



UNIVERSIDADE DO ESTADO DO RIO DE JANEIRO
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS
LABORATÓRIO DE ESTUDOS SOBRE REGIONALISMO E POLÍTICA EXTERNA

POLICY PAPER

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BRICS, Latin America and Brazil

May 2024

"they are countries that are not structurally integrated into wider areas, nor do they occupy one of the central poles, they see in globalisation the possibility of realising their status as a power and not being forced to opt for a scheme of peripheral association with one of the three major areas... they are the natural candidates to have a prominent place in the new world order". Similarities such as "continental dimensions", "recognised regional importance", "population", "gross domestic product", "natural resources", "democratic regime".¹

¹ This definition is written in the book: *O repensar do Itamaraty e da Política Externa Brasileira*, organised by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1993.

BRICS and the institutions in place

The conditions of the 2000s were favorable for the creation of a bloc such as BRICS. After September 11, the international scenario has become fragmented, making it prone to crises as well as opportunities. The US war in the Middle East and South Asia provoked questions and doubts. The five countries that came to make up the BRIC(S) experienced economic growth. The BRIC was established in 2006 as an informal mechanism for interaction and with a focus on the international financial system and conducted meetings at ministerial level. Initially it aimed to change the framework of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, where BRIC countries were under-represented. BRIC began by acting as a foreign policy network between countries that were linked by common interests in global politics.

However, it was the 2008 financial crisis that provided the final impetus for the bloc's institutionalization. The summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, transformed a financial acronym into a political-strategic, multi-thematic entity with a global scope, although the main focus remained the reform of global financial institutions. In 2011, South Africa joined the bloc, transforming it into BRICS.

Although the group did not make progress towards strong institutionalization, annual summits were held, and agreements were signed in various fields. There was an initiative to articulate positions in the United Nations, which materialized in the convergence of votes in the UN Security Council. However, it was in the financial field that BRICS made the most progress. The creation of the New BRICS Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement in 2014 opened up new perspectives for the bloc. The group's guidelines oppose the order of multilateral financial institutions and condemn various practices that violate what is understood as national sovereignty.

The countries that comprise it up, however, have different behavioral profiles in international politics. The main difference lies in the military field, where three of the member countries are nuclear powers. There is no consensus among the members on how to support international law, nor is there an ideal conception of a common world based on shared values. China, with its greater capacity for global projection, seeks to draw the BRICS into its fold, while strengthening bilateral relations within the bloc. In international politics, Brazil and India prioritize the formation of coalitions of countries to advance their preferences. These differences have led the bloc to veto interventionist practices among its members.

On specific issues, there is no common position within the bloc on topics such as UN Security Council reform. There are also divergent interests in the trade sphere. While Brazil and South Africa suggest liberalizing the agricultural sector, India and China are more protectionist in this regard.

The BRICS summit in 2015, held amidst the civil war in Syria, expressed an intention to act on international security issues. In 2016 the bloc indicated support for

reforms at the International Monetary Fund, although it did not consider them sufficient. An important intra-bloc cooperation agenda has developed over time.

On the other hand, BRICS seeks to build a strategic narrative to attract external members. Noort highlights the geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives that seek to give the group an image of coherence by advocating for the eventual democratization of the international order.² Although BRICS acts as a soft balancing force against the West, individual states do not possess excessive soft power, understood as the ability to influence through military or economic resources. The group aims to adjust the pieces of international chess; it does not question the existence of these institutions, but rather the place they occupy within them, positioning itself mainly a revisionist arrangement.

Internal asymmetry has progressively increased in China's favor, and the Chinese government has acted to include new partners in the bloc. The BRICS' actions have often been confused with China's, creating ambiguities. Recently, China has pressured partners, such as Brazil, who were against the incorporation of new members to enlarge the group. For the Brazilian government, this would reduce the country's maneuverability within the bloc. However, in 2023, BRICS approved the incorporation of six new members, becoming BRICS+. In January 2024, the group added Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. Argentina, under Javier Milei's government, refused to join despite being approved as a member. The incorporation of these five countries presents a challenge, as they are very different from each other, making it more difficult to find common denominators.

Brazil and the BRICS

Brazil's rapprochement with the countries that later became part of the BRICS began under the presidency of Itamar Franco, with Celso Amorim serving as foreign minister. In November 1993, Brazil and China began to enhance their relations with a view to organize a "strategic partnership" in the infrastructure and technology sectors. A protocol was signed for co-operation in space research. During the same period, efforts were made to strengthen relations with India, focusing on greater coordination between the two countries' activities in multilateral forums dealing with international political and trade issues. The aim was to act jointly in multilateral forums in order to maximize their influence. An agreement in the field of science and technology was also signed between the two countries in 1993. However, in practice, however, these efforts have not translated into a significant increase of the relations.

² Carolijn Noort, The Construction of Power in the Strategic Narratives of the BRICS. *Global Society* v33, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2019.1581733>

As far as South Africa is concerned, a new stage in relations between the two countries began in 1994 with the end of apartheid. In 1996, the Pretoria Agreement was signed, and President Fernando Henrique Cardoso visited South Africa, initiating trade negotiations between MERCOSUR and the South African Customs Union (SACU). However, tangible results only materialized in the long term. Regarding relations with Russia, in 1994 minister Celso Amorim traveled to the country to begin talks on forming a consultative body between the two nations, leading to the signing of a partnership treaty that sought to establish their relationship as a "strategic partnership". Nevertheless, trade remained at low levels. In 1997, the "Joint Declaration on the Creation of a High-Level Commission" was signed.

This rapprochement began to produce concrete results with the inauguration of Lula da Silva as president in 2003. Lula's presidency gave new weight to South-South cooperation within Brazilian foreign policy, aiming to consolidate a multilateralism favorable to these countries. Among other initiatives, he worked to re-emphasize the North/South divide and put it back at the center of the international agenda.

Regarding Brazil's relations with India and South Africa, a permanent alliance was established through the IBSA Dialogue Forum (India, Brazil and South Africa). Its objectives were to strengthen the capacity of the three countries in international negotiations, fight for reform of the United Nations, and promote technical cooperation in various areas. In partnership with India, Brazilian diplomacy worked on setting up the Commercial G20, in 2003.

Numerous economic and technological cooperation agreements have been signed with China, and a Cooperation and Concertation Commission has been established. In 2009, China became Brazil's main trading partner. Conversely, as far as Russia is concerned, there has been no significant progress in relations. Despite the speeches and the diplomatic mechanism for consultation, Russia's international position does not fit into the category of middle powers, due to its geographical location, its relationship with its immediate neighborhood, and its military power. It was during Lula's government that BRIC(S) was created, although it only solidified during Dilma Rousseff's administration.

During Dilma Rousseff's administration, the incorporation of South Africa into the then BRIC limited the areas of action of the IBSA Forum, causing an overlap of agendas between the two networks and eventual conflicts of loyalty. As a result, the BRICS network was strengthened at the expense of IBSA. Brazilian diplomacy prioritized actions aligned with BRICS, while IBSA initiatives were restricted to the IBSA Fund and interaction between the respective civil societies. Brazil's performance in BRICS became the main and renewed focus.

Under the presidencies of Michel Temer and later Jair Bolsonaro, initial statements against BRICS were made, but both maintained close relations within the

bloc once in office. They focused more on the economic side. For Michel Temer, the priority was economic cooperation, and the issue of reforming international institutions lost traction in his speeches. Despite initial mistrust from the other BRICS members, Temer's ascension did not change Brazil's policy towards the bloc. Brazilian policymakers pragmatically identified BRICS as the main arena for Brazil to get inputs to help overcome the economic crisis.

Jair Bolsonaro followed Temer's approach and prioritized the economic agenda. Although he had an ambiguous relationship with China, it remained Brazil's main trading partner. Bolsonaro partially revived criticism of international institutions, focusing on the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. The demand for Brazil to play a more prominent role in the UN Security Council was also revived. Maintaining close relations with the BRICS was supported by domestic actors, especially those linked to agribusiness.

The return of Lula da Silva to the presidency in 2023, after four years of Bolsonaro's administration, led to a restructuring of foreign policy. This marked the return of an autonomist current of thought to the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, linked to former minister Celso Amorim, which was oriented towards the revision of the international order and Brazilian activism. Lula implemented initiatives aimed at reintegrating Brazil into the mainstream of international politics, undoing the changes made to the ministry by Bolsonaro.

Among other initiatives, Brazilian diplomacy renewed its commitment to the two-state solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine; guided changes in Brazilian delegation's votes in the United Nations Human Rights Council, resumed environmental negotiations based on Brazil's credentials in biodiversity and water resources, and brought Brazil closer to China, overcoming ambiguities created by Bolsonaro's term. These changes in Brazilian foreign policy have brought the country closer to its BRICS partners, not only in the economic field, but also in international politics.

In the recent expansion of the bloc, Brazil suggested incorporating Argentina, which would have given greater weight to South America, but this was not confirmed. Although the Colombian government has expressed interest in joining the bloc, its instability does not raise many expectations of incorporation.

The current moment is different from 2009, with China now playing a more prominent role within the bloc, creating relative ambiguity. Nonetheless, there are significant issues on the agenda of this rapprochement. Besides leveraging Brazil's international presence, technological and investment cooperation issues are important, as is the prospect of establishing the group's own monetary standard as an alternative to the dollar for international transactions. Former president Dilma Rousseff currently chairs the New Development Bank.

The impact of the BRICS in Latin America

The impact of BRICS as a group in Latin America is very limited. Historically, there has been one notable summit between the BRICS and the South American countries, which took place in 2014 in Brazil, alongside a BRICS summit. In 2019, during Bolsonaro's term, there was a second BRICS summit held in Brazil, but it was not accompanied by a meeting with South American countries. At the time, UNASUR was no longer functioning, and the Brazilian government was avoiding interactions with the South American group.

South Africa's contacts with other Latin American partners include negotiations with MERCOSUR to sign a preferential trade agreement between the bloc and SACU. India approached countries in the region during the COVID-19 pandemic due to its vaccine production. Russia has stronger relations with countries with left-wing governments such as Nicaragua and Venezuela. Of the new BRICS members, none of the five have outstanding relations with Latin American countries.

China, however, is concentrating its presence and influence in the region, though it is primarily through bilateral approaches rather than through BRICS mechanisms. China has been establishing increasingly strong links with countries in the region, focusing mainly on economic aspects such as trade and investment, especially in infrastructure. These efforts exhibit a hard power character. China's political partnerships are selective, with an emphasis on a partnership with Brazil within the BRICS. The trade dependence of Latin American countries on China has developed rapidly and bilaterally; without an articulated regional response, despite the existence of the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum, which has held triennial ministerial meetings since 2015. The main focus of this partnership is to address the region's infrastructure and technology gap. CELAC has been formally included in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to cooperate with Latin America to bridge these gaps. Currently, some countries in the region consider China as their main trading partner or major trading partner, benefiting from annual investments. These relations resemble traditional North/South relations.

China's approach towards the region does not involve persuasion and consensus, which does not advance regionalization in South America nor foster the building of regional governance. Additionally, it does not enhance BRICS interaction with the region.

Brazil's role in South America/Latin America

The subregion of possible Brazilian influence is primarily limited to South America, although the country is an important player in Latin America as a whole. And today's South American scenario is very different and more challenging in terms of integration or cooperation compared to the first decade of the 2000s.

During Lula da Silva's first terms in office (2003-2010), the Brazilian government sought to build regional governance in South America under Brazilian leadership. Externally, the United States had lost interest in the region, and in regional terms, the decade was marked by the election of several progressive governments, whose parties were already interacting with the Workers' Party within the framework of the Sao Paulo Forum. The high price of commodities favored the balance of payments of these governments and brought stability to the region. Domestically, the Brazilian economy was experiencing a period of stability and growth. The development of cooperation and/or integration initiatives, the main one being UNASUR, was encouraged by the Brazilian government and other governments. The Brazilian Development Bank was the primary investor in the region's infrastructure in the period.

From 2011 to 2022, Brazil's interaction with neighboring countries gradually lost momentum, culminating in a period of distancing marked by Bolsonaro's government. Infrastructure projects came to a halt and cooperation and/or regional integration initiatives regressed. Progressive governments gave way to liberal and/or conservative governments and, in 2018, six countries in the region left UNASUR, including Brazil, paralyzing its activities.

The international, regional and domestic scenarios in 2023 when Lula returns to the presidency are very different, much more difficult. Internationally, multilateralism is experiencing a crisis of fragmentation and failure, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. Regionally, Latin America is highly fragmented, with a mix of conservative, extreme right-wing and progressive governments, that do not align with the traditional Latin American left. These are alternative and autonomous lefts compared to the region's traditional progressivism. Domestically, Brazil is emerging from a period of low economic growth and intense political polarization. Latin America is currently experiencing severe fragmentation, with polarization both within countries, affecting government changes, and between countries.

In this environment, Lula's government is attempting to rebuild ties with neighboring countries and revive regional cooperation and/or integration initiatives. Lula brought Brazil back into CELAC (from which Brazil had withdrawn under Bolsonaro) and UNASUR. He also took steps to rebuild the strategic partnership with Argentina. However, these attempts have not been fully successful, hindered by the significant fragmentation experienced in the region.

In the first half of 2023, Lula organized a summit of South American presidents with the aim of restructuring UNASUR or, if that was not possible, establishing an alternative cooperation mechanism. However, the meeting was unsuccessful and only resulted in the formation of groups of foreign ministers to consider possible lines of cooperation focused on technical issues. Once again, Venezuela contributed to divisions among the region's presidents. The election of Javier Milei in Argentina dashed any hopes of setting up regional governance. Currently, Lula is investing more in the Amazon countries, but there is no consensus there either. For the foreseeable future, Latin

America will remain fragmented and without the necessary consensus for joint action in international politics.

European Union-Latin America interaction

Firstly, it should be emphasized that Latin America's fragmented scenario has not contributed to an increase in interregionalism. At the EU-CELAC summit in July, the main difficulty in composing the final declaration was the differences among Latin American countries. However, bilateral or EU relations with sub-regional groups can still be explored.

The EU's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean face several challenges that hinder interaction and must be considered when structuring future policies. The first challenge is the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic. The cooperation expected by Latin Americans to help tackle the pandemic did not materialize, leading to a certain level of frustration (the BRICS countries were very active). The second challenge relates to differences in positions on important international issues, including the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and. The third challenge concerns environmental issue, which are much more pressing for the EU than for Latin Americans. Finally, there is a contradiction in European behavior towards the region: the EU is closer to liberal governments in the economic field and to progressives in the social field. While there are exceptions, the majority of progressive governments in Latin America tend towards developmentalism in the economic field.

Where the BRICS can compete with the Europeans in the region is in terms of trade and investment in infrastructure. In terms of values and customs, and consequently in cooperation and dialogue with local civil societies, the European presence is much stronger. As mentioned earlier, the BRICS as a group (and many of them individually) do not have significant soft power. In the field of trade, however, the new rules of the European Green Pact could cause problems for Latin Americans, one of which is already evident in the non-validation of the agreement signed between the EU and MERCOSUR.

Final remarks: Questions for reflection

- What are the limitations of the BRICS in achieving their desired role in shaping and sustaining international institutions?
- How can the concept of "South of the West" be understood?
- How can we interpret the ambiguity of China position within the BRICS?
- To what extent does the association of LAC countries with China or the BRICS jeopardize their interaction with the European Union, especially in terms of the Eu's main areas of influence: soft power, investment, and technology?