

# Paradiplomacy Studies in Brazil in the 21st Century: a Narrative Literature Review

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**Abstract.** This article presents a narrative literature review of a selected sample of literature regarding the phenomenon of paradiplomacy by the subnational unities in the Brazilian federation. Through the criteria-based selection of open-source journals, followed by analysis and cross-reference, the research provides insight into multiple perspectives regarding Brazilian paradiplomacy. Additionally, the article identifies several research gaps brought forth by recent changes in the international and Brazilian political and social landscape, gaps that then allow for the conclusion that further research is possible on the topic, focused on multiple new objects, and possible theoretical focuses.

**Keywords.** Paradiplomacy, federal diplomacy, literature review, Brazil, decentralized international cooperation

## 1. Introduction

Among the multiple transdisciplinary debates and investigations that compose the International Relations domain, the inquiries regarding the phenomenon of paradiplomacy are fairly recent, but also highly promising in terms of more accurate and in-depth analyses of international politics agents. The field grounds itself in the theoretical background of liberal and constructivist perspectives from the second half of the 20th century, stressing how the phenomena of interdependence, heightened globalization, and transnational politics have allowed for the multiplication of relevant actors in the international scenario.

Even though the concept of “paradiplomacy” has been employed to refer to the international actions of all sorts of agents, this paper is grounded on Soldatos and Duchacek’s notion of paradiplomacy as the international outreach and at least partially autonomous activity of subnational government entities such as regions, states or cities(1,2). As defined by Cornago, “paradiplomacy can be simply defined as subnational governments’ involvement in international relations through the establishment of formal and informal ties, be they permanent or ad hoc, with foreign public or private entities, to promote social, economic, cultural or political dimensions of development”(3).

Similarly, the studies of the paradiplomatic actions

in the Brazilian context are also incipient and have only recently gained significant development. Even though the beginning of the practice of international outreach by Brazilian states and cities predates most studies by at least a few decades, this phenomenon gained significant impulse in the 1990s; which was mostly boosted by the increased complexity of the international landscape in the post-Cold War era, simultaneous to the re-democratization and international re-opening of Brazil after the end of the civilian-military dictatorial regime in 1985. Since then, the actual practice and the academic lookout for paradiplomacy in Brazil have extended to a wide array of international topics and agendas. It is now possible to find international interventions by the Brazilian federative subnational entities in matters ranging from environmental politics(1) to regional integration(2-4), cross-border affairs(2,3,5) to public health concerns(6,7), among others.

However, most Brazilian studies on the topic of paradiplomacy appear to be chronologically focused on a period of relatively high activity and harmonious coordination between the federal and subnational spheres of government. This ranges from former president Cardoso’s government (1994-2002) to the end of former president Dilma Roussef’s first mandate (2014), a period in which the concepts of federal diplomacy and, following, decentralized international cooperation reached their maximum expression. Since then, the international and domestic political conjuncture has gone through major changes. Not only has Brazil

gone through three changes in the federal government, one of them through an impeachment procedure, and it is currently under a government considered highly disruptive from the country's recent history, but also the COVID-19 pandemic changed radically and rapidly the international field, imposing new challenges and, in the Brazilian case, tensioning the relations between the federal and sub-national levels of government.

Therefore, this paper aims to re-visit some of the core literature regarding paradiplomacy in Brazil under the new optics of the 2022 context, matching the studies' proposals and findings with an updated political perspective. This review will go over selected studies on paradiplomacy from four distinct perspectives. Through this, the author intends to answer the following research questions:

- How do the changes in the Brazilian political context potentially affect the phenomenon of paradiplomacy in the country?
- What research gaps do these changes bring forth?

## 2. Research methods

This paper proposes, for the revisiting of the core literature on Brazilian paradiplomacy, the execution of a narrative literature review. A search was performed in the Brazilian CAPES Journal Database, applying the string

*("paradiplomacy" AND "Brazil") OR ("paradiplomacia" AND "Brasil") OR "Federal diplomacy"*

The search results were then sequentially filtered by the following criteria;

- C1: accepting only peer-reviewed papers, published in a journal and found in open-access sources;
- C2: accepting only papers found in Portuguese, English, or Spanish;
- C3: accepting only papers published from 2000 onward;

From the resulting set, papers were manually selected after a review of the title and abstract. The papers were selected purposefully attempting to provide a significant sample of the literature on the topic of Brazilian paradiplomacy from multiple angles. These papers were then analyzed and cross-referenced to produce the following narrative literature review.

## 3. Review and discussions

The application of the above-mentioned criteria led to the selection of 10 main papers as a starting set, along with others used for supporting the analysis.

After a careful reading and cross-study of the articles, the discussions proposed in them could be classified into four subtopics: theoretical discussions on the Brazilian paradiplomacy; paradiplomacy and regional integration; paradiplomacy and cross-border relations; and municipal paradiplomacy in Brazil. All of the selected studies, in some fashion, approached the study of paradiplomacy from one or multiple of these perspectives.

### 3.1 Theoretical background

From a preliminary analysis, it is possible to recognize in all of the selected studies, as well as in several of those cited by them, several common threads of theoretical grounding. First, a shared understanding or conceptualization of paradiplomacy: even though the topics being analyzed (environmental policy, cross-border affairs, economic and political regional blocks) are notoriously multi-layered, all of the studies remain focused on the previously mentioned narrower definition of paradiplomacy in Brazil as a manifestation specifically by the subnational government unities, encompassed earlier by Cornago(3).

Aside from a common definition, all of the studies also acknowledge, explicitly or implicitly, that the paradiplomatic activities stem necessarily from a context of complex interdependence in the international medium. It is the impacts of globalization and foreign events on the local circumstances and social conditions that motivate international movements by subnational units, seeking to either reap benefits or control negative externalities coming from global affairs without recurring to disputing space for its demands at the national-level foreign policy(4). This is especially true when there is a perception that the local interests do not find echoes in the priorities of the national agenda(5). This leads then to a specific characterization of the paradiplomatic activities: it is eminently a pragmatic activity, focused on objective and specific issues and concerns regarding a given local context, and does not require significant symbolic or principle-related validations. Also, it is highly dependent on the local political circumstances and political will of the involved elites, something Vigevani, and other authors refer to as "entrepreneurial politicians"(4).

Another significant discussion shared across all studies is a concern regarding the juridical status of the subnational paradiplomatic actions, and their formal and informal relationship to the national official foreign policy, which is the focus of the discussion brought forth by Vigevani in his paper(4). It is a fact established by all studies that, in the Brazilian context, the international activities of the subnational entities occur largely outside of constitutional provisions. The Brazilian federal constitution attributes to the President and, consequently, to the federal level, the natural authority to engage in relations with other countries

and establish international agreements. It, however, does not mention, neither authorizing nor forbidding, the possibility of subnational states engaging in foreign affairs pertinent to their competencies (6). Despite so, the paradiplomatic activities in Brazil exist in a legitimacy limbo, characterized by Vigevani with the term “unlawful practices” (7).

This ambiguous legal situation is the background then where the relations between the national and subnational foreign interests take place. Mainly due to a recognized centralizing tradition embedded in the Brazilian federalist structure and diplomatic practices, there was historically anxiety by the diplomatic national corps of losing singular control over the direction of the country’s foreign affairs(8). However, partly forced by the previously mentioned globalization circumstances, the period of 1997 and 2003 was one of concessions, with the national diplomatic corps opening and strengthening institutional channels to coordinate and support paradiplomatic efforts aligned with the national political agenda. This paved the way for notorious successes, such as cooperation in the Amazonian issues(8). It was also a consensus that paradiplomatic affairs would probably remain restricted to the realms of “low politics”(4), which expectedly would prevent significant shocks with the directions of the national foreign policy.

Nevertheless, the changing circumstances brought unexpected tensions to this relationship between the national and the local. Not only are the institutionalized channels still insufficient to provide a satisfactory dialogue and cooperation between national diplomacy and local interested actors, but the absence of a solid legal framework for paradiplomacy was also made evident by the recent relationship tensions between the federal and local authorities, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Further crises in the federative relationships are undesirable but should be expected and anticipated, and newer analyses on the risks of this diplomatic dissonance between national and subnational in this new context are necessary.

### **3.2 Paradiplomacy and regional integration**

The studies that cover the relationship between paradiplomacy and regional integration stem from the fact that both phenomena arise from the contemporary context of complex international interdependence that characterizes the current international arena, only on different geopolitical scales. Also, both practices seek to address and are dependent on the practical needs and demands of social groups and elites, and need to generate positive externalities for some to be achieved. Additionally, both regional integration and paradiplomacy require some political synergy and the will of key political figures in all involved parties, since both phenomena need political compromises and mutual guarantees to progress (5,7,8).

The paper by Mallman and Clemente, however, goes beyond pointing out the similarities between both practices. The authors highlight their potential complementary dynamics: while the engagement in paradiplomatic affairs by a subnational entity promotes the international relevance of the whole region where it is inserted and integrated, the fact of it being part of an integrated region or block favors its negotiation momentum and leverage when engaging in paradiplomatic affairs (5).

While this described positive feedback is highly viable, it once again relies on harmony of interests between the integrating region and the subnational entity: it is also entirely possible to conduct paradiplomatic efforts in opposition to aspects of an integrationist project, as mentioned by Mallman and Clemente regarding certain Argentinean regions opposing steps of MERCOSUR integration(5). Other aspects stressed in the studies on this matter regard the creation of regional networks of cities and other institutionalized collectives of subnational entities to further international projection while also pushing forward a greater degree of integration.

That said, the changing political landscape potentially has also altered the environment for the progress of paradiplomacy linked to regional integration. Brazil has lived recently a significant change in the orientation of its foreign policy, diverging away from a tendency to south-south cooperation mindset predominant in previous years. Initiatives such as MERCOSUR and UNASUL have mostly left the focus of attention of the Brazilian federal government. In this new context, more investigation is necessary to update the study of regionally integrative paradiplomacy in this new context of dissonance with the national agenda, to evaluate whether it has been significantly hindered by it.

### **3.3 Cross-border paradiplomacy**

Closely related to the discussions regarding paradiplomacy and regional integration are those classified by Duchacek(1) according to a geographical scale as “cross-border” diplomacy, that is, paradiplomatic activities between subnational entities geographically sharing a border region(5).

Border regions usually present to the subnational entities bonded to them issues in common that can be usually better addressed through collaborative efforts(5,7), inviting the entities to eventually engage in paradiplomatic efforts if these problems are not adequately conducted by the national diplomacy. However, as is usually the case for cooperation efforts, this remains conditional to the existence of a favorable historical and political relationship that lends itself to common understandings, something that border regions may or may not possess.

In the case of Brazil and of South America in general, borders are economically and politically neglected regions. In a sense, this generates a lack of resources

for the subnational entities to develop professional and formalized diplomatic efforts. From a different perspective, this also propels them to seek international solutions to overcome internal regional resource asymmetries and address local-level problems often overlooked by the central authorities.

Also related to cross-border relations, borders are favorable for regional integration, as presented by Prado regarding the MERCOSUR context (9). It is also evident the relevance of cross-border relations in the paradiplomatic efforts of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, where the international efforts of the state are notoriously directed to the Plata River basin region, with priority dialogue with the Argentinian regions that it shares a border with(7).

Nevertheless, the same political context changes that might have affected the paradiplomatic regional integration efforts might have potential impacts on cross-border paradiplomacy as well. That is because in South America, given geographical and political convenience circumstances, much of these cross-border decentralized cooperation activities happened under the scope of MERCOSUR. Therefore, understanding how is the Brazilian cross-border cooperation currently, absent the full attention of the federal government to MERCOSUR, is a promising investigation gap.

### 3.4 Municipal paradiplomacy in Brazil

In a different tone, part of the selected studies delves into the topic of paradiplomatic activities developed by cities(10,11). The cooperation between the so-called global cities is another prolific field of study in paradiplomacy. As presented by the work of Saskia Sassen, the proponent of the term “global city”, in the context of a globalized world the large metropolitan centers take on the role of economic growth inductor and main developer of further productive capabilities(10,12,13).

In their paper, Mendes and Figueira present the concept proposed by Brenner of “glocal cities”(10,14). In this framework, the relation between the national state and local level is not one of eroded relevance of the national state, but one where it assumes the role of promoting the cities’ economic potential. The authors illustrate this perspective through the case of Rio de Janeiro and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, highlighting simultaneously the city’s efforts to promote its global city potential and the collaboration of the federal government in this process. This also presents the debate of the mega-events as a tool to be used in the paradiplomacy of cities(10).

Also regarding the international outreach of cities, Milani and Ribeiro propose the concept of Local International Management. Aware that their context is deeply impacted by international events and a globalized contexts, cities would build their local international management strategies, defined as “a series of organizational structures and management

procedures that guarantee an increasing capacity for cities to set up, participate in and foster regional and global economic, cultural, social and information networks or flows”(11).

Additionally, Milani and Ribeiro also trace the development and situation of the paradiplomatic activities of seventy-two Brazilian cities. The authors confirm the role of the federal government in cooperation with the cities in inducing and promoting the cities’ international outreach. The authors also point out that, even though this constructive relationship between national and local is productive, the cities’ are not dependent on the national level induction to promote their potential. Even so, they also do not usually position themselves in opposition to the supervision and direction of the national level, nor do they intend to call any sense of ethnonational belonging into question(11).

Given this context, new questions arise when one takes into consideration the more contemporary Brazilian political and social contexts. Considering the role of the federal government in promoting abroad the economic attractiveness of major cities, and that the Brazilian international reputation is significantly eroded, how effective is this activity in the present situation?

## 4. Conclusions

Considering the contemporary sudden and drastic changes in the social and political landscapes experienced in the international arena and the Brazilian domestic context, this article proposed a narrative literature review of a sample of core literature on the topic of Brazilian paradiplomacy, aiming to encompass multiple perspectives on the phenomenon. The goal was to not only further the understanding of these several approaches to the study of paradiplomacy, federal diplomacy, or decentralized cooperation, but also to identify how the changes in the Brazilian political context potentially affect the phenomenon of paradiplomacy in the country and how this brings forth new research gaps and favorable new lines on inquiry.

To do so, a narrative literature review was conducted, starting from database research of open-access sources and applying several criteria of choice. As a result of this procedure, a starting set of articles regarding multiple different aspects of the topic was identified, along with several articles as supporting literature.

The analysis conducted on the found literature categorized the selected articles according to four different analytical perspectives: theoretical discussions on the Brazilian paradiplomacy; paradiplomacy and regional integration; paradiplomacy and cross-border relations; and municipal paradiplomacy in Brazil.

First, the analysis identified a shared theoretical background in all of the selected articles: a shared

understanding or conceptualization of paradiplomacy as a manifestation specifically by the subnational government unities(3); an acknowledgment that the paradiplomatic activities stem necessarily from a context of complex interdependence in the international medium and globalization; a specific characterization of the paradiplomatic activities as an eminently pragmatic activity; and an understanding of paradiplomacy as highly dependent on the local political circumstances and political will of the involved elites(4) An additional significant discussion on multiple papers regard the juridical status of the subnational paradiplomatic actions, and its formal and informal relationship to the national official foreign policy, considering that in the Brazilian context, the international activities of the subnational entities occur largely outside of constitutional provisions(4).

Regarding the first perspective of analysis, paradiplomacy and regional integration, it was identified a deep connection between both phenomena, both in terms of origin and mutual feedback (5,9). However, considering that Brazil has lived recently a significant change in the orientation of its foreign policy, diverging away from a well-established south-south cooperation mindset, the author suggests that more investigation is necessary to update the study of paradiplomacy aimed at regional integration goals in this new context of dissonance with the national agenda priorities, to evaluate whether it has been significantly hindered by it.

Concerning the topic of cross-border paradiplomacy, a closely related discussion to the topic of paradiplomacy and regional integration, it is the established interpretation that border regions usually present to the subnational entities bonded to their issues in common that can be usually better addressed through collaborative efforts(5,7), inviting the entities to eventually engage in paradiplomatic efforts. Even considering that in the Brazilian and South American context, borders are, in general, economically and politically neglected regions and that this generates a lack of resources for the subnational entities to develop professional and formalized diplomatic efforts, this also propels them to seek international solutions to resource asymmetries and to address local-level problems overlooked by the central authorities.

In this subject, considering the same political context changes that might have affected the paradiplomatic regional integration efforts, some potential impacts in cross-border paradiplomacy as well can be expected. That is because in South America, given geographical and political convenience circumstances, much of these cross-border decentralized cooperation activities happened under the scope of MERCOSUR, which is the focus of current literature(5,7,9). Therefore, the author suggests that further researching Brazilian cross-border cooperation currently, with diminished

attention of the federal government to MERCOSUR, is a promising investigation gap identified.

Finally, concerning municipal paradiplomacy in Brazil, the selected studies present an array of significant concepts, namely the concept of “global cities” (10,12,13) and “glocal cities”(10,14), enlightening to interpret the possibilities of constructive and complementary relations between the local level of cities and national foreign policy agenda. Additionally, the concept of local international management, also identified in one of the studies, summarizes the efforts by major urban centers to promote their own productive and economic capabilities(11). It is precisely the role of the productive promoter of cities’ productive capabilities that open an opportunity for further inquiry: considering the role of the federal government in promoting abroad the economic attractiveness of major cities, and that the Brazilian international reputation is significantly eroded, how effective is this activity in the present situation?

Therefore, following the analyses performed, it is possible to conclude that, even though most recent, the literature regarding Brazilian paradiplomacy is comprehensive, approaching the topic from several different perspectives. This diversity of focuses goes beyond the scope of this article, and many more innovative approaches can indeed be found in different samples of articles that diverge from the selection criteria adopted in this research. Nevertheless, this article concludes by the remark that, due to the focus of most literature on a political and social context that is already surpassed, several new research gaps are now available and demand further in-depth inquiries.

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