

## **SINO-BRAZILIAN COOPERATION IN ANALYSIS: BILATERALISM, MULTILATERALISM AND MINILATERALISM**

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### **Abstract**

The current international system is undergoing several structural changes boosted by the so-called Global South, in an attempt to change the norms and structuring organisations built up after World War II under US hegemony. Emerging states, who have a great deal of influence in the international system, often question the westernised nature of global governance and its main institutions, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In this context it seems pertinent to study the cases of Brazil and China, who look for changes in the traditional North-South relations that have long failed to reflect the power dynamics resulting from their emergence. To this end, we will pay special attention not only to their bilateral and multilateral initiatives, but also to the potential of minilateralism as a complementary approach in the process, despite often neglected by the literature. Based on this gap, we argue that the interplay between bilateralism, multilateralism and minilateralism is crucial in Sino-Brazilian endeavours to reform obsolete structures for the sake of their own interests and those of the Global South. This being said, the research



question that will guide our study is the following: Which role play bilateralism, multilateralism and minilateralism within Sino-Brazilian relations? Focusing on the specific bilateral and mini cooperation dynamics together with the multilateral forums in which China and Brazil are integrated - namely the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, the BRICS, BASIC, the G20, among others - one can expect the interplay between bilateralism, multilateralism and minilateralism to assume an increasing and complementary role in Sino-Brazilian relations.

### Keywords

Bilateralism, Brazil, China, Global South, Minilateralism, Multilateralism.

### Resumo

O atual sistema internacional passa por diversas mudanças estruturais impulsionadas pelo chamado Sul Global, na tentativa de alterar as normas e as organizações estruturantes construídas após a Segunda Guerra Mundial sob a hegemonia dos EUA. Os Estados emergentes, que têm uma grande influência no sistema internacional, questionam frequentemente a natureza ocidentalizada da governação global e das suas principais instituições, como as Nações Unidas, o Fundo Monetário Internacional e o Banco Mundial. Neste contexto, parece pertinente estudar os casos do Brasil e da China, que procuram mudanças nas relações tradicionais Norte-Sul que há muito não conseguem reflectir a dinâmica de poder resultante da sua emergência. Para tal, prestaremos especial atenção não só às suas iniciativas bilaterais e multilaterais, mas também ao potencial do minilateralismo como abordagem complementar no processo, apesar de muitas vezes negligenciado pela literatura. Com base nesta lacuna, argumentamos que a interação entre bilateralismo, multilateralismo e minilateralismo é crucial nos esforços sino-brasileiros para reformar estruturas obsoletas em prol dos seus próprios interesses e dos do Sul Global. Dito isto, a pergunta de pesquisa que norteará nosso estudo é a seguinte: Qual o papel do bilateralismo, do multilateralismo e do minilateralismo nas relações sino-brasileiras? Centrando-nos nas dinâmicas específicas de cooperação bilateral e de minicooperação, juntamente com os fóruns multilaterais em que a China e o Brasil estão integrados - nomeadamente o Banco Asiático de Investimento em Infraestruturas, o Novo Banco de Desenvolvimento, os BRICS, o BASIC, o G20, entre outros - pode-se esperar a interação entre bilateralismo, multilateralismo e minilateralismo para assumir um papel crescente e complementar nas relações sino-brasileiras.

### Palavras-chave

Bilateralismo, Brasil, China, Sul Global, Minilateralismo, Multilateralismo.

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### **1. Introduction**

Over the past decades, Brazil and China have built and consolidated a comprehensive cooperation on a broad range of fields, including social development, environmental protection, low-carbon economy, digital economy, scientific and technological innovation, and poverty reduction, as stressed by Zhang and Chen (2021) as well as by de Castro Neves and Cariello (2022). Besides, the literature offers insightful analyses concerning the bilateral nature of Sino-Brazilian cooperation (Hase Ueta, Alencastro & Pinheiro-Machado, 2023; van Tongerlo 2023). At the same time, Sino-Brazil cooperation was referred to by Maurício Santoro (2022, p.28) as a strategic partnership based on the “political perspective” of the Global South to push the world order towards multilateralism (Lessa, 2010). Academic literature further suggests that Sino-Brazilian cooperation is highly conditioned by multilateralism and a stronger sense of Global South identity (Vigevani & Cepaluni, 2007; Oliveira, 2010; Guilhon-Albuquerque, 2014). In this regard, China and Brazil were among the pioneers who founded G20 which affirms their commitment to South-South cooperation (Alles, 2012). Not only economics are key in their relation (Lins, 2024; Zumah, 2024) but also a shared sense that world institutions have become obsolete, thus needing to be reshaped in order to better accommodate the interests of the developing countries (Bezerra & Lin, 2023; Dams, 2024)

Yet, literature dedicated to the contribution of minilateralism as a complementary approach vis-à-vis the traditional multilateral and bilateral dimensions of Sino-Brazilian relations, as well the interplay between the three, remains a gap which the present study



will help to narrow down. Along these lines, we have adopted the following research question: *Which role play bilateralism, multilateralism and minilateralism within Sino-Brazilian relations?* The analysis spans from 1993, when the Sino-Brazilian Strategic Partnership was established - a significant milestone in both actors' bilateral and even multilateral cooperation - until the most recent developments under current President Lula da Silva at the time of writing. This time frame enables us to better grasp the geostrategic and geopolitical dynamics associated with the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, whose impacts reinforce the debate on the effectiveness of the existing western-led world structures. In fact, the Lula da Silva administration represents one of the most significant contributions to this debate, unlike other administrations such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso's or even Jair Bolsonaro. The recent appointment of former President Dilma Rousseff as head of the new Development Bank is one of the signs of Brazil coming back again to its place in multilateralism with converging interests with China's own agenda for the Global South.

All this means that the United States' area of influence is gradually being replaced by China's own initiatives in multilateralism, which under Lula's administration have been largely supported. On August 15, 2024, Brazil and China marked the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations, a milestone that highlights the evolving nature of their strategic partnership. The creation of mechanisms like the High-Level Sino-Brazilian Commission on Consultation and Cooperation (COSBAN) in 2004 underscores efforts to institutionalize bilateral cooperation, yet the outcomes of such initiatives warrant further examination. In 2023, bilateral trade reached a record \$157 billion, with Brazil achieving a \$51 billion trade surplus, reflecting China's role as a critical market for Brazilian exports. Additionally, Brazil has become a notable destination for Chinese investments, particularly in infrastructure, which aligns with domestic initiatives like the Growth Acceleration Program (China Daily, 2024).

The present study will start by outlining the most relevant milestones in Brazil-China bilateral relations. It then attempts to understand how multilateralism complements both actors' agendas when addressing Global South issues and international policy perspectives, mainly regarding global governance. The final section aims to investigate the role and manifestations of minilateralism as an in-between and complementary approach to both bilateralism and multilateralism. The conclusion summarises the main findings whilst pointing to future avenues of research.

## **2. Bilateralism in Sino-Brazilian Relations**

This section aims to evaluate the evolution of Sino-Brazilian relations in order to understand the degree of relationship between the two States and whether this is determined by cyclical or structural factors.

Brazil and China have never been as close in terms of bilateral relations as they are today. The dynamic between China and Brazil stands out among Beijing's relations with other Latin American countries primarily because Brazil is the sole Latin American



member of BRICS<sup>1</sup> (Santoro, 2022). Since Lula da Silva's return to the Planalto Palace in 2022, Brasília and Beijing have shown signs of geopolitical alignment regarding major international issues, which represents a departure from the traditional equidistance of Brazilian foreign policy in the dispute between the great powers. This approach will not be strange to Brazil's commitment to cooperation within the BRICS, seen as an attempt at a greater role in the so-called Global South, resulting in a distance from the United States of America (US) and the European Union (EU).

The turning point dates back to 2009, the year in which China overtook the US as Brazil's largest trading partner, a situation that continues to this day. The global strategic partnership established between the two countries in 2012, reinforcing the strategic partnership celebrated in 1993 (Serra, 2016), is the corollary of a rapprochement initiated since they established diplomatic relations in 1974. Therefrom Brasília would recognise mainland China as the legitimate representative of the Chinese State to the detriment of the nationalist regime taking refuge in Taipei, on the island of Formosa.

According to Brazilian scholar Adriana Abdenur (2022), Brazil's prominent role in South-South cooperation and global environmental agenda had been undermined under Bolsonaro presidency, which significantly weakened the country's multilateral practice and ties with the Global South. Yet, the Guardian's reference to the victory of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in presidential elections as "Brazil is Back" is more than relevant (The Guardian, 2023; da Silva, 2023). Lula's new revisionist agenda is set to grant the Global South a larger voice in world decision-making, reduce hunger and poverty as well as curb climate change as priorities under Brazil's G20 presidency. In doing so, Lula's Brazil is resolute to revitalise close cooperation with China to cope with pressure coming from the Global North (Berg & Baena, 2023; Vieira, 2023). In this context, Brazil endorsed Beijing's efforts to end the dollar dominance of global commerce by calling on developing nations to replace the US dollar with their own currencies in international trade (Financial Times, 2023).

The most decisive step taken by Brazil took place during the visit that Lula da Silva made to Beijing, in 2023, when he signed an agreement with Xi Jinping aiming to replace the US dollar in international trade. Brasília meets the Chinese aim of weakening the North American role in the international system, thereby distancing itself from Washington, but also from its Western partners, especially the Europeans. Although it has not formally joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Brazil has welcomed significant Chinese investment in infrastructure and increased its cooperation in strategic areas such as aerospace, involving the respective national agencies.

Traditionally very jealous of its sovereignty over the Amazon rainforest, Brasília did not shy away from establishing the China-Brazil Earth Resources program with Beijing, which includes, among other capabilities, the launch of Earth observation satellites, including the Amazon rainforest. Lula and Xi "signed 15 agreements that foster cooperation between the two countries in various areas, such as trade and industry, communication, innovation, research and technology" (Presidency of the Republic of Brazil, 2023), deepening the Sino-Brazilian strategic partnership that dates back to the 90s. Brazil

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<sup>1</sup> BRICS refers to Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.



supplies China with raw materials that it lacks and, in return, receives investment in infrastructure where Beijing has potential.

A study by the BRICS Policy Centre (2019), which analyses the number of Sino-Brazilian agreements signed over twenty years (1999-2019), reveals that it was during Dilma Russef's mandate (2011-2016) that the largest number of agreements were signed (109), more than the double of those signed during Lula's governments (2002-2010), which were 53. The two presidents assigned by the Workers' Party were much more proactive in relation to China than their predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who between 1999 and 2002 made six agreements, or his successor, Michel Temer, responsible for 15 agreements in 2017 and 2018, while Jair Bolsonaro concluded two in 2019.

At the international level, the so-called enlarged West, with the US and the EU at its head, has expressed caution in its opening to the Chinese market, for reasons of alleged national security. At stake are mainly strategic sectors, such as communications and semiconductors, where there is fear that the Chinese authorities, who control investment, may access information considered strategic for Western countries. To this fear, which follows years of relocation of Western companies to Asian countries, more favourable to production, with a cheaper, although qualified, workforce, is added the global geopolitical context marked by the conflict in Ukraine, in relation to which Beijing has maintained public neutrality, although it promotes an "unlimited strategic partnership" with Moscow (Reuters 2022). At the same time, tension in the Taiwan Strait is intensifying, with Beijing reaffirming its intention to absorb the territory of Taipei, despite the 2024 presidential elections reaffirming the power of defenders of autonomy for the island of Formosa vis-à-vis Mainland China. In this geopolitical context, the rapprochement between Brasília and Beijing continues to be seen in Western chancelleries as a distancing of Brazil from liberal democracies, which could affect the approval of agreements such as the EU-Mercosur or mortgage Brazil's ambition for a greater role in the United Nations system, including accession to a permanent member position on the Security Council.

This feeling is shared by Thiago de Aragão (2023, p.8), who professionally deals with foreign investment funds, who expresses a fear: "Without choosing sides, Brazil would continue to enjoy everything that the two superpowers and their allies could offer. By choosing a side, Brazil must hope that tensions do not worsen, as then the price of alliances can be placed on the table".

If there is a hallmark that Itamaraty (reference for the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations) has cultivated since the democratisation of the regime, it is Brazil's strategic autonomy in navigating relations with the great powers. It began with non-alignment, during the Cold War period, which had as a corollary the creation of the Zone of Peace and Cooperation in South Atlantic (ZOPACAS)<sup>2</sup>, under the sponsorship of the United Nations, and continued with the deepening of South-Atlantic relations, especially during

<sup>2</sup> Established in 1986 by resolution 41/11 of the United Nations General Assembly, the ZOPACAS includes 24 members states: Angola, Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Namibia, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Togo and Uruguay.





the mandates of Lula da Silva (Fonseca, 2011), the embryo of what is today called the Global South.

President Lula sought to place Brazil in the leadership of the countries of the South, bringing his country closer to the most influential African countries and then extending this cooperation to great powers considered allies in this purpose, such as India, China and the Russian Federation, within the scope of the BRICS. Former President Dilma Rousseff was elected, in 2023, president of the New BRICS Development Bank, based in Shanghai, which is intended to finance infrastructure projects in the five countries, but also in Bangladesh, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Uruguay, admitted as members of the bank in 2021. The South African summit also approved the expansion of the BRICS to new countries - Argentina<sup>3</sup>, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - a fact that, on the one hand, could expand China's influence in other markets and, on the other hand, could reduce Brazil's influence (Bingyun, 2024).

Although the relationship between China and Brazil has intensified in the last two decades due to the BRICS, the participation in their bilateral relations is intense. In 2022, Chinese companies invested in thirty-two new investment projects across strategic sectors such as energy, information technology, and agriculture, the highest number annually recorded in history, distributed among all regions of the country. Chinese investments in Brazil are not limited only to large projects, but also include bilateral agreements and joint initiatives that strengthen cooperation from bilateral relations, especially so that in 2021 Brazil reached the mark of the largest recipient of Chinese investments (CEBC, 2023).

In addition to direct investments, bilateral cooperation between Brazil and China is facilitated by a series of agreements and protocols established between the two countries. On January 19, 2024, an agreement was signed between the Brazilian and Chinese governments on long-stay and multiple-entry visas, further facilitating trade and business relations between the two countries. Other agreements cover areas such as defence cooperation, outer space science and technology, and strengthening ministerial relations, as table 1 shows.

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<sup>3</sup> The new president of Argentina, Javier Milei, announced on December 10, 2023 that Argentina was renouncing membership of the BRICS.



**Table 1. Brazil-China Cooperation Agreements**

| Agreement Title  | Area of Cooperation         | Date Signed | Status          |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| <b>Earth-Resources Satellite (CBERS) Project - CBERS-6</b> | Space and Technology        | 14/04/2023  | In Progress     |
| <b>Memorandum of Understanding on Trade and Investment</b> | Economic and Trade          | 12/11/2004  | Superseded      |
| <b>Cultural and Educational Cooperation Agreement</b>      | Cultural and Educational    | 01/11/1985  | In Force        |
| <b>Defense Cooperation Agreement</b>                       | Defense and Military        | 12/04/2011  | Special Status  |
| <b>Infrastructure Construction Cooperation Agreement</b>   | Infrastructure and Energy   | 05/06/2006  | In Force        |
| <b>Energy and Mining Cooperation Protocol</b>              | Energy and Mining           | 19/02/2009  | In Force        |
| <b>Judicial Assistance Treaty</b>                          | Judicial and Administrative | 19/05/2009  | In Force        |
| <b>Multiple Entry Visa Agreement</b>                       | Visas and Immigration       | 19/01/2024  | In Promulgation |

Source: The authors

Although the relations between the ministries of foreign affairs are primarily those that demarcate bilateral cooperation, initiatives associated with investments in states of the federation, municipalities or linked to the various ministries take place systematically and in parallel with macro-agreements also take place in the form of paradiplomacy (Setzer & Anderton, 2019), an essential component of minilateralism (see section 4) in our perspective.

In this sense, the Sino-Brazilian High-Level Commission for Consultation and Cooperation – COSBAN, created in 2004 to promote biannual regions between China and Brazil to deepen bilateral relations, is one of the drivers of the outstanding numbers of this bilaterality. Although delayed, the VI COSBAN Meeting states a Strategic Planning between 2022 and 2031 and an Executive Planning until 2026, so that the first document registers the World Trade Organization<sup>4</sup> as the primary forum for multilateralism of trade relations between the parties, in the promotion of cooperation, including bilateral regulatory cooperation. The forum includes scientific exchange and renewable energies as an essential agenda, dividing the commitment between axes of economic, scientific, energy and mineral cooperation, and digitalisation, with the formulation of specific working groups. In addition, the Executive Plan reinforces the commitment to institutions within the framework of the UN and the 2030 Agenda, but also to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the G20, in addition to the BRICS, which reveals the non-opposition to the Western international financial system.

Also, within this agenda, a group of agreements touches on the defence system, including space cooperation, technologies, and communications. In this framework, the cooperation system highlights the peaceful application of space technology, through the Complementary Protocol on the Joint Development of CBERS-6 between the Government of the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Government of China as part of the Framework on Cooperation in Peaceful Applications of Science and Technology from Outer Space between the Government of the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Government

<sup>4</sup> It had a Brazilian director general, Roberto Azevêdo (2013-2020).





of China. Also, within the bilateral cooperation framework, the 2010 Defence Cooperation Agreement includes joint military exchanges and exercises, disseminated for peaceful purposes.

This diverse group of initiatives and agreements, whether sheltered by large umbrellas of technical cooperation and long-term investments, moves forward with fewer barriers and with a repercussion that may not be observed in proportion (Oliveira, 2010). In addition, the stakeholders representing Chinese interests are also of different natures. Institutions such as the Brazil-China Business Council (CEBC) have played a crucial role in promoting dialogue and facilitating investment and business between the two nations, whose annual conference highlighted the importance of a new bilateral agenda focused on sustainability and neo-industrialization, as appointed.

### **3. Multilateralism as a way to deepen the Global South's agenda**

After analysing Sino-Brazilian relations from a bilateral perspective, we will now try to understand how multilateralism complements both actors' agendas when addressing Global South issues and international policy perspectives, mainly regarding global governance.

In the last decades, China became a global actor, while Brazil maintained its journey as a regional power. Both countries have turned to a vibrant diplomacy to increase their international role and notoriety based on dynamic bilateral relations and the building of innovative multilateral ties. Inclusively, China created several international forums based on a new multilateral perspective that gathered China with different regions of the world (e.g. FOCAC, Forum China Middle East, China-CELAC, Macao Forum), or that inaugurated a new way to deal with issues like defence and security (The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). Through these diplomatic forms, China could develop a global discourse for foreign policy and ensure the recognition of new ways of dealing with multilateralism (Costa, 2023). Besides engaging in global discourse, China used bilateral and multilateral relations to export some elements that successfully developed the economy and society (e.g., the special economic zones) (Costa & Li, 2022).

Brazil also explored multilateralism through diverse regional and global organisations, participating actively in creating Mercosur. Brazil's direct contribution to building new international organisations or multilateral forums is also relevant, mainly through its association with regional blocks or other emergent economies, like in the case of the BRICS or the G20. Some authors refer to 2003-2014 as a shifting moment for Brazilian foreign policy when the country engaged with an unprecedented international agenda (Chin & Diaz, 2016). Besides evolving in international politics, Brazil also diversified bilateral and multilateral relations by introducing new countries and geographies as their primary partners. During this period, Brazilian authorities tried to balance the principles of the Washington Consensus and a public policy to foster industrialization and innovation. Brazil also became more ambitious regarding security policies, trying to implement a strategy for regional security and a permanent presence in the global south. Somehow, the Brazilian new approach to foreign policy resulted in a commitment to



innovative international governance, paying more attention to the needs and claims of peripheral countries, namely the ones in the Global South.

China and Brazil experimented with the momentum to increase and deepen their relationship but also to engage mutually in a broader process of building alternatives to an international order that did not allow newcomers to lead or deeply participate in the decision processes. The non-conformist way of looking at international order and foreign policy overlaps with the growth of both economies and a common interest in matching each country's development processes in a way they could be complimentary. The next step was to reinforce multilateralism through new patterns and to engage in the creation of new multilateral organisations (Stephen & Parížek, 2019).

Authors such as Petrone (2021) agree that multilateralism has become convenient for emerging powers to propose new perspectives on global issues and their governance. BRICS is one of the most successful international organisations, reflecting a Global South approach and the demand for a different global order, better reflecting the needs for the International Order identified by these countries. The role of countries such as Brazil and China in the shift of the international balance is evident. However, this new context resulted in the establishment of new organisations, some of them reflecting multilateralism with a tendency to address solutions through multilateralism and bilateralism, paying more attention to their national interests. This situation results in a convergence when these international organisations have to address global issues and propose a nationalist approach regarding specific development questions (Stephen & Parížek, 2019).

The lack of success of global organisations such as the World Trade Organisation also contributed to the peripheral states regarding the decision to experiment with specific alignments through minilateralism diplomacy. In the particular case of Brazil and China, the flexible way they use multilateral approaches, in complementarity with other diplomatic methods such as bilateral relations to minilateral relations BRICS is a relevant example of a new way to deal with multilateralism, allowing the use of diverse formats inside the organisation in a multilateralism a "la carte", encompassing bilteralization and multilateralization within the member states, but fostering an alignment when participating in other multilateral organisations such as WTO (Vazquez, 2021). This open way of engaging member states is very attractive for dynamic regional powers that can claim deeper participation in global governance and the international order. One of the main issues at BRICS is the accommodation of diversity, following a coexistence strategy while contributing to a non-west perspective of global governance (van Noort, 2018).

As for the G20, it was unclear how the pandemic and the Ukrainian war would impact the organisation in which Brazil and China are also active members. However, the commitment to some drivers of global governance such as climate change, taxation or cooperation for development allowed the organisation to maintain its role, not without a perception of a precedent of western-driven nature that these events contributed to eroding (Larionova, 2023).

Combining the cases of BRICS and G20, it is noticeable that both countries used multilateralism to address global issues and to establish a leading position with the



countries of the Global South. Some authors even refer to the combination of strategic policies in the BRICS and the G20, promoting reform in economic governance (Larionova & Shelepov, 2022). Other authors also argue that the BRICS region was criticised several times due to its lack of institutionalisation. Nevertheless, the BRICS maintained the needed institutional coherence to survive the challenges of proposing an alternative to the dominant multilateralism (Abdenur, 2014).

Brazil and China share other geopolitical spaces, with variable geometry, such as the case of the G77. The origin of the Group of 77 (number of founding States) dates back to 1964 and has its origins in a joint position of those States, taken during a United Nations conference on trade and development. Another multilateral platform in which Brazil and China are included is BASIC. The latter is the acronym for Brazil, South Africa, India and China, industrialised countries that in 2009 defined a joint strategy within the scope of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change, cooperation that they have maintained in this area, with the most recent taking place in 2023, at the New York climate summit (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2023).

#### **4. Minilateralism as a complementary approach in Sino-Brazilian cooperation**

This section aims to investigate the role and manifestations of minilateralism as an in-between and complementary approach to both bilateralism and multilateralism. More specifically, it claims that a multistakeholder arena has been evolving from various forms of diplomatic engagement, from bottom-up to top-down institutions.

Sino-Brazilian cooperation extends beyond multilateral platforms like BRICS or G20<sup>5</sup> to encompass minilateralism. This is evident in the establishment of the High-Level Sino-Brazilian Commission and the creation of the "private arm" of the Sino-Brazilian relationship, the Brazil-China Business Council in 2004 (Lessa, 2010).

Minilateralism as a diplomatic tool has coexisted with other forms of global governance since the end of World War II, for example, when considering initiatives such as the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), the precursor of the European Community. Minilateralism represents an alternative approach to international cooperation, characterised by the formation of narrower and more targeted partnerships between a limited number of countries that share common interests and concerns on specific agendas. Unlike multilateralism, which involves a greater number of states in comprehensive agreements and institutions, minilateral agreements seek to bring together varied stakeholders in discussing limited issues, and on some occasions, in defined periods. These initiatives often arise in response to the perception that existing multilateral structures are ineffective or incapable of adequately dealing with urgent global challenges, a relevant characteristic presented about three decades ago in the literature (Braga, 1989; Naim, 2009; Becard, 2011).

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<sup>5</sup> The G20 brings together the most developed economies that have met since 1999, with the aim of regulating the financial system and the global economy.



Minilateralism offers advantages in terms of agility, flexibility, and focus, allowing participants to act more quickly and decisively on specific issues, often bypassing the complexity and time-consuming associated with multilateral processes (Wuthnow, 2019). The complementarity between multilateral agreements qualified by traditional diplomacy and minilateral agreements qualified by alternative multi stakeholder diplomatic axes characterises and encompasses a large part of the systems and subsystems in use. This phenomenon incorporates actions marked, for example, by paradiplomacy, whether interministerial, inter-municipal or multisectoral (Ribeiro, 2009), once treated as convergent paradiplomacy (Zeraoui, 2016).

Some axes of cooperation have emerged from systems guided by themes and qualified as minilateral, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade of 1947 (GATT), which began as expanded bilateral negotiations between the major trading powers (Tirkey, 2021). To some extent, the criticism of minilateral agreements involves the question of the efficiency and legitimacy of these agreements for the macro-processes in which they are involved, but also the presence of minilateralism to soften the circuit of influences carried by the instruments. In addition, some risk seems to be associated with what have been called "power imbalances" derived from the accentuation of minilateral relationships (Mladenov, 2023).

There is also a growth proportional to the complexity between the minilateral agreements and the expansion of the system of international interdependencies. The difficulties associated with the governance of multilateral organisations have reduced the belief in global cooperation on crucial issues. Part of the scepticism in the classical multilateral environment points out that minilateralism may be the new type of efficient multilateralism (Duygun, 2022). Although it is relevant to note that there has been progress in multilateral structures in recent decades, the progressive fragmentation of these structures, the reorientation of agendas, the more specific thematic attribution and the strengthening of civil society are components that reveal this incidence (Anuar & Hussain, 2021; McGee, 2011; Tirkey, 2021).

Through trilateral/bilateral agreements and/or minilateral partnerships, challenges such as climate change, technology, energy, or food security are addressed, highlighting the greatest possible effectiveness of minilateralism in bringing together relevant stakeholders, unlocking original barriers between diplomacies, and achieving shared goals in a more targeted and pragmatic manner (Eckersley, 2012; Falkner, 2015). In this context, minilateralism is associated with the concept of club governance, since the conduct of an important part of global governance is translated by third parties into forums of possible low visibility (Duygun, 2022).

Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the environment in which minilateralism and all associated decentralisation movements thrived highlighted the weaknesses of the main multilateral forums, so that relationships and partnerships of a different nature were created following the paralysis of many of these forums (Tirkey, 2021). In this context, minilateral agreements and subsystems swiftly emerge, benefiting not only China but also facilitating its planned expansion across various sectors. Minilateralism encompasses diplomatic initiatives involving multiple layers and stakeholders,



underpinned by a robust commitment to investment. In this dynamic context, minilateral agreements and subsystems rapidly come to the forefront, not only advancing China's interests but also facilitating its strategic expansion across diverse sectors. Minilateralism epitomises diplomatic endeavours that engage multiple layers of governance and stakeholders, bolstered by a steadfast commitment to investment. Notably, this approach has been emblematic of China's strategy in the Global South, where it positions itself as a partner adept at navigating the demands and intricacies unique to these regions (Kobayashi & Sanchez, 2017).

Conversely, microlateralism pertains to smaller-scale partnerships, as implied by its nomenclature, and is not within the scope of this study. A clear distinction arises: bilateral or trilateral actions qualify as minilateralism when they (1) diverge from conventional diplomatic approaches, (2) engage multiple stakeholders in their implementation, (3) operate outside the framework of complex multilateral environments, and (4) span various layers of representation within national or international spheres (such as local, federative, or other).

Whether concerning international agreements related to technological development or climate change, Chinese participation in most economies, especially in developing economies, has been significantly higher in recent years (Duygun, 2022). In the global diplomatic landscape, China finds an advantage both in the elaboration of traditional diplomatic, and thematic agreements or in the expansion of its commercial and cultural stakeholders.

The emergence of middle and emerging powers and rapid technological advances make it clear that minilateralism is a viable path for many countries (Anuar & Hussain 2021). China's presence and influence in Brazil have intensified over the years, reflected through a variety of investments and cooperation agreements in various sectors. In agribusiness, for example, China's share as an importer went from less than 3 percent to more than 35 percent between 2000 and 2020. The ties between the two countries extend beyond the economic realm, also encompassing areas such as technology, diplomacy, and defence (Medeiros, Feodrippe & Benvenuto, 2018; Medeiros & Benvenuto, 2020).

Following the shift in Brazil's foreign policy focus towards South-South cooperation in the early 2000s, the expansion of Brazil-China collaboration consistently incorporated a broad strategic element. This revitalization of the strategic partnership with China ushered in a new era of relations (Marcondes & Barbosa, 2018). During Lula's initial term, two significant institutional developments underscored this renewed defence cooperation: the establishment of the Joint Commission for Exchange and Cooperation (referred to as JCEC) and the ratification of the Framework Agreement on Defence Cooperation. Sino-Brazilian strategic cooperation also extends to the satellite sector, notably through the China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite (CBERS) project. As a space-related scientific and technological initiative that began under a cooperation agreement established in 1988, it currently involves a group of different service providers from Brazil (China Daily, 2024) and whose cooperation was reaffirmed in June 2024 under a Joint Declaration for the CBERS 5. In this regard, China's participation in the "Amazon Protection system" monitoring initiative is noteworthy as the latter enables the sharing of





Chinese satellite imagery of the Amazon forest to safeguard Brazil's maritime exclusive economic zone (Marcondes & Barbosa, 2018; de Stange, 2023). One should note that while Brazilian satellite institutions involved in cooperation are civilian, Chinese ones are directly linked to the People's Liberation Army.

To ensure that minilateral instruments effectively complement the work of multilateral instruments, for example on climate issues, minilateral agreements play a crucial role in facilitating cooperation in the research and implementation of renewable energy technologies. Working to uphold the interests of developing nations in the international climate change agenda, China and Brazil have pursued climate diplomacy, advocating for equitable compensation for the past emissions generated by developed countries during their developmental phases (Hallding *et al.*, 2011; Qi, 2011; Conrad, 2012; Groen, 2020).

These partnerships are structured by subnational and non-governmental actors, expanding the capacity to generate innovative solutions to contemporary challenges, whilst China has a programme on its energy security (Foguel, Paiva & Medeiros, 2014). Ultimately, the operation of minilateral agreements is guided by a perspective that includes a variety of actors, from developing countries to vulnerable economies, broadening political dialogue in confidence-building and for international cooperation and global governance.

In the context of the High-Level Sino-Brazilian Commission (COSBAN), significant achievements include the successful facilitation of bilateral trade growth. For instance, in June 2024, Brazil exported \$9.74 billion to China and imported \$5.84 billion, resulting in a positive trade balance of \$3.9 billion. Over the past year, Brazilian exports to China increased by \$435 million (4.67%), driven primarily by higher exports of Crude Petroleum, which rose by \$623 million (64.1%), and Corn, which saw a substantial increase of \$275 million. Concurrently, imports from China grew by \$1.29 billion (28.3%), largely due to increased imports of Refined Petroleum and Video and Card Games (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2024). As of 2024, the COSBAN has been representing the China-Brazilian bilateral relations, whilst paving the road for deepening South-South Relations (Maia, 2024).

The Brazil-China Business Council has played a pivotal role in this expansion by facilitating over \$15 billion in bilateral investments. For instance, the Council's initiatives have significantly enhanced Brazil's trade dynamics, evidenced by a substantial year-over-year growth in key export sectors. The increase in exports of products such as Crude Petroleum and Corn highlights the effectiveness of the Council in boosting Brazil's trade performance and economic engagement with China. Regarding its participation, although it is focused on Brazil's bilateral relations with China, the Council reports the important participation of bilateralism both regarding the states of the federation and sectors of interest, as well as in the strengthening of other relations such as in Latin America, which can be evidenced through events and news from the Council's own system (CEBC, 2024).

The relationship between Brazil and China continues to expand, driven by cooperation in several areas, although the participants of the Brazil-China Meeting still consider the investments to be lower than expected. The establishment of strategic partnerships and





the deepening of economic development and trade ties are key elements of this bilateral relationship and this invisible minilateralism. As a consumer of Brazilian agribusiness, China has also concentrated its investments in the sector given the significant increase in demand for food. In 2022, Chinese investments in Brazilian agribusiness reached almost US\$99 million, benefiting agricultural exploration projects in the Midwest of Brazil. In addition, the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation of Portuguese-speaking Countries (Macao) has promoted multilateral cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, strengthening economic and trade ties, where a relevant part is the cooperation with Brazil. It is notable that Brazil's participation in the Global South and Portuguese-Language international systems is both boosted and a driver of minilateral relationships that are dissipated by cooperative sublayers and offer space for multi-stakeholder relationships with greater flexibility, increasing bilateral synergies.

While triangulation is a key aspect of Brazil's foreign policy strategy in promoting South-South Cooperation and development, within the context of bilateral agreements, the formation of minilateral arrangements often arises from shared commitments to broad regimes, such as climate change, technological development, and energy security. On the other side, while minilateralism offers notable benefits in terms of agility and focus, it also poses several challenges. The efficiency of minilateral agreements can sometimes lead to questions about their legitimacy and broader acceptance, as they often exclude less influential actors or are part of semi-formal agreements. Additionally, the proliferation of minilateral agreements contribute to the fragmentation of global governance structures, potentially undermining the effectiveness of multilateral institutions designed to address global challenges comprehensively, posing a demand for bridging the different cooperative layers.

## 6. Conclusion

Drawing on an existing gap in the literature that has failed to consider other alternative approaches to the traditional bilateral and multilateral elements in Sino-Brazilian cooperation, this article has attempted to answer the previously stated research question: *Which role play bilateralism, multilateralism and minilateralism within Sino-Brazilian relations?* In doing so, we have arrived at some important conclusions.

As a first major finding, we conclude that the Sino-Brazilian bilateral relationship is marked by interests that can be considered cyclical, in the case of economic cooperation, but also structural, in the case of opposition to the Western model led by the US. Furthermore, bilateralism has been the privileged approach to advance the Sino-Brazilian Strategic Partnership. The latter is often recognised as a model of South-South cooperation and reflects a shared sense that world institutions have become obsolete, thus needing to be reshaped in order to better accommodate the interests of the developing countries. The 'strategic' essence of Sino-Brazilian ties has been connected with a broad range of fields encompassing trade, political dialogue, technological cooperation (such as building satellites), science and climate change (the case of the Amazon), but also more macro goals such as reforming the international system. This links to our second finding, which is precisely the complementary boost that Sino-



Brazilian endeavours in multilateralism provide to their parallel bilateral approach. Multilateralism seems to be both actors' preferred foreign policy tool for mutual support in the BRICS, G20, BASIC, New Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, based on non-intervention, solidarity, and mutual respect. Moreover, multilateralism is the instrument that both favour to build alternatives both for the obsolete Bretton Woods' institutions and US-Eurocentric world order. In this regard, President Lula's view that countries have the right to go into debt in order to develop, without the pressure from the International Monetary Fund, together with his questioning of the dominance of the dollar as the world's dominant currency, and his attempt to encourage Chinese strategic projects in Brazil (including 5G), clearly contrast with Bolsonaro's Washington first policies. With Lula's return to Brazilian presidency, the country is therefore back to the multilateral agenda that it has shared with China in the defence of the Global South.

As a third last finding, we conclude that minilateralism provides an alternative approach in the longstanding Sino-Brazilian foreign policy that has been simultaneously driven by the traditional bilateral and multilateral elements. Nonetheless, minilateralism has proved advantageous in terms of agility, flexibility, and focus, enabling Brazil and China to reach faster decisions, often bypassing the complexity and time-consuming associated with multilateral processes. Besides, Sino-Brazilian engagement in minilateralism arises in response to the perception that Western-led multilateral structures are too broad, ineffective or incapable of adequately dealing with urgent global challenges. The session's scope was chosen to focus on the detection of minilateral efforts as specifically bridging evidence, without deepening into specific case studies or empirical measurements of impact. Given the relatively recent and evolving nature of Sino-Brazilian minilateralism due to the multiplying efforts from different stakeholders, this approach allows for a more flexible and comprehensive discussion of its potential, which can be tested in future studies.

Considering the new stage inaugurated by President Lula in the Sino-Brazilian Strategic Partnership and its impacts for the Global South, future avenues of research would certainly benefit from paying closer attention to the South Atlantic as a case of bilateral, multilateral and minilateral governance. In fact, the rekindling of the conflict in the Middle East and its extension to other actors, namely the Houthi of Yemen, affecting navigation in the Red Sea between the ocean Indian and Mediterranean Sea, via the Suez Canal, led to alternative maritime routes, through the South Atlantic, via the Cape (South Africa), in the transport of goods between Asia-Pacific countries and Europe or the east coast of the US. Hence future studies should complement the works of Palmeira (2023) and Ferreira-Pereira & Duarte (2023) on the importance of Brazil's role in strengthening ZOPACAS and other bilateral and multilateral agreements, particularly with Portuguese-speaking African countries, such as Angola, which has intervened in the Gulf of Guinea Commission, a region in whose security the EU has also been involved, given its strategic interest for international maritime security. As a global actor, China also seeks to exert its influence in the South Atlantic, with Brazil emerging as a potential ally in this purpose.



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