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ABSTRACT

Maurício Santoro explores the role China has played in Brazil's COVID pandemic era politics, carefully examining the participation of commodities in Sino-Brazilian trade and the environmental issues that arise. The literature on Brazil-China relations has expanded significantly during the last few years, however, most of the scholarship focuses mostly on trade and economic approaches. Santoro provides a new framework for understanding the current state of Sino-Brazilian relations in a changing world, bringing the reader an intelligent and conscientious example of diplomatic historical research that goes far beyond trade. For dealing with a profound and multifaceted approach, and presenting a broad perspective of this bilateral relationship, I consider the book "Brazil-China Relations in the 21st Century" as a pioneer for the study of Brazil relations with China.

Keywords: Brazil. China. Sino Brazilian relations.

RESUMO

Durante o período da pandemia de Covid-19, Maurício Santoro explorou o papel político que a China desempenhou para o Brasil, examinando cuidadosamente a participação das commodities no comércio sino-brasileiro e as questões ambientais que surgiram ao longo da relação bilateral. A literatura sobre as relações Brasil-China expandiu-se significativamente durante os últimos anos, no entanto, a maioria dos estudos concentra-se principalmente em abordagens comerciais e econômicas. Santoro fornece uma nova estrutura para a compreensão do estado atual das relações sino-brasileiras em um mundo em transformação, trazendo ao leitor um exemplo talentoso de pesquisa histórica diplomática que vai muito além do comércio. Por tratar de uma abordagem profunda e multifacetada, e apresentar uma perspectiva ampla dessa relação bilateral, considero o livro "Relações Brasil-China no século XXI" como pioneiro no estudo das relações do Brasil com a China.

Palavras-chave: Brasil. China. Relações sino-brasileiras.

Over the nearly 12 years in which I have been dealing almost uninterruptedly with Brazil's political, economic and commercial relations with China, one theme stands out: Brazil does not have a plan or a strategy to guide bilateral relations with China. The book *Brazil-China Relations in the 21st Century – The Making of a Strategic Partnership*, authored by Maurício Santoro, is a piece of out this equation, offering a ground-breaking study of Brazil-China diplomatic history since the establishment of official diplomatic ties between the two countries back in the mid-seventies until the present. Santoro brings an impressive contribution to further expand knowledge of how these relations achieved the status of a Global Strategic Partnership in less than twenty years.

Santoro turned the hectic COVID-19 pandemic period into an opportunity to reflect about history and anticipate something much needed in Sino Brazilian studies: contributions that go

beyond the economic/trade sphere. Aware that the contours of the world order are quickly changing in the present and with an eye on the past, the author proposed to review the bilateral ties between Brazil and China through a very generous method: engaging with a wide network of stakeholders that are ahead of the China agenda in Brazil in different ways, ranging from scientists to policymakers, from think tanks to private companies.

Maurício first acknowledges that the Sino-Brazilian strategic partnership has been built around two main lines of actions: joint efforts to cooperation on development and political concertation on the multilateral fora, both in search of a multipolar world. By the very beginning it is already surprising that Santoro brings to our attention that it took less than 30 years till relations between China and Brazil reached their full potential in the 2000s and China became Brazil's main trade partner thanks to the commodity boom.

It is worth mentioning that during the past decade, in the context of overcoming the 2008/09 crisis, Brazil and China also built an institutional framework that the country does not have with any other partner with higher degrees of cultural proximity or mutual trust – with the rare exception of the MERCOSUR countries. Maurício notes that the current state of the Sino-Brazilian strategic partnership includes a wide variety of sectors, for example, a joint program to build satellites, dialogues in multilateral groups such as BRICS, G20, BASIC and a rising agenda concerning the Amazon and climate change.

With a clear-eye, Santoro stresses that the bilateral relations also present challenges to Brazil, both domestically and regionally. Since the mid-2000s, China has become an exogenous factor complicating the development of South American integration, directly affecting Brazilian interests in the region and the efforts of neighboring countries toward existing regional projects, just as it also implies changes in relations with the United States and Europe. In this context, trade relations between South American countries have remained constant or even declined, while trade between all South American countries and China has increased.

Bilateral trade between Brazil and China reached US\$135 billion in 2022, according to data from Brazil's Ministry of Industry, Foreign Trade and Services (MDIC) and China currently plays an important role as a foreign investor in Brazil's most diverse industries. Brazil has also received thirteen loans from Chinese banks, totaling US\$30.5 billion, according to the China-Latin America Finance Database data from 2023. In South America, trade flow has increased strongly over the last 10 years, especially with regard to the level of imports. According to the World Economics Forum, trade between China and the region accounted for US\$315 billion in 2020, compared to the US\$12 billion in 2000.

Drawing on the "China threat" vs "peaceful rise" concerns, yet savvily not taking sides, Santoro reminds us that great power competition can find fertile ground in Brazil and the region due, for instance, the increasingly tensions between the United States and China, or the negotiations of a Free Trade Agreement between MERCOSUR and Europe. As history flashes

before our eyes, Mauricio does not fall in the tantalizing trap of trying to predict scenarios around these circumstances; instead, the author conducts a very sober and articulated narrative that emphasized that the history behind the bilateral ties between China and Brazil are heavily marked by mutual learning on aspects ranging from personal networks to compliance and regulations.

Chapter one draws on Brazilian foreign policy history and brings evidence to the controversial period when the military established a dictatorship in the country. Although the period was ghastly in the domestic sphere during this time, most of these regimes conducted Brazilian foreign policy through a very pragmatic stance, with few exceptions – these latter ones complicated the establishment of relations with China in the beginning.

Many Brazilian diplomats and political leaders saw the People's Republic as a partner with great potential for this kind of diplomatic dialogue. However, there was an ideological split between left and right, among the polarization taking place in Brazil's domestic policy at the time. The coup d'Etat of 1964 interrupted this rapprochement with Beijing and turned the subject into a taboo for a decade. But relations advanced in a consistent and profound manner. In the 1990's, it was gaining strength the idea that both countries needed some kind of political gesture to signalize that the bilateral relationship was important beyond the current economic problems. The solution came during a trip of vice-prime minister Zhu Ronji to Brazil. This is the climax of the book, so the passage deserves full citation:

"He [Zhu Ronji] visited the usual spotlights that Brazil liked to show to Chinese authorities: the Manaus special development zone, the Carajás mining complex and the Itaipu dam. Ambassador Abdenur accompanied him and during an airplane trip from Foz do Iguaçu to São Paulo suggested the term "strategic partnership" to describe Sino-Brazilian relations. Zhu approved the expression and started to use it in his speeches, first to businessmen in the São Paulo Industry Federation (Fiesp) and then to the interim minister of Foreign Affairs Luiz Fernando Lampreia and president Itamar Franco in Brasília. The idea was well received by all audiences. In the words of Abdenur: "It is interesting to notice that the creation of certain 'concepts' and certain 'key ideas', are important to elevate the level of the bilateral relations, for they have a capacity of mobilization and persuasion" (Santoro, 2021).

In the 1990s, Brazilian trade with China began to flow (approximately half a billion dollars). Throughout that decade, Brazil exported iron ore and soybeans to China and imported low value-added manufactured products from China (trinkets). In this trade balance, Brazil had a surplus. The concept of an "Strategic Partnership" was invented by then and consolidated in the diplomatic rhetoric of both countries between March and November of 1993, during three high-level visits of Chinese authorities to Brazil: minister of Foreign Relations Qian Qichen, Zhu Ronji and, finally, secretary-general and designated president Jiang Zemin

However, in 2001 China entered the WTO (mostly due to Chinese support for the US war on terror). From here, China could no longer sell its products below the market average for 15 years. In practice, China increased its profit and even improved the quality of its products. As a consequence, China was forging away from the image of a country that sold trinkets to start to

have products of great international competitiveness. Thus, China started to receive a lot of international capital, attracting international high-tech companies to produce their products in the country, mostly because of cheaper costs.

It is worth to note that Brazil's trade relationship with China has extrapolated to other areas, such as investments (training Brazilian labor to produce touchscreen technology), as well as joint action in multilateral scenarios (G-20 finance, BRICS, BASIC). In this sense, in 2004, a space for these joint actions between Brazil and China was created, the high-level COSBAN Sino-Brazilian Commission for cooperation and concertation.

China and Brazil ties also reached the Amazon. Much is debated in academia about the role of Beijing in the forest and how Brazil is cooperating in a more assertive diplomacy to fight climate change. Santoro carefully presents the economic history of the Amazon, analyzing its several stages in the colonial times, in the military regime and in the recent democratic governments, explaining how the region became Brazil's biggest producer of meat and an important area for soybeans.

The author then discusses the impacts of Chinese trade and investment in the Amazon, both in the positive and in the negative aspects. For example, there are bad consequences in terms of deforestation but also good measures in environmental responsibility, such as attempts to create systems of international certification to ensure that Chinese firms are not buying commodities that are products of illegal deforestation. But this relationship in this specific theme is constantly under review by both countries and they could leverage high levels of exchanges and knowledge about rules and localization, serving as relevant empirical evidence of "guanxi", the Chinese way of doing networking.

Santoro brings new insight into how Brazil and China became major players not only through bilateral channels, but also internationally. Brazil-China Relations in the 21st Century – The Making of a Strategic Partnership has significant implications for the rapid evolvement of Brazil and China's relations through recent years. Mauricio adds significantly to our understanding of the Brazilian Foreign Policy, mostly because of the author's very rich sources and references and it also acts as a powerful corrective to past studies which have appeared somewhat self-celebratory. His work is especially illuminating in the sphere of Brazil-China relations beyond bilateral and trade channels.

The author excels on balancing history and empirical evidence in the book. It is a portraiture of both Brazil and China achievements in the thorny problem of exploring the huge potentials they can explore and cooperate. The sources examined are all generously dissected with a host of original information, offering salience beyond these vignettes of the field, and extending our wide-angle lens of Brazilian foreign policy and how China has creatively and rapidly adapted its interests to Brazil over time. Finally, one must conclude that this study is somewhat victimized by its own success in tackling such a wide topic while inevitably being constrained by

documentation depicting a finite cameo set of experimental foreign policy practices. In sum, the narrative is impressively delineated, and Mauricio Santoro lays foundations for wider depictions of China-Brazil relations and possible contributions to narratives in International Relations research.