

LULA 3 AND THE NEW AUTONOMY WITHIN DEPENDENCE? BRAZIL-THE UNITED STATES-CHINA TRIANGULAR RELATIONS (2023-2026)¹

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In January 2023, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took office in his third, non-consecutive Presidential term, in Brazil. Lula's comeback to power occurred after the 2011-2022 interim, composed of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) mandates. During this period, International Relations presented a trend of continuity and discontinuity with Rousseff and Temer, as well as breaks with Bolsonaro. From the electoral campaign until the new presidency, the international agenda was presented as a recovery of Lula's 1 and 2 high profile, symbolized by the slogan "Brazil is Back".

The internal and external contexts of Brazil's "return" is different from the ones of 2003-2010. In the first decade of the 21st century, the international scenario was characterized by the rise of the emergent nations from the Geopolitical South³ (in particular China's consolidation of power), the United States (US) military engagement in Eurasia due to the Global War on Terror (GWT) in Afghanistan (2001-2014) and Iraq (2001-2011) and the 2008 global economic crisis, with the US and the European Union as its core. Brazilian room for manoeuvre was more significant facing these changes and power vacuums.

Apart from the traditional Western axis US-EU-United Nations (UN),

¹ This article was finalized on March 29th, 2026.

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³ During this article, the concepts of South or Geopolitical South will be used, to present a set of emerging nations that share converging external goals as the international order reform and autonomy. Check Costa and Duarte 2023 for the concept of Geopolitical South.

there was a possibility of opening spaces and adding power resources through South-South and North-South partnerships. Internally, the governmental coalition was supported by the alliance established between the Workers Party (PT) and the more traditional sectors of the national political-economic elite. The Vice-President José de Alencar was able to bridge the gap between these sectors and PT, with an accommodation of centre-right forces and diverse interest groups linked to the export of commodities, infrastructure and financial sector. These agendas were reconciled with the welfare ones. The Legislative scenario was mostly favourable, due to the scope of the coalition, which, despite difficulties, was able to form majorities for votes. Likewise, even though the Brazilian economy in 2002 was in a stagnant situation, Fernando Henrique Cardoso's (1995-2002) legacy was of a stable country.

The second decade of this same century presented opposing trends: an internal political dynamic marked by the break of the pact established in the first Lula government, that led to Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 (Bastos and Hiratuka 2020; Milan 2016), with the migration of the interest groups mentioned above to the centre and the far-right. The economic-social vulnerability generated by the redirection of the neoliberal model and pressures of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemics that, from 2020-2021, paralysed the global economy, prevailed in Brazil. From the electoral victory confirmation to the inauguration, leading to January 8th, 2023, Brazil endured a period of institutional crises and the risk of a democratic rupture. Initially focused on the immediate post-election period, these movements led to the interruption of public roads and popular demonstrations, culminating in the coup attempt, with the invasion and the destruction of public spaces in the federal capital, Brasília.

Even though the regime rupture was avoided, these signals, added to the election of a conservative Congress ("centrão"⁴ majority), both at the Representative and Senate chambers, represented a fragile governmental basis, supported by a coalition of progressive forces. Occupied by former São Paulo's government Geraldo Alckmin, a historical name of the Brazilian Social-Democratic Party (PSDB) that migrated to the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), the Vice-Presidency tried to enlarge these coalitions with centre forces. Alckmin was also ahead of the Ministry of Development, Industry, Trade and Services as a way of interacting with the productive sectors.

The international scenario proved more sensitive, due to the acceleration of the hegemonic competition, generated by US-China competition. As a result of the competitive coexistence between these powers, there is a rise in

4 In Portuguese, the expression refers to the centre and centre-right political movements in Brazil, that also are joined by some members of the far-right.

geopolitical and geoeconomic clashes amongst them. From the centre to the periphery, all continents present conflicts and political polarizations: Russia-Ukraine, Israel, Yemen, the strengthening of the far-right just to mention a few phenomena. The decentralization of power is still ongoing, generating, as Visentini (2025), points out, an unstable multipolarity.

It is possible to establish a parallel, even though some conditions are different (such as US-China interdependence), between the current moment and the 1930s decade. The decline of Pax Britannica, and the prevailing imbalances since the First World War (1914-1918), the arrangements of the Versailles Treaty (1919), the Great Depression (1929), the rise of fascism and defying powers (Japan and Germany) and the US repositioning, led to the Second World War (1939-1945).

If there are similarities between the 1930s and the 2020s, would it be possible to revitalize the so-called “autonomy within the dependence” (Moura 1980), when Brazil bargained between the US and Germany? In concrete terms, the major players of the present hegemonic transition are the US and China, Brazil’s main individual partners. According to Hirst (2025), Brazil-US’s bilateralism is affected by this context, and, consequently, Brazil-China’s bilateralism will be too. What is the impact for Lula’s 3 agenda?

Based on these questions, the goal of this text is to evaluate Brazil-US’s relations and Brazil-China’s in Lula’s third term. There is no intention of exhausting or mapping all of Lula’s 3 initiatives, but to present some reflections from the general principles, focusing on the bilateral partnerships. For that, the text will be divided into three parts, added to this Introduction and Final Thoughts. In the first part, “Conjunctural and Structural Overview (2003-2022)”, there is a brief contextualization of Lula’s 1 and 2 period, and the presidencies that succeeded him. Added to this mapping there is a set of structural thoughts, systematizing geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural variables, with impacts in policy and decision making. The second part “Stabilization and Relative Reconstruction (2023-2024)”, presents the two-year initial period of the administration, whereas the third “Defensive Action, Adaptation and Pragmatism (2025-2026)”, evaluates the government’s continuity in adverse conditions.

Conjunctural and Structural Overview (2003-2022)

During Lula’s first government cycle, 2003-2010 (with the reelection

⁵ Some of these ideas and arguments about Brazil-United States relations in Lula 3 were previously developed in Pecequillo 2025 and Pecequillo 2025b and will be recovered here.

in 2006), the country's international relations presented a significant process of strengthening and enlargement. This process embodied both innovative patterns of State-State and multilateral South-South and North-South interactions, as well as the recovery of strategic projects such as the Common Market of the South (Mercosur) and bilateral relations with nations such as the US and China⁶.

Considering the innovations, South-American regional integration mechanisms such as the Union of the South American Nations (UNASUR), and the Community of Latin-American and Caribbean States (CELAC), variable geometry coalitions as IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) and the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China⁷) and the trade G-20 for the World Trade Organization (WTO) talks were created. The financial G-20 assumed a relevant role as an enlarged negotiation forum for economic issues.

In the South-South agenda, the South America-Africa (ASA) and the South America-Arab (ASPA) Countries Summits were relevant, adding to the diplomatic acceleration of efforts with Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Brazil emphasized South-South Cooperation (SSC) for the development of a stronger interdependence of internal social programs and the external field as *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger). Together with *Fome Zero*, projects as *Bolsa Família* (Minimum Wage), *Farmácia Popular* (Free Medicine Drugs) and *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (Housing Financing) embodied a set of social welfare public policies (added to education access enlargement policies), that had become international references.

As for the recovery of the strategic projects and partnerships, in particular Mercosur, China and the US as mentioned, Lula's 1-2 agenda presented greater complexity. In the case of Mercosur, similar to other regional integration processes based on South America, the bloc focused on trade issues, but also worked as a platform for international projections with other regions and blocs, including the EU. The preservation of the democratic governance and the autonomy of member countries were defined as priorities.

Evaluating the partnership with China there was an upgrade in the

6 Ambassador Celso Amorim led this process, ahead of the Ministry of Foreign Relations (MRE), Ambassador Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães acted as MRE's Secretary General and the academic Marco Aurelio Garcia as Special Advisor of the President of the Republic for International Affairs.

7 In 2011, South Africa entered the alliance in its first enlargement, becoming the BRICS. In 2024, it became the BRICS Plus, with the new full members, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, followed by Indonesia in 2025. BRICS Plus also includes partner countries such as: Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Malaysia, Nigeria, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Data collected at: BRICS. Brasil 2025. Available at: <https://brics.br/pt-br/sobre-o-brics>. Accessed 25 March. 2026.

relationship, promoting the joining of geopolitical and geoeconomic agendas. Since its reestablishment in 1974, in the context of the Military Regime (1964-1985), within the framework of the Responsible and Ecumenical Pragmatism (1974-1979) in Geisel's government), Sino-Brazilian relations sustained a pattern that prioritized trade agendas. The partnership was characterized by a unidimensional and instrumental economic view, focusing on the opening of markets and opportunities. Despite scientific-technological efforts, such as the satellite programs *China Brazil Earth Resources* (CBERS), launched in 1998, China was neither quantitatively, nor qualitatively seen as a priority partner.

In the post-Cold War world, mostly in the 1990s, even this agenda was put on hold due to the priority given to the North-South axis by governments such as Collor de Mello (1990-1994) and the first mandate of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC- 1995-1998). The situation only began to change from 1999-2002, when FHC's foreign policy started to search for South-South alternatives, with a focus on emerging nations, Russia, India and China. In a reaction to the national economic crisis (and the lack of benefits from the North), these partnerships were defined as strategic, but the contents of the agenda was still leaning towards trade issues.

It was only in the 2003-2010 period that bilateral relations experienced a qualitative leap, with the convergence of South-South agendas. These convergences led to the introduction of multidimensional components in the Sino-American political-strategic and social exchanges. This advancement could be noticed in a greater complexity of the bi and multilateral agendas, such as the BRICS, the recovery of scientific and technological projects, the defence of multilateralism, multipolarity and the reform of the world order. Added to the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of Brazil-China bilateral relations, the year of 2004, was characterized by the enlargement of formal frameworks of cooperation, with the creation of the Sino-Brazilian High-Level Commission for Coordination and Cooperation (COSBAN) and of the Brazil-China Business Council (CEBC).

China initiated a process of taking part in infrastructure works and development in Brazil, that, in the following President's Dilma Rousseff government resulted in the Ten-Year Cooperation Plan Between the Government of the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Government of the People's Republic of China (2012-2021) and the Brazil-China Joint Action Plan (2015-2021). Another milestone was China's rise to the position of Brazil's main sole trade partner between 2009-2010. Historically, since Brazilian independence, the Western axis, represented first by Great Britain, and later by the US, was the core of Brazil's imports and exports. In this new reality,

the US started to occupy the second position in the Brazilian trade agenda. According to Pereira (2025),

In 2001, the United States share of Brazilian exports was 24,4% and China's 3,3%. In 2009, China surpassed the US, and, in 2023, China's share was 30,7% and the United States was 10,9%. Since 2012, China gained percentages, and South America from 2013 onwards (...). Till October 2024, the aggregated numbers showed a 29,3% China's share and 11,6% for the United States (Pereira 2025, 53).

Considering imports,

(...) there is a similar behaviour. However, there is a smaller difference between the percentages. Since 2018, China's share is surpassing the United States and, in 2023, the shares were: China (21,1%); European Union (18,9%); United States (15,8%); and South America (11,3%). Till October 2024, the aggregated numbers showed China's share at 23,9% and 15,5% for the United States (Pereira 2025, 53).

Pereira (2025) shows the concentration of Brazilian exports in the primary sector, live stocking and mineral commodities⁸. This reorientation (reprimarization) is leading to Brazil's de-industrialization. Added to other elements such as lower investments in science, technology and innovation, these trends reveal a change in the national economic profile.

China's rise in the ranking of trading partners, and the increase of interdependence happened not only in Brazil. It is a part of Chinese international projection, beyond its geographical scope, that, in the 21st century, also included a process of expansion to Latin America. China had started to occupy US power vacuums in the sectors already mentioned of trade, infrastructure and development. Added to bilateral partnerships with Hemispheric nations, since 2018, Chinese presence entered a new phase with the China-CELAC Forum. At that moment, an Action Plan was presented, with the goal of expanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI⁹) to Latin America. Even though Brazil is not a BRI member, until the ending to this

⁸ Considering Brazil-China relations, the country represents an important pillar of Chinese food security with its grain and all sorts of meat (bovine, chicken, pork) exports.

⁹ Launched in 2013, during Xi Jinping's government the BRI (either/or New Silk Road) is a project based on China's interconnectivity with Eurasian regions (Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia), through land and maritime infrastructure corridors. See Xing (2019) for an overview.

text in March 2026, this process is core to understanding the update of US policy in the Hemisphere during Trump's second mandate (2025-Current).

Considering Brazil-US bilateral relations, Lula's government experienced moments of cooperation, such as the establishment of the Strategic Dialogue in 2005 (changed into the Global Dialogue) and the energy sector agreements (ethanol), as well as tensions. Even though they were portrayed by the opposition as moments of Brazilian ruptures and aggression, these tensions were, in fact, a natural counter hegemonic reaction to the country's repositioning in the world's balance of power. Added to coalitions, SSC and integration projections, Brazil also increased its role and resistance in negotiation forums such as the WTO and as a major player in international mediation talks, mostly, the conclusion of the Three-party Nuclear agreement Brazil-Iran-Turkey. Although the agreement was not implemented due to US pressures, it was representative of the regional powers' ability, Brazil and Turkey, to negotiate relevant geopolitical issues as mediators (Hirst 2022).

These initiatives consolidated national autonomy, defined as the increase in power resources and of Brazil's repositioning in the world's balance of power by opening new external opportunities and partnerships (Visentini 2013)¹⁰. In the words of Ambassador Amorim, it was a "proud and active", and high profile, foreign policy (Amorim 2015). Concepts such as autonomy through diversification (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2003) and combined axis (Pecequillo 2021) also defined these dynamics.

Despite real advances, Lula's foreign policy never was, at any time, consensual. As a result, there was a break in the "proud and active" agenda from 2011-2022, the period preceding Lula's return to Planalto. During this interim period, which was encompassed by the governments of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), a low-profile agenda of decline and deconstruction.

Amongst these three governments, Dilma, elected by PT as Lula's heir, represented continuity, but with lesser attention to international politics. Temer had regained the North-South agenda and Bolsonaro represented the most significant break. Although some analysts argued that the break was symbolised by its alignment to the US, during the overlapping of Trump's first mandate two-year final period that began in 2017, between 2019 and 2020, this was not a novelty in international relations.

It is necessary to qualify the break, pointing out that there is a change in Brazilian stance towards multilateralism and the liberal international order,

¹⁰ Pinheiro and Lima 2018 can be suggested for the conceptual debate regarding autonomy in Brazilian foreign policy.

focusing on Westernization and conservative values (Casarões and Farias 2021). This change tried to align with Trump's vision of opposing international regimes, mainly the social ones (human rights in general, the environment and health), criticizing SSC in international organizations and the discredit of these organisms as cooperation forums. Although, as mentioned, the alignment towards the US was not a novelty, these dimensions represented a relative break.

This translated into the abandonment of demands such as the update of multilateral organizations and the strategic emptiness of variable geometry coalitions, the BRICS and SSC as a whole, and, in South American integration, leaving CELAC and the end of UNASUR. At the same time, this multilateral abandonment was not clear-cut, as Brazil was still in negotiations, through Mercosur, of a trade agreement with the EU and, as part of the neoliberal economic agenda, was seeking to be a member of OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). So, vertical multilateralism (North-South) was a priority and the South-South one not.

The Sino-Brazilian partnership alternated ideological criticism and fake news (especially in the COVID-19 pandemics) with the exporting sectors economic dependence. These sectors were part of the core of interest groups that encompassed the governmental coalition, such as the commodities exporters, and started to put pressure on the administration to avoid losing markets. Even the own government could not risk losing the Chinese markets and others, such as the Middle East. Therefore, it was necessary to accommodate these interest groups as defined by Casarões as the 5Bs (in Portuguese): *bala* (public security), *boi* (agricultural, livestock and commodities in general), *bíblia* (evangelicals and conservative electors), *bancos* (financial sector) and *bolsolavismo* (the defense of the West, as represented by Olavo de Carvalho ideas). Realistically, we should mention that four of these five groups never ceased to be relevant in the domestic scenario, the changes are related to how they exercise their influence and mobilize coalitions: *bala, boi, bíblia e bancos*.

We are not going to list all the period's actions but indicate that several domestic disputes regarding the bi and multilateral relations of the country stand still. This finding comes from the evaluation that foreign policy is influenced by five structural frameworks. These frameworks are rooted in historical and contemporary dimensions, linked to the evolution of Brazilian foreign policy, US hegemony and international changes. What are these structural frameworks?

The first framework relates to US weight in Brazil's profile as a Western nation, influencing national models of development over time. The political, social, economic, cultural and strategic logic of alignments is engrained in

Brazilian thinking and is shared by diverse interest groups. This leads to a negative definition of national priorities, as the State's project is evaluated not endogenously, but exogenously, as one considers which kind of impact a certain policy will bring to relations with the US.

Second, since 1945, the US has been the hegemonic power of the international system, containing the rise of challengers that may threaten its interests and strategic positions in all continents. Although also sustained in co-optation and ideology, through international multilateral organizations, and the liberal rhetoric, Pax Americana, is not shy in using unilateral or war measures. Third, in Latin America this hegemony is stronger due to geopolitical reasons. The region is in the US sphere of influence, as defined by the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. According to this Doctrine, America's region should be preserved as a projection zone and security frontier. Three priorities are defined by the Doctrine: the containment of inter-regional threats, the prevention of external risks and the promotion of democratic regimes and the free market.

Fourth, despite the continuity of the hegemonic status, the US is being pressured by changes in its society and in the international system. In its society, there is a change in its economic, social and populational profile that generates imbalances and fragmentation. There is the reorganization of interest groups, with the rise of new elites such as the tech giants, that are joining the traditional ones linked to the industrial military-complex and energy. In the international system, change is related to the relocation of power resources, towards the South, in particular emerging nations, more specifically, China.

Fifth, for Brazil, China's global rise and as a bilateral partner can already be regarded as a structural framework in the definition of foreign policy. Not only China's weight in trade balance is relevant, but also there is a growth in its direct investments, infrastructure projects and transfer of multinationals. Therefore, both the US and China can, in the 21st century, be regarded as structural partners: the US in the geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural dimensions, and China in geopolitics and geoeconomics. What is the impact of these conjunctural and structural analysis for Lula 3?

Stabilization and Relative Reconstruction (2023-2024)

As argued, Lula's 3rd coming into power faced more significant

11 In Lula 3, Ambassador Celso Amorim acts as the Special Advisor of the President of the Republic for International Affairs, whereas Ambassador Mauro Vieira was appointed as Mi-

challenges than in his previous mandates. Also as mentioned, the milestone of Lula 3 was the recovery of principles and agendas summarized in the expression “Brazil is Back”. Guimarães (2025) explains this foreign policy phase as one of autonomy through reconstruction. The goal was to achieve Brazil’s repositioning in the world and power gains (therefore, the definition of autonomy) and to reach this from known tactics that would be adapted to new realities. In practical terms, although the goal of reconstruction was clear-cut, it highlights some problems.

First, the demand for reconstruction occurs because there was a break before, as a result of domestic political disputes and interest groups movements. Second, the dismantling of initiatives, such as the ones related to South American integration was fast. Third, this dismantling and relativization of principles and international regimes represent a lack of consensus regarding the national project. So, changes were not produced by voluntarist actions, but as part of a clash of domestic models that reflect political struggles. In the lack of understanding these oscillations or the built of a sustainable consensus, the construction-de-construction cycle may repeat. Faced by these realities, how did Lula’s 3 policies evolve in its first two-year period?

In the domestic field, welfare policies investments were resumed, and ambitious goals of modernization and development were launched in projects such as the “New Industry Brazil” and the new “National Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation”. This agenda was also present in a third project with internal and external dimensions, the “South American Integration Routes”. While the Integration Routes aimed to recover regional integration projects led by Brazil, focusing on infrastructure, the others prioritized modernization purposes. As a convergent characteristic, the three projects were part of an arch, in which the role of the State as the promoter of development in strategic sectors was recovered.

However, material internal and external conditions were not conducive for the advancement of these projects. In addition, there was an international counterhegemonic reaction and the regaining of power by domestic oligarchies in the region, that put into question the so-called “Pink Tide”, that, in the beginning of the 21st century led to the rise of progressive governments. In that context, governments of right- and left-wing orientations began to alternate. Lastly, the growth of China’s presence in Latin America made the country the main individual partner of local partners, promoting the break of political integration processes.

Therefore, Brazilian room of maneuver was smaller, as well its

nister of Foreign Relations and Ambassador Maria Laurada Rocha Santos as MRE’s Secretary General.

capacity to occupy spaces. That does not mean that Brazil had no weight or leadership, but that cooperation dynamics needed to be rethought in more updated and flexible frameworks. The possibility of resuming projects like UNASUR is low in current conditions. Even Mercosur, as a strategic tool, loses ground for a Mercosur focused on trade and bi-regional talks, as shown by the Mercosur-EU negotiations during this period. The agreement was finally signed in January 2026, after almost two decades, and presented as a proof of multilateralism success.

Since the beginning, regarding multilateralism, Lula 3 was able to successfully recover Brazil's image. Another positive point was the exercise of Presidential Diplomacy. Efforts to assure that Brazil was able to host huge multilateral events during the mandate were prioritized, as the country held the presidency of blocs and alliances. Between 2023-2024, Brazil presided the National Security Council of the United Nations (from October till November 2023), as a non-permanent member, and was head of the financial G-20 (hosting the Rio de Janeiro Summit in November 2024). For the two-year period of 2025-2026, in particular during 2025, occupied the presidency of Mercosur and the BRICS Plus, and organized COP-30.

As this brief overview shows, Brazil valued multilateral agendas and social issues. However, the second decade of the 21st century presented a certain mismatch between this Brazilian focus and the geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics that were leaning towards the reduction of the relevance of multilateral spaces. Interstate relations were more relevant than non-state ones, which affects both the dynamics as well as the perceptions of bilateral relations with the US and China.

As for the Brazil-US interchange, Joe Biden's Democratic party government played a relevant role between 2021-2023, considering the national political instability situation. Still in Bolsonaro's period, US concern was to signal that it would not support antidemocratic movements that offered the risk of a democratic rupture. From 2021-2022, several US authorities visited the country such as the Head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), William Burns, and Jake Sullivan from the National Security Council. Another concern was to contain China's geopolitical and geoeconomic advances, avoiding a direct confrontation with the Brazilian government.

Disagreements regarding Brazil's neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine War were present, but clashes were avoided. Brazil took part, as a US guest, in the Environmental Summit and the Summit of the Americas, even in the lack of political-strategic convergence. In 2022, US Ambassador to Brazil, during public audiences in the Brazilian Congress, reinforced the support for a peaceful and stable governmental transition, within democratic rules. In this context, the US, alongside the international community, condemned the

January 2023 coup attempt.

For Lula's government, the overlap with the Biden administration was seen as positive, due to the convergence of social agendas, in the fields of democracy-human rights-environment. In February 2023, during Lula's trip to the US there was the reaffirmation of this common agenda, a trend that lasted until the end of the democratic mandate in 2024. Nevertheless, the concrete results of this convergence are not as significant as the rhetorical dimension that comes along. In this field, the "Partnership for the Rights of Workers" (Decent Work Initiative), US participation in the Amazon Fund and the defence of initiatives pro-renewable energies and the fight against climate change could be mentioned.

In geopolitics, Brazil and the US negotiated together the Barbados Agreement in which the government of Nicolás Maduro established a compromise to respect the results of the 2024 elections in the country. Nevertheless, disagreements such as those already mentioned about the Russia-Ukraine War, and Brazil's criticism of Israel in the confrontation of the Gaza Strip (that began in October 2023), remained. Also, there were no economic advances, as bilateral trade sustained its trends already examined, focusing on China. The Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity (APEP) initiative, a US project of development for the Latin America region was not extended to Brazil.

It can be said that Lula's first two-year period was of stability regarding Brazil-US bilateral relations (which involved both accommodation and reconstruction), in which convergences came alongside divergences, without ruptures. In 2024, the celebration of the bicentennial of bilateral relations was considered relevant, but without further advances. This reality also is a result of the low priority given by Democrats to the Latin America region and their priority involvement in Eurasia and the Asia Pacific. A power vacuum prevailed, in which China grew, and even Brazil, was searching to recover, without success, the framework of South American integration, as analysed.

However, there was a prevailing image of Biden and his party as being cordial. This Democrat image is rooted in the 1930s when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Good Neighbour Policy (PBV) for the American Hemisphere. Brazilian "bets" on the multilateral offensive during Lula's 3 mandate relied on an international scenario linked to the Democrat's continuity in power, either with Biden or with a Kamala Harris win¹². These bets were surrounded by a certain utopia that Biden's US would promote the

¹² It should be recalled that there was no guarantee of continuity even with a Democratic government, as it would be held by Kamala Harris and Tim Walz, since Biden was not up for re-election.

valorisation of international organizations and regimes, which was not real, at least when the geopolitical reality was considered. The convergence on issues was not as significant as it was portrayed. One of Biden's agendas, for instance, the criticism of autocracies, affected Brazil's South-South alliances. And what about China?

In comparison, Sino-Brazilian relations presented more density and range than Brazil-US dynamics. As mentioned, China, as well as the US, started to exercise a structural weight on the definition of Brazilian policies, due to the rise of its economic influence. Unlike the US, with whom there were no advances in concrete cooperation for development projects, China was in the opposite direction: the deepening of bilateral exchanges, more effective multilateral alliances and the consolidation of projects, such as the BRI.

Lula 3 regained a multidimensional political-strategic stance of the relation, in which bilateral and multilateral mechanisms overlap. Both countries are moving in different spheres of power. Although China's foreign policy seeks a horizontal agenda with its partners, in the win-win logic, reality shows that Brazil, when compared to China and the US, is the country with the least relative power. So, as in the 1930s, the country is between two major powers of the hegemonic transition.

However, unlike that period, the bargain for an autonomy within dependence, lacks two elements: first, that the country holds a consensual national project for the State, defining its priorities and what it wishes from its partners; second, that the two disputing poles are in a position to offer benefits, so that the Brazilian State can have a pendular movement towards opportunities. Despite the priorities present in Lula's 3 projects, there is no consensus about these agendas, and, considering the two poles, only China is offering possibilities of development and cooperation, whereas the US oscillates from rhetoric cooperation to pressure.

With regards to multilateralism, the BRICS Plus is the main arrangement, with the enlargement of its geographic area of projection, and it also recovers its agenda of international order reform and the defence of a pro-multipolar context and multilateral organizations as forums. A possible Brazilian participation in the BRI is not viable from the multilateral point of view, as it would represent a more direct confrontation of US interests. Nevertheless, the BRI logic, focused on the increase of China's interdependence with its partners is already reached in the bilateral dimension.

In 2023, President Lula visited China, with the priority of attracting investments and increasing transnational Chinese activities in the country

(mostly the automobile sector¹³), the convergence of environmental agendas and the update of cooperation plans (in 2022, the Strategic Plan 2022-2031, was launched). In order to consolidate this strategic partnership, the “Joint Declaration Between the Federative Republic of Brazil and the People’s Republic of China on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” was signed.

According to CEBC data, there is an expansion of the Chinese role in Brazil, that goes beyond trade. Chinese investments, previously concentrated in infrastructure (energy, communications and transports), started to explore new issues for industrialization and the Digital Economy (Cariello 2024). Considering the Digital Economy, the issue is composed of three layers: material, virtual and the traditional. The material layer unfolds into five sectors: critical mineral and rare earth elements, base technologies, equipment and devices, infrastructure and telecommunications. For its turn, the virtual layer encompasses other additional dimensions: enabling technologies, intermediary platforms, social networks, media and content, and digital, added to software. Finally, the traditional layer refers to pre-existing sectors of the economy that can be transformed through technology (Pecequilo e Marzinotto, 2024).

The Digital Economy is one of the main fields of US-China competition during the hegemonic transition process, and Brazil is one of the most affected countries. Besides having non-explored critical mineral and rare earth elements, the country is an attractive market for big tech enterprises. The geopolitics of the Digital Economy and the competition of the digital-industrial complexes, affects both relations and could be a bargaining field.

All these sectors are representatives of what Galvão and Leme (2024) define as areas of complementarity for a pragmatic convergence. From June till November 2024, this convergence, with the Vice-President’s Geraldo Alckmin visit to China, and the Chinese President visit to Brazil for the G-20 Summit, represented a qualitative leap in the relation. There was the establishment of “A Community of Shared Future for a More Just World and a Sustainable Planet” (BRASIL 2024) and a set of thirty-nine deals was closed. We are not going to list of all them, but it is worth mentioning that these projects had several priorities linked to the reindustrialization and modernization plans in Brazil, scientific, technological and innovation cooperation, added to ongoing investments in commodities and infrastructure¹⁴. This strengthening of

¹³ One of the events that better exemplifies the Chinese occupation of US spaces in Brazil was the installation of the BYD plant, an enterprise of electric vehicles in Bahia, a local that was once explored by the American multinational Ford.

¹⁴ Amongst the main deals are the “Cooperation Plan between the Government of the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Government of the People’s Republic of China for establishing

relations coincided with the fifty years of Sino-Brazilian bilateral relations, and their goals were exactly these ones, the creation of a new deeper phase of the partnership¹⁵.

Lula's first two years can be defined as positive in recovering the rhetoric of foreign policy and for the promotion of multilateral initiatives. On the other hand, the concrete success needs to be qualified, due to the limitations faced in some issues (South America) and the advance of others (China). In the 21st century, China has become a structural component of foreign policy. At the same time, relations with the US presented an inertial trend. The Brazilian position was not the one of a triangular bargain, but one of occupying spaces due to the US power vacuum. At the end of this period, this situation significantly changed because of the transformation of foreign policy structural elements (US-China-Hegemonic Transition), and of conjunctural realities (the Republican Donald J. Trump's election in November 2024).

Defensive Action, Adaptation and Pragmatism (2025-2026)

Trump's return to the White House in January 2025, a conjunctural event, ignited a process of acceleration of phenomenon that changed the scenario in which Brazilian foreign policy (and all countries for that matter) operated. Although general principles and priorities of Lula's government might be the same, structural and conjunctural dynamics offer distinct pressures in this two-year period. Moreover, a period that represents the final two years of Lula's third presidential mandate, with the deepening of electoral disputes and polarization. The need for a defensive action and adaptation to a context that is more and more adverse is real, as the period overlaps with the two first years of Trump's 2.0 mandate, which is characterized by an offensive.

The multilateralism arena was one of the most affected in the International Relations planning. As argued, Brazil focuses its efforts on several multilateral negotiating processes. With Trump's return to power, multilateral processes were affected as a whole. This action resembles the first mandate of the Republican President from 2017 till 2020, that led to US withdrawal from some organizations and international regimes, whereas reframing and exercising pressures on allies and institutions. This pattern repeated itself: the suspension of US participation in the World Health

synergies between the Growth Acceleration Program, the New Industry Brazil Plan, the Ecological Transformation Plan, the South American Integration Routes Program, and the Belt and Road Initiative". This and other agreements can be accessed at: BRASIL 2024.

¹⁵ For a collection regarding the fiftieth anniversary, see Castro e Loureiro 2024.

Organization and the Paris Agreement, the reassessment of NATO and making use of the UN as a political instrument.

On the other hand, considering the alliances and organizations in which the US is not participating show a counterhegemonic reaction. Critics of the BRICS Plus, mostly to de-dollarization efforts and coalitions for development are some issues that could be mentioned. The multilateral arena as a whole and the variable geometry coalitions are affected by an adverse agenda.

According to Guimarães (2025b), Trump's return to the White House demanded, for Brazilian diplomacy, the need to contain and engage US actions around five axes: geopolitics, trade, institutional/elections, regional and technology/infrastructure. For this article, a three-axis division will be applied (already present in Pecequilo 2025b): geopolitics (geopolitics and regional), geoeconomics (trade, technology and infrastructure) and geocultural (institutional and elections). In the 2025-2026 period, Brazil-US relations may be divided into four phases¹⁶: January-July, August-September, September-December and January-March.

Considering the first phase, January-July, Brazil-US relations experienced a pattern of normalcy, even with the launch of the trade war in April (*Liberation Day*). Trump's trade war was based on the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 (IEEPA), a mechanism created in the 1970s decade still. The trade issue, similar to the migration one, was declared a national emergency, which allows the use of exceptional measures. Its roots are in Super 301 Law, which allows US unilateral actions against partners that, in their view, are exercising unfair trade practices.

In the trade war field, the additional tariff applied to Latin America and Brazil was 10%. So, Brazilian commodities exports to the US were preserved (bovine meat, orange juice, fish, oilseeds, among others) and machinery components. Brazil is one of the countries with which the US has a trade surplus. From a logical point of view, the application of higher tariffs would not make sense as it would affect food prices and US inflation.

This situation allowed a certain accommodation from the Brazilian government in the geoeconomics axis. However, July's month started to show signs of a deterioration of the relationship. The juxtaposition of geopolitics-geoeconomics, Trump's pressures against de-dollarization, a BRICS Plus goal, increased. Even though, they were mostly rhetorical, the pressures

¹⁶ This timeline was already presented in Pecequilo 2025b and is enlarged in this article. Although each phase may look short, this temporal division is justified due to changes in US policy.

indicated that the US would not tolerate any initiative that could harm the US dollar. On the geocultural field, the arrest of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and other people condemned by the acts of January 8th, 2023, led to a new rearrangement of far-right forces in both nations.

One of Trump's first indication that the pressures on Brazil were about to increase happened when the Magnitsky Law¹⁷ was directed towards Brazilian authorities such as the Minister of the Federal Supreme Court Alexandre Moraes and the Minister of Health Alexandre Padilha. The Law establishes that US Visas would be suspended, banning travels to the country due to corruption acts, authoritarianism and violation of human rights. Even though the Brazilian far-right presented these actions as an answer to its request for an intervention in Lula's government, there was an additional motive that was even more relevant: to ban the attempt to impose regulations on US technological companies (big techs).

The next phase, August-September, began under the shadow of this escalation and was only finished after the brief encounter of Presidents Lula and Trump at the United Nations General Assembly on September 23rd, 2025. The most relevant issue of the period was the imposition of the 50% tariff on Brazilian products exported to the US, including food commodities. Following the same logic applied to other countries such as India (and even allies as Japan and South Korea), the US government was using its tariff measures as a political pressure instrument.

For the Brazilian far-right, tariffs were essential to reignite a cycle of mobilization. The offensive stance of party leaders and of the ones holding public office against Lula's government and pro-US alignment were the symbol of this period. Episodes such as the "cap war" were used as a tool for social media engagement: as the Make America Great Again (MAGA) red caps were in favour of concessions and an alignment to Trump's positions, the blue caps with the "Brazil belongs to the Brazilians" writing were preaching autonomy.

Apart from these mediatic smokescreens, the caps are representative of development and international relations models. As they argued in favour of a subordinate position to the US, generating panic, the alignment sponsors were representative of economic interest groups that were seeking to yield to Trump's pressures. Lula's government kept a balanced position, going from a defensive action, to one of accommodation and pragmatism, focusing on Brazilian sovereignty and diplomatic negotiation. This move was positive for

¹⁷ The Magnitsky Law was created by former President Barack Obama in 2012 as a tool of US unilateral pressure towards other nations' authorities that were, according to their assessment, practicing corruption acts and rights violations (see BBC 2025, for further development).

Lula, both inside and outside the country. After the seconds-long Lula-Trump encounter at the UN's Assembly General opening, a change of path came through.

The meeting marks the beginning of the third phase of bilateral relations, September-December. Brazil remained coherent and showed strength, which is respected by Trump, and preserved talks with national and US productive sectors. These talks, as well as US inflationary pressures, led to the cut on commodities tariffs (meat and orange juice) mostly, and the suspension of the Magnitsky Law. Brazilian industrial sectors and some commodities such as fish and fruits were not benefited by significant cuts at that time. In October 2025, Lula and Trump met briefly one more time. During this meeting, the commitment for a new presidential meeting for 2026, that remains with no date. At the same time, trade talks remained under the command of the Vice-President and MDIC Alckmin to include more Brazilian products on the list of those exempted from fees.

The last event of this cycle happened in December, when the US launched the National Security Council, NSS-2025, from now on. Added to the consolidation of MAGA, America First and Peace Through Strength principles, the NSS-2025 established a rebalancing of US priorities. This rebalancing had direct impacts for Brazil and China, as it envisions the Western Hemisphere as US interest "first priority", bringing the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. The Americas, followed by Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, signalling US global hegemonic projection. But mainly, the US warned the US vacuum that prevailed in the Western Hemisphere in previous decades would not be tolerated. Therefore,

After years of neglect, the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, and to protect our homeland and our access to key geographies throughout the region. We will deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere. This "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine is a common-sense and potent restoration of American power and priorities, consistent with American security interests. Our goals for the Western Hemisphere can be summarized as "Enlist and Expand." We will *enlist* established friends in the Hemisphere to control migration, stop drug flows, and strengthen stability and security on land and sea. We will expand by cultivating and strengthening new partners while bolstering our own nation's appeal as the Hemisphere's economic and security partner of choice (The White House 2025, 15-16, italics from the original).

During his first mandate, Trump had already begun this regional counterhegemonic reaction with projects such as Growth in the Americas. This project tried to answer hemispheric demands for investments and development, through public-private partnerships. However, there were no advances from the geoeconomic point of view, as the US has less regional projection capacity than China, due to the resources destined for the hemisphere and the already consolidated Chinese influence.

Within the January-March framework, January began with the first episode linked to the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine in Venezuela, with a unilateral operation for ousting President Nicolás Maduro on day three. A new military intervention, in the Middle East, happened on February 28th, in Iran. Trump was not shy to mention the possibility of an intervention in Cuba, in which the humanitarian crisis was aggravating, and other nations such as Nicaragua and Yemen. There is an acceleration of processes, and the enlargement of US actions with global impacts. A few months before these military operations Trump was presenting himself as a potential candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, as responsible for peace processes and negotiations.

In 2026, the geopolitical peace through strength exercise is prevailing. Not only Trump enhanced the military features of foreign policy, as he is making these efforts in a condition of lower domestic popularity and social and institutional pressures. At this point, the US is enduring the effects of domestic budget cuts (public services paralysis, the lay-off of public servants, healthcare cuts for low income, elderly and children), as it enlarges its foreign operations, and inflation remains high (with a potential to get even worse due to the energy and food crises). Another event that could be mentioned was the US Supreme Court reversal of tariffs in February 2026. The Supreme Court considered IEEP illegal, but until the end of this article, the US government continues to impose tariffs to its partners, using other decision-making tools.

Considering MAGA, an event that must be mentioned, as Trump's popularity is falling, was the *Conservative Political Action Conference* (CPAC) meeting that exposed MAGA fragmentations and the search for new leadership envisioning 2028 (among them, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and the Vice-President J.D. Vance) and the far-right movements in other nations. In this sense, it should be mentioned the participation of Flavio Bolsonaro, the candidate for the Brazilian presidency that, in his speech during the convention, accused Biden's US of interfering in the 2022 elections, and stressed the importance that Trump's government would act, institutionally, in Brazil, during the 2026 election (Alves 2026).

Summing up, the brief 2025-2026 period shows an ideal type of the

intersection of geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural components of Brazil-US relations. How do these set of Trump's 2.0 circumstances and the rendering of the Corollary affect Brazil-China bilateral relations?

Making a conjunctural and short-term analysis, officially, the commitments assumed by both countries in their bilateral relations remain unchanged. Nevertheless, a difference must be pointed out: although there are no setbacks on bilateral agendas, and, one may add, multilateral ones, between Brazil-China, there is a foreign pressure that affects both nations in a distinct way due to their vulnerability level. As one considers events such as the intervention in Iran, for instance, Brazil's resistance to the crisis is lower than China's.

However, the concern with Trump's 2.0 impacts is not limited to the macro level in which the partnership operates, as the global instabilities that affect China may redirect its priorities to its geographic region, leading to a lesser projection in Latin America. In the micro level this could reduce investments and actions in Brazil, and the country could also be targeted in the Sino-American disputes. In this field one issue needs to be taken into account: the access to Brazilian critical mineral and rare earth elements, and its exploration by foreign companies. Already a focus of the Sino-American conflicts that involves Brazil as mentioned, the scenario is even more complex due to the new policies announced by the White House.

Amongst them, in February 2026, Trump launched "Project Vault" (The White House 2026). The goal of this project is to stock critical minerals and rare earths for US usage by any means necessary, preserving its autonomy. Comparing Brazil, China and the US, the US is the country with the highest vulnerability in the sector, due to the scarcity of its reserves, China is the largest owner and producer, and Brazil owns the resources but is unable to fully explore their potential. In December 2017, during Trump's first mandate, a draft of this project was presented in the "Executive Order 13817, *A Federal Strategy to Ensure Secure and Reliable Supplies of Critical Minerals*".

On the Brazilian side, the Law Project 4404/2025 for the creation of the National Policy on Critical and Strategic Minerals (PNMCE) is still being discussed in the Legislative, and several other regulations regarding these resources. As one of the greatest owners of these reserves, this legal vacuum calls attention. One of the most updated documents in the country is the Law no. 10567 (2021), but so far there is few progresses in the regulation of the sector¹⁸. This is a most pressing issue and the lack of a sovereign legislation

¹⁸ Due to this vacuum, and the political clashes in Brazil, state governments such as Goiás, had held direct talks with the US for agreements in this sector, even though it is a prerogative of the federal level. The deal was closed but would not hold legal validity (Xavier 2026).

in Brazil shows the concrete difficulties for the country, in order to exercise its bargain with its main partners.

Final Thoughts

The period of January 2023 until March 2026, can be defined as one of ambiguous autonomy. Even though it announced the reproduction of an autonomy within dependence, Lula's 3 foreign policy endured several internal and external obstacles that did not help the bargaining practice. Nevertheless, in particular due to the increase of China's presence in Brazil, there were Brazilian resource power gains, despite US vacuums and pressures. The milestone of the Integration Routes projects, the New Industry Brazil initiative, and the National Science and Technology Strategy, as well as the agreements signed by Brazil and China during this period (and with other BRICS Plus) represented the existence of qualitative advances. If these advances would be sustained due to the nearness of a new presidential election cycle in 2026 is a question mark.

Another question refers to the internal management capacity and the continuity of State's planning in a society polarized by social-economic models. US structural influence in Brazilian foreign policy is complex, as it involves, as analysed, geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural elements. National projections must also take into account multilateralism imbalances, that demand more pragmatic and innovative South-South alliances, the dominance of interstate relations and potential breakthroughs generated by the Sino-American hegemonic transition.

The situation can become even more critical in 2027, as Trump 2.0 will be facing mid-term elections in November 2026. Since 2025, one of Trump's assets is the Republican majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate: the loss of one of these two chambers, or of both, may put his political project in check. If there is some strategic clarity in Trump's 2025-2026 actions, within the boundaries of the "predictable unpredictability", and the unilateral factors, interstate politics, and peace through strength, the reversal of his favourable internal conditions can change this stance. The acceleration of the 2028 US presidential race is also a variable to consider.

For Brazil, internal and external vulnerabilities, domestic polarizations and models' oscillations can lead to a new low-profile interregnum. One cannot rule out, considering the structural elements described in the text, and the conjunctural dynamics, that the combination of geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural variables, leads to a rapprochement with the US and a new

economical instrumentalization of Sino-Brazilian relations. In the overlapping of a new Brazilian government with different options than the ones of Lula 3, to the last half of Trump 2.0 mandate, the hypotheses of the revival of an “alignment with no reward” (Moura 2021) should be considered. More than ambiguity, the greatest risk is one of dependence, without autonomy.

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ABSTRACT

In Brazilian foreign policy history, the concept of autonomy within dependence, created by Gerson Moura (1980), refers to the bargaining between the US and the Germany before the Second World War, during the Getúlio Vargas government (1930-1945). During the hegemonic transition Brazil chose to negotiate with the two competing poles, gaining advantages for its national project of development. The goal of this text is to analyse whether the actions of Lula 3 whereas facing the United States and China, represent a new autonomy within dependence in the context of the 21st century, by emphasizing a pragmatic triangulation, or if the current domestic and foreign conditions, lead to the restructuring of this same dependence without autonomy.

KEYWORDS

Brazilian Foreign Policy, Brazil-China Bilateral Relations, Brazil-US Bilateral Relations

Received on April 29, 2026

Accepted on May 30, 2026