristina Fernandes, ‘Xi buscou recolocar Bolsonaro na rota das relações bilaterais’, *Valor Econômico*, 25 Oct. 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Ricardo Senra, ‘Estou num país capitalista, diz Bolsonaro ao chegar à China’, *BBC News Brazil*, 24 Oct. 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Authors’ interview, 14 Nov. 2019, with a diplomat working closely with the administration. He argued that, despite taking a robust anti-communist line in his speeches, Bolsonaro tries to accommodate economic interests by saying that China is not communist, or that it is a ‘Chinese communism’.

that the Brazilian leader apologized, in private, to the Chinese leader for his past comments on China.¹⁰⁷

Everything changed again with the COVID-19 crisis. Bolsonaro's supporters and important members of his cabinet started accusing the Chinese government of fabricating the coronavirus in state laboratories, with the intention of using it against the West to secure China's rise as a global power.¹⁰⁸ Bolsonaro had made a formal apology to Xi Jinping—only to see his supporters creating a grass-roots Sinophobe campaign much criticized by the Brazilian media.¹⁰⁹ In the end, however, mimicking Trump's position on the issue turned out to be more important to Bolsonaro's administration than any trade consideration—to the exasperation of Brazilian farmers, and contributing significantly to a contradictory foreign policy stance towards China.¹¹⁰

In sum, Bolsonaro's characterization of China evolved from arch-enemy to trade partner and back to ideological rival in a matter of months. It was clear that Bolsonaro found in Beijing's position towards the Amazon a powerful tool with which to forge mutual expectations between Ego and Alter when economic interests were at stake. There was a convergence between the two leaders on the issue of sovereignty, and Bolsonaro used this as a tool to improve the relationship with an ideological rival. However, as Carl Schmitt argued in his *The concept of the political*, the 'political enemy need not be morally evil; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflict with him is possible.'¹¹¹ The COVID-19 crisis only reinforced the sense of Chinese menace among Bolsonaro's die-hard supporters. In Bolsonaro's own words while in Beijing: 'We will never be 100 per cent aligned with China, but in economic issues, we are strong (very close to each other)'.¹¹²

Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that far-right populist governments tend to emphasize an ultra-conservative identity-set when dealing with other conservative governments. This identity-set includes three interrelated national role conceptions: (1) an anti-globalist role; (2) a nationalist role; and (3) a friend/foe role. We called this 'thick conservative identity'. However, when these same governments negotiate with ideological adversaries, they tend to use a more nuanced and contradictory conservative identity-set. We called this 'thin conservative identity'.

¹⁰⁷ Patrícia Campos Mello and Talita Fernandes, 'Em reunião fechada, Bolsonaro se retrata por críticas à China', *Folha de São Paulo*, 15 Nov. 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Agence France-Presse, 'China outraged after Brazil minister suggests COVID-19 is part of "plan for world domination"', *Guardian*, 7 April 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Ricardo della Coletta and Julia Chaib, 'Após crise diplomática, Bolsonaro telefona para Xi Jinping e fala em "laços de amizade"', *Folha de São Paulo*, 24 March 2020.

¹¹⁰ Jamil Chade, 'Bolsonaro está colhendo o que semeou com a China, afirma Rubens Ricupero', *Uol*, 4 April 2020.

¹¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1932), p. 27.

¹¹² Maria Cristina Fernandes, 'Bolsonaro: nunca seremos 100% afinados com a China, mas na questão econômica estamos fortes', *O Globo*, 25 Oct. 2019.

Anticipated expectations between Ego and Alter trigger the variation between these two types of conservatism. That is, when dealing with Significant Others, the Ego anticipates mutual expectations of deep conservatism to enact a congruent foreign policy narrative, mimicking the Significant Other's moral identity-set to gain admittance to the conservative social club. On the other hand, when negotiating with ideological rivals, the government pursues a narrower narrative in which one of the three national role conceptions is shared between Ego and Alter. However, the ideological rival continues to be perceived as a foe and this reactivates anti-foe narratives. In the end, the overall narrative towards an ideological rival leads to contradiction between national role conceptions.

It is fair to say that the 'thick conservative identity' defines and sets the boundaries of the 'thin conservative identity'; indeed, that the latter is dependent on the former. It is the thicker version that sets the conservative limits within which the milder version can operate. In this sense, the anticipated mutual expectations of two conservative governments are powerful enough to set the tone of such expectations not only between them, but also between them and their rivals. In the end, if for some reason an ideological rival does not defend sovereignty, a cornerstone principle for nationalist and conservative governments, then even minimum convergence is not possible and rivalry becomes enmity.

The analysis of Bolsonaro's relationships with Trump's United States and Xi Jinping's China exemplifies this contrast. With Trump, who personified his Significant Other, Bolsonaro readily anticipated shared national role conceptions; but with Xi he sought to create a narrower common foreign policy narrative focused on the defence of national sovereignty and mutual business interests. It is apparent that the anti-foe conception, once targeting China itself, was played down after Beijing decided to support a national role conception very dear to Bolsonaro—sovereignty over the Amazon. But as soon as the COVID-19 crisis arose, Bolsonaro's supporters and cabinet members began to accuse China of conspiracy against the West, once more triggering the anti-foe narrative and undermining the shared ground of territorial sovereignty.

We have also showed that Bolsonaro's political alignment with Trump went beyond the economic considerations that have been central in past Brazilian foreign policy. It was deeply rooted in the mindset of far-right governments worldwide, in which foreign policy identity-making is not just about building common national role conceptions, but guides their actions towards other powers, including ideological rivals. In this sense, both the relationship with China and the future relationship with Joe Biden are dependent on the relationship with the conservative role model. The identity formed *vis-à-vis* the Significant Other frames expectations when facing rivals, even if a new rival is seated in the White House.

The implications of our study for the literature on populism and foreign policy are threefold. First, we have shown that international aspects of far-right populism, such as fear of immigration and hostility towards global elites, are becoming bases from which populist governments reach out to other conservative governments

and build international political alignments. Although their underlying foreign policy narrative is dominated by nationalistic claims, they seek to create a common internationalized narrative of victims fighting global conspiracies. The mechanism of anticipated mutual expectation and mimicry is just one possible explanation for these alignments, and the literature needs to expand the understanding of how these alignments are formed and their consequences for world politics.

Second, we have tried to fill a gap in the literature on populism and foreign policy by providing a model of how far-right governments align their expectations with those of other far-right governments, using their conservative identity-set. The existing literature is focused either on personal profiling of far-right leaders and their foreign policy or on how globalization has contributed to their rise across the world. So far, studies have not looked at how these alignments are produced and how conservative identity influences such formations. Only comparative studies of multiple far-right governments can provide the stronger evidence needed as a basis for understanding the connections between far-right identity and foreign policy.

Third, the far-right national role conceptions—anti-globalism, pro-nationalism and anti-foe belligerence—provide a conceptual connection between the broader literature on populism, which has to date been excessively focused on its domestic aspects, and its international consequences. That is, by associating anti-globalism and nationalism with the people/elite divide, and the anti-foe narrative with authoritarianism, it is possible to understand far-right governments as representing a political movement with a global vocation as well as more parochial aspirations.

For Michael Walzer,¹¹³ to call a moral argument ‘thin’ is not to imply that it is trivial or emotionally shallow. Indeed, the opposite is more likely to be the case: this is morality close to the bone, the last frontier that cannot be crossed. Once the point of minimum agreement is reached, there is no going further back; otherwise, open conflict will arise. In moral discourse, thinness and intensity go together, whereas with thickness come qualification, compromise and disagreement. In this sense, the path towards understanding ‘thick’ moral and ideational alignments between far-right governments is a complex one, with multiple branching routes yet to be investigated, and requires consideration of how these governments deal with ideological rivals as well as sympathizers.

¹¹³ Walzer, *Thick and thin*, p. 6.

