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Brazil's split worlds

Navigating between the Global South and the United States

Lauri Tähtinen

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Summary

- Brazilian foreign policy, traditionally nonpartisan, is increasingly shaped by domestic political divides, complicating alignment with global powers. This also fuels unpredictability, especially in relation to the United States.

- Brazil's political right is looking to align with Washington in a bipolar world order, while its political left still seeks multipolarity through the Global South and with the help of the Global East. If, contrary to many expectations and current Brazilian policy, the world becomes bipolar, Brazil may be forced to pick sides, challenging its tradition of balanced diplomacy.

- If the world appears to be heading towards multipolarity, this would fulfil a long-held Brazilian foreign policy objective. However, Brazil faces regional dynamics that, perhaps paradoxically, resemble bipolarity, as South America remains only a secondary, or even tertiary, zone for great power competition.

- Hosting major forums like the G20, BRICS, and COP30 puts pressure on Brazil to deliver more consistent global messaging, limiting its room for strategic flexibility.

Author

Lauri Tähtinen
Non-Resident Fellow,
Global Security and Governance,
The Center on us Politics and Power,
Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Introduction

On 6–7 July, the BRICS Summit will be held on Brazil's southeastern coast, in Rio de Janeiro, sandwiched between last November's G20 Summit in the same city and this November's COP Summit in the Amazonian city of Belém. Brazil's role in presiding over leading fora of multilateral diplomacy draws attention to different facets of left-wing President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's policy. Lula, now serving his third term as president, has positioned Brazil as a vocal advocate for climate action, Global South cooperation, and a more multipolar world order. These platforms offer his government a chance to demonstrate global leadership and score some wins.

This Briefing Paper examines whether Brazil's traditional approach – marrying the abovementioned foreign policy positions with basic alignment with the United States – remains sustainable in the face of today's shifting global dynamics. The challenge lies not only in balancing between two powers – the US and China – but also in navigating two different international structures, bipolarity and multipolarity, at both global and regional levels. Adding to the complexity, Brazil's outlook is also subject to major swings due to the increasingly partisan slant in its foreign policy.

This analysis is divided into four parts. First, Brazil's current push for multipolarity is addressed. Second, the development of a distinctly Brazilian foreign policy vision is outlined, particularly in the context of its evolving relationship with the United States and its views on Brazil's hemispheric and global roles. Third, this vision is examined in light of Brazil's current objective of global multipolarity – particularly through BRICS – and its preference for multilateralism in settings such as the UN and its climate regime, the WTO, and the G20. This is also compared with India's behaviour on both regional and global stages. Fourth, the sustainability of Brazil's current path is assessed: a path that entails keeping Washington close enough while simultaneously pursuing a world that is not necessarily aligned with US interests.

Brazil currently faces both ample opportunities for diverse partnerships and challenges in avoiding open alignment. As much as Brazil may have publicly pushed for reforming international institutions, it has been a relative beneficiary of the pre-existing rules-based order and a less divided world. Thus, this analysis concludes with the conjecture that other global powers will find it increasingly difficult to comprehend the ambiguity of Brazil's alignment, and that Brazil itself may struggle to maintain its balancing act. European actors, in particular, would do well to study Brazil's experience closely, both as a warning and as a model, to avoid repeating missteps or overlooking structural tensions.

Brazil's push for multipolarity

Brazil's 2025 BRICS presidency got off to a flying start in January, when Indonesia joined the organization.[1] With its 280 million people and $1.4 trillion GDP, Indonesia strengthens Brazil's pursuit of multipolarity and its multi-aligned stance in global affairs. For Brasília, Jakarta's accession marked a major

1 Government of Brazil, "Brazil Announces Indonesia as Full Member of BRICS", 6 January 2025. https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/latest-news/2025/01/brazil-announces-indonesia-as-full-member-of-brics.

diplomatic win and underscored Brazil's emphasis on BRICS as a framework for cooperation in the Global South – a Global South in which Brazil sees itself as a, or the, major leader.

Yet BRICS remains divided on its basic orientation. Russia, Iran, and China openly challenge the Western-led international order, while Indonesia has now joined India and Brazil as a major multi-aligned member, one that emphasises strategic autonomy. This underlines the bloc's strikingly diverse composition, which also includes Egypt and the United Arab Emirates – both close strategic allies of the US – while South Africa and Ethiopia, which are currently suffering from cooling relations with the United States, are the final two of the group's fully declared ten members.

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Saudi Arabia is a case in point when discussing the strategic ambiguity surrounding the group. While Brazil refers to Saudi Arabia as a member, Riyadh has neither accepted nor declined the invitation to join.[2] For Saudi Arabia – as well as for many other BRICS partners and applicants – ambiguity remains a strategic hedge in an evolving world order. Nonetheless, the current BRICS members already account for a higher share of global GDP in terms of purchasing power parity terms than the G7 core. To make matters more interesting, this shift comes at a time when this Western rival to BRICS appears increasingly divided, as seen in its June summit.

This growing juxtaposition between BRICS and the G7 raises broader questions about the structure of the international system. Brazil's role in BRICS depends not just on the country's partnerships, but also on how power is distributed globally. A central tension emerges here: is the world heading towards multipolarity or bipolarity?[3] Although not taking a definitive stance on the question, this paper examines how countries may need to prepare for both scenarios. For Brazil, this question is particularly pressing, as in a more multipolar world, it may aspire to emerge as a pole of its own; in a bipolar world, it may have to choose, or at least balance, between two superpowers.

For the purposes of this analysis, bipolarity refers to a global or regional system defined and driven by two countries. At the global level, for example, even the rapprochement between the United States and Russia can be seen as a sign of such bipolarity, as Washington seeks an understanding with Moscow that would allow it to focus more energy on Beijing. However, the very existence of such a Muscovite lever – one with the world's largest arsenal of nuclear weapons – suggests a considerable element of multipolarity in the emerging global order, where power is distributed among several influential states rather than concentrated in two.

Regional dynamics complicate the picture further, as the structure of the international system can appear very different depending on the perspective. For example, India is situated at the heart of multipolarity, both in the Indo-Pacific and in Eurasia. Brazil, by contrast, is geographically removed from the hottest spots of geopolitical contestation. As a result, it is more vulnerable to the pressures of systemic bipolarity than countries located in regions shaped by several great powers. This means that Brazil must actively seek out and build multipolarity, pursuing partnerships with other actors, including parties such as the European Union. While doing so, it must also follow a path that reconciles its global ambitions with domestic and regional constraints.

2 Stuenkel, Oliver and Margot Treadwell (2024) "Why Is Saudi Arabia Hedging Its BRICS Invite?", Emissary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 November. https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/11/brics-saudi-arabia-hedging-why?lang=en.

3 For a clear argument for emerging multipolarity, see Tobias Bunde, Sophie Eisentraut & Leonard Schütte (eds.), Munich Security Report 2025. Multipolarization, Munich: Munich Security Conference, 2025. https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2025.

Brazil's Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira (left) shakes hands with Indonesia's Foreign Minister Sugiono during the BRICS meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Monday, 28 April 2025.
Credits: Bruna Prado / AP / Lehtikuva

Brazil, the US, and the quest for global status

To understand Brazil's amorphous ambitions for global leadership, it is first necessary to comprehend how its relationship with the United States has evolved. Beneath the surface of Brazil's foreign policy discourse lies an undercurrent of jealousy that has the potential to turn into resentment: Why them and not us? Both countries are continental in scale, and Brazil also entered modernity in overdrive.

Before the Napoleonic Wars, Brazil was merely a Portuguese colony, lacking even a printing press. Then, from 1808 to 1821, the Portuguese Court ruled from Rio de Janeiro. In 1822, Brazil gained independence under an emperor, the son of the King of Portugal. The resulting Empire of Brazil had two overarching policy objectives: actualizing territorial integrity and preserving slavery in the New World, even after European kingdoms turned against the slave trade. In 1889, Brazil abolished slavery and emerged as an aristocratic republic with a predilection for localized civil war, but also continued territorial expansion, especially in the Amazon region.

While Brazil fought on the side of the Allies in World War I and took part in the League of Nations, its foreign policy remained largely focused on internal and regional affairs. A more multifaceted approach began to emerge in the mid-to-late 1930s, co-created with Washington in the context of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. Roosevelt sought a partnership with Brazil, soon convinced the country to join World War II, and in 1947, President Harry Truman signed the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance. Known as the Rio Treaty, it formalized collective defence in the Americas and helped inspire the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

This was an auspicious decade for both US-Brazil relations and Brazil's rise as a global player. However, from the perspective of then-capital Rio de Janeiro, one crucial shortcoming stood out: Brazil

failed to secure a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Despite early US support, Brazil lacked the international recognition needed to secure the seat. This failure has shaped Brazil's foreign policy ever since. Why did the quest fail, and how could that wrong be rectified?

The quest for global status via a permanent seat on the UNSC has remained, on and off, a mainstay of Brazil's foreign policy vision. Similarly, its relationship with the United States – with the bicentennial of diplomatic ties celebrated in 2024 – has remained a constant, if sometimes one-sided, question.[4] Washington's view of Brazil has shifted over time: at certain points, the US has hoped that Brazil would play a more prominent role in South America or the broader Americas, and at other times, it has found Brazil's efforts, at best, a hindrance to its own goals.

Proximity has not always bred harmony, and during the Cold War, for example, bilateral ties were often controversial. One notable episode was Brazil's participation, during its military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985, in the US-led intervention in the Dominican Republic. The relationship between the two great federal republics of the Americas has alternated between cooperation and phases of Brazilian assertiveness, including the pursuit of an autonomous foreign policy and regional leadership, if not against, then at least not for the purposes of the United States. The latter tendencies were particularly pronounced during the eight years of the first and second Lula presidencies (2003–2010).

Throughout the 21st century, Brazilian foreign policy has taken an increasingly partisan turn. In recent years, the country's political right has seen itself aligning with the United States bilaterally.[5] For example, under hard-right President Jair Bolsonaro from 2019 to 2022, the last Trump administration designated Brazil a Major Non-NATO Ally. By contrast, Lula's return to office has created more distance between Brasília and Washington, even though President Joe Biden intervened to help secure the Brazilian election in 2022.

With hardening partisanship, Brazil's foreign policy vision is becoming increasingly complex. It is also shaped by the rise of a near-peer rival to the United States – China – and several international regimes built around Beijing. The most important of these is BRICS, an organization whose future is essential to Brazil's grand strategy.

Yet there is a risk. To avoid being seen as openly aligned against the United States, Brazil must succeed in portraying its BRICS engagement as cooperation within the Global South, rather than as an anteroom for entering the Global East – the bloc of countries openly challenging the United States and many of its friends and allies. As a pair of shrewd analysts have put it, the outcome of the ongoing battle for the direction of BRICS will help determine the future of the global order.[6]

Brazil in BRICS and beyond

The Global South has arguably been among the greatest beneficiaries of the last quarter – if not the last half – of a century of globalization. While many countries commonly regarded as part of the Global South still struggled with a myriad of financial crises at the turn of the millennium, many of them have now not only secured seats at the tables where international policy is made but also built alternatives to them.

In this context, it is useful to distinguish between the Global South, which may not be part of the Global West or North, but does not necessarily seek to challenge them, and the Global East, which increasingly does.[7] This distinction is important for two reasons: first, there is overlap in membership between the two groups; and second, the Global East has arguably been the greatest winner of the 21st century. China's growth is already legendary, but

4 Mainly Fernanda Petená Magnotta (ed.) (2024) A Bicentennial Partnership: Past, Present and Future of BrazilUnited States Relations, Brasília: FUNAG. https://funag.gov.br/biblioteca-nova/produto/1-1278. See also Downes, Earl Richard, with Rafael R. Ioris (2025) *The United States and the Luso-Brazilian Empires: Beyond Coffee, Plow, and Bible*. New York: Routledge.

5 Stuenkel, Oliver (2025) "The Risks—and One Major Opportunity—Trump Presents to Brazil", Emissary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 April. https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/04/brazil-trump-risks-opportunities-brics-trade?lang=en.

6 Gabuev, Alexander and Oliver Stuenkel (2024) "The Battle for the BRICS: Why the Future of the Bloc Will Shape Global Order", *Foreign Affairs*, 24 September. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/battle-brics.

7 For these global geographic divisions, see Alexander Stubb's comments at "Exception and Exceptionalism: Deciphering the 2025 World Order", Munich Security Conference, 16 February 2025. https://youtu.be/9V2M9MOD3o4?feature=shared&t=310.

even under wartime sanctions, Russia's economy has proven remarkably resilient. In recent years, the Global East has shifted from simply growing its share of the global economic pie to translating economic gains into geostrategic capabilities – a shift that has not gone unnoticed in European capitals, much less in Washington. From the first Trump administration through Joe Biden's four years in office, the United States has sought to hamper the economic growth of not only its clear foes such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea, but also, increasingly, that of its principal systemic challenger: China.

To complicate matters further, leading lights in Washington now see even the prosperity of many longstanding allies as something of a threat. This signals a shift towards a more confrontational understanding of global power and creates a challenging scenario for Brasília, regardless of who is in power – and even despite Brazil's trade surplus with the United States. In response, President Lula has insisted that BRICS is not aimed against anyone, and therefore no country should have any reason to turn down an invitation or use the organization to its own advantage. However, others seem to see things differently. Saudi Arabia's fence-sitting is one example, but Argentina's outright refusal to accept an invitation to join in 2023 – following the electoral victory of Javier Milei, a right-wing president aligning the country more closely with the United States[8] – suggests that some governments do indeed see BRICS as politically charged, or as standing in opposition to Washington and allied capitals. This also speaks to the evolution of BRIC into the so-called BRICS+, with the plus sign symbolising not only growing membership, but also expanded ambition. What began as a forum for those seeking simple recognition has evolved into economic cooperation and increasingly ventured into the realm of geopolitics.

While both Brazil and India have at times resisted the expansion of BRICS and its overt geopoliticization, they have ultimately chosen to remain within the changing organization – or perhaps concluded that they have nowhere else to go. For Brazil, this became particularly apparent during its G20 presidency in 2024. Although it managed to highlight poverty and hunger – and even build an alliance around these issues – it achieved little in terms of furthering the reform of international institutions. In contrast, Brazil has devoted more of its international efforts in 2025 to BRICS, a platform increasingly associated with a more confrontational stance towards the Global West or North. The contrast is telling: as such, the G20, born of the Global Financial Crisis and an institution that has sought to balance a variety of interests, may be turning into a relic of High Globalization. BRICS, by comparison, reflects a more disruptive vision for global governance. If the G7 has continued to exist alongside the G20, then why not BRICS?

"In response, President Lula has insisted that BRICS is not aimed against anyone, and therefore no country should have any reason to turn down an invitation or use the organization to its own advantage."

Perhaps paradoxically, emerging multipolarity, at least at the regional level, seems to be challenging multilateral governance frameworks. Brazil and India – both prominent actors in the Global South and founding members of BRICS – offer contrasting examples. While Brazil, located in a relatively peaceful area, has largely existed in a region shaped by bipolar great power dynamics – with China steadily displacing the United States in areas such as trade and finance – India is living through multipolarity in its region, surrounded by multiple nuclear-armed rivals.[9] This is perhaps why both US and European policymakers have expressed more empathy towards India's strategy of multi-alignment. In a tougher neighbourhood, New Delhi's balancing strategy is approached with more understanding than Brazil's, even when it blends increasing military cooperation with the United States with military-industrial and energy engagement with Russia, and a generally

8 Alaranta, Toni & Mohammed Hadi (2025) "BRICS+ and the Age of Multipolarity: Why Turkey and Saudi Arabia Remain Cautious", *FIIA Briefing Paper* 407, March. https://fiia.fi/en/publication/brics-and-the-age-of-multipolarity.

9 Brands, Hal (2025) *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

sceptical approach to world-trade regimes. Meanwhile, Brazil, despite its support for multilateralism and participation in institutions like the WTO, is afforded less leeway – even though it has clearly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, despite some odd remarks from its presidents. Compounding this, Brazil's economic performance has lagged, while India is on a path to overtake Japan as the world's fourth-largest economy, possibly as early as 2025.

Additionally, Brazil's past role as a potential bridge between the West and the Global South has become less plausible in a world where the West itself is more divided and where the United States has, once again, withdrawn from the Paris Agreement. This matters because, in late 2025, Brazil will also host the UN Climate Change Conference (COP30) in Belém, an event intended to showcase its global climate leadership. Climate diplomacy has been a central part of Brazil's multilateral identity ever since the Rio Conventions of 1992, although the Lula government's sustainability commitments are in tension with its interest in expanding fossil fuel exploration – including in areas near Belém, at the mouth of the Amazon River.

Despite these contradictions, Brasília's intention is to double down on Brazil's legacy of leadership through multilateralism and to re-emphasise sustainability. The inclusion of Indonesia in BRICS during the first days of Brazil's presidency suggests that its leadership in the Global South can also yield tangible results. Brasília, indeed, seems capable of moulding the world in a direction it desires. Whether that direction aligns with Washington or other Western capitals is another matter.

Conclusions: Between alignment and autonomy

Can Brazil simultaneously maintain sufficient alignment with the United States while also pursuing an increasingly independent stance in the region and the world? Answers to this question are becoming increasingly contradictory and contentious. Yet Brazil's relationship with the United States continues to influence its aspirations for both regional and global leadership. Ultimately, Brazil still needs Washington's vote for a hypothetical permanent seat on the UNSC, and more immediately, Brasília's interests lie in avoiding alarm over its current trajectory. But this balancing act will only become more difficult as Brazil seeks further multipolarity and asserts itself as a leader in the Global South. While Brazil's geopolitically quiet neighbourhood has often been advantageous, it may also result in relative blindness to the outcomes and stakes of the tug-of-war between multipolarity and bipolarity. Three reflections remain on this outlook.

First, US-Brazil relations offer a case study on how partnerships with the US can inform broader alignment strategies, especially in the context of national foreign policy traditions breaking down along partisan lines. Brazil has been at the forefront of a recent trend of alignment based on ruling parties rather than a broader sense of national interest. As a result, US-Brazil relations now clearly fluctuate depending on who holds power in both countries. For example, if the Brazilian Right returns to power, further alignment with Trump's United States can be expected. Such alignment would also enjoy support from a significant portion of Brazil's increasingly ideological public.

A further complication lies in Brazil's judiciary, which has constrained both the power of the country's own executive and the influence of US tech companies. This has resulted in a major rallying cry in Washington and Silicon Valley. The European Union and its member states would do well to examine the Brazilian case to avoid some of the same pitfalls.

Second, China's growing influence is a reality that Brazil must navigate, especially in the realm of trade and investments. Brazil's total exports to China are already more than double those to the United States, and within a few years, the US share may shrink to just one-third. While this means that the US trading relationship is diminishing in importance, there is a good chance that Brazil will still benefit from such a shift, as global trade tensions create new openings: US tariff policy has made China buy more soy, Japan more beef, and perhaps even France will drop its opposition to the EU-Mercosur deal. Despite never having been known for the lowest tariffs, Brazil has long supported rules-based trade, and the country is generally well-placed in Trump's view of the trading world – with the US holding a slight surplus in bilateral trade. Still, this will be a difficult adjustment for Brazil's foreign policy outlook. This raises a third and vital point below.

In today's geopolitical climate, Brazil may simply end up aligning against the United States, perhaps even accidentally. This could happen, for example, if Brazil continues to pursue multipolarity in a world that – contrary to most current projections – shifts towards bipolarity. Under such circumstances, the very pursuit of multipolarity could draw Brazil closer to China, the beneficiary of today's anti-hegemonic policies. While Brazil may try to avoid unnecessary confrontation with the United States today, this is no easy task for a government that also seeks to express disagreement for the sake of what it perceives as a greater good. As Lula said during a March 2025 visit to Japan, "Trump is not the world's sheriff – he's only president of the United States," adding that protectionism must be overcome if free trade is to grow.[10]

While it is clear who the main target of such a statement is, it can also be interpreted as a message to Brussels. Brazil has waited more than a quarter of a century for a trade deal with the European Union; and for just as long, it has decried Europe's fluctuating interest in both the country and the deal. Without ratification of the EU–Mercosur agreement, Brazil's distance from not only the United States but also from other parts of the Global West will only grow. Europe would do well to heed such calls for cooperation and build common cause with Brazil and other countries of the non-aligned – or at least less-aligned – Global South whenever possible. The recent trade agreement with Chile is a good start. But without more substantial change, Brazil may ultimately shift from a tradition of constructive diplomacy to openly challenging Western-led institutions. In such a world, the reform of global governance would not be achieved through compromise but, at best, through the ascension of the Global South or, more troublingly, the rise of the Global East. For these reasons, Europeans should also endeavour to develop a vision of global order that is ameliorative and does not run counter to their own interests.

Most importantly, any European vision should be one that Brazil could share and one that helps tether the country to global institutions. Such an outlook would prepare the international system for a world in which Brazil may no longer be able to pursue multipolarity and maintain alignment with the United States at the same time. In a period of intensifying bipolar rivalry, Washington is likely to resume demanding clear alignment from its friends and allies – even if, at present, it is sending mixed signals about its own alliances and other commitments. As such, Brasília – and the viability of its double-edged foreign policy – is something that all global observers should watch. Luckily, Brazil has recently made this easier by assuming the presidency of several international forums. Being under the spotlight also makes it harder to practise any form of strategic ambiguity; instead, the country's contradictions and challenges are now in plain sight. ⬢

10 Lula quoted in "Brazil Looks Like a Winner in the Global Trade War" (2025) *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 April. https://www.wsj.com/world/americas/brazil-us-china-trade-war-tariffs-ccfb9a6b.

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FIIA
FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Arkadiankatu 23 b
POB 425 / 00101 Helsinki
Telephone +358 (0)9 432 7799
www.fiia.fi