

# The Welcomed Rise of China: An overview of Beijing's relations with Brazil and other BRICS countries

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## Abstract

Cooperation between China and Brazil based on similar principles of international affairs evolved not only in their long-lasting bilateral relations but also through their contacts with other members of the BRICS, a group of countries formed in 2009 whose tenets include the defense of a multipolar and more just world order. The former American National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski had foreseen the dangers for the US global hegemony that could arise from the coalition of dissatisfied powers; today it has become clear that China's relations with Brazil and within BRICS play an essential role in the configuration of a Non-Western international system. The purpose of this article is to explore China's political and economic rise based on its relations with Brazil and other BRICS countries, which have effectively formed an 'anti-hegemonic association' and a platform most suitable for democratization of international affairs. The results of our research demonstrate that the rise of China has been beneficial for both Brazil and other BRICS over many years due to China's contribution to a new global configuration of power. The paper uses analytical and qualitative approaches to both economic data and political discourse related to China's interactions with Brazil and inside BRICS.

## Keywords

BRICS, Brazilian foreign policy, Chinese foreign policy, global governance, world order.

**JEL:** O10, O14, O23, O24.

In the year 2000, the advanced economies of the West generated around 57% of global production; in 2024, their share is expected to drop to 37%; meanwhile, China's contribution to global production will most probably rise from 7% in 2000 to 21% in 2024, surpassing the that of the United States (Wolf, 2019). Throughout the period, the Chinese government stood firmly "on the path of the world economic leadership" (Milani, 2018) while taking "the responsibility of playing a key role in global economic governance" (Leksyutina, 2019).

As a result, in 2017 the National Security Strategy of the United States labelled China as a challenge to "American power, influence and interests". The interpretation of China's rise as a challenge to Washington primarily originates from American realist and neorealist thinkers. In their view, a wealthy China dissatisfied with the distribution of power in the current world order will be trying to change the rules of the system in its own favor (Mearsheimer, 2007). John Mearsheimer (a Neo-Realist thinker of International Relations) states for example that "With the rise of China and the resurrection of Russia, we moved from a Unipolar world in which the United States really dominated the stage and was in a position to reshape the world into a world where the US must compete against China. (...) The structure of the international order has changed. (The Beaver, 2019)"

However, not everybody agrees with this negative view of the rise of China. Some believe that Beijing does not represent a 'critical challenge' to the liberal international order, but that the rise of non-Western powers in the system suggests that "the world is returning to a culturally and politically polycentric form" (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p.227). In this context, with the old post-war order under the leadership of the United States giving way to a more multi-faceted configuration of power, Western observers have started to write about a 'crisis of transition' (Ikenberry, 2018) represented by new coalitions of States (like BRICS) and new governance institutions, such as the New Development Bank, that had become the most evident signs of a relative American decline in the world affairs.

China, on the other hand, holds a position of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Charleaux, 2018); this discourse has not only drawn other countries towards Beijing, but also caused concerns in the United States about China becoming a role model for many regional powers. As stated by the former American National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (Brzezinski, 1997) the most dangerous scenario for the US hegemony in global affairs is the formation of a coalition of dissatisfied powers (namely: China, Russia, Brazil, India, Iran, Turkey, Indonesia and others), representing an 'anti-hegemonic' group of States united not by ideology, but by complementary grievances. Moreover, China has become a role model in the sense that it defends a 'free-trade market economy', the importance of multilateralism, the necessity of a multipolar world order and respect for cultural diversity. As Chairman Xi Jinping announced in his speeches, his country reaffirms its support for multilateralism and for the use of diplomacy to solve acute problems of international life.

This emphasis on multilateralism emanating from China's discourse is an indication of Beijing's principled stand against 'zero-sum game' politics and the 'reckless' defense

of 'national interests' undertaken by some countries. In China's view, unilateralism contradicts the UN-centered multilateral international system, thus undermining the solidarity and cooperation between States (Wang, 2021). During the fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress, Foreign Minister of China, Mr. Wang Yi (2017) commented that 'selective multilateralism' is not the right choice for tackling today's problems; China, in his words, hopes that all members of the international community will work collectively to let the 'torch of multilateralism illuminate the future of mankind'.

For China, international affairs are based on five fundamental principles: mutual respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and peaceful coexistence between states. Such principles are stated in the preamble to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. Their origins date back to the speech of former prime minister Zhou Enlai entitled 'The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' during the Bandung Conference of 1955, also known as the conference of the 'Non-Aligned Movement' during the Cold War. In view of such principles, China proposes an International Order based on the primacy of International Law and on "the purposes ... of the UN Charter" (Hong, 2015).

While Western analysts often emphasize the role of anarchy and the predominance of power competition among states within the international system, China prefers to focus on different aspects of global politics. During a conference of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying (2021) noted that "differences and competition are everywhere in this world, [...] but the key is to engage in a healthy competition on a fair and just basis, which [...] benefits everyone, rather than choosing a life-or-death struggle or zero-sum game". Within this worldview, China has invited "other civilizations to jointly explore new measures for a 'win-win' cooperation [...] defending the vision of building a community with a shared future for humanity, overcoming ideologies, respecting different social systems and seeking the path of [...] peaceful coexistence" (Júnior, 2021, p. 19; our translation)

Notably, China has also opposed the 'homogenization' of the world based on the Western values that are not 'universally applicable', emphasizing the equal 'sovereignty of all actors' in the system, both politically and culturally, and whose relations should be guided by International Law and multilateral agreements (Li, 2021). In that context, China considers the role of organizations such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank and that of arms control treaties to be the essential elements of the International Order (Da, 2020). Instead of seeking "predominance in the world affairs, China [...] advocates for a new international political and economic order, one that can be achieved through [...] democratization of international relations" (Zheng, 2005, p. 24). It follows that, although China has acquired greater importance globally owing to its economic rise, the country's "target is to constantly surpass itself and become a better China, rather than overtake the US" (Hua, 2021).

During the 2000s China started to build relations with a number of influential powers and participate in several coalitions of states, maintaining political and economic

cooperation with Brazil and other BRICS countries. Chinese-Brazilian relations became a focus of attention because both countries identify themselves as belonging to the Global South, a term loosely associated with regions such as Latin America, Africa and some parts of Asia. At the same time, Beijing's participation in BRICS is important to understand the 'anti-hegemonic' character of the group, which is cherished not only by China, but also by the other members.

## **China's rise and its consequences for the relations with Brazil**

In recent decades Brazil and China have established closer political and commercial relationships. As a result, China became Brazil's main trading partner in 2010 and the two countries' bilateral relations were soon elevated to the status of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership', a landmark for Beijing's foreign policy in Latin America. The region is especially important for China, having been visited by Xi Jinping five times since he came to power in 2013. In 2021 alone, Latin American-Chinese bilateral trade exceeded US\$445 billion (The Economist, 2023), with China being the largest trading partner of the region; meanwhile, Latin America represented the second largest overseas destination for Chinese companies' investments, hosting more than 2500 Chinese-funded enterprises (Liu, 2020).

There has been massive cooperation in the area of culture and tourism, China has established 40 Confucius Institutes and 12 Confucius Classrooms in 21 Latin American and Caribbean countries; there are five direct flights to the region; more than 120 Chinese universities have opened Spanish courses, nearly 40 have established Portuguese courses, and around 60 academic institutions have set up Latin American research centers (Liu, 2020). Establishing good relations with Brazil, the biggest country in Latin America in economic and territorial terms, became paramount to China's foreign policy in the region. According to the Chinese Ambassador in Brazil Yang Wanming (2013), both countries "are helpful partners to each other [...] from a long-term and strategic perspective".

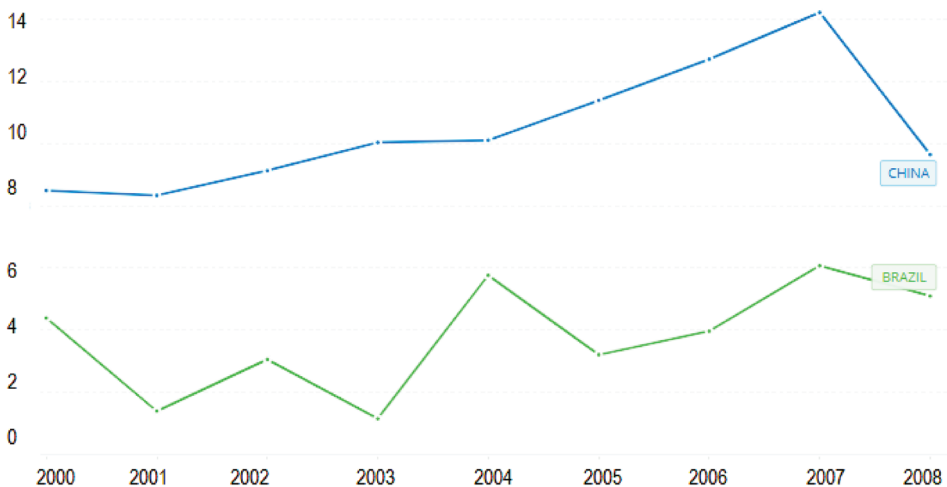
Judging by their historical experience, China and Brazil share extensive common interests in many areas of the global agenda, promoting democratization of international relations, encouraging fair development of economic globalization and, at the same time, embracing multilateralism and multipolarity. Economically, since mid-2000s Brazil has become one of the main suppliers of commodities to the Chinese market, providing some of the fundamental inputs required for Beijing's consistent economic growth. During Lula da Silva's first presidential periods (2003-2010), the importance of China for Brazil was twofold. First, it represented a diversification of Brazil's partnerships, with universalism being a key tenet for Brazilian foreign policy in that time (Milani, 2018).

Second, Lula and its universalist proposal gave special priority to contacts with countries located in Africa and Asia (such as China), motivated by a perception that these partnerships with emerging markets could amplify the possibilities for Brazilian

exports while supplying inputs and investments required for Brazil's own development (Oliveira, 2005). In this context, China also represented a strong political partner, with whom Brazil could join forces in different international organizations. In line with the global conjuncture of the times, Lula sought the formation of a South-South Cooperation between Brazil and China, for a joint defense of these countries' common interests in their contacts with the West (Oliveira, 2005).

Secondly, it decreased Brazil's dependence on its commercial and political relations with the United States and the European Union. As stated by Oliveira (2005, p.11; our translation) foreign trade plays a fundamental role "in defining Brazilian foreign policy, whether in seeking to reduce the country's vulnerability caused by its integration into the world economy, or in the policy of diversifying commercial partners". In addition, Brazil's cooperation with China was marked by 1) an increase in the volume of Brazilian exports to the Chinese market; 2) a rise in direct and indirect investments from China to the country; 3) a boost in Brazil's global influence. On the other hand, Chinese relations with Brazil gave Beijing 1) the necessary raw materials and energy resources to ensure further expansion of its economy; 2) a strong presence in Latin American markets; 3) a boost in the country's influence in the region (Milani, 2018). In retrospect "The Chinese trajectory has been marked by strong economic expansion and the need for markets, energy and raw materials that could sustain its growth in the long term. During the 2000s, the US remained the main buyer of Chinese products, but it was also an obstacle to the greater independence and strategic reorientation of China's defense and international relations agendas (Pecequilo and Forner, 2017; our translation)"

That was one of the reasons why China was interested in developing closer commercial relations with Brazil. Once their tight relations were established, the volume of bilateral trade between Brazil and China has grown significantly during the last



**Figure 1.** Chinese and Brazilian GDP Growth (2000-2008), in %. *Source:* World Bank

two decades: Brazil exports commodities, especially crude petroleum, iron ore and soybeans to the Chinese market, while China exports to Brazil mainly, but not only, manufactured products of medium and high added value. In 2019, China was the world's biggest importer of crude oil (\$204B), iron ore (\$83.1B), petroleum gas (\$47.8B), soybeans (\$32.1B) and copper ore (\$31.3B) (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n/d). In the early 2000s, as China grew economically Brazil was also growing with it.

Brazil's output of soybeans, corn, rice, chicken, and beef is at the top positions globally; China's large and rapid economic development demanded a great deal of energy resources and food supplies (Zhang, 2014). In 2019, the value of Chinese exports to the Brazilian market (US\$ 36.3 billion) was approximately twenty-eight times higher than that recorded in 2001 (approximately US \$ 1.26 billion) and the value of Brazilian exports to the Chinese market (US \$ 63.5 billion) was equivalent to approximately fifty times the value recorded in 2000 (US\$ 1.15 billion) (OEC, n/d). In 2020, according to the data from the Foreign Trade Secretariat (SECEX) of the Brazilian Ministry of Economy, China-Brazil bilateral trade exceeded USD 100 billion, with China absorbing as much as a third of Brazil's total agricultural output.

Economic ties between the two countries are not the only issue on the agenda: diplomatic circles in Brazil view China as an important player in establishing a new international distribution of power, which better suits Brazil's political interests as it should limit the hegemonic and unilateralist policies of the West thus helping to solidify multipolarity (Zhang, 2014). The rising China has been seen as showing the way for other nations around the world who "not only seek to develop their countries, but are also trying to fit themselves into the international order in a way that would allow them to be truly independent, to protect their way of life and political choices" (Ramo, 2004). Finally, China and Brazil as representatives of emerging and developing countries have similar diplomatic traditions in South-South cooperation; over the years, they have acquired vast experience in building strong and lasting partnerships with other developing countries (Zhang, 2014) around the world. Another important thing is that "rather than building a US-style power, bristling with arms and intolerant of other worldviews, China's emerging power is based on the example of their own model, the strength of their economic position and their strong defense of the Westphalian system of national sovereignty (Ramo, 2004, p. 37)"

Such experience in defending national sovereignty and promoting multipolarity in the world affairs has been gained in the course of China and Brazil's cooperation with other powers like Russia, India and South Africa within BRICS.

## **BRICS's incorporation of Chinese principles**

The original acronym BRIC was borrowed from an article by the economist Jim O' Neill in 2001, in which he advised investors to pay close attention to Brazil, Russia, India and China as promising emerging economies and reliable destinations for investments. During the first decade of the new century, all the BRIC countries were growing rapidly:



between 2000 and 2007, the average GDP growth in the BRIC economies was about 5%. China alone had an average GDP growth of almost 15% during that period, thus providing substantial support to its partners' economies. In 2009 the BRIC association (South Africa joined the group only in 2011) was established in Yekaterinburg (Russia), attesting to the tendency "toward convergence and interaction of states located thousands of kilometers away from each other" (Lagutina, 2019, p. 51) who shared "common aversion to the dominant power of the [...] the United States" (Cynthia *et al*, 2018, p. 1).

It is not surprising then that the BRICS association is often seen as a coalition of emerging states that aim to defend their interests in the world affairs by supporting multilateralism and multipolarity (Zhou, 2012). By 2010, many countries around the world started to oppose certain aspects of the American hegemony, especially Washington's military unilateralism, proposing instead the use of 'diplomacy' for solving complicated problems of international life. That's why the BRICS countries have always emphasized the central role of "the United Nations [...] in dealing with global challenges and threats" (BRICS, 2018). Rather naturally, since its inception the BRICS has been portrayed in the West as a coalition of 'revisionist states', given their common dissatisfaction "with the West's geopolitical and geo-economic dominance in the world" (Sergunin, 2019, p. 102) and attempts to complement existing structures of global governance (Tisdall, 2012). Moreover, the western media accused BRICS of being "an unwelcome challenge to the established world order as defined by the US-dominated IMF and the World Bank" (Tisdall, 2012), regarding the group as a potential threat to the West's dominant position in the international system (Stuenkel, 2017). However, only "those who consider the leadership of the United States [...] to be the decisive element of today's order will say that the emerging powers are revisionists" (Stuenkel, 2018, p.25).

On the one hand, BRICS's coordination has provided a counterbalance to Western hegemony in international affairs, while advocating for a more inclusive global governance. In this sense, BRICS uses a Soft Balancing strategy, which focuses on developing multilateral coalitions of countries to question the legitimacy of unilateral actions (Hurrell, 2009), rather than involving direct attempts to confront the hegemonic power of the West. The BRICS members maintain that emerging countries should play a more prominent role in the global decision-making. All this is in line with the position stated by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping during his speech of 2017 in Davos, when he affirmed that "countries, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are all equal members of the international community. As such, they are entitled to participate in decision-making, enjoy rights and fulfill obligations on an equal basis. Emerging markets and developing countries deserve greater representation and voice (Xi Jinping, 2017)"

An analysis of BRICS' documents makes it possible to highlight the following propositions advocated by the group in its summits: 1) the world should be multipolar and global politics should be determined by multiple centers of economic, political, and civilizational influence; 2) the architecture of financial governance (represented

by the IMF and the World Bank) should be reformed in order to empower emerging economies and 3) BRICS will work as an important force for the necessary changes in the international system. The group's discourse therefore often refers to the necessity of reforming the obsolete international financial architecture, which has not so far given its due to the recently increased importance of emerging market economies. For example, the G7 (composed by Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States) currently holds 41.2% of the voting shares at the International Monetary Fund (before 2010s Quota Reforms, this percentage was even higher, amounting to 43%), while the BRICS countries, on the other hand, have only 13.54%. China is underrepresented in terms of quotas/voting shares in the IMF when compared to its actual share of global GDP by PPP and nominal global GDP.

**Table 1.** G7 and BRICS's IMF Quotas and Voting Shares

Group	Quotas	Voting Shares (%)	Nominal GDP	GDP by PPP*	% of Global GDP	% of Global GDP in PPP*
G7	43.51	41.27	38.76 trillion USD	40.67 trillion USD	45.16	30.18
BRIC	14.2	13.54	19.83 trillion USD	43.24 trillion USD	23.12	31.97

Source: International Monetary Fund

In 2017, the Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping (2017) pointed out that, although the global economic landscape had “changed profoundly in the past few decades... the global governance system has not embraced those new changes and is therefore inadequate in terms of representation and inclusiveness”. This view is also shared by the Brazilian ex-President Dilma Rousseff (who is now heading the New Development Bank). In her speech at the 2014's UN General Assembly, Dilma drew attention to the imperative of eliminating the disparity “between the growing importance of developing countries in the global economy and their insufficient representation and participation in the decision-making processes of international financial institutions”.

In short, the BRICS group is fighting against “the hegemonic nature of the current world order and the unfair structure of the world economic architecture” (Lagutina, 2019, p.8), as stated in the group's numerous declarations made at its summits. That is why, as Wang Lei, the Director of the BRICS Cooperation Research Center of Beijing University, notes, China firmly defends the BRICS strategic partnership. At the same time, China postulates that BRICS should advance policies to sustain an open global economy, promoting fair economic development for all by working together in such areas as innovation and sustainable development. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the role of the New Development Bank (NDB), also known as the BRICS Bank, launched by BRICS in 2015, whose Headquarters are located in Shanghai (China). The institution's main goal is to finance sustainable development projects in emerging countries.



Unlike the IMF, the NDB attaches no political or social conditionality to its loans, thus upholding the principle of 'non-interference' in the internal affairs of recipient countries (Barone and Spratt, 2015). This approach is akin to the one undertaken by China itself in its bilateral cooperation with other countries. After all, Chinese policymakers affirm that every nation should have the freedom to choose independently its own development strategy based on its domestic needs and specific characteristics. As a result of the Bank's operations, more than 75 loans totaling US\$ 27 billion have been approved so far to finance projects related to renewable and clean energy, transport, infrastructure, sanitation, sustainable development, and others (New Development Bank, n/d). For example, in 2020 during the pandemic, the NDB approved US\$ 3 billion in loans to Brazil, India and South Africa to support public health and social safety sectors in order to create better programs to fight the COVID-19. China's contribution to the establishment and consolidation of the NDB can therefore be considered an essential factor in the consolidation of BRICS and in the establishment of a multipolar order.

## Conclusion

The Realist and Neorealist school of International Relations postulate that Great Powers are rarely satisfied with the distribution of power in the system and therefore have a permanent incentive to change it in their own favor. This view is quite popular in Western political and academic circles and it helps to explain why the Chinese rise in the world affairs is seen negatively in western capitals from Brussels to Washington. China's increased global importance, however, is seen differently by a number of non-Western nations and by many states in the Global South (such as Brazil), who positively regarded their relationship with Beijing.

With those countries, China defended a 'win-win' cooperation, based on respect for their sovereignty and the primacy of International Law and multilateralism. In Latin America, Brazilian-Chinese interaction took the form of strong economic ties during the 2000s, with both countries advocating for the necessity for 'multipolarity' in world affairs. Brazil has therefore consolidated its position as a reliable regional partner for Beijing, while enjoying increased exports to the Chinese markets and receiving significant direct and indirect investments originating from the Asian country.

Finally, within the BRICS, the rise of China and other non-Western States, such as Russia, India and South Africa, helped to reinforce the perception of a relative Western decline in the world affairs, while setting the stage for a multipolar order. Since mid-2000s, China has been working with Brazil, Russia and India to consolidate a political bloc that would democratize international relations. That is why China is currently open to discussions about possible BRICS enlargement, allowing the achievements of the group to benefit other developing countries of the system. China's increasing political and economic importance in the world is seen as a welcome phenomenon by many, in contrast to rather negative and stereotyped view of Beijing by Western elites who continue to hold on to their privileges.

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