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Leadership Challenges in Covid-19 Vaccine Campaigns: The Story of Brazil

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Introduction

In the one-and-a-half years of the COVID-19 pandemic, global health supply chains have played a critical role in determining which populations have had access to medical essentials such as personal protection equipment and respirators, and, in the more recent months, to vaccines. This report tells the story of Brazil.

It explains how the country's COVID-19 challenge is but a symptom of deeper, cascading crises that have hobbled a country that, not too long ago, was regarded as a potential regional powerhouse. The report begins by recalling the

general conditions under which Brazil was hit hard at the beginning of the pandemic. Adapting a famous saying by Nelson Rodrigues, a prominent Brazilian playwright, "Lack of preparedness to fight an epidemic is something one cannot easily improvise; it takes time."

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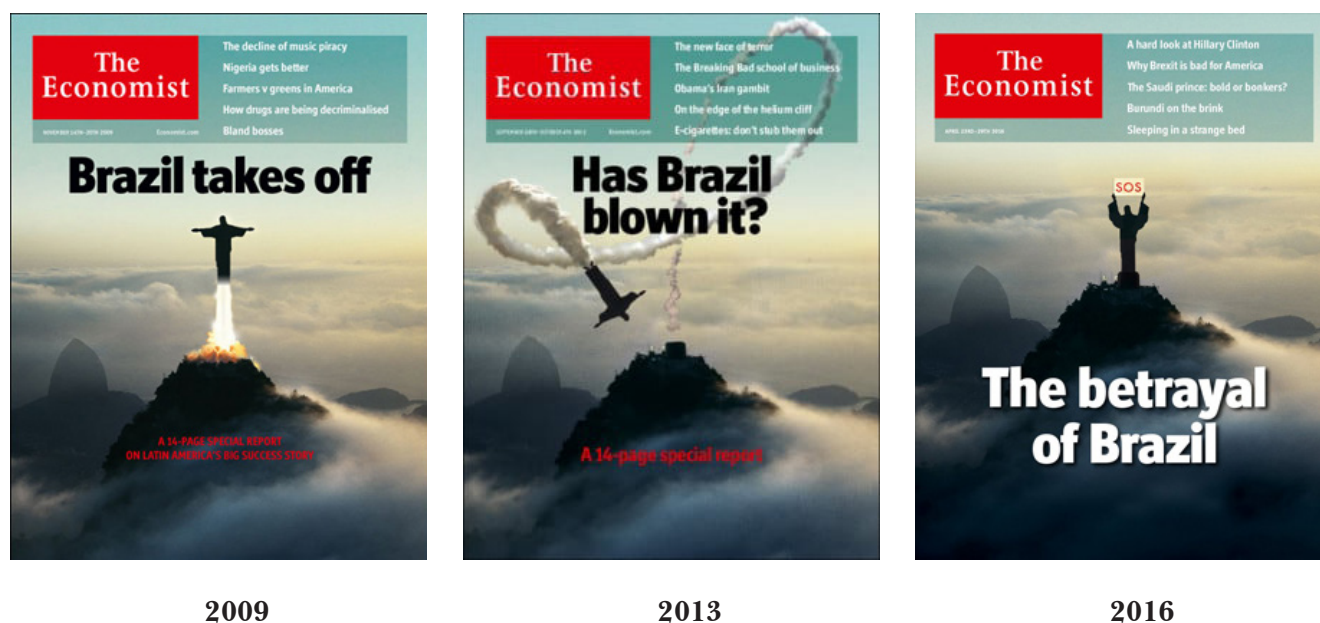
Historical Background

In the first decade of the 21st century, there was a widely held view that Brazil was showing promise as a global power. It was “the rise of the rest”, as Indian-American journalist Fareed Zakaria once dubbed the emerging “post-Western” world. In the decade that followed, however, Brazil seemed to have lost its way. As the country was battered by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, some observers called the situation a “biological Fukushima,”¹ in reference to the nuclear disaster that hit the Japanese city in 2011. What happened to Brazil in the relatively short span of two decades?

Some 15 years ago, Brazil was moving upwards in the eyes of observers of international affairs. A series of cover pieces in *The Economist* is illustrative of how the Western view of Brazil has evolved. In 2009,

the magazine’s cover depicted Brazil’s national landmark, the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, as a rocket preparing to be launched. A second cover, some years later in 2013, showed the same Christ, depicted again as a rocket, and in the throes of crashing. It was the year Brazil ceased to be a reservoir of hope. In 2016, *The Economist* cover’s Christ statue was sending out a call for help. The situation has remained the same since, if not worse in 2021.

Figure 1:
Three Covers of *The Economist* on Brazil



There are some important antecedents to the current state of Brazil. The “third wave of re-democratisation,” which first took place in Europe around the 1970s—reaching Turkey, Greece, Spain, and Portugal—had soon embraced Brazil and the rest of Latin America. Peru’s dictatorship was the first to fall in 1978; then, like a domino effect, many other countries in the region experienced re-democratisation. Brazil, after 21 years of a

brutal military dictatorship, finally had a civilian president in 1985. A few years later, in 1988, the country passed a new Federal Constitution, which left behind normative contents related to the military dictatorship and set into force a new legal democratic framework for the country.

In 1992, Brazil witnessed its first presidential impeachment process, as Collor de Mello was ousted through constitutional means over charges of corruption. Despite all the turbulence, the country remained stable; in hindsight, one can contend that it was a successful stress test, which Brazilian institutions survived.

From 1993 to 2013, the country underwent a transformation in the “golden years” under a democratic regime. A succession of governments, led by presidents Itamar Franco and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, worked to tackle the key macroeconomic problems facing the country. During the first decade of the current century, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva managed to mitigate the problem of social inequality by way of massive targeted social investments.

In 2000, the “Global Brazil” campaign was launched, and the country resuscitated its regional integration project. Prior to this, Brazil had recurrently turned its back on South America, in an attempt to forge stronger bonds with, and possibly become part of, Europe. Further, it preferred connecting with the United States (US) rather

than cultivating regional ties.² This behaviour was consistent for most of Brazil’s 200 years as an independent nation, primarily because these dependency relations had been maintained for centuries since Brazil was colonised by Portugal in the early 1500s.

At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the country attempted to become an autonomous player and associate with its peers from the Global South. This was a turning point, and Brazil became a founding member of the BRICS, or the forum for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Within this context, Brazil assumed the identity of a Global South powerhouse. The country held that the world belonged to Global Southerners and that the BRICS grouping was the embodiment of this project. It also seemed as if Brazil had an implicit mandate to represent South America, or Latin America, in world affairs.³

a Unasur and Mercosur are two regional blocs launched over the last 30 years under Brazilian sponsorship.

“For 20 years from 1993, Brazil experienced its “golden years”; around 2013, a series of crises began.”

At this point, Brazil was thus being seen as a regional hegemon, with Brasilia spearheading integration initiatives such as the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), and doubling down on the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR).^a Indeed, UNASUR, founded in 2008, would be an emulation of the European Union (EU) in the tropics. For Brazil, taking the lead for South America was part of the country’s efforts at global projection. Moreover, in the first decade of this century, Brazil was chosen to host global events such as the

Summer Olympics in 2016 and the FIFA Football World Cup in 2014—simply an indicator that the country was gaining the world’s attention enough to be considered as host to these important events. In 2011, Brazil became the sixth major economy in the world, a true milestone, creating more room for optimism. Despite these breakthroughs, however, by 2013, Brazil was facing a “quadruple crisis.”⁴

Brazil's Quadruple Crisis

Economic

The Brazilian economy has stagnated over the last decade, with its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2020 being roughly the same size as in 2008, at USD 1.43 trillion. Since 2014, the country's economy has not grown, and its participation in international trade and investments has diminished over the years. It has become increasingly difficult for Brazil to place itself as a competitive player in world economic relations, and the current and future prospects appear bleak. Furthermore, the unemployment rate has soared, from 6.6 percent in 2014 to 11.9 percent in 2020. For the country to catch up with the leading economies of the world, many issues need to be urgently addressed.

Politico-Institutional

Brazil is a federation made up of more than 5,500 municipalities, 27 federal states, and the Union. By force of Brazil's 1988 Federal Constitution, the Brazilian Federative Pact comprises more than 5,500 federal entities, with each one of them having some leverage and administrative autonomy. Over the years, the country has become increasingly

difficult to rule, and there seems to be no way to efficiently coordinate this entire machinery. When it held elections for presidency in 2014, the results were promptly questioned by Aécio Neves, Dilma Rousseff's challenger. Following that, in 2016, a second impeachment process took place, culminating in the ousting of President Rousseff barely one year after she was re-elected.

In 2018, Brazilians voted massively for Jair Bolsonaro, widely acknowledged as both politically and intellectually ill-equipped to run the nation. Power branches—the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary—are constantly in conflict with each other and competing for space, with no resolution in sight. In a situation where the central administration refuses to take on its leadership role, things are likely to become even more chaotic.⁵

Diplomatic

From 2013 onwards, Brazil has had seven foreign ministers, or an average of one per year. Thus, there is no sense of continuity, since the person in-charge of, for instance, Brazil's diplomacy and foreign affairs keeps changing. Brazil has failed to catch up with the most pressing global agendas and has been repeatedly left out of many important decisions, particularly with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the past, the country used to be a global reference for environmental affairs given its status as a huge reservoir of biodiversity; its potential for hydroelectricity and clean energy; and as the *barn of the world* based on the large amount of food produced in its territory. Indeed, Brazil was an important voice in matters of global environmental governance. However, the current administration

has jeopardised the Amazon forest, persecuted indigenous populations inside the territory, and failed to arrest deforestation and resource-smuggling—destroying not only Brazil's natural resources but also an important source of its authority, and thus framing the country as a global villain.⁶

The fourth cascading crisis is a fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section of this report analyses it in detail.

The COVID-19 Crisis

The current health and humanitarian crisis in Brazil can be considered the most serious and crucial, and has turned the country into a cautionary tale for what countries ought not to do during a pandemic. Brazil had mishandled the COVID-19 outbreak at the outset.

So far, Brazil has recorded more than 570,000 casualties due to COVID-19, and millions of hospitalised citizens, many of them suffering from post-COVID symptoms. Scientific consensus points to mass vaccination as a way through the pandemic. As of 30 August 2021, over 60 percent of the Brazilian adult population have received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 27 percent are now fully vaccinated. After witnessing a considerable delay in the vaccination rollout, mostly due to procurement failures and President Jair

Bolsonaro's insistence on hydroxychloroquine as a miraculous panacea for COVID-19,⁷ the country has quickly managed to catch up.⁸

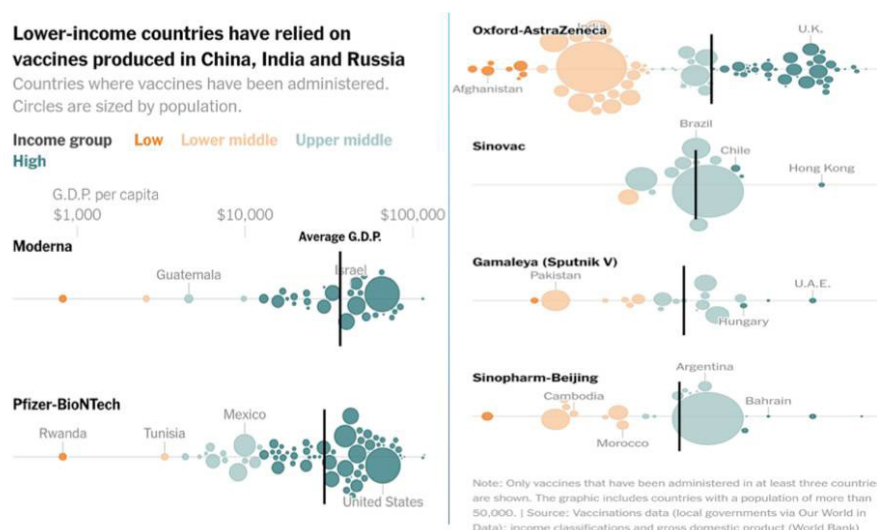
The current president of Brazil is widely considered as one of the many 'strongman' heads of state who emerged in different parts of the world in the past several years. Bolsonaro's anti-China discourse—one that mimics Trump's Sinophobic rhetoric—has ensured that Brazil fails to meet its most urgent needs during this pandemic. Indeed, it is patently unwise to openly confront the country that supplies over half of the world's pharmaceutical ingredients, in the midst of a pandemic. This is especially relevant for Brazil, given its failure to develop its own vaccine, making it entirely dependent on international

suppliers. While China did deliver millions of vaccine doses to Latin America as part of its vaccine diplomacy, Bolsonaro’s hostile attitude towards Beijing caused significant delays in signing vaccine agreements and initiating shipments.⁹

As Figure 2 shows, lower-income countries, particularly those in Latin America and Africa, have depended heavily on China, India and Russia for access to their first vaccine doses, whereas higher-income nations relied on American and European companies to secure doses for their populations.

To contextualise these dependency ties from a Brazilian perspective, China was by and large the only country providing Latin America with some vaccine relief in early 2021, as Sinovac quickly managed to penetrate these regional markets. India’s Covishield (manufactured by the Serum Institute of India), too, succeeded in reaching some parts of the region, namely Central American countries and Brazil; meanwhile, Russia established closer connections with Mexico and Argentina.

Figure 2:
Developing Nations’ Reliance on Vaccines from China, India and Russia



Source: *The New York Times*, 2021.

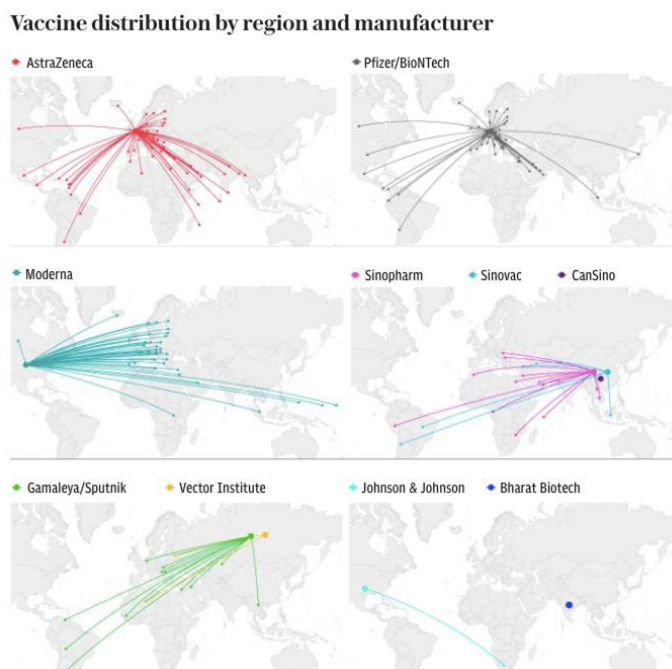
Figure 3 provides a clearer picture of the regional context, and how the US played a minimal role, if at all, in catering to the needs of its hemispheric allies.

Since rich countries did not hesitate to operate on a first-come, first-served basis, ordering surplus stocks of vaccines despite limited global supply, under-resourced countries and people were naturally left behind. Canada, for instance, procured vaccine doses 10 times the total population of the country. Thus, wealthy populations managed better and faster protection against COVID-19,

while underdeveloped countries with no domestic vaccines, such as Brazil, were left vulnerable to high rates of infection and massive deaths.

While the World Health Organization (WHO) has set up the COVAX Facility Initiative, it does not have the capacity to meet the global demand for vaccines in the short term. Indeed, one should not expect from an intergovernmental body what it was not created to deliver.

Figure 3: The Relative Absence of the US in Latin America’s Rollout Effort



Source: Rigby, 2021.

Without any broad consensus on the need to distribute vaccines in an equitable manner across the planet, the Geneva-based organisation cannot be expected to resolve the issue on its own.

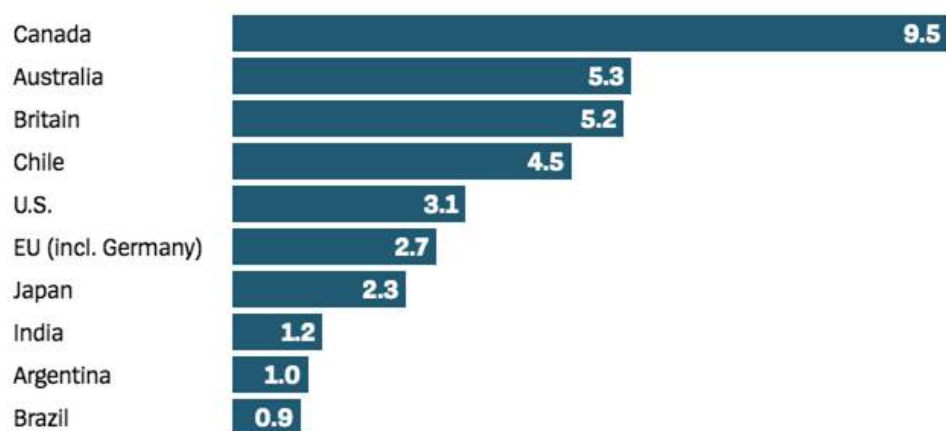
It is also vital not to lose sight of the complex machinery behind the distribution of vaccines across more than two hundred sovereign states. Since there is no such thing as a unified production line or a global sanitary agency

to oversee and validate every vaccine that reaches an advanced stage of development, techniques vary enormously. Consequently, the vaccines have different transportation and storage requirements to maintain viability, as well as diverse inoculation regimens with regard to dosing, timing, and side effects.

Figure 4:
Global Vaccine Pre-Orders (as of November 2020)

Supplies Secured

Confirmed COVID-19 vaccine pre-orders*, doses of vaccine per resident
(in selected countries)



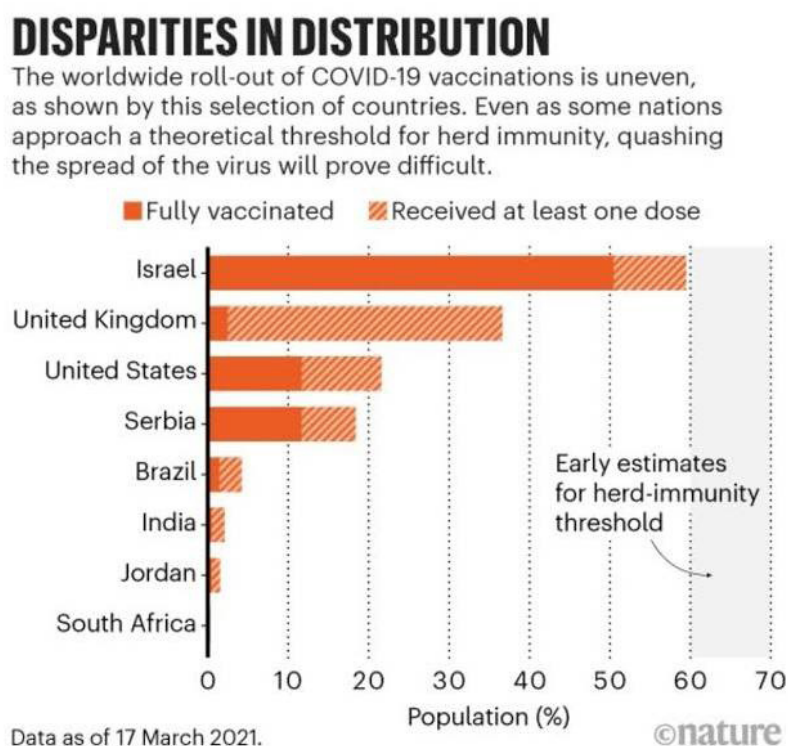
* in some cases from multiple suppliers

Source: Der Spiegel, 2020.

The global coordination effort, therefore, is limited in its application and efficacy. Thus, while the overall COVID-19 response has been more robust in every dimension and by every metric than the response to any previous epidemic or pandemic, better-off countries continue to outperform poorer ones in securing and distributing vaccine doses for their citizens.

Finally, it is important to note that pharmaceutical companies, despite US President Joe Biden’s public statements and foreign policy positions, have fiercely opposed any move to waive patents for COVID-19 vaccines.

Figure 5:
Global Vaccine Distribution (as of March 2021)



Source: Aschwanden, 2021.

This stance has longstanding, deep roots, as the US health market faces almost no regulation, and American pharmaceutical companies have steep profit margins—not only inside the US territory but also abroad. Since the actual and potential harm this pandemic caused to the global economy is estimated to have already reached US\$10 trillion,¹⁰ products that increase the prospect of resuming global economic activity, such as vaccines, automatically bring in large revenues as well as strategic interest. Consequently, this situation directly favours wealthier nations, often at the cost of poorer ones like Brazil.

Within this context, Bolsonaro's Brazil has failed to navigate the crisis and continues to grapple with the impact of poor response to the pandemic. At the time of writing this report, Brazil's COVID-19 death count had crossed 570,000. Compounding the economic and humanitarian fallout is a devastating economic crunch and a high level of unemployment. South America's largest country must now work to leave this quagmire and jump into a post-pandemic reality.

“Brazil is entirely dependent on international suppliers for its vaccine rollout.”

What Lies Ahead

While the pandemic has affected all nations across the world, President Bolsonaro's leadership has particularly failed in arresting the massive fallout for Brazil.¹¹ Various sectors have also expressed concerns over Brazil's democracy profile, overall.¹²

In 2022, Brazil is set to hold its general elections. This offers some scope for implementing changes, with opposition candidates registering more voting intentions than Bolsonaro in the polls. With the charges of corruption that kept Lula da Silva from running in 2018 having been dropped, he is likely to face Bolsonaro as a top contender.¹³ In light of

questions around Bolsonaro's handling of not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also other aspects of the country's national affairs, a power shift might prove to be key for Brazil to make a comeback and find its way to recovery. In the post-pandemic world, Brazil must aim to return to its former status as a powerhouse, building on its 200-year diplomatic tradition of embracing a multilateralist and universalist stance. [ORF](#)

Endnotes

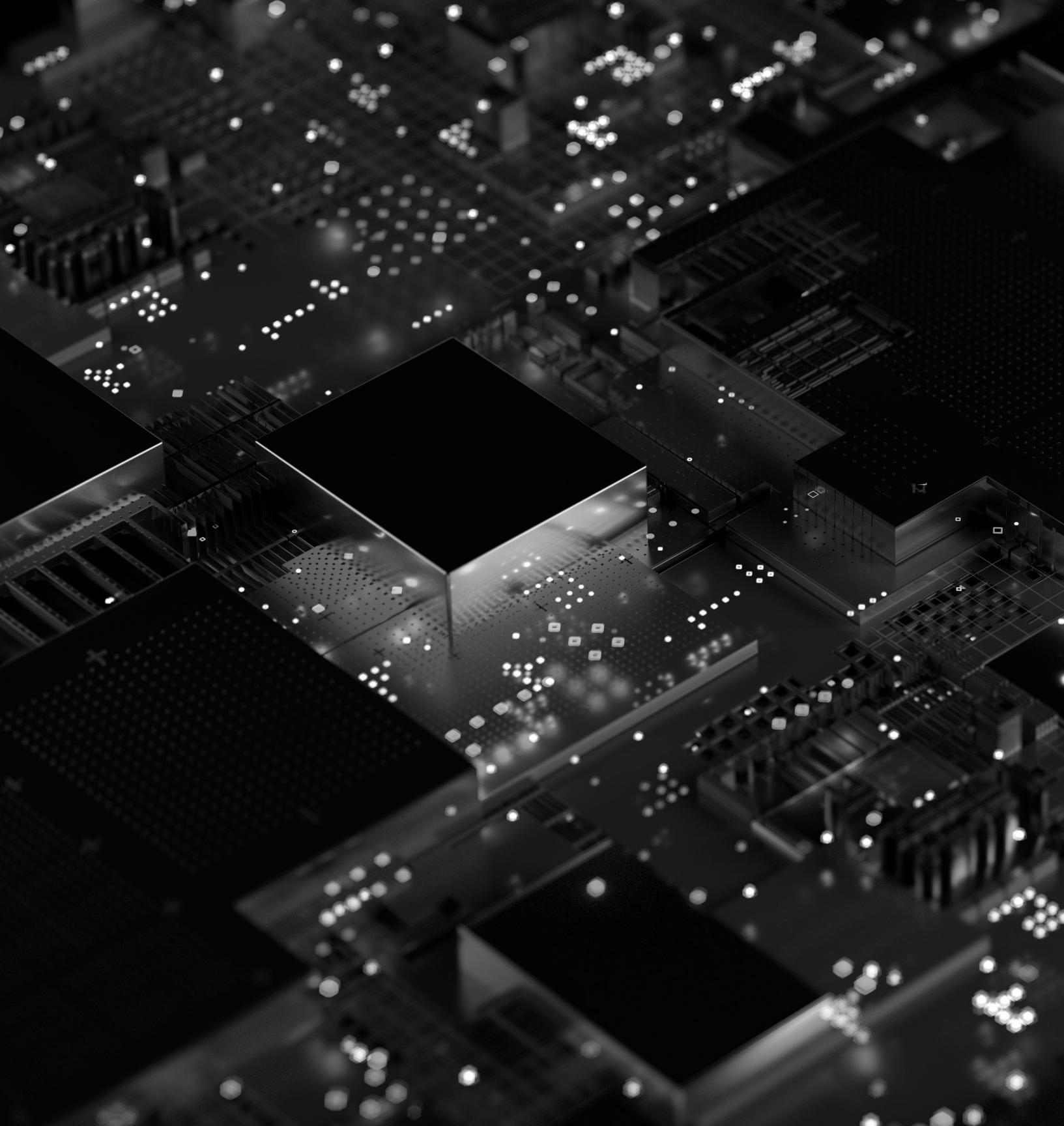
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