

Brazil: Lula Land

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Lula Land

What is Brazil's main criticism of the international order, and what does its vision of "cooperative multipolarity" imply? How are Brazil's policy of non-alignment and its ambition to build bridges playing out? And how is Brazil influencing global food, climate, and energy debates?

Nicole Koenig and
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In 2022, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, commonly known as Lula, heralded the start of his third presidency by declaring that "Brazil is back."¹ This came after his predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, had almost completely withdrawn Brazil from the international stage.² Bolsonaro had described the World Health Organization and environmental protection as national security threats and proposed withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change.³ After a narrow victory, Lula returned Brazil to its traditional foreign policy course of strong multilateral engagement.⁴ For Brazil's G20 presidency last year, as well as its role as host of this year's BRICS Summit and the UN Climate Conference COP30 in Belém, Lula announced that Brazil would act as a bridge between the so-called Global South and Global North.⁵ However, multilateral engagement does not equate to unwavering support for the system as it is. Brazil has been skeptical of the current global order, seeing it as a manifestation of global inequality.⁶

Embracing Multipolarity

Under Lula, Brazil has promoted a vision of a global order that is based on the concept of "cooperative multipolarity," originally coined by former Foreign Minister Antonio de Aguiar Patriota.⁷ Based on international law, the universality of human rights, and the rejection of the use of force, the concept highlights the importance of more inclusive global governance mechanisms for stability and security.⁸ Brazil views the greater distribution of power among countries as an opportunity to rebalance outdated power structures and give countries of the Global South a stronger say in international decision-making (Figure 1.4). Accordingly, it put global governance reform at the top of the agenda of last year's G20 presidency, along with other priorities of the Global South, such as poverty reduction and food security.



“The future will be multipolar. Accepting this reality paves the way for peace.”¹²

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva,
Brazilian President, G20
Summit in Rio de Janeiro,
November 18, 2024

In his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2024, Lula criticized the lack of permanent seats for Latin America and Africa on the UN Security Council (UNSC), calling it an “unacceptable echo of domination from the colonial past.”⁹ Brazil proposed reforms to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, including making the composition of senior management more regionally representative.¹⁰ It also suggested boosting the banks’ lending practices by rechanneling Special Drawing Rights to multilateral development banks to unlock resources for vulnerable countries to help them deal with the climate crisis.¹¹ In addition, Brazil used its G20 presidency to initiate discussions on a two-percent tax on the world’s super-rich to raise funds to help poorer countries deal with climate change impacts.

Brazil’s vision of multipolarity is not anti-Western but rather critical of Western domination.¹³ The country has repeatedly condemned unilateral actions by Western states.¹⁴ This included sanctions that have not been approved by the UNSC, notably those imposed by the US and the EU on Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine.¹⁵ Brazil also rejects the framing of a global struggle between democracies and autocracies, adopted by the Biden administration, among others.¹⁶ Emphasizing the principle of non-interference, Brazil is eager to cooperate with a variety of countries, regardless of their form of government. As a founding member of BRICS, it seeks to promote the group as a platform that amplifies the influence of the Global South in the international system and deepens economic relations among its members.¹⁷ Lula has, for instance, supported the creation of a common currency to facilitate trade and investment among the BRICS nations and has described the group’s New Development Bank as an alternative to the Western-dominated Bretton Woods institutions.¹⁸ Even so, Brazil rejects the Chinese and Russian framing of BRICS as an anti-Western club.¹⁹ Despite being critical of the West and the current order, Brasília actively engages in formats and organizations that it deems Western-centric.²⁰ For instance, it applied for membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2017. If Brazil were to join, it would be the only country to simultaneously be a member of BRICS, the G20, and the OECD.

A Non-Aligned Bridge-BUILDER

Brazil views the emergence of a multipolar order as an opportunity to increase its influence as a “middle power” and bridge-builder.²¹ Its foreign policy is shaped by a tradition of independence and non-alignment.²² The country has sought to position itself as an impartial mediator in conflicts such as the war in Ukraine.²³ In 2022, Lula irritated Western partners by

stating that Ukraine and Russia were equally responsible for the war.²⁴ After taking office in 2023, he proposed a “peace club” of neutral countries that should mediate between Ukraine and Russia. This was followed by a push for negotiations together with China in 2024, which included a six-point plan for a political settlement.²⁵ Both attempts failed. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the Chinese-Brazilian initiative “destructive,” because it did not mention the need to respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity.²⁶ At the same time, Brazil has vocally criticized what it perceives as Western double standards, particularly regarding Israel’s military campaign in Gaza. Lula has repeatedly slammed Israel for what he sees as a “disproportionate” response to the Hamas terror attacks of October 7, sparking criticism by comparing it to the Holocaust.²⁷



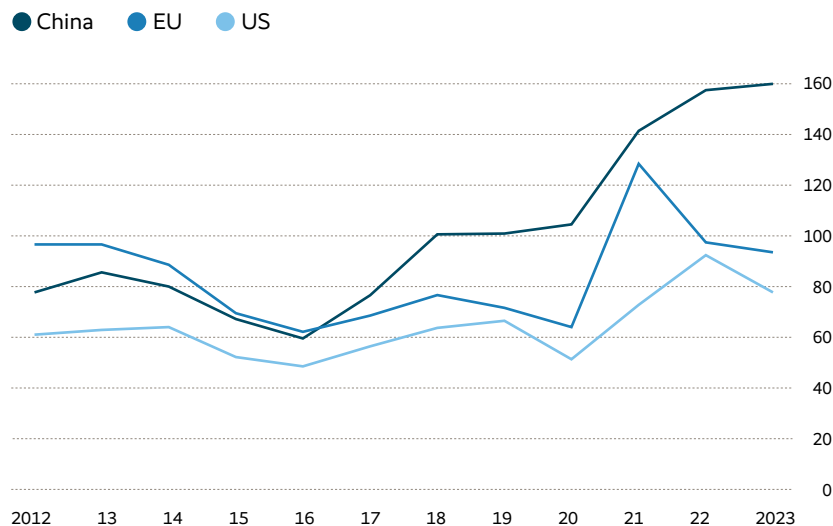
“The Chinese-Brazilian proposal is [...] destructive.”²⁸

Volodymyr Zelenskyy,
Ukrainian President,
Metrópolis, September 11,
2024

Non-alignment also shapes Brazil’s relations with China and the US. While China has become Brazil’s largest trading partner and second-largest investor, the US remains its largest direct investor and second-largest trading partner (Figure 8.1).²⁹ Since choosing sides could result in economic losses, Brazil seeks to maintain good relations with both. However, its positioning between the great powers is also subject to domestic controversy. Lula’s government was, for instance, divided on the decision not to join

Figure 8.1

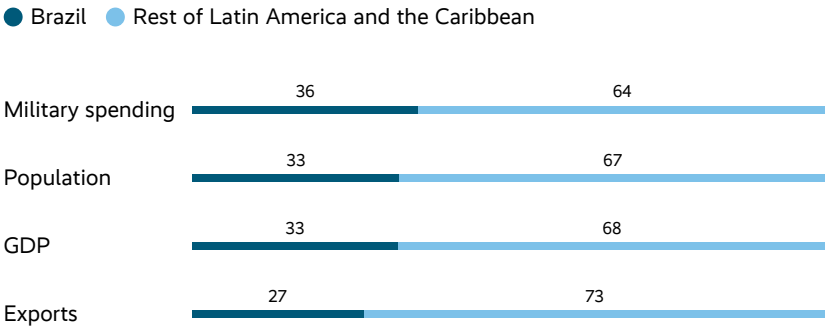
Brazil’s trade (imports and exports) with key partners, USD billions



Data: Trading Economics. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

China’s Belt and Road Initiative, with some members viewing it as an opportunity to attract investment and others warning of negative effects on relations with the US and the EU.³⁰ More generally, voters of right-wing parties, including Bolsonaro’s, seem to be much more in favor of alignment with the US than voters of left-wing parties, including Lula’s, who prefer a more balanced stance toward the great powers.³¹ Trump’s re-election could put this balancing act to the test. His threat to impose a 100 percent tariff on the BRICS countries if they were to create an alternative currency suggests that Brazil’s strategy may come under pressure.³²

Figure 8.2
Brazil’s share of key indicators, 2023/2024,
percent of regional total



Data: IMF; World Bank. Illustration: Munich Security Conference

Brazil’s ambition to build bridges is reflected in its approach to its own neighborhood. Accounting for roughly one third of GDP, population, military spending, and exports in Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil is a regional heavyweight (Figure 8.2). It seeks to promote closer integration and a stronger voice for the region in global decision-making. Under Lula, Brazil rejoined regional organizations such as the Union of South American Nations and has intensified regional cooperation on transnational challenges like organized crime. However, Brazil has also been described as a “leader without followers,” not least due to its failed attempts to rally the region behind its initiatives and integration efforts.³³ For example, Brazil’s attempts to drive greater integration of the Mercosur trade bloc – also including Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay – have been hampered by internal divides and protectionist policies. Argentinian President Javier Milei’s comments about leaving the bloc in

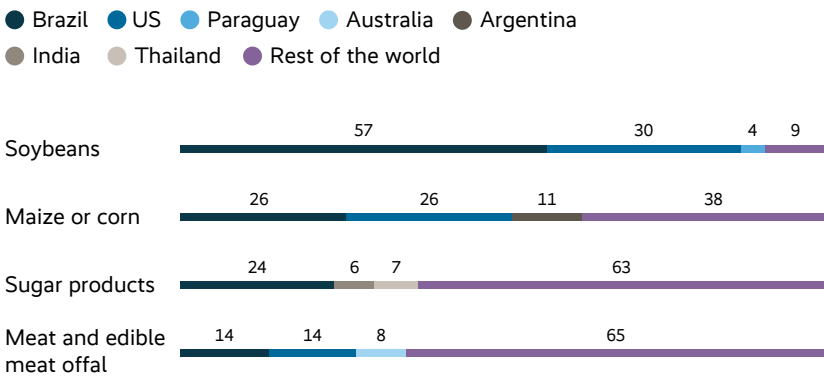
August 2023 could have jeopardized the trade deal with the EU, which was recently finalized after 25 years of negotiations.³⁴ Milei also announced his intention to pursue a bilateral trade deal with the new US administration, calling on his Mercosur partners to free him from the “prison” of having to negotiate as a bloc.³⁵

A Constrained Issue-Specific Power

There are at least two issues where Brazil’s global clout is set to grow. The first is food security. As the world’s second largest exporter of agricultural products, leading in soy, meat, and sugar (Figure 8.3), Brazil is a major agripower.³⁶ Countries such as Egypt and China heavily depend on Brazilian produce. For instance, 67.9 percent of China’s soybean imports come from Brazil.³⁷ Lula successfully raised food security on the G20’s agenda and called the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty, with more than 88 signatories, the “most important legacy” of Brazil’s presidency.³⁸ However, the country’s agripower also comes with fragilities. The Brazilian economy is highly dependent on commodity exports, including agricultural products, making it vulnerable to price volatility and market fluctuations.³⁹ In 2023, 36 percent of Brazil’s total agricultural exports went to a single destination: China.⁴⁰ At the same time, Brazil is the world’s largest importer of fertilizers, with one quarter of its supply coming from Russia.⁴¹ This dependency influenced Brazil’s reluctance to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as Bolsonaro admitted, limiting the country’s credibility as a mediator in the war.⁴²

Figure 8.3

Brazil’s share of global food exports, 2023, percent



Data: International Trade Centre. Illustration: Munich Security Conference



“Trump is back, and it’s a sign we’ll be back, too.”⁴⁹

Jair Bolsonaro, former
Brazilian President,
Wall Street Journal,
November 29, 2024

The second issue is the energy transition and the global fight against climate change. Brazil’s critical mineral reserves make it indispensable for the development of clean technologies. It holds 94 percent of the world’s niobium, 22 percent of its graphite, 16 percent of its nickel, and 17 percent of its rare earth elements – all vital components in green technologies.⁴³

In the fight against climate change, Brazil already plays a key role due to its 60 percent share of the Amazon basin. Lula introduced measures to correct Bolsonaro’s regressive climate policies, which include restoring Brazil’s greenhouse gas reduction targets and pledging to achieve zero deforestation in the Amazon.⁴⁴ However, green ambitions appear to be colliding with economic interests. The construction of a new highway, cutting across the Amazon, threatens to fuel deforestation once again.⁴⁵ Lula has also supported plans for fossil fuel exploration in the Amazon, with some areas located in nature reserves.⁴⁶ Clashes between green and economic ambitions were also on display at the G20 Summit, where Brazil pushed for a more ambitious timeline for carbon neutrality but also agreed with Argentina to facilitate the importation of natural gas obtained through fracking.⁴⁷

Bridging Over Troubled Water

With its vision of cooperative multipolarity, its strategy of non-alignment, and its strong ties to both Western and non-Western institutions, Brazil is well positioned to act as a bridge between the Global South and Global North. During its recent G20 presidency, it successfully put concerns of the Global South on the agenda. However, amid rising geopolitical tensions and Trump’s second term, it will be increasingly difficult for Brazil to act as a global agenda-setter and maintain its strategy of non-alignment. Its G20 priorities, including more ambitious climate action and the proposed wealth tax, will be even harder to implement. Initiatives within BRICS and cooperation with China could come under pressure as the Chinese-US rivalry intensifies. Internal polarization could also increase ahead of the 2026 elections, with Bolsonaro having expressed hope that Trump’s return to the White House could help his own comeback.⁴⁸ Brazil’s vision of cooperative multipolarity may thus clash with the reality of a more uncooperative geopolitical context and polarization at home.

Key Points

- ① Under Lula, Brazil sees the emergence of a multipolar order as an opportunity to rebalance outdated power structures and give the countries of the Global South a stronger voice in international decision-making.
- ② Brazil's foreign policy is characterized by a strategy of non-alignment. It seeks to position itself as a neutral mediator in international conflicts, such as in Ukraine, and to maintain equidistance between the US and China.
- ③ With its significant natural resources, Brazil has the potential to shape global debates on food, climate, and energy security. But while its agripower comes with vulnerabilities and dependencies, Lula's green ambitions appear to be clashing with economic interests.
- ④ Playing the role of a global agenda-setter and pursuing non-alignment may become more difficult amid rising geopolitical tensions and President Trump's second term. The new US administration could also strengthen Bolsonaro and his supporters, contributing to internal polarization.

Quotations originally in British English have been adapted to American English. In some cases, stylistic adjustments were made to quotes.

Endnotes

8 Brazil: Lula Land

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