



Paradiplomacy and internationalization of higher education: The Mato Grosso International Relations Group (Nurimat)

Paradiplomacia e internacionalização do ensino superior: O Núcleo de Relações Internacionais de Mato Grosso (Nurimat)

Paradiplomacia e internacionalización de la educación superior: El Grupo de Relaciones Internacionales de Mato Grosso (Nurimat)

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Abstract: This paper theoretically discusses the concept of paradiplomacy and evaluates the Mato Grosso International Relations Group (Nurimat) as a paradiplomatic actor. Methodologically, it is based on documentary and bibliographic research. The structure and functioning of Nurimat are presented, along with its role in two practical cases: the cooperation agreement with the South China Agricultural University (SCAU) to establish the Brazil-China Center for Research in Sustainable Technology and Agribusiness Innovation of Mato Grosso (BCAgriMT) and the creation of the Center for Chinese Language and Agricultural Science and Technology Development. The article argues for the importance of paradiplomacy in foreign

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policy, its relationship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE), and the potential for advancing research in this emerging field. It is observed that Nurimat, universities, and other potential new actors are examples to be considered in the development of international relations by subnational agents. The article discusses that there is no direct competition between the state and subnational actors in paradiplomacy. However, the perception of paradiplomatic activities as "low politics" marginalizes this process, resulting in a limited understanding of the role of subnational actors and their impact on international politics. The research indicates that cooperation within BRICS offers fertile ground for studying paradiplomacy and the effectiveness of educational policy, focusing on partnerships between universities, subnational actors, and their impact on education and innovation.

Keywords: Paradiplomacy; Subnational actors; International cooperation; Educational policy

Resumo: Este artigo discute teoricamente o conceito de paradiplomacia e avalia o Núcleo de Relações Internacionais de Mato Grosso (Nurimat) como ator paradiplomático. Metodologicamente, baseia-se em pesquisa documental e bibliográfica. Apresenta-se a estrutura e funcionamento do Nurimat e sua atuação em dois casos práticos: o acordo de cooperação com a Universidade Agrícola do Sul da China (SCAU) para criação do Centro Brasil-China de Pesquisa em Tecnologia Sustentável e Inovação do Agronegócio de Mato Grosso (BCAgriMT) e a criação do Centro de Língua Chinesa e de Desenvolvimento de Ciência e Tecnologia Agrícola. Argumenta-se sobre a importância da paradiplomacia para a política externa, sua relação com o Ministério das Relações Exteriores (MRE) e as possibilidades de avanço nas pesquisas deste campo emergente. Verifica-se que o Nurimat, universidades e outros possíveis novos atores são exemplos a serem observados no desenvolvimento das relações internacionais por agentes subnacionais. Discute-se que não há competição direta entre o Estado e atores subnacionais na paradiplomacia. No entanto, a percepção de que atividades paradiplomáticas são de "baixa política" marginaliza esse processo, resultando em uma compreensão limitada da atuação de atores subnacionais e suas consequências na política internacional. A pesquisa aponta que a cooperação nos BRICS oferece um campo fértil para estudar a paradiplomacia e a eficácia da política educacional, focando nas parcerias entre universidades, atores subnacionais e seus impactos na educação e inovação.

Palavras-chave: Paradiplomacia; Atores subnacionais; Cooperação internacional; Política educacional

Resumen: Este artículo discute teóricamente el concepto de paradiplomacia y evalúa al Grupo de Relaciones Internacionales de Mato Grosso (Nurimat) como un actor paradiplomático. Metodológicamente, se basa en la investigación documental y bibliográfica. Se presenta la estructura y funcionamiento del Nurimat y su actuación en dos casos prácticos: el acuerdo de cooperación con la Universidad Agrícola del Sur de China (SCAU) para la creación del Centro Brasil-China de Investigación en Tecnología Sostenible e Innovación del Agronegocio de Mato Grosso (BCAgriMT) y la creación del Centro de Lengua China y Desarrollo de Ciencia y Tecnología Agrícola. Se argumenta sobre la importancia de la paradiplomacia para la política exterior, su relación con el Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (MRE) y las posibilidades de avance en la investigación de este campo emergente. Se verifica que el Nurimat, las universidades y otros posibles nuevos actores son ejemplos a ser observados en el desarrollo de las relaciones internacionales por agentes subnacionales. Se discute que no hay competencia directa entre el Estado y los actores subnacionales en la paradiplomacia. No obstante, la percepción de que las actividades paradiplomáticas son de "baja política" marginaliza este proceso, resultando en una comprensión limitada de la actuación de los actores subnacionales y sus consecuencias en la política internacional. La investigación indica que la cooperación en el ámbito de los BRICS ofrece un campo fértil para estudiar la paradiplomacia y la eficacia de la política educativa, centrándose en las asociaciones entre universidades, actores subnacionales y sus impactos en la educación y la innovación.

Palabras clave: Paradiplomacia; Actores subnacionales; Cooperación internacional; Política educativa

Introduction

The Mato Grosso International Relations Group (Nurimat) was established in October 2018 through a partnership between the government of the State of Mato Grosso, Brazil, and public higher education institutions in the state: the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT), the State University of Mato Grosso (UNEMAT), and the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Mato Grosso (IFMT). The objective of Nurimat is to contribute to the promotion of higher education internationalization. In practice, this organization engages with diplomatic and paradiplomatic agents and higher education institutions abroad to structure partnerships to strengthen teaching, research, extension, and scientific and technological development activities in the state and its member institutions.

Globally, subnational governments and non-state actors play an increasingly active role in international relations, participating in international trade, cultural missions, and diplomatic ties with foreign agents and entities. Generically labelled as “paradiplomacy,” this is a significant research area that allows for various approaches to understanding the role of subnational actors in international affairs. Moreover, the topic gains further relevance within current critical research perspectives, which seek to unveil and problematize the multiplicity of non-state actors, theoretical epistemologies, and intersectionalities in international relations.

This paper aims to theoretically discuss the concept of paradiplomacy and explore the possibility of characterizing Nurimat as a paradiplomatic actor. Specifically, it seeks to examine the role that the associated universities play alongside the state government in the internationalization process through Nurimat. Have these efforts and strategies created an environment of alternative diplomacy? Could this new international relations entity be characterized as an exponent of paradiplomacy?

Methodologically, we approach these questions by applying the principles of documentary and bibliographic research. First, we utilized primary sources accessed with specific authorization from the organization’s management to describe Nurimat’s constitution, organization, functioning, and actions. Second, we relied on secondary sources, including established academic works, to present and discuss the concept of paradiplomacy.

We begin with a literature review on the concept of paradiplomacy, which, despite criticism, remains a crucial reference for studying the international actions of subnational agents. Following this, we explore the relevance of higher education internationalization, a concept that has become particularly positive, differentiating, and transformative in the current context of globalization. The third section examines the structure and functioning of Nurimat and its role as a paradiplomatic agent through two practical cases. Finally, we discuss the importance of paradiplomatic action, foreign policy, and the potential for advancing research in this field, which intersects with subnational, national, and international political actors and arenas.

Paradiplomacy

Paradiplomacy has been widely studied in recent decades from different perspectives as a way to bring subnational agents into international relations. From the pioneering definitions of Ivo Duchacek (1986) and Panayotis Soldatos (1990), paradiplomacy is predominantly defined as the involvement of subnational governments in international relations through the establishment of formal and informal relationships, bilateral or multilateral contacts with foreign public or private entities, aiming to promote socioeconomic, political, cultural, or environmental issues (CORNAGO 2018). Thus, the concept can be understood by its core characteristic of international mobilization, where actors demonstrate agency and projection with a significant degree of political autonomy, though not sovereign, beyond the nation-state and its central government (see PAQUIN 2020; KUZNETSOV 2015; ZERAOUI 2016).

Although most authors, following Duchacek (1984) and Soldatos (1990), understand and apply the concept of paradiplomacy solely to subnational governments, studies such as those by Martins Senhoras (2009), Wadman et al. (2018), Mèrcher (2020), and Zapata-Morán et al. (2021) not only address certain actors outside the central state but also expand the concept to include all actors with international activities, whether state or non-state, including companies, NGOs, or universities. This even brings the possibility of university paradiplomacy. Thus, in a broader sense, paradiplomacy does not exclude other forms of mobilization and strategies through which other non-state actors, such as universities and subnational governments, can pursue their goals.

A critical exponent of the paradiplomacy perspective, Hocking (1993, 1996), argues that the field of international activity of subnational governments and agents can be studied through approaches such as polyarchy, multi-level governance, and his own concept of multilayered diplomacy, each in its way conveying the essence of the phenomenon: the intersection between subnational, national, and international political actors and arenas. The author suggests replacing the term “paradiplomacy” with an analytical approach that considers non-central governments' cooperative and non-segmented participation in international politics. Thus, it is proposed that the categories proposed by Duchacek (1986) and Soldatos (1990) be rejected. According to Hocking (1993), this classic definition does not reflect the contemporary international scenario, where the boundaries between domestic and international are negotiated and flexible. On the contrary, this term would end up reinforcing the distinction by emphasizing the elements of conflict and demarcation between subnational and national actions. In short, from this perspective, international diplomacy should be understood not as a segmented process led by unquestionable actors but as a network of interactions with diverse and versatile actors interacting in different ways.

In line with a critical approach to the methodological use of paradiplomacy, Lecours (2002) emphasized the lack of a comprehensive theoretical perspective in studying subnational governments' international actions. Furthermore, he highlighted the lack of emphasis on constructing general analytical frameworks to guide research on paradiplomacy due to the prevalence of case studies and descriptive work in the field. This author's premise seems insufficient at first because we understand that developing descriptive work and case studies contributes to constructing a theoretical framework. Second, observing and analyzing specific cases can highlight the actors and processes that traverse subnational, national, and international political arenas and enable the generalization and stabilization of concepts.

It is essential to mention that the literature identifies two ideal and antagonistic types of international activities of subnational entities: paradiplomacy, indicating activities complementary to States and not generating any tension, and the concept of protodiplomacy to identify subnational entities' initiatives that conflict with national coordination, usually aimed at State separation (See SOLDATOS 1990; AGUIRRE 1999; KUZNETSOV 2015; PAQUIN 2020).

Like Hocking (1993, 1996) and others, Kuznetsov (2015) discusses and highlights other ways to conceptualize this international activity of subnational agents. Despite the deficiencies raised by the authors and the alternative proposals, he argues that the concept remains a reference. Thus, in this work, we follow Kuznetsov in recognizing that the concept of “paradiplomacy” is imperfect and has vulnerabilities, which various researchers have repeatedly mentioned. However, the expression “paradiplomacy” has already established itself as a stable category in contemporary social sciences discourse and is associated with most scholars dedicated to the theme of regional governments’ international engagement (KUZNETSOV 2014, p. 30).

Beyond the conceptual controversies that the concept of paradiplomacy occasionally provokes, it facilitates the understanding and problematization of an essential dimension of international relations in both theory and practice. Consequently, this study seeks to apply the concept in an empirical case through Nurimat and its objective of university internationalization of the associated institutions. Thus, we choose to contribute to a broader theoretical framework for studying subnational agents’ international actions through qualitative work that uses a case study as a methodological choice.

Internationalization of Higher Education

Activities related to internationalization have been a constant part of the experience of higher education, encompassing collaboration between academics in knowledge production. In the past, the international dimension for national and subnational agents might have been optional. Still, it has now become emergent and “[...] is one of the main forces impacting and shaping higher education as it changes to meet the challenges of the 21st century.” (KNIGHT 2020, p. 11).

Due to the need to respond to the global process of society’s interconnection, higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as national and subnational states like the government of Mato Grosso, are facing challenges that demand the adoption of new initiatives, actions, priorities, and strategies.

The internationalization of higher education is a concept under construction, and scholars agree that it should be understood as a pathway, not an end, aimed at the

development of society. According to Knight (2004, p. 2), internationalization consists of the process of incorporating international or intercultural dimensions into the activities of teaching, research, and service provision of a higher education institution. On the other hand, Paige (2005) defines internationalization as creating an educational, research, and extension environment with an international character.

Widely accepted, De Wit and Hunter (2015) define internationalization as an intentional process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, function, and offerings of higher education to enhance the quality of teaching and research for students and staff, as well as to make a significant contribution to life in society.

Identifying the actors, actions, and motivations that drive internationalization is essential to understanding all aspects of the international dimension of higher education. They help explain why an institution, state, or subnational agent believes internationalization is important, what strategies are used, what benefits are expected, and what risks are assumed or feared. On a more fundamental level, returning to Knight (2010), strategies reflect the core values that a higher education system holds regarding the contribution that international, intercultural, and global elements make to the role of higher education in society.

In this context, higher education internationalization emerges as a central concept, no longer occupying a peripheral position and becoming intrinsically linked to a positive vision of cooperation and international relations as a differentiating and transformative agent in the current context of academic formation. This requires acquiring language skills and incorporating international, intercultural values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge, along with the intensification of competition in scientific and technological research, leading to consequent innovation and entrepreneurship capacity.

The Nurimat

The Mato Grosso International Relations Group (Nurimat) is self-defined in its statute as a state cooperation group—an interinstitutional, non-profit, and non-economic organization with an academic, scientific, technological, and cultural focus. Its

constitution is anchored in Brazilian legislation but has an international scope, allowing the development of activities in Brazil and other countries to achieve its objectives.

Since its foundation, Nurimat has established its domicile, headquarters, and jurisdiction in the State Civil House of Mato Grosso, located in the Palácio Paiaguás, Centro Político Administrativo, Cuiabá-MT/Brazil. The bylaws stipulate that this headquarters can be transferred to any of the other member institutions, provided it is approved by an absolute majority of the members at an ordinary meeting.

The founding members of Nurimat are the institutions that signed the Cooperation Agreement for the group's creation, published in the Official Gazette of the State of Mato Grosso on October 31, 2018, comprising UFMT, UNEMAT, IFMT, and the government of the State of Mato Grosso. Considering the creation of the Federal University of Rondonópolis (UFR) from the structure of a UFMT campus, the first Addendum to the Cooperation Agreement was published in the Official Gazette of the State of Mato Grosso on September 30, 2021, adding UFR to the list of founding institutions of the group.

According to the internal regulations, Nurimat's objectives are to:

- I. Promote internationalization opportunities for associated institutions through academic, scientific, technological, and cultural activities;
- II. Encourage and carry out international cooperation actions regarding teaching, research, extension, and innovation in conjunction with public and private higher education or research institutions and international organizations, enabling the realization of international cooperation research, student and staff mobility, and institutional leaders, as well as the exchange of new curriculum models and joint training;
- III. Stimulate and organize international cooperation activities;
- IV. Foster and intermediate the execution of international cooperation projects of interest to the State of Mato Grosso and with international relevance between Nurimat member institutions and national and international institutions and organizations in the areas of science, technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship;
- V. Promote multilateral cooperation in partnerships with networks and associations of higher education, science, research, and technology, international organizations, national and international governmental institutions, and any other institutions that can contribute to the internationalization process of the member institutions of this group;
- VI. Organize courses, seminars, and other national and international events;
- VII. Make efforts to obtain financial resources for research funding, scholarships, and other supports that promote international research collaboration actions, faculty mobility, other staff members related to the partnerships, and students (NURIMAT 2023, p. 2).

Nurimat's powers are exercised by its governing bodies, the General Assembly and the Board of Directors. The General Assembly consists of a meeting of all members in full enjoyment of their rights and can be either ordinary or extraordinary. The Board of Directors comprises a President, a Vice-President, and a Secretary. These positions are filled objectively, with the organization's management conducted by representatives designated by the participating institutions, who must be staff members in the area of International Relations.

The General Assembly's responsibilities include electing the President and Vice President, deliberating on any event, document, agreement, project, or program involving Nurimat's name, approving changes to the Bylaws, and deciding on the admission and exclusion of members and the dissolution of the organization.

The duties of the President and Vice-President include overseeing management, representing the group, and mediating general agreements, terms of cooperation, and memorandums of understanding at both national and international levels with public or private organizations or entities. However, such agreements must not compromise Nurimat's objectives and purposes nor endanger its independence. Additionally, they have the authority to decide on the creation, dissolution, alteration, and coordination of Working Groups or Committees.

The Secretary is responsible for scheduling, organizing, and documenting the group's meetings and assemblies. The Secretary also drafts, approves, disseminates, and archives the organization's minutes. Furthermore, the Secretary is tasked with articulating proposals to seek consensus, receiving, analyzing, and forwarding correspondence, emails, and other relevant demands for Nurimat.

Nurimat's Actions

As previously described, Nurimat can act as a paradiplomatic agent by fostering, mediating, and organizing international cooperation activities and projects. To demonstrate this role, we have chosen to describe two practical actions: a) The cooperation agreement between Nurimat and South China Agricultural University (SCAU) to establish the Brazil-China Centre for Research in Sustainable Technology and

Agribusiness Innovation of Mato Grosso (BCAgriMT); and b) Nurimat's role in creating the Chinese Language and Agricultural Science and Technology Development Centre at UFMT.

BCAgriMT

The agreement to create BCAgriMT is particularly noteworthy as it was the first document and legal instrument capable of formalizing technical cooperation aimed at implementing a project or activity of mutual interest, signed by the organization. Issued in Portuguese and English in identical digital copies, the agreement was signed by Nurimat President Rita de Cássia Oliveira Chiletto and SCAU President Liu Yahong on December 13, 2021. This cooperation agreement is based on the recognition of the common principles and values of academic excellence and social responsibility upheld by both institutions and is intended to comply with the current legislation in their respective countries as well as international law norms.

The proposal for BCAgriMT, headquartered in the State of Mato Grosso, constitutes a legal act of cooperation and internationalization, aimed at creating an articulated space for knowledge production and dissemination, training, and business generation, with the following goals:

- I. Structure different partnership arrangements, including public-private partnerships;
- II. Provide infrastructure and technical resources of international excellence and scope;
- III. Prospect national and international talents;
- IV. Develop applied technologies in the academic environment;
- V. Disseminate technology developed among producers and rural associations;
- VI. Contribute to continuous and entrepreneurial education focused on agribusiness;
- VII. Add value to agricultural production;
- VIII. Promote sustainability in agro-industrial chains.

According to the cooperation agreement, the BCAgriMT Centre will cover research projects in agronomy, animal science, agricultural engineering, fishery resources, forest

resources and engineering, veterinary medicine, food science and technology, and biodiversity. Nurimat member institutions will collaborate by providing existing research laboratories, personnel, and other infrastructure resources for developing projects at the BCAgriMT Centre. Additionally, key laboratories and experimental areas created under this agreement may be established in the Mato Grosso Technological Park or other institutions linked to Nurimat, depending on commercial interests, strategic research needs, or other agreements between the parties.

To achieve the stated objectives, both institutions agree to carry out joint activities, prioritizing research cooperation, the exchange of professors, technical and administrative staff, and students related to BCAgriMT projects, and participation in seminars, academic meetings, courses, and international cultural exchange activities related to BCAgriMT projects.

The actions resulting from this Cooperation Agreement will be coordinated by the respective International Relations units of the two institutions, and a management committee composed of a representative from each institution affiliated with Nurimat will be responsible for: (i) coordinating BCAgriMT's administrative routine; (ii) discussing with international partners the projects of mutual interest to be developed in Mato Grosso.

Chinese Language and Agricultural Science and Technology Development Centre

The Chinese Language and Agricultural Science and Technology Development Centre results from Nurimat's promotion, articulation, and negotiation efforts. UFMT Rector Evandro Aparecido Soares da Silva and South China Agricultural University (SCAU) President Professor Liu Yahong signed the cooperation agreement for the creation of the Centre on 30 May 2022 in identical digital copies in English and Portuguese.

Through this agreement negotiated by Nurimat, UFMT and SCAU will promote cooperation in Chinese and Portuguese languages, cultural events, and agricultural science and technology based on the principle of collaborative innovation and win-win cooperation. The two parties aim to develop joint projects in training and research, fostering language, culture, and scientific knowledge exchange, prioritizing the exchange or stay of researchers, professors, and undergraduate, master's, or doctoral students for

the development of studies and internships in Chinese language, cultural, and academic activities related to agriculture.

The general objective is to promote Chinese education and foster the development of bilateral relations, particularly concerning agricultural sciences. At the same time, a space for cooperation and exchange with China will be opened, providing scholarships to jointly conduct scientific research and academic exchanges, highlighting mutual strengths, and promoting joint learning.

The Centre was inaugurated on 23 May 2023 and is headquartered at the UFMT Institute of Languages. According to SCAU Vice-President Qiu Rongliang, who attended the inauguration ceremony in Cuiabá, “the Centre is the first in the world with this perspective, including language and agricultural knowledge, which reinforces its importance on the international and local scene as it opens up possibilities for various other partnerships”⁴. From September 2023, the Centre plans to offer basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of Chinese language instruction, with the number of classes and schedules defined in a work plan prepared semi-annually by the Centre’s coordination at UFMT.

Regarding academic and research cooperation, the Centre will function as a hub for academic communication facilitation and regular exchange for professors and researchers from all Nurimat member institutions. Based on the Centre, experts and academics, especially those related to agricultural sciences from SCAU and Nurimat member universities, will consolidate their academic research teams in areas of common interest, culminating in the joint publication of articles in international journals, translation of works, joint applications for international scientific programs, and the organization of high-level international seminars, academic lectures, workshops, and more.

Regarding cultural exchange cooperation, the Centre is intended to serve as a platform for academic exchanges and visits between professors and students from Nurimat institutions and SCAU for cultural activities. The agreement emphasizes the Centre’s role as a bridge to explore cultural differences between China and Brazil,

⁴ Available in: https://www.ufmt.br/secretaria/secr/noticias/secr-coordena-o-lancamento-de-centro-de-lingua-chinesa-1687788108#top_page

deepening mutual understanding and immediately strengthening the friendship between the two nations.

Nurimat's International Action

Understanding that the formulation of foreign policy usually falls within the purview of nation-states, it is observed that Nurimat's international organization and actions do not compete with state diplomacy. Rather, they serve as instruments to strengthen and promote both internal matters and the State's foreign policy, as universities and the government seek external partnerships to enhance their development and obtain local academic, technological, economic, political, and cultural benefits.

Unlike other associations⁵ that work to expand the internationalization process of higher education institutions and promote their countries' education systems abroad, Nurimat associates a subnational state (Mato Grosso) with other subnational agents (higher education institutions) to promote internationalization. Additionally, it goes further by signing agreements, fostering negotiations, and mediating the organization of international cooperation activities and projects.

Paradiplomacy is the concept that perfectly characterizes this action, as it focuses on the international activities of the involved institutions. However, these activities do not occur in isolation but rather within a focused management framework aimed at the internationalization of higher education, supported by the nation-state's foreign policy to which they are subordinate.

Nurimat, universities, and other potential new actors in international relations active in paradiplomacy are examples to be observed in responding to various situations both internationally and locally in the emergence, exercise, and development of international relations by subnational agents. Whether initiated by States or through the autonomy of actors outside the central State, these subnational organizations are

⁵ See for example the FAUBAI – Brazilian Association of International Education, which brings together managers and those responsible for international affairs at Brazilian higher education institutions, and the GCUB – International Cooperation Group of Brazilian Universities, which also brings together Brazilian universities with the aim of promoting international cooperation projects.

increasingly involved in international relations, developing instruments to institutionalize their relationship with the world.

Influence and Subnational Paradiplomacy

Returning to the theoretical approach taken by Duchacek (1990), it is important to emphasize that governments and other subnational agents have begun to exert their influence not only within the national States to which they are linked but also internationally, especially in areas where international relations can directly impact their interests. We clearly see this influence, not free from interests and political biases, in the tightening of practical and diplomatic ties with China through Nurimat's actions.

The emergence of governments and other subnational agents as actors on the international scene does not imply a loss of power and functions by the central State, particularly with the exercise of paradiplomacy, which presents itself as a tool for exercising soft power and, therefore, can strengthen the State's international presence at a level where high and traditional diplomacy has not addressed.

Discussing the main characteristics of subnational action in Brazil, Farias (2000) emphasizes the pragmatic nature of actions and involvement in activities limited to "low politics" issues such as commercial promotion, cultural exchange, tourism, technological agreements, technical cooperation, and investments. In general, these actions are integrated into governments' general activities, with the scope and direction of international engagement often determined by the political will of governors, commercial opportunities, and individual interests of each Brazilian state or municipality.

Even if "in the opinion of Itamaraty, only States develop and conduct foreign policy *stricto sensu*, and localities are limited to carrying out international actions" (PEREIRA, 2004), and considering that Nurimat only acts on traditional "low politics" themes (culture, education, development cooperation), its negotiation capacity plays a vital role in projecting power and action from the regional to the global level.

The evaluation of a policy as "high" or "low" depends on the observer's perspective (KINCAID 1990; PRADO 2019). A subnational state like Mato Grosso, which seeks global engagement to attract investments, establish, and promote internationalization opportunities for higher education institutions through agreements and academic,

scientific, technological, and cultural cooperation projects with direct and indirect impacts on innovation capacity, entrepreneurship, and economic development, cannot be considered a policy of lower relevance.

Horizontalization of Brazilian Foreign Policy

According to Faria (2012), there is a process of “horizontalization of Brazilian foreign policy,” which has legal and organizational foundations. This transformation should be understood as clear evidence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) loss of monopoly over Brazil’s international agenda. Such a loss is intrinsically linked to the consequent dilution of the boundaries between domestic and international spheres and the deepening of the country’s international relations. However, according to Faria (2012), it is not necessary to conceive of this as a perspective of competition between subnational actors and the Brazilian State since the MRE seeks to coordinate the activities of other government actors and agencies within foreign policy, given that all share the same source of authority. Thus, a cooperative relationship is established with subnational governments that have some autonomy as federated entities, and with civil society actors who enjoy formal autonomy.

In the same perspective, Miklos (2010), when analyzing the Brazilian government’s initiatives to monitor and coordinate this type of involvement, highlights the importance of avoiding possible conflicts with the Brazilian government’s interests on the international stage. In this context, the MRE uses the terms “federative diplomacy” or “decentralized international cooperation” to dispel the perception that these actors’ engagement occurs without the federal government’s proper monitoring or that their actions are contrary to national foreign policy.

Nurimat can be seen as a paradiplomatic actor and a soft power tool in its participants’ internationalization processes and strategies. However, it is worth noting that it is not the only or the most important actor, although the objective here is not to determine its degree of importance but to analyze the presence of this strategic action in higher education internationalization and foreign policy.

Initiatives like Nurimat exemplify paradiplomacy by engaging subnational actors and promoting regional and local partnerships, providing access to internationalization

more openly and democratically. These horizontal articulations allow smaller institutions, such as regional universities, to benefit from international partnerships and academic, technological, and cultural collaborations.

On the other hand, for example, the proposal of the BRICS Network University⁶, which has been articulated within the scope of the MRE and Ministers of Education, stands out as a high-policy initiative. This university network, forged and led by the States' official diplomacy, by restricting itself to a few HEIs from each member State, produces precisely the opposite of its objective of "minimizing the impacts of existing asymmetries between academic institutions by establishing a cooperation relationship in which all partners benefit from the knowledge sharing in areas of strategic interest to the countries" (KHOMYAKOV; DWYER; WELLER 2020, p. 130). Therefore, this elitist and restrictive approach contrasts with university paradiplomacy cooperation, which, without the direct involvement of the States' official diplomacy, operates with subnational actors more horizontally and democratically.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that we should not underestimate the importance of paradiplomatic action, relegating it to a secondary plan without carefully analyzing these activities beyond the so-called high politics sphere. It would be a mistake since such an approach does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of the impacts that such actions can generate in relations with national States, questioning the perception that subnational activities in the country are simple instruments for strengthening traditional diplomacy. This becomes clear when we consider the various research possibilities that open up from a critical and practical perspective of Brazil-China relations based on this action in higher education institutions and the State of Mato Grosso.

Final Considerations

The objective of this text was to theoretically discuss the concept of paradiplomacy and analyze the possibility of characterizing Nurimat as a paradiplomatic actor. Based on the analysis presented, it is clear that Nurimat exemplifies paradiplomatic agency, demonstrating creativity and influence on the international stage through practical

⁶ Available in: <http://portal.mec.gov.br/busca-geral/212-noticias/educacao-superior-1690610854/34411-universidade-em-rede-do-brics-divulga-nomes-das-instituicoes-brasileiras-selecionadas>

results and technical competence. Despite the federal government's refusal to recognize subnational governments' capacity to conduct foreign policy—asserting that this is the exclusive domain of the national State—it is justifiable, from an academic-scientific perspective, to affirm that certain governments and subnational actors do indeed engage in foreign policy, as exemplified by Nurimat.

However, it is essential that paradiplomatic agents be recognized as collaborators rather than competitors. The perception that activities carried out in the realm of paradiplomacy are merely “low politics” tends to marginalize this process. Excluding or devaluing these activities as formal foreign policy actions restricts our understanding of the actions of subnational actors and their impact on international politics.

Therefore, foreign policy analysis must incorporate a broader set of research parameters, recognizing the various actors involved, their interactions, and the outcomes of these interactions. This perspective challenges the traditional view that foreign policy is the sole prerogative of the State, emphasizing instead the role of diverse initiatives by multiple actors within the international environment.

Moving forward, it is crucial to highlight the significant role played by subnational agents and governments in international politics. Developing a research agenda on this topic requires breaking away from the notion that foreign policy is exclusively the domain of national States, and instead acknowledging the diverse structures and configurations of subnational organizations that, like Nurimat, have acted internationally with tangible impacts on innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic development in their regions.

Research on paradiplomacy should also engage professionals working directly in institutions and subnational governments, leveraging their expertise to develop diplomacy beyond the Ministry of International Affairs. Such expertise is invaluable in understanding the practical realities of these actions.

The initiatives described here demonstrate how subnational actors, including universities and international relations groups, can significantly contribute to building educational and scientific bridges between countries. The creation of the Brazil-China Centre for Research in Sustainable Technology and Agribusiness Innovation of Mato Grosso (BCAgriMT) and the Chinese Language and Agricultural Science and Technology Development Centre at UFMT are concrete examples of how international cooperation can be realized through strategic partnerships between academic and research

institutions. These partnerships foster a diversity of approaches and solutions, which are essential for addressing educational challenges in an innovative and collaborative manner, particularly in the Global South, where local needs and realities require adapted and contextualized responses.

Paradiplomacy empowers universities and other subnational actors to play an active role in foreign policy, not merely complementing the State's actions but also introducing new perspectives and competencies to the international arena. This practice strengthens local capacities, promotes intercultural understanding, and contributes to the development of more inclusive and equitable educational solutions. By exploring new forms of participation and social mobilization, paradiplomatic action emerges as a critical element in constructing a richer and more diversified international educational agenda.

As a future research direction, cooperation within the BRICS provides fertile ground for investigating the effectiveness of educational policies and the dynamics of subnational participation. With paradiplomacy as the foundation, studies can explore how partnerships between universities and other subnational actors within the group influence the implementation of educational and scientific projects, and the impact of these collaborations on improving educational quality and fostering innovation. Additionally, examining the interactions between national policies and subnational initiatives can offer valuable insights into multi-level governance and the development of a more inclusive and effective educational diplomacy. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for crafting strategies that enhance the BRICS's contribution to global education, particularly in terms of cultural diversity, equity, and sustainability.

In line with this new reality, paradiplomacy undertaken by subnational actors is not only a tool for foreign policy and international cooperation but also a vital area of research. It helps to unveil and critically examine the multiplicity of state and non-state actors, theoretical epistemologies, and intersectionalities in international relations.

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