Brazil's Multilateral Trajectory and the Challenges the Crisis of Multilateralism Poses to the Global South

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/05/21/brazils-multilateral-trajectory-and-the-challenges-the-crisis-of-multilateralism-poses-to-the-global-south/

RAFAEL R. IORIS, MAY 21 2025

The Liberal International Order (LIO) put in place in the aftermath of WWII is facing unprecedented challenges. Trump has attacked traditional allies while actively working to undermine the logic of the entire multilateral system. His administration sustains that the heightened interdependence of the last thirty years has gone astray, that traditional outsiders, like such as China and much of the so-called Global South, have rigged the system, and that an aggressive unilateralist approach, based on the notion that might makes right, is necessary to reset the normal international hierarchy of power. Other powerful nations may follow suit, which would likely inflame tensions across the globe, but this is not a viable option for most countries whose prospects would be increasingly dependent on the whims and actions of stronger states.

Undeniably, the multilateral structures created by the LIO did not equitably address the needs of both industrialized and developing societies. But it was at least partially within these new arenas for global representation and deliberation created after 1945 that emerging nations in the south managed to advance their needs and demands on the global stage, though often by pushing the boundaries and redefining the role and operation of these same institutions. These efforts were complex and multidimensional, and gains were unevenly shared. And it is clear by now that the enlargement of the agenda of multilateral agencies to include themes, such as development and unfair trade, came only as a response to the assertive and independent mobilization of nations of the decolonized world.

After all, it was only after the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), in September 1961, that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) decided to host its first Conference on Trade and Development, in the spring of 1964, leading to the creation of a new international agency (the UNCTAD) focused on addressing development concerns of what was then referred to as the Third World. Brazil's independent foreign policy at that time – known as *Política Externa Independente* (PEB) – allowed Latin America's largest nation to play an important role in this process, though it would never join the NAM. Alternatively, even though a US-supported, right-wing military coup, in March the same year, curtailed the fulfillment of its autonomist approach, Brazil would become a central actor within the Group 77, a coalition of developing nations created at the first UNCTAD meeting. Brazil's engagement in the G77 reflected its long-standing commitment to multilateralism and its broader foreign policy objective of reshaping the international development agenda, increasingly by promoting South-South cooperation.

Though a central focus of its foreign policy, Brazil continued pursuit of a sovereign diplomatic path has not been easy as the country consistently faced challenges in seeking to promote the interests of a rising economy given the constraints imposed by US hegemony in the Western hemisphere. Given this constrained context, Brazilian elites historically perceived the defense of the multilateral logic as a central means in their diplomatic efforts. And considering the on-going erosion of multilateralism poses major new challenges to societies in the Global South, looking at Brazil's path of increasing involvement in multilateral initiatives may be illuminating towards a better understanding of the major issues middle powers face with the on-going unraveling of multilateralism.

To begin, it is important to note that until the 1930s, Brazilian foreign policy was defined by friendly relations with both Europe and the United States, the main destinations for the country's primary exports and key sources of its political

models and cultural mores. During the Good Neighbor Policy put in place by FDR, Brazil-US relations deepened, including in terms of strategic cooperations for the Allied war effort in the early 1940s. The fundamental reframing of the US foreign policy caused by the Cold War presented new challenges for Brazil's attempted development-oriented diplomatic efforts. In the 1950s, the country experienced a historic process of fast-paced, government-led industrialization – based on the import-substitution recipe put forward by the UN-based Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) -, which though involving US sources of capital and technology, was not always well received by American leaders.

Not surprisingly, these transformations fostered new socio-economic and political demands that required institutional changes that Brazilian and US elites were unwilling to concede. The 1960s thus witnessed the collapse of the democratic order in place since the end of WWII, and the country lived under a conservative dictatorial regime aligned with Washington from the height of Latin America's Cold War until the mid-1980s. Counter-intuitively, however, in the 1970s, Brazilian diplomacy rehashed elements of the country's attempted Independent Foreign Policy while also updating its projects to the moment when southern demands and mobilization were at an unprecedented high point.

In a more promising scenario made possible by the climate of the Détente established between the two superpowers, members and non-members of the Non-Aligned Movement managed to impose their historical demand for a more inclusive world order into the center of multilateral institutions. In 1974, the UN approved the resolution for the creation of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), which could be seen both as the clearest recognition of remaining structural limits of multilateralism, as well as of its malleability to respond to the needs and hopes of nations in the south.

Navigating this unique international scenario, defined by ambitious global initiatives amidst continued Cold War constraints, Brazilian elites supported elements of the Third World agenda while sustaining good relations with the United States, particularly on the economic front. And the very existence of multilateral channels to advance the agenda of developing states proved central for Brazil's continued developmental path. Moreover, though the country had to implement painful structural economic reforms, formulated by multilateral financial agencies, such as the IMF, through the 1990s, when a center-left coalition manage to assume power in the early 2000s, Brazilian leaders could bring back to fore a more autonomist line of foreign policy.

Brazil seemed then on the verge of crossing the supposed threshold of underdevelopment, thanks both to the consolidation of its democratic institutions and an unprecedented level of socio-economic inclusion. And the country could thus assume an ambitious lofty and active diplomatic approach – as sustained by the influential diplomat Celsol Amorin who served as Foreign Minister under Lula's first two terms – which expanded the nation's involvement in regional (UNASUR, CELAC) and global (G20, BRICS) multilateral initiatives, while sustaining good relations with traditional partners, such as the US and the European Union.

China's growing economic presence in Latin America, and the high revenues that its expanding market for Brazilian commodity exports provided certainly aided in these achievements. The more autonomous, or universalistic path (as the country's diplomatic elites prefer to call it) that Brazilian leaders assumed at the time was nonetheless essential in the many achievements of the period. This conclusion is made evident by the diminishing relevance of the country in the last decade as its democratic institutions faced its most forceful challenge, since the experience of re-democratization in the mid-1980s, and the associated redirection of the country's foreign policy towards an associated, at times automatic, and ideologically driven alignment with the United States, under Bolsonaro, produced minimal gains.

Since his return to power in 2023, Lula has tried to reproduce the successes of his first term. He has faced much less amenable domestic and international scenarios though, and thus far results have been mixed. In addition to the rising hegemonic dispute between the US and China, and global conflicts that have fractured countries along belligerent sides, Trump's direct attacks on the very multilateral logic, and its associated channels for deliberation, presents unique challenges to middle-power states that learned to use the maneuvering spaces these agencies provide to advance their own needs and goals. Brazil occupies a prominent place in a list of such countries, and how it moves

forward may reveal the limits – and opportunities – that similar nations may encounter in the upcoming years.

As a leading nation in the BRICS, set to host its annual meeting in July, Brazil continues to seek to innovate in finding new avenues for promoting its national interests. Lula recently defended the idea that the CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) needs to be strengthen so that the region is not entirely place at the whims of its powerful (and increasingly erratic) northern neighbor. At the same time, since his return to power Lula has visited the United States, China and several European states, all signs of the country's persistent path of trying to balance established partnerships with new initiatives, as long as both channels provide ways to advance the country's autonomous but not confrontational approach to promoting its developmental needs and ambitions.

In the overlap between the first two years of Lula's third term and the final two years of the Biden administration, demands from the US and China for Brazil to select each side's technological platforms signaled that, once again, Brazil's universalistic foreign policy was already facing an increasingly narrow path for maneuvering between hegemonic disputes. Now, with Trump's neo-mercantilist (rehashed imperialist) approach to the region, pressure is mounting. Will Brazil be able to navigate these rising tensions and, if not, what are the prospects of even smaller and less diversified economies in the Global South?

Responses to these questions will largely depend on what Brazilian leaders may be able to articulate both domestically, in terms of defending the country's democratic institutions against continued pressures from the extreme right, as well as internationally, particularly in terms of being able to continue to sustain open and constructive dialogue with actual and potential allies around the globe. Much will also depend on how strategic partners see Brazil and what type of mutual collaboration they may be interested in establishing.

There is a clear risk – signaled by Trump himself as well as by key commentators in recent weeks – that a balance of power situation, wherein the US, Russia, and perhaps even China (the latter two, key members of the BRICS) may decide to carve out their own zones of influence around the world. Such a scenario would clearly be very negative to countries like Brazil, as well as to other key BRICS members, including historical leaders of the South, such as India and Indonesia. This outcome would represent a clear reversal from the multilateral frame of the preceding decades, which even if far from perfect, did provide an arena for middle-powers, like Brazil, to advance its own interests while, at the same, expanding (democratizing) the global agenda.

Lula has recently returned from a visit to China where both countries signed over 30 different agreements that will strengthen their relationship in multiple dimensions. Yet, it is to be expected that Chines leaders are negotiating their role in a more multipolar world with similar superpowers, in addition to deepening ties with emerging nations, like Brazil. It is therefore incumbent on Brazil's political and diplomatic leaders to make sure the upcoming BRICS meeting serves as a key space to convince the nuclear members of the group to give up on any proposition to reviving such an outdated, unequal, and ultimately unstable approach to global affairs as the one advanced by the new Trump administration.

About the author:

Rafael R. Ioris is Associate Professor of Latin American History and an Affiliated Faculty to the Latin American Center at JKSIS, University of Denver.