Formulating the concept of "mitigation agent"—a study on the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce bulletin

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Abstract

This paper introduces the expression "mitigation agent" and conceptualizes it by analyzing a publication called *Japanese-Brazilian Exchange*, a bulletin from the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce. It had only one number published (November 1941) because of the growing tensions between Brazil and the powers of the Axis during the Second World War, which culminated in Brazil entering the group of the Allies (then opposing Germany, Italy, and Japan). Starting from the bulletin's content, the definition of "mitigation agent" is elaborated on and explained in an initial stage, especially concerning its roots in soft power.

Keywords

Japanese diaspora, Brazilian history, Mitigation Agent, peace and conflict studies, World War II, international relations

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Introduction

International relations between Brazil and Japan started before Brazil began to receive Japanese immigrants in 1908, with the arrival of the ship Kasato Maru in the port of Santos, São Paulo. The ground was prepared first on paper, with the cooperation between the two countries formalized through a Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation, signed on November 5, 1895, in Paris and approved by the National Congress the following year, becoming effective after the publication of Decree No. 2,489, March 31, 1897. From the brief exposition introducing the full text of the Treaty (in French and Portuguese) sent to the National Congress, we know that, although emigration/immigration is not mentioned in the document at any time, it was part of the motivations of the Brazilian government for this agreement:

Nothing was stipulated regarding emigration because it is not necessary. The Japanese government decided, as you know, not to allow emigration to countries that did not have reciprocity treaties with them. We have a Treaty, and since they are interested in reducing the excess of their population, they will not create difficulties for us.\(^1\) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1896, p. 187—author’s own translation)

The stimulus of commercial relations between the two countries, as is evident from the very name of the Treaty, also integrates its primary objectives—even though the term “commercial agents,” established by Decree No. 997 B of November 11, 1890, was replaced by “consular agents.” This measure was taken at the request of the Japanese government, under the justification that it did not include officials of such a category (“commercial”) in its treaties. Nothing seemed to threaten the “perpetual peace and constant friendship” between the two countries.

A significant impulse for commercial relations was the creation of the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce in December 1937. After the visit of a Brazilian trade mission led by Joaquim P. S. Filho (a federal congressman who was an enthusiast of Japanese immigration to Brazil) to Tokyo in September 1936, the Japanese government demonstrated a special interest in Brazilian products, like cotton, for example. Japan needed to diversify its trade partners since its relations with the United States and Great Britain were becoming turbulent (Duus, 2005, p. 16; Endoh, 2010, p. 173). An example of the Chamber’s actions at that time was the organization of the “Industrial Art Exhibition,” with the exposition of Japanese manufactured goods.\(^2\) The products were presented not only as useful items for daily life but as exotic works of art to be admired. The exhibition in Rio de Janeiro lasted only two days: on the first, only authorities, journalists, and art critics were allowed to attend; the second was open to the public. It was also taken to São Paulo, where it was open to the public for a longer period, from July 1st to 20.\(^3\)

Despite the intentions and efforts of the Chamber’s leadership, with the conflicting situation in Europe and the scenario designed for Japan and Brazil to be on opposite sides, it was impossible to have the desired result. Nevertheless, in the beginning, there was still a good result, as the president, Mr. Orlando Soares de Carvalho, wrote in the first bulletin of the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, published in November 1941.

The Chamber could not maintain itself under the same auspices as before in the prevailing political and economic situation. Only one issue of the bulletin was published since the Brazilian members of the Chamber’s Board of Directors resigned the following month. Not long before, the National Press Council made a public statement, definitively interdicting many periodicals linked to Germans and Italians. Immigrants in Brazil were facing a very hostile moment in the early 1940s, especially Germans, Italians, and Japanese. This delicate moment persisted for almost all the decade because, even after the end of the World War in 1945, the resistance against immigrants (especially Japanese) was still present in the discourse of some politicians. In 1946, for example, deputy Miguel Couto Filho (whose father Miguel Couto had also been a deputy and had opposed Japanese immigration to Brazil) together with deputy José Augusto signed and submitted the project of constitutional amendment number 3,165, proposing that the “entry of Japanese immigrants of any age and any origin” be forbidden (Hayashi, 2022, p. 4–5). Dos Santos (2019, p. 381) adds that the vote was tied (99 votes for and 99 against), and the president of the session had to give the casting vote. The final decision was contrary to the project, the absolute embargo never coming to reality. However, it also demonstrated how divided the deputies were and how fierce feelings still aroused at that time. Such polarization usually does not happen fast; it takes years and affects many people as it grows.

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\(^1\) Original text in Portuguese: “Nada se estipulou a respeito de emigração, porque não é preciso. O Governo Japonez resolveu, como sabeis, não permitir-l-a para os Países que não tivessem com elle Tratados de reciprocidade. Temos Tratado, e pois elle, que é interessado em diminuir o excesso da sua população, não nos criará dificuldades.”

\(^2\) The Industrial Art Exhibition in 1940 was publicized, for example, in newspapers and magazines like O Cruzeiro (Uma exposição de arte industrial japonesa (“A Japanese Industrial Art Exhibition”), 1940), with pictures not only of the objects but also of the attendants, including obviously the Brazilian and Japanese authorities. The article and pictures can be found here, at the Brazilian National Library Archives: https://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=003581&pagfis=28547

\(^3\) According to the newspaper Correio Paulistano (Federação Japoneza de Artes Industriais (“Japanese Federation of Industrial Arts”), 1940), retrieved at the Brazilian National Library Archives: http://memoria.bn.br/DocReader/DocReader.aspx?bib=090972_09&pesq%22arte%20industrial%22&past ano%20194&hf=memoria.bn.br&pagfis=2175
During its activities, the Chamber had to administrate the pressure of the circumstances in the developing business. It was necessary to make Brazilian entrepreneurs sympathize with the Japanese people. No advantage in commerce would suppress the patriotic zeal on both sides. This paper presents the concept of mitigation agents (people or institutions that would testify positively about a group—circumstantially set in momentaneous opposition—to ameliorate their relations, aiming at the best possible result for the ones involved) after examining some passages from the bulletin. Despite the disturbing political scenario, called “the European war” in the publication many times, the effort of maintaining smooth commercial relationships was prevalent and manifest.

Experimenting with a concept: framing and illustrating
By examining this unique (in different aspects) publication, it is clear that it is more than a testimony to the increase in commercial relations between Japan and Brazil. There is more than just trade and profit. Named under the title Interêmbio Nipo-Brasileiro (in English, “Japanese-Brazilian Exchange”), its summary shows some of the top products in import/export from the beginning but also brings some other information on Japanese and Brazilian relations. Articles that follow this theme call special attention and respond directly to the historical moment and social circumstances of the time.

Japanese-Brazilian Exchange—the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce bulletin
In its no more than 35 pages, the bulletin offered information on Japanese machines (electric locomotives, pneumatic and hydraulic machines, cars, radio and television sets, machines to produce synthetic oil, water turbines and pumps), cotton in Brazil, diamonds and carbonates, silk in Japan (and also the chemical process to fold the silk thread of the cocoon), as well as on the Yokohama Specie Bank, Ltd. and commercial opportunities for exporting and importing from Japan. Miscellaneous news and a list of the publications belonging to the Chamber available for consultation close the number.

The opening pages are, as usual, dedicated to formal words from authorities: Dr. Itaro Ishii, then Japan Ambassador in Brazil; Dr. Kunimitsu Katsuyama, Secretary of Commerce of the Japanese Embassy; Dr. José Manoel Fernandes, 1st Vice-President of the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce; Mr. Gosuke Hachiya, 2nd Vice-President of the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce; Dr. Fumiya Shigi, Managing Director of the Yokohama Specie Bank Ltd.; Dr. Artur de Lacerda Pinheiro, Director of the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce; and Mr. Orlando Soares de Carvalho, President of the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce and its most engaged member, according to what his companions declare. The salutations from such distinguished men, introduced by the photograph of the President of Brazil, Dr. Getúlio Vargas, were a combined foreword for all readers to capture what the bulletin showed as the greatness of the endeavor taken so far. Lack of authority would not be a problem. Nevertheless, this was not enough in times of mistrust—at least not that kind of authority alone.

If not that, then what kind? There is an example that illustrates this point very well. It is found in the article “The work of the Japanese in the interior of Brazil.” Written on only one page, divided into two columns, it gives us information about the average production of the Japanese colonies, mainly in São Paulo, with a highlight on the jute from Amazonas in the end. However, these superficial data are restricted to the first column. The second one is the paraphrase of an article written by a priest called Guido Del Toro after having visited a Japanese colony in the state of Paraná. According to the text, the colony called Esperança (“Hope,” in Portuguese) was created by a priest called Emilio Kircher together with about seventy families of Japanese catholic immigrants. The priest Del Toro visited that distant colony because many children wanted to become priests/nuns. Furthermore, the text finishes this way:

These families of ardent faith like their sons to be priests. We will have very good vocations in this colony. From there, 12 good and intelligent boys have come to St. Francis Xavier Japanese Catholic High School to apply for the priesthood.

In conclusion, this “Esperança” colony, this gathering of seventy families, is a true masterpiece. It is the best thing about the Japanese mission in Brazil. (Japanese Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, 1941—author’s own translation)

The bulletin in this article goes deeper when it comes to harvesting. In a publication whose scope is commerce and exchange, readers would expect more numbers, more information on products, on market conditions—yet the writer of this specific article, whose name is not declared, uses the opportunity to let know about a colony of Japanese catholic immigrants. The community was indeed cared for by the German priest Emilio Kircher with the help of priest Del Toro that had come from Italy (Ozaki, 1990, p. 16). However, these were only secondary information to the eyes and ears of traditional catholic Brazilian families, who would read this reference to the Japanese as potential brothers and sisters instead of latent enemies.

The anonymous writer of the mentioned article was trying to lessen the hostilities currently being raised at that specific time against Japanese immigrants in Brazil by highlighting cultural alignment and religious commitment under the topos of harvesting. This writer, although unknown, is someone whose intention seems to be to approach the Japanese community to the Brazilian readers. It does not matter if the purposes rely only on monetary benefits or commercial relationship upgrades, for we can precisely know neither purposes nor intentions. What does matter is that the article appeals to aspects both groups have in common, and they are substantial aspects once they are linked to religion, a vital part of life and culture.
This episode is an example of endorsement by a religious authority; we can also find an example of endorsement, now by a political authority. There is a clipping of brief news from September 1941 on pages 31 and 32. In this section of the bulletin, there is information about awards given to Japanese authorities by the President of the Republic on September 21:

Represents the government of Japan in Brazil awarded by the Head of the Nation

-The President of the Republic signed decrees in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conferring the National Order of the Southern Cross, in the rank of the Grand Cross, to Mr. Kazue Kuwajima, Japanese Ambassador to Brazil; in the rank of Commander, to Colonel Yoiti Koko, military attaché to the Japanese Embassy in Brazil, and in the rank of Officer to Mr. Tadao Kudo, 1st Secretary of the Embassy of Japan in Brazil.4 (Japanese Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, 1941—author’s own translation)

The National Order of the Southern Cross is the highest civilian award given exclusively to foreigners in Brazil. This commendation represented acknowledgment of relevant contributions to the country. The names of the awarded were checked in the Reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1941, p. 60), where it is possible to find a list of decorated foreigners from various origins. In the same document, an attachment of a letter sent by the Brazilian government to the United States (against Japan) in solidarity can be found. People, in general, would know about the support given to the United States yet would not know about the award—theoretically a sign of approval—given to Japanese authorities in Brazil. The bulletin fills this gap.

News of cooperation—cooperation of news

After a flood that destroyed about 45% of the rice production of Rio Grande do Sul in April 1940, another one in the following year had worse consequences, with many homeless people. As documented in Brazilian newspapers, donations came from other regions, for the situation was drastic.

The article “Charity collection in the Japanese colony in favor of the people of Rio Grande do Sul” (“A coleta na colônia japonesa em favor dos riograndenses do sul,” p. 20) is about the campaign sponsored with funds raised by the Japanese Embassy and regional Consulates. It registers that the campaign was promoted by the newspapers Burajiru Asahi (“Brasil Asahi”), Seishū Shinbō (“Notícias de São Paulo”), Burajiru Jihō (“Notícias do Brasil”), and Nanbei Shinpō (no translation to Portuguese), all of them run by Japanese. The results were surprising, for the campaign raised almost 147 million réis.5 This amount would roughly correspond nowadays to seventy thousand dollars, an expressive quantity, given the historical period and the circumstances.6

So far, no information on this collection was found in other contemporary Brazilian newspapers—yet this cooperation effort was recorded in the Japanese-Brazilian Exchange, ending with these words:

The collection began on May 25 and ended on July 20, and we were delighted to see that the total amount reached the sum of 146.768$100.

This was the brilliant end of this collection, with such a high purpose and under the promotion of those tireless newspapers that at that time still circulated in the Japanese language.7 (Japanese Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, 1941—author’s own translation)

By making this information public, the bulletin tried to undermine the animosity against Japanese newspapers, but it was probably too late. After 1937, due to a restriction on foreign-language publications, Japanese newspapers such as Burajiru Jihō and Seishū Shinbō, as well as Nippaku Shinbun (which survived a little longer by changing its language to Portuguese and its name to Burajiru Asahi) were discontinued. In 1939, all foreign-language publications were ordered to provide Portuguese translations. Later, in 1941, coincidently the bulletin’s year of creation, all foreign-language newspapers were banned. According to Endoh (2010, p. 33), such laws “limited the immigrants’ freedom to maintain their Japanese cultural identity and their information networks in Brazil. They also severed immigrants’ connections to their homeland.” It gives us an idea of the pressure upon the newspapers at that time. Maybe they could continue their activities (or at least keep them for a more extended period) if their acts of cooperation came to the knowledge of a wider public.

There is a session on the bulletin dedicated to informing about the publications received by the Chamber. There are bulletins of similar Chambers from other countries and also books and catalogs. This material was made accessible freely

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5 Do not confuse réis (Brazilian money today) and réis (Brazilian money at the time of the Bulletin’s publication).

6 Applying the Estadão Index, which uses the price of a workday newspaper as a reference unit.

7 In Portuguese: “A dita coleta teve seu início no dia 25 de maio e seu término no dia 20 de julho e foi com grande satisfação que verificamos que a importância total atingiu a vultosa soma de 146.768$100 (cento e quarenta e seis milhões e setecentos e sessenta e oito mil réis).

Ficou assim brilhantemente encerrada esta coleta, com tão alto objetivo e sob a promoção daqueles incansáveis jornais que naquela época ainda circulavam em língua japonesa.”
by the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce. The primary aim of sharing these publications was to make relevant and updated information on commerce available. Moreover, it also gave an impression of normality in business relations between Japan and other countries. Unfortunately, the days to come would bring more than just instability to Japan-Brazil relations.

**Defining mitigation agents**

The idea of “mitigation agents” derives from the concept of soft power elaborated by Joseph Nye in his “Soft power: The means to success in world politics” and developed in posterior works. *Nye (2009, p. 161)* writes that soft power’s major elements are a country’s “culture (when it is pleasing to others), its values (when they are attractive and consistently practiced), and its policies (when they are seen as inclusive and legitimate).” Public diplomacy, exchange programs (artistic, cultural, or technical), and development assistance are just some examples of the way soft power can be exerted by one country on another. The point is: that a given country (let us call it country A) uses its soft power on countries B, C, and D through its embassies, consulates, and organizations tailored to foster good relations with initiatives, programs, conjunct activities, and many other actions that potentially may benefit country A’s image to the people of countries B, C and D. However, this is the country (its nationals included) working for itself. What about nationals from countries B, C, and D acting to improve country A’s image to collaborate on maintaining good relations? They might be a product of soft power, but would it be appropriate to call them soft power actors if they do not belong to country A?

Taking the example of the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce bulletin and the historical time it was launched, it is possible to see that it was an attempt to contribute to good relations (commercial in the primary analysis, but not only) between Brazil and Japan. It was run and written by Brazilian citizens in a period when Japanese immigrants in Brazil were seen as potential enemies because of the spread of the propaganda of the “yellow peril” and also because Japan and Brazil as countries eventually stood on opposite sides in the second World War. There were voices for and against the Japanese in Brazil—in the newspapers, on the radio, and in politics. Nationalism would serve as a support for either group, be it defending the country from enemies “loyal to their Emperor in a foreign land;” be it fostering intense exchange with a developed industrialized nation. In such a global-scale conflict scenario, those interested in keeping good relations could not resist too long, especially after Brazil interrupted diplomatic and commercial relations ties with Germany, Italy, and Japan on January 28, 1942, during the III Meeting of the American Chancellors. As far as they resisted, all they could do would be an attempt to mitigate the effects of the quarrel, and this could be done only by trying to mitigate the aggressiveness of both sides.

To mitigate means “to alleviate,” “to extenuate”; “to cause to become less harsh or hostile,” in its first sense, “to make less severe or painful.” It usually has “aggressiveness,” “offense,” “suffering,” and “war” and their synonyms or correlated words as objects. This is the reason why we chose “mitigation” instead of “attenuation,” “extenuation,” “alleviation,” “relief,” and others. Mitigation agents will certainly not stop war or its effects, but they make an effort to escape it as long as possible. They will not solve conflicts definitely, but try to survive them. Their focus is to assuage tension the more they can, sometimes acting as pacifiers who do not even speak of peace. If soft power can be defined more simply as “the ability of a country to attract and co-opt others” (*Beckley, 2018*), then mitigation agents are the “others” who were co-opted (passive) and started to co-opt (active), as multiplying actors.

As *Nye (2004, p. 5)* writes, “in behavioral terms soft power is attractive power”, mitigation agents perform their actions to induce sympathy that leads to cooperation through attractiveness. However, they function as an indirect channel, for they are not nationals of the country that is wielding this power. These agents can be individuals with some prominence, like journalists, scientists, politicians, professors, and others enjoying some prestige and occupying leading positions or institutions formed or run by these individuals. Sometimes the attractiveness of their discourse emanates from the compel of acknowledged authority in their respective fields.

Obviously, the morals of their intentions are not to be judged, which means their actions are not to be measured by an ideal of easing the minds for peace as an end in itself, as an elevated objective. It may be one of the purposes of the actions, and it is laudable that they happen with this goal, but intentions are not a valid criterion for determining if someone (or some group or institution) is a mitigation agent because intentions cannot be measured. They are subjective, and we need objective evidence to observe (declarations, images, deliberations, to cite some). It does not matter if a mitigation agent is doing something for world peace or the good of its own patrimony: “what” is relevant, and also “how” and “when,” but not “why.”

With all this in mind, we call a mitigation agent an individual or institution whose words or actions are bound to demonstrate a positive image of a group in situations of conflict (light or severe, constant or intermittent), aiming at improving their relations with other groups as much as possible. A mitigation agent is a kind of pacifier, a barrier-breaker, a bridge-builder that acts indirectly. We can say that the mitigation agency is tasked with diminishing the possibilities of attrition.

A mitigation agent is not a liar and certainly not a fake news producer as well. All the words and actions must be moved towards mutual comprehension, points of convergence, and agreement. When it comes to exchanging (and it can be broadly understood as in cultural exchange, not only in trade), mitigation agents are fundamental and become one of the analysis elements in interdependence among countries—another topic to be explored further.

**Final remarks**

This work is a primary attempt to formulate the concept of mitigation agents, understood as actors whose declarations (spoken or written) or activities are driven towards reconciliation between two or more groups eventually in conflict.
Starting from a practical example—the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce bulletin—and considering the meaning and uses of the word “mitigate,” it delineates the scope and nature of the expression, whose purpose is to define a category of analysis that can become a helpful tool in studying and understanding cases like the Japanese-Brazilian Exchange, the Japanese-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce bulletin.

“Mitigation agent” as a concept can be developed in different disciplines, not only in the International Relations Theory. It can serve as a valid instrument for those who study Linguistics (especially in the branch of Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, etc.), Economy, History, Communication, and many others. Further research will compare the example used here for illustration first with other mitigation agents in the same context and then in other frames.

Another task for the near future is to verify the opposite hand, i.e., mitigation agents in Japan fostering relations with Brazil, like the deputy Tsukasa Uetsuka, mentor of the Kōtaku project that successfully established Japanese immigrants in the state of Amazonas, Brazil, and made jute acclimatization possible, contributing considerably to the national economy. After the end of the war, even though there was still hostility against Japanese immigrants in Brazil, Uetsuka tried to reinitiate the works in Vila Amazônia, traveled sometimes to Brazil accompanied by other Japanese, probably potential investors, and also wrote articles in Japan defending the restart of immigration to Amazonas.

Finally, it has to be clearly stated that mitigation agents’ more outstanding feature is that they are nationals of the country that is receiving soft power, not from the one that is wielding it. If this were not the case, there would be no need to give them a specific name. Their intentions are also not discussable, for they cannot be objectively measured; only the source, the form, and the results of their actions and declarations can be scrutinized.

**Data availability**
No data are associated with this article.

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