

## **BRAZIL-CHINA RELATIONS SINCE 2003: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES**

**ANDRÉ LUIZ REIS DA SILVA**

[reisdasilva@hotmail.com](mailto:reisdasilva@hotmail.com)

Associated professor at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil). Ph.D. in Political Science and CNPq researcher. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2593-1189>.

**JULI ARUSIEWICZ BERTA**

[juli.bera@ufrgs.br](mailto:juli.bera@ufrgs.br)

International Relations student at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) and researcher assistant which a FAPERGS scholarship. <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2013-7449>.

**MAIARA DE ALMEIDA CARDOZO NUNES**

[maiaranunes663@gmail.com](mailto:maiaranunes663@gmail.com)

International Relations student at Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) and researcher assistant which a CNPq scholarship. <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2279-3930>.

### **Abstract**

This article aims to analyze the relations between Brazil and China since 2003 to identify major lines of continuity and changes. The specific objectives are to map the main lines of Brazilian Foreign Policy, the perspective on the importance of China in bilateral relations and the main differences and challenges presented. The central argument is that changes in Brazilian Foreign Policy, especially with how Brazil perceives its position in the world and its relationship with major powers, have conditioned relations with China since 2003, causing fluctuations in the political relationship despite their growing economic interaction. The methodology is based on bibliographic analysis and the examination of Brazilian public diplomatic documents.

### **Keywords**

Brazil-China Relations, Brazilian Foreign Policy, Lula, Dilma, Bolsonaro.

### **Resumo**

Este artigo tem como objetivo geral analisar as relações Brasil-China desde 2003, identificando as grandes linhas de continuidade e de mudança. Como objetivos específicos mapear as grandes linhas da política externa brasileira, a visão sobre a importância da China nas relações bilaterais e as principais oscilações e desafios apresentados. A metodologia de análise está assentada em análise bibliográfica e de documentos públicos diplomáticos brasileiros. O argumento central é de que as alterações na política externa brasileira, em especial como o Brasil percebe sua posição no mundo e na relação com as grandes potências, condicionaram as relações com a China desde 2003, provocando oscilações no relacionamento político, a despeito de sua crescente interação econômica.

### **Palavras-chave**

Relações Brasil-China, Política Externa Brasileira, Lula, Dilma, Bolsonaro.



**How to cite this article**

Silva, André Luiz Reis da & Nunes, Maiara de Almeida Cardozo (2024). Brazil-China Relations Since 2003: Convergences And Divergences. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL 15 N.º 2, TD1 – Thematic Dossier – “Brazil - China Relations: The Rise Of Modern International Order”. December 2024, pp. 354-367. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0324.17>.

**Article received on 1 June 2024 and accepted for publication on 30 September 2024.**





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### **Introduction**

The international system is facing a complex and transformative power transition, becoming more multipolar, in which the United States, as the hegemonic leader, considers China its main rival. China's rise, observed in recent decades, characterized by the shift in its growth model and rapid economic and technological development, has challenged the U.S. position in the global order, increasing tension between the two countries (Ross, 2020). However, the economies of China and the U.S are strongly linked and interdependent (Li & Bernal-Meza, 2021). According to Ross (2020) the power transition stimulates competition between Beijing and Washington but doesn't stop them from cooperating. However, this requires pragmatic leadership. Nonetheless, China has been expanding its economic and diplomatic ties, becoming one of the main economic partners for many countries.

China emerges as an alternative to the current world order, challenging the division of States into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral categories proposed by Wallerstein (2004), as well as the maintenance of the global status quo (Li, 2020). As a rising power, the Asian country seeks to promote multipolarity and reform international agreements to include the interests of developing countries. It is evident, therefore, that China's rise and the relative decline of the United States represent a shift in the global balance of power (Can & Chan, 2020).

In the early 21st century, Brazil emerged as a significant player on the international system, recognized as important by other powers. Brazil's place in the world is in constant redefinition. Whether designated as an emerging power, a middle power, or a regional power, the country's size does not allow it to play a minor role. It is within this context of systemic transformations that one of Brazil's central challenges lies: navigate these global changes while aiming for autonomy and internal development (Silva, 2023). To achieve this, Brazil has pursued strategic partnerships, South-South cooperation,



regional integration, and a multilateral approach (Silva, 2023). In this context, relations with China have been fundamental for Brazil's development.

In 1974, Brazil and China established political-diplomatic relations due to the convergence of their interests and agendas. In this context, the subsequent years were marked by the establishment of a "Strategic Partnership" between the two countries in 1993 and the creation of the China-Brazil High-Level Coordination and Cooperation Commission (COSBAN) in 2004. These relations had deepened to such an extent that in 2009 the Asian country became Brazil's main trading partner and the primary contributor to the surplus in Brazil's trade balance (Brasil, 2024). Meanwhile, the international scenario was characterized by China's economic rise and the weakening of the United States as a global power. Concurrently, a multipolar system is increasingly emerging, with the persistence of old and the rise of new powers, both in the Global North and the Global South.

This article has the main objective to analyze the relations between Brazil and China since 2003, identifying the continuity and changes up to the present day. The specific objectives are to map the main lines of Brazilian Foreign Policy, the view on the importance of China in bilateral relations and the main fluctuations and challenges presented. The methodology is based on bibliographic analysis and the examination of Brazilian diplomatic documents. The theoretical basis is in the interpretation that foreign policy is a public policy, influenced by internal and external factors, and conditioned by the country's capacities and constraints within the international system, as well as its internal power bloc, political leadership, and worldview (Silva, 2004; Silva, 2023). The central hypothesis is that changes in Brazilian Foreign Policy, particularly in how Brazil perceives its global position and its relationships with major powers, affect the speed and intensity of relations with China, despite the growing economic interaction.

Since the first Lula administration, which began in 2003, Brazil has increased its proximity to China both diplomatically and economically. Brazil and China have maintained a deep connection since the beginning of their relations, celebrating 50 years in 2024 (MRE, 2024). Therefore, it is important to understand how Brazil-China relations developed from 2003 to 2010, the changes from 2011 to 2022, and the perspectives of Brazilian governments on China, including the current view, cooperation, and the limitations posed by internal and international policies.

### **The expansion of Brazil-China Relations since the turn of the millennium**

The first Lula's government operated on a new base of Brazilian Foreign Policy, aiming to overcome the limitations of the 1990s and adapting Brazil to the transition in the international system. This approach focused on deepening regional integration in South America, reviving Brazil's multilateral tradition with a critical approach on international asymmetries and seeking strategic partnerships with similar countries worldwide (Cervo and Bueno, 2011; Silva, 2015). Additionally, coalition groups with variable geometry, such as IBSA, the G20 in the WTO, and BRICS, were formed. These new coalitions expanded the power of the participating countries, not only through an increased veto



capacity (collective obstruction) against dominant-country initiatives and proposing proactive solutions to global challenges (Silva, 2015).

During Lula's first two governments (2003-2010), relations with China were primarily guided by the principles of cooperation and mutual interests across various sectors including science, technology, agriculture, education, culture, trade, industry, infrastructure, development and multilateral affairs. During this period, Brazil tried to align itself with China aiming for mutual development through a "Strategic Partnership" (Silva & Frutuoso, 2011). Simultaneously, China was opening up to foreign investment and expanding its economic presence with a bilateral and multilateral commercial diplomacy in a quest to translate economic power into political gains (Dittmer, 2010).

With the end of the first two Lula governments, Brazil entered a new phase both domestically and in its foreign policy. During Dilma Rousseff's presidency (2011-2016), Brazil maintained a foreign policy similar to Lula's but faced internal crises, economic deterioration and a political support loss aggravated by the 2008 global financial crisis. Brazil's position in the international system remained largely unchanged. However, domestically, the country experienced economic decline, inflation, and recession. The government of Dilma Rousseff was marked by protests and a loss of support from business and political sectors, culminating in her impeachment in 2016 (Silva, 2021).

From 2010 to 2014, Brazil and China strengthened their relations as China expanded its global influence. Brazil's foreign policy focused on South-South cooperation, universalism, and enhancing its regional leadership. Consequently, both governments approved the Joint Action Plan (2010-2014), which aimed to promote equal cooperation, bilateral discussions on mutual interests to deepen relations with a focus on coordination, strategic vision, and exchange between the countries (MRE, 2010a; MRE, 2010b). This joint plan underscored the shared interests of both parties in forming a strategic partnership for the development of each country and their relations domestically and internationally (Leite, 2013). The strategic partnership has been upgraded to "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2012 and a Global Strategic Dialogue between Ministers of Foreign Affairs along Ten-Year Cooperation Plan was established (2012-2021).

With Dilma's impeachment, Vice President Michel Temer assumed the presidency of Brazil from 2016 to 2019. During Temer's government, Brazil-China relations were not as close as in the two previous administrations (De Sousa, Abrão & Porto, 2023). The focus was primarily on internal crises, particularly economic challenges. The relationship with China continued based on economic interests, especially in agribusiness, as the Temer government has interests in economic benefits from the bilateral relationship with China (Moreira, 2020).

In this context of internal crisis and reorientation of Brazilian Foreign Policy, Jair Bolsonaro assumed the presidency from 2019 to 2022, proposing a shift that included distancing Brazil from China, now seen as a threat to Brazil and the West. However, as we will see next, this orientation was moderated by various factors. In 2023, Lula returned to the presidency, aiming to reclaim Brazil's lost ground in international relations. Under the slogan "Brazil is back," Lula's government adopted a foreign policy focused on defending multilateralism and multipolarity, reestablishing South-South



cooperation, and enhancing regional articulation in South America. In this context, it also meant revitalizing political-diplomatic cooperation within the BRICS group and expanding partnership with China (Silva, 2023).

Over the past 20 years, Brazil and the world have undergone various changes, especially in their relations with China, which have also adapted to the interests and objectives of the different Brazilian governments. From 2000 to 2010, the most recurrent themes in bilateral cooperation between China and Brazil were multipolarity, infrastructure, trade, science and technology, global governance, and cooperation in business, trade, and investments (MRE, 2004). With the transition to Dilma Rousseff's presidency, national interests shifted towards a series of internal conflicts spreading across the country (Silva, 2021). Additionally, cooperation with China continued to focus on multipolarity, international governance, science and technology, energy, mining, investments, infrastructure, and cultural exchanges between the countries and their national subunits (MRE, 2014).

Under Michel Temer's government, internal issues, especially economic ones, were predominant (Moreira, 2020). The relationship with China continued to be based on cooperation, international governance, multipolarity, investments, and free trade (MRE, 2017). During Bolsonaro's administration, relations with China were turbulent (Santoro, 2020), but they remained focused on trade, investments, agriculture, energy, science, technology, and commercial flows (MRE, 2019). Under Lula's new government, Brazil seeks to increase its role in the international system and strengthen ties with developing countries. Therefore, there is a renewed effort to enhance relations with China, aiming for cooperation in social development, technology, multilateralism, trade, environment, transportation, science, and technology (MRE, 2023).

### **Brazil-China Relations in the Bolsonaro Government (2019-2022)**

In 2019, with Bolsonaro as president and Ernesto Araújo as Minister of Foreign Affairs, there was a shift in Brazilian Foreign Policy, with significant internal and international implications. From a bilateral perspective, the new foreign policy matrix prioritized closer ties with developed countries and distanced itself from developing countries, selecting ideologically aligned partnerships with the conservative right. There was also a rapprochement with Trump's United States (2017-2021), seen as a "defender of Western values." South-South cooperation was viewed with suspicion, while Brazil distanced itself from the Middle East and Africa and adopted a strong anti-China rhetoric (Silva, 2023).

This transformation in Brazilian Foreign Policy was also heavily influenced by the then Minister Ernesto Araújo's view that the West was experiencing a loss of its own identity and that only Donald Trump was capable of saving the West. Thus, the role of Brazil's foreign policy agenda, as a Western country, would be to fight against "globalism" and support the recovery of the West through alliances with Western nations, especially the United States, and the reaffirmation of the Judeo-Christian identity (Araújo, 2017). This perception led to the country becoming increasingly isolated on the international stage (Magalhães, 2022).



Regarding the relationship with China, even before his victory in the 2018 election, Bolsonaro faced strong criticism from the Chinese government for visiting Taiwan and for stating that China "does not buy in Brazil, it buys Brazil" (Marra et. al., 2021). The first years of his administration were characterized by a hostile stance (Bones, Pennaforte & Auler, 2023). When Eduardo Bolsonaro, then a Federal Deputy, made a statement on the social network X, formerly Twitter, blaming China for the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, he received a note from the Chinese Embassy in Brasília repudiating his words. Additionally, statements by the then Minister of Education, Abraham Weintraub, caused friction in Sino-Brazilian relations by suggesting that the pandemic was a strategy for Chinese global domination. These declarations caused strains in diplomatic relations between China and Brazil, hindering Brazil's access to vaccine supplies and mechanical ventilators, for example (Magalhães, 2022).

Another issue that was a point of contention during Bolsonaro's government concerned the debate over Brazil's adoption of 5G technology standards. The Clean Network initiative, from Donald Trump's administration, received support from the Bolsonaro government at the end of 2020, ruling out the possibility of a partnership between Brazil and the Chinese company Huawei. At the time, Eduardo Bolsonaro stated that the alliance with the US would enable "secure 5G without Chinese espionage" (Schreiber, 2020). However, in 2021, after Trump left the White House, Brazil ceased to impose restrictions on the Chinese company regarding 5G.

Despite these recurring tensions in relations between Beijing and Brasília, a movement contrary to President Bolsonaro's position was also present during his government. This movement, primarily linked to economic sectors such as industry and agribusiness, recognized the need to maintain relations with China through a more pragmatic approach. Pressure from these sectors enabled a more moderate treatment of China by the government. For example, in June 2019, Vice President Hamilton Mourão visited the Asian country, resulting in the reactivation of COSBAN. In November of the same year, Chinese President Xi Jinping was received by Bolsonaro during the BRICS summit, with the statement that "China is increasingly becoming a part of Brazil's future" (Mazui, Barbiéri & Rodrigues; 2019).

Concerning economic and trade relations, starting with the so-called "Trade War" between China and the United States in 2018, Sino-Brazilian trade relations grew considerably, increasing the degree of interdependence between the two countries. These relations were consolidated through the sale of Brazilian primary products to the Chinese market and the purchase of manufactured goods from China by Brazil. Furthermore, the Asian country is the main destination for Brazilian exports and the primary source of its imports, also being the main contributor to Brazil's trade surplus (Bones, Pennaforte & Auler, 2023).

According to the Secretariat of Foreign Trade (2024), Brazil's exports to China were US\$67.8 billion in 2020 and US\$89.4 billion in 2022. As for Brazil's trade surplus with China, it amounted to US\$27.3 billion in 2019 and US\$40.2 billion in 2021 (Brazil, 2024). In contrast, Brazil had a trade deficit with the United States of US\$5.1 billion in 2019 and US\$8.3 billion in 2021 (AMCHAM, 2022). Despite the political and diplomatic strain in





Sino-Brazilian relations during Bolsonaro's administration, trade between China and Brazil reached record levels.

These indices demonstrate that Chinese pragmatism has prevailed, meaning Beijing has chosen to prioritize its economic and trade interests. It also shows China's importance as a consumer market, as well as Brazil's consequent dependence on the Asian country, which is greater than Brazil's dependence on the United States (Kalout & Martins da Costa, 2022). However, despite this strong interdependence between the two countries, China is seeking to diversify its food suppliers, such as soybeans, by purchasing more from countries like Uruguay, Argentina, and Canada, which could reduce long-term dependency on Brazil (Marra; et al., 2021).

In 2020, the U.S. was the second-largest source of foreign direct investment in Brazil, following the Netherlands (Brasil, 2021). In relation to Chinese investments in Brazil, their volume increased significantly from 2010 onwards, especially in the energy and manufacturing sectors. If Chinese direct investments in Brazil continue at the same pace in the coming years, this dependency relationship could be reversed (Kalout & Martins da Costa, 2022).

### **Brasil-China relations in the Third Lula's Government (2023-)**

The proposal for the new Lula's government is to operate in a similar manner of international relations from his two previous governments. However, contextual changes and the learning of the last decade require adaptations to Brazilian Foreign Policy. The first year of government allows us to evaluate the priorities in Brazilian Foreign Policy which are the recovery of international credibility, the environmental agenda, the strengthening of BRICS, regional cooperation, South-South cooperation and the reinforcement of multilateralism (Silva, 2023).

Over the last two decades, Brazil and the international system passed through a lot of changes. With that it is necessary to comprehend how the internal and external influences affected Brazil and vice versa. For Putnam (2010), a country's internal and external politics are interconnected. The author highlights the existence of a two-level game: at the domestic level, actors pursue their interests and seek ways to adapt favorable policies to those interests. At an international level, national governments maximize their capabilities to satisfy pressures from domestic groups while minimizing the consequences of external actions (Putnam, 2010).

Having this in mind, the two-level game, Lula's new government aims to restore Brazil's international credibility in addition to maintaining a certain balance in the country's foreign policy. Lula returned to government with a Foreign Policy deeply affected by various diplomatic crises caused by his predecessor and the country's internal challenges that Brazil is facing. In addition to that, the international landscape is turbulent, marked by the Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Palestine conflicts, the post-Covid-19 pandemic and environmental crises. Thus, under Lula's new government, Brazil is seeking to build a multipolar order, with less inequality and the ability to support the Global South, a different view from Bolsonaro's administration, which prioritized Christian values and an anti-globalist agenda (Júnior, 2023).





Lula's new government is in a difficult position, but re-establishing ties with China can be an opportunity for Brazil's government to build a more inclusive international order with active participation of emerging countries. There is also a return of concepts from Lula's first terms, such as prioritizing development and poverty reduction, strengthening South-South relations, focusing on coalitions like the BRICS, promoting economic growth with income distribution, multilateralism, and the reform of organizations like the UN (De Almeida, 2023). Therefore, relations with China are seen as an opportunity to achieve these objectives. Thus, with China's support, Lula's government seeks to revive bilateral opportunities for internal and global development goals, projecting Brazilian interests and its international protagonism (Lopes, Almeida & De Souza, 2023).

With these new opportunities, Lula performed a State visit to China in 2023. During the meeting, issues regarding bilateral cooperations, regional and international topics of common interest were discussed. Both countries signed a series of agreements of understanding in areas such as poverty and hunger reduction, food security, science, technology, innovation, space cooperation, communication, investments, finances, digital economy, trade facilitation and media. In terms of economy, both parties discussed the diversification and facilitation of trade and the increase in agricultural exchange and the resilience of production chains. The parties committed to create conditions for facilitating more competitive and high value products to be included in bilateral trade. Both countries agreed to encourage their companies to invest in each other, especially in areas such as infrastructure, energy, logistics, agriculture, industry and high technology (MRE, 2023). In the matter of political factors, Sino-Brazilian relations are marked by cooperation, mutual benefit, understanding and mutual interest in the progress of developing countries.

Therefore, it is evident that China is utilizing a Chinese model for cooperation with the Global South which is characterized by eight guiding principles formulated by Zhou Enlai in 1964. These principles are: (i) Equality and mutual benefit; (ii) Unconditionality; (iii) Relief of the burden on beneficiary countries; (iv) Self-sufficiency and independent economic development; (v) Promotion of efficient projects with less investment; (vi) Better quality equipment; (vii) Transfer of techniques to beneficiary countries; (viii) Chinese experts without special privileges. Thus, China leads the development of the Global South through trade, investment, and external assistance (Vadell, Lo Brutto, Leite & Crivelli, 2020).

However, in Sino-Brazilian relations, it is notable that trade exchanges are characterized by Brazil's role as a producer and exporter of natural resources, while China, in turn, acts as an exporter of manufactured goods and capital (Cunha, Lélis, Silva & De Lima, 2012). By investing in infrastructure and financing, China has built strong connections worldwide, allowing the Asian country to produce higher value-added products and creating a great interdependence and collaboration with developing countries. The debate about the nature of economic relations with China in Brazil occurs due to the growth of exportations in sectors with lower added value such as agriculture. On the other hand, the advantages of these trade relations are associated with the possibilities of investment and increased diversification of negotiations with major development centers (Rodrigues, 2022).



Given the current international scenario, the re-establishment ties with China after the Bolsonaro government and the new Lula government could be an opportunity to promote a new Brazilian international insertion, as well as to bring incentives for an internal reindustrialization plan, thus rescuing principles of Foreign Policy Brazilian as those of balance and diversification (Lopes, Almeida & De Souza, 2023). The new Lula government aims to rearticulate political and diplomatic relations, improve bilateral relations, especially economic ones, and rebuild strategic cooperation on global issues. In this way, the relationship with China aims to boost industrialization, technological advancement, and greater international insertion for Brazil during Lula's new government.

### Final Considerations

During Lula's first two governments, relations with China were based on cooperation and mutual interests in areas such as science, agriculture, culture, education, trade, industry, infrastructure, development, and multilateralism. The Dilma government maintained these characteristics. As a result, Lula's first government and Dilma's government brought Brazil closer to China and the Global South. This rapprochement was strategic as it aimed to satisfy the development interests, partnerships, strengthening of multipolarity, and South-South cooperation of both Brazil and China.

During Michel Temer's government, the pursuit of cooperation in Sino-Brazilian relations was maintained, primarily in the economic and trade spheres. On the other hand, Jair Bolsonaro's government was marked by a break with Brazilian diplomatic tradition, specifically the history of pragmatism, the pursuit of multilateralism, and autonomy. The automatic alignment with the USA and the anti-China rhetoric weakened the strategic partnership between Brazil and China, as well as isolated Brazil internationally.

In summary, during the analyzed period, economic interaction between Brazil and China grew, while political relations fluctuated. The administrations of Lula, Dilma, Temer, and Bolsonaro maintained economic interaction with China. Their differences lie in the strategic and political closeness from 2003 to 2016, followed by political distancing during Bolsonaro's government, and a new re-establishment starting in 2023. The new Lula government seeks to restore Brazil's international projection, as well as rebuild global strategic cooperation. In this context, China is a potential ally for Brazilian development and a partner for Brazil in various international agendas.

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