

BRAZIL: EUROPE'S BRIDGE TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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SUMMARY

- Europeans often misunderstand Brazil, either assuming it should be an eager supporter of all Western initiatives or believing it has already aligned with an anti-Western bloc led by China and Russia. Both assumptions are wrong.
- In reality, Brazil enjoys living in an “à la carte world”, positioning itself as a key middle power in a multipolar landscape, as evidenced by its membership of both the G20 and BRICS, alongside a dominating regional role.
- However, growing geopolitical competition between the US and China, along with an increasingly hostile Russia, is narrowing the space for Brazil’s non-alignment. Donald Trump’s re-election will only complicate the matter further.
- Brazil’s foreign policy, which historically exhibited a strong sense of continuity, is also increasingly influenced by domestic political polarisation.
- Europe has strong cards to position itself as Brazil’s much-needed partner for decades to come, especially given their shared interest in promoting global multilateral cooperation. But first it must respect Brazil’s own needs and aspirations.

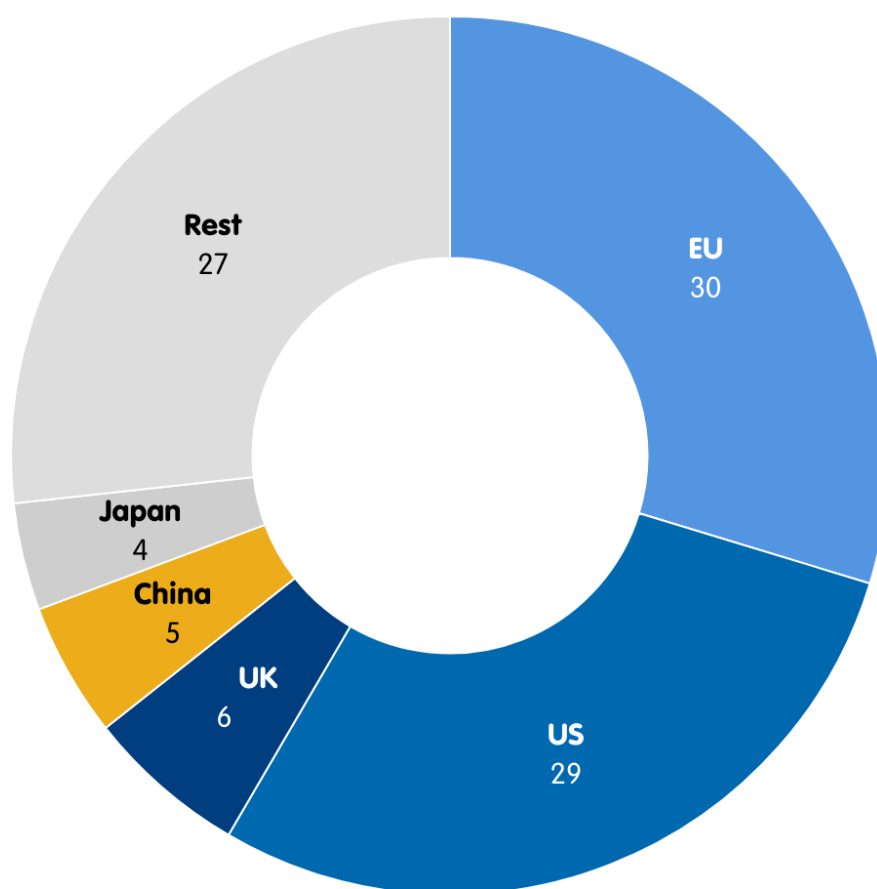
Introduction

Europeans are looking for friends. As the global order fragments and reorders amid escalating US-China tensions, the rise of assertive “middle powers,” and growing scepticism toward the international rules-based system, Europe finds itself increasingly isolated in the global south. To secure its position and avoid being drawn into a new cold war dynamic between Washington and Beijing (which will likely be exacerbated by Donald Trump’s re-election to the White House), Europe must balance its strong transatlantic alliance with the building of new partnerships with emerging powers, particularly those shaping this new reality.

European policymakers are only too aware of this. The last couple of years have seen a flurry of outreach efforts aimed at diversifying the European Union’s relationships and dependencies on an array of topics, from climate to energy and technology. As part of these efforts, Latin America and the Caribbean, a region historically underappreciated by the EU, has come into the spotlight. Brazil stands out as a prime candidate for enhanced cooperation, as the largest economy and arguably the only true middle power in the region, having both the ambition and capacity to influence the global order.

Yet the EU-Brazil relationship faces significant challenges. Despite being the country’s leading investor and second-largest trade partner, the EU has frequently been frustrated by Brazil’s foreign policy choices, particularly its presence in BRICS and its peace diplomacy on Ukraine. Rather than a partner fully aligned with its vision of global order, the EU often finds in Brazil a middle power that challenges Western-centric multilateralism, favours multipolarity, and – like many countries in the region – is well versed in strategic hedging between the United States and China to further its interests and autonomy.

Share of FDI stocks in Brazil, by origin, in 2022. In per cent



Source: Central Bank of Brazil
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Brazil, meanwhile, has expressed frustration at what it perceives as Western double standards on conflicts such as Gaza and Ukraine, or the EU's inward-looking response to the covid-19 pandemic and the supply of vaccines. Other irritants include the extraterritorial application of EU legislation, such as the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) and deforestation laws, alongside delays in achieving any major form of rapprochement, epitomised by the lengthy EU-Mercosur negotiations.

To overcome this, Europe must move beyond rhetoric and finger-pointing, overcome misperceptions, understand the deeper reasons behind Brazil's foreign policy stances, and effectively communicate its positions to Brazilian counterparts. The EU and Brazil cannot single-handedly change the global order. But by identifying areas of collaboration and reform, they can work together more efficiently and inclusively.

This paper aims to support such efforts by unpacking Brazil's vision of global order. It explores the enduring and evolving elements of its foreign policy, the mechanisms Brazil uses to project its influence, and some of the inherent challenges and contradictions in its approach. Finally, this paper outlines ways in which the EU and Brazil might be able to identify common interests on which to work together, arguing that instead of gaining a perfectly aligned partnership, Europe could benefit by cultivating a strategic ally. If Europe wants to dance with Brazil, it will need to learn how to samba.

This paper is written by three Europeans. Through interviews with leading experts, diplomats, and policymakers from Brazil and other Latin American countries, we sought to better understand and unpack the country's approach to global order. The paper will reflect, for better or for worse, a European perspective on Brazil's goals and views. Still, we believe this can be a valuable contribution to the debate. After all, our goal is to challenge and inspire European thought on Brazil's global role – which we believe often rests on simplifications and misconceptions. But we'd also like to show Brazilians how they may be perceived from a distance. By doing so, we hope to provoke both sides into a frank exchange about perceptions and misperceptions. Overcoming these is essential for a constructive partnership.

Continuity and change in Brazil's global approach

Latin America's political landscape often exhibits a pendulum, swinging between leftist and rightist ideologies. While this phenomenon is common in democratic systems, in this region it often leads to pronounced shifts in foreign policy.

This is partly due to intense political polarisation, which fosters ruptures between administrations, as well as the outsized impact of presidential preferences on international affairs, particularly in countries with weaker bureaucracies. Consequently, foreign policy in the region tends to be erratic, undermining long-term diplomatic initiatives and hindering progress toward deeper regional integration.

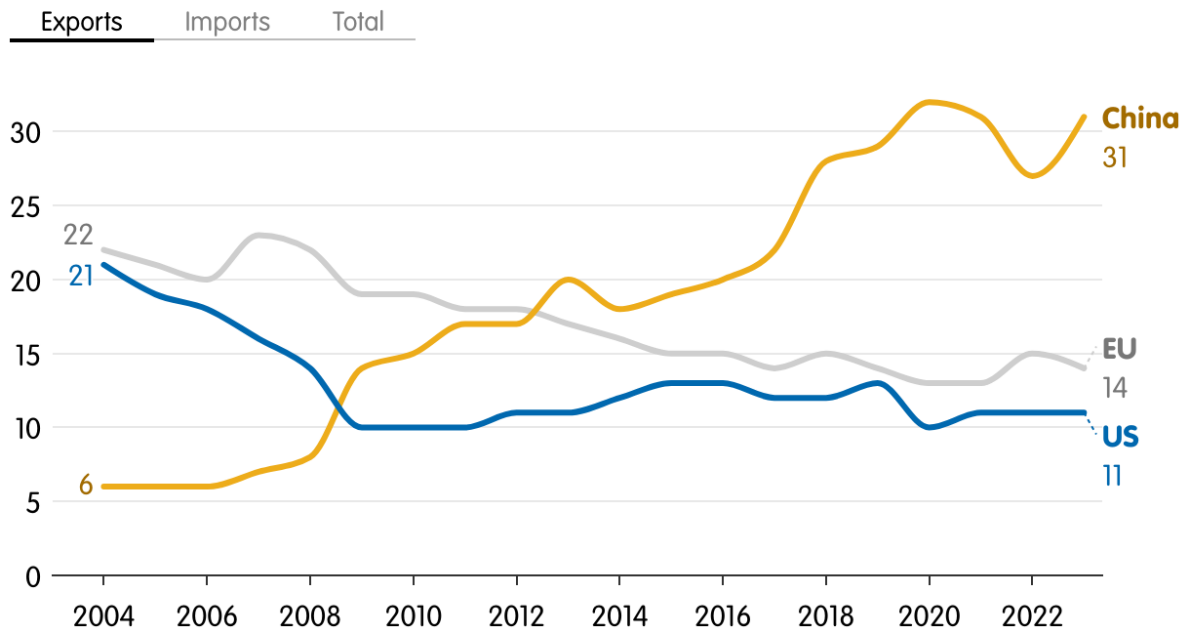
Nevertheless, a handful of countries in the region tend to show notable continuity in foreign

affairs – including Brazil. This may come as a surprise given Brazil’s recent history, with the sharp contrast between former president Jair Bolsonaro’s nationalist, pro-Trump stance and incumbent Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s pivot back towards multilateralism, along with a more critical view of Western positions and a greater sympathy for China.

It is true that Bolsonaro’s ultra-conservative, nativist, “anti-globalist” position represented a profound change in foreign policy for Brazil. Suspicious of an international system seen to be dominated by the “globalist ideological arc”, Bolsonaro preferred an isolationist approach, prioritising national interests over international cooperation (for example on climate), with only a limited number of partnerships with other “conservatives” like Trump. This marked a significant departure from Brazil’s established foreign policy approach, which has historically emphasised pragmatic and proactive multilateral engagement, international projection, and diplomatic relations with a broad array of powers.

However, in many ways, this dramatic shift in narrative is a striking outlier – perhaps unmatched since Brazil’s return to democracy in the 1980s – underscoring the existence of a well-established and identifiable foreign policy tradition from which it diverged. Furthermore, even during Bolsonaro’s administration, various elements of continuity persisted in practice. For instance, Brazil’s economic ties with China, a so-called globalist he vilified, remained robust – in fact, trade with Beijing increased during his mandate.

Brazil's annual exports. Share of total, by partner



In free on board terms

Source: Comex Stat

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Beneath the varying ideological rhetoric of presidents such as Lula, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and even Bolsonaro, some core elements of Brazilian foreign policy have largely endured, with differences between administrations being often of degree of emphasis rather than shifts in direction. This is also seen in Brazil's relatively stable voting patterns at the UN, particularly evident in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Brazil tends to support international law and condemn its violations, yet simultaneously rejects great power interference in other countries' internal affairs, including through the use of economic sanctions as an instrument of pressure.

Below, this paper outlines three leitmotifs in Brazil's foreign policy: its effort to remain autonomous vis-à-vis the main power centres; its search for a great power role for itself; and its qualified commitment to multilateralism.

Strategic hedging and active non-alignment

Brazil has a long history of pursuing independence and autonomy in its foreign policy, punctuated by brief periods of alignment with the US. Generally, Brazil seeks to

counterbalance US influence in the Western hemisphere while maintaining flexibility in its international relations. This strategy is justified by the limited political and economic gains derived from previous alignments with the US (compared to the significant benefits experienced by other middle powers, such as South Korea). Brazil's stable geopolitical context has allowed it a high level of independence from Washington, including in security affairs. Under Lula in particular, Brazil openly embraces a post-US global order, where the focus is for the US to take on a different role rather than leading the world.

Much like other middle powers, multipolarity is welcomed as an opportunity to increase its influence in international institutions and to wield greater global influence. Resisting alignment with either the US or China, in what Lula refers to as a “mentality of the Cold War,” Brazil, like many other middle powers, strategically hedges between the two, capitalising on opportunities created by competition between them – opportunities that were unavailable during the era of US dominance. Brazil seems to enjoy living in an “à la carte world”, although this sometimes requires it to walk a fine line – exemplified by when it recently signalled it would not be joining China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Like other Latin American countries, such as Chile and Argentina, Brazil leverages investment, infrastructure projects, and trade deals from both superpowers. In contrast, countries like Mexico or Colombia have less room to manoeuvre due to their deeper economic, geographic, or security dependence on the US, making them more constrained in navigating the competition. Such hedging strategy also allows Brazil to prepare for diverse scenarios arising from the US-China rivalry, reminiscent of its approach during the second world war when it maintained neutrality between Nazi Germany and the Allies until circumstances made alignment with the Allies more beneficial to its national interests.

Brazil's evolving role in the world stage

Brazil under Lula uses the approach of “active non-alignment”, or “logic of autonomy”, as some Latin American scholars describe it, to try and position itself as an autonomous actor and a mediator in international disputes, notably the war in Ukraine and tensions in Venezuela (which have seen limited success, as this paper later explores.) As part of this, Lula's Brazil often seeks to act as a broker or bridge between the West and the global south, as a rare example of a major country that can present itself as part of both. Indeed, despite its distancing from the West under Lula, Brazil's strong economic ties with Western countries, involvement in Western-led groups like the G20, and its status as one of the world's largest liberal democracies, all strengthen its perception in the global south as having a foothold in the West. This role as broker or bridge is a key part of Brazil's strategy to project power and

influence on the global stage, a long-standing ambition of Brazil's foreign policy.

Yet, within this continuity, there are notable differences between Brazilian administrations in how they perceive the scope of Brazil's international role. While successive governments agree on Brazil's potential as a major international player, they differ in the degree of engagement with global affairs. For instance, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's Brazil focused its diplomatic efforts on regional stability and protection of its interests from great powers. Cardoso emphasised a more cautious and measured foreign policy that aimed to exert influence without overstressing its resources, viewing integration as a way to build the country's autonomy.

In contrast, Lula views Brazil as more than just a middle power; he sees it as a "*grande nação*" (great nation), a major emerging global power that deserves a greater voice in international institutions and should actively address critical global issues, from non-proliferation to climate action – evident in his 2023 and 2024 interventions at the United Nations General Assembly. Rather than simply participating in multilateral frameworks to safeguard Brazil's interests from other great powers, Lula aims to reshape these institutions and build coalitions that can challenge Western dominance, asserting Brazil as a key architect in global governance.

Still, this approach does not enjoy universal support in Brazil, where many, especially Lula's conservative opponents, consider it a dangerous overreach.

Commitment to – and criticism of – multilateralism

Brazil is a non-nuclear armed power with limited military capacity and a relatively secure geographic position, free from significant external security threats. As such, its approach to international relations has, and since before the military dictatorship, emphasised diplomacy over military force. Its foreign policy, especially during democratic periods, has been characterised by a preference for peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Exceptions occurred during the military dictatorship (1964–1985), when Brazil adopted a more assertive, militaristic approach, including a secret nuclear weapons programme (although it never committed any acts of external aggression in that period). Thus, diplomacy over military strength has generally prevailed. This is evidenced today by Brazil's participation in peacekeeping missions, contributing to 50 UN peacekeeping operations since 1947, with 57,700 military and civilian personnel involved.

Lacking military power, Brazil has harnessed international institutions, norms, and coalitions

to exert influence and advance its interests on the global stage, leading the country to champion multilateralism as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Like Europe, Brazil relies on a well-functioning trading system, with its economic model deeply intertwined with the global economy. Disruptions to trade – such as protectionist policies or breakdowns in multilateral trade agreements – pose significant threats to its national development. This is an overriding priority for Brazilian administrations and a major driver of foreign policy, as long-term economic growth is enshrined in Article 4 of the Brazilian constitution.

But by no means does its reliance on multilateralism make Brazil an unquestioning champion of the system. Indeed, Brazil is often frustrated by the unrepresentative nature of these institutions – Lula recently dubbed the current makeup of the UN Security Council (UNSC) a “legacy of colonialism” – and has long called for their reform. Specifically, Brazil advocates for more representation of global south countries in global governance institutions, a more balanced quota system that aligns voting power with the real contributions and economic weight of emerging markets, fair-trade practices, and equitable access to technology and resources, all aiming to level the playing field for developing nations.

In particular, one of Brazil’s most enduring foreign policy priorities is its bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC, as part of the G4 coalition alongside Germany, India, and Japan. While it enjoys rhetorical support from some Europeans (including Germany, France, and the UK), it lacks the crucial backing of the US – whose officials recently suggested that Germany, India, and Japan should get a seat, notably omitting Brazil.

Internal sources of continuity

Brazil’s foreign policy continuity can be partly attributed to the country’s very own “deep state”: its ministry of foreign affairs, known as Itamaraty. Renowned for its professionalism, *esprit de corps*, and capacity to instil vision and long-term perspective in Brazil’s foreign policy, Itamaraty provides a robust bureaucratic framework capable of weathering fluctuations in domestic politics and shifts in presidential ideological preferences. With over 200 embassies, consulates, and permanent missions worldwide, staffed by approximately 1,500 diplomats, Itamaraty ranks among the top 10 diplomatic powers in the world. This positions Brazil as one of the countries with the most extensive diplomatic reach in the global south, alongside Turkey and India.

Another source of foreign policy continuity are the major interest groups within Brazil, who exert a stabilising – though at times frustrating – influence on Brazil’s international dealings.

The agribusiness sector, despite the more conservative ideological leanings of its members, has a vested economic interest in maintaining strong trade relations with China, for example. This lesson was learned by Bolsonaro's foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, who faced significant backlash for his anti-China stance. Bolsonaro himself had to make a reluctant U-turn on China, after initially travelling to Taiwan as a presidential candidate and mirroring Donald Trump's China-bashing rhetoric.

And as Lula attempts to diverge from his predecessor's climate policies, he is learning his bitter lessons too. His efforts to reassert Brazil's commitment to combating climate change, could be constrained by the powerful agribusiness, mining, and oil sectors whom Lula cannot afford to ignore given their ties with the opposition-dominated congress.

Vehicles of Brazil's global influence

When seeking to impact global affairs, countries rely on a variety of resources beyond just economic or military strength. They also draw from softer assets, such as membership of various networks and organisations, capacity to perform a leadership role, and credibility to discuss specific topics. While not all countries aspire to shape world affairs, those that do usually grapple with certain weaknesses. To compensate, they leverage their strengths as vehicles of global influence.

Brazil is no exception. It has several characteristics of a great power. It is the world's fifth-largest country by area, seventh largest by population, and eighth largest by GDP – behind only the US, China, Germany, Japan, India, United Kingdom, and France. Its diplomats and commentators tend to call Brazil a continental power, or a “monster country” (in reference to George Kennan's concept, which also described the US, China, India, and Russia). This allows them to argue that Brazil's interests go beyond merely achieving a certain outcome and encompass its influence in how global affairs are managed.

But Brazil has major weaknesses too. It is only the 14th largest military spender, trailing behind Italy and just ahead of Canada. Its military insignificance presents one of the obstacles in convincing other nations that it deserves a permanent seat in the UNSC.

Geographically, Brazil must contend with living under the shadow of the US. Although this factor is less overwhelming than it is for Mexico, it remains relevant. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which established Washington's hegemonic claim on the Western hemisphere, continues to affect international relations in the Americas – even if the United States' regional

influence is currently much weaker today than it was two centuries or even just three decades ago. In practice, this means that Brazil's capacity to build coalitions in Latin America and assert itself as regional leader is seriously constrained, as some of its neighbours still rely on the US for their security and prosperity.

Faced with these challenges, Brazil tends to leverage four main assets when seeking to increase its global clout: its credibility on specific sectoral issues (such as climate, poverty, and peace-making); its membership in the G20; its founding role in BRICS; and its regional influence.

Climate, poverty, and peace-making

Brazil often focuses on issues where it can harness its credibility and hard-won recognition, such as fighting climate change, poverty, and hunger – major development challenges that are also the priorities of its G20 presidency this year. As a major agri-food producer and guardian of the Amazon, Brazil currently views environmental preservation and sustainability as essential to its international policy.

The country also increasingly tries to play a constructive role in resolving international conflicts, harnessing its non-membership of any military alliance and its diplomatic strength. Under the previous Lula administrations (2003-2010), it was part of an initiative regarding the Iranian nuclear programme. It also sent peacekeeping missions to Lusophone Africa and lead the military component of an UN-backed peacekeeping mission to Haiti. (However, the latter experience is remembered in Brazil as a disaster, as it not only failed to secure the Caribbean nation but also contributed to the militarisation of the government under Bolsonaro. This helps explain Lula's current reluctance to contribute to a new mission in Haiti.)

Since Lula's return to power in January 2023, Brazil has reaffirmed its desire to serve as an honest broker capable of contributing to conflict resolution worldwide. Shortly after taking office, Lula emphasised the need to negotiate peace in Ukraine, suggesting a creation of a "G20 for peace". In May this year, Brazil and China put forth a joint proposal for peace negotiations. While Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky initially bashed this plan as "destructive", and the EU rejected it because it did not demand Russia to respect international law, it nonetheless displays Brazil's lasting ambition to play a major role in ending that war. In the following month, Brazil diverged from Western nations when it refused to sign a communique after the 2024 summit on peace in Ukraine held in Switzerland, arguing that Russia hadn't been invited to participate.

Lula has also been vocal on the war in Gaza, openly criticising Israel and distancing himself neatly from views held in much of the West (and from his predecessor, who continues to display a strong pro-Israel position as an ex-president, by, for example, featuring the Israeli flag at rallies). This is consistent with Lula's historical approach to the Middle East and is in many ways in keeping with the UN Charter – demonstrating, once more, Brazil's attachment to the basic principles of international law, even if the historical pro-Palestinian stance of the Workers' Party also helps explain the attention Lula dedicates to this geographically distant conflict.

G20

The establishment of this group in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis clearly played a major role in elevating Brazil to a rising power status, particularly as it is not a member of the G7. From Brazil's perspective, the G20 is not just a forum that allows it to be at the table – it is also one where it feels very much at ease, thanks to its inclusion of both developed and developing countries, and representing all the world's regions. Such a framework allows Brazil to be at the centre, leveraging its unique identity as both a Western and global south country. As such, Brazil can position itself as an in-between player, leading the efforts to address a growing disconnect between emerging powers and existing global institutions.

Therefore, Brazilian government has dedicated significant resources and attention to its first presidency of the G20, seeing the leaders' summit in November in Rio de Janeiro as a pivotal moment (alongside the COP30 climate conference in Belém in 2025) to enhance the country's global prominence and reaffirm its power status. In light of the criticisms regarding the G20's waning relevance (for example, during the covid-19 pandemic), Brazil has proposed a pragmatic agenda aimed at restoring the group's G20 credibility as a forum capable of addressing main global problems, such as climate change and poverty.

In our conversations, [1]Brazilian experts and diplomats presented the G20 as a parallel institution to the UN, through which agreements could pave the way for changes in larger international institutions. They also considered it as an essential platform for discussions on global governance, benefitting from a smaller size than the UN, which permits more streamlined negotiations and generating momentum for broader talks. Informally, some of these experts talked of changing the system “from within the system but not from within its institutions”. What they mean is that, while today's global governance could be reformed rather than remade from scratch, one should not expect a reformist drive to come from within institutions such as IMF, the World Trade Organization, or the World Bank themselves.

In this context, the G20 is seen as a rare example of a narrower forum that represents all the world's main power centres of today, including the US and China.

BRICS and the global south

BRICS serves a different purpose compared to the G20. As one of our interlocutors remarked, “life isn’t easy for anyone inside this club”. It’s obvious that major divisions exist among its original members, particularly between China and India. Additionally, from Brazil’s perspective, the ongoing enlargement of BRICS – an initiative Brazil sought to derail because it dilutes the group’s identity and Brazil’s weight within it – poses challenges to its own agenda. From Brazil’s perspective, expansion makes the group lose its defining characteristic – an exclusive forum for the most powerful countries in the global south. It reduces the relative weight of the Americas within the mix – especially following Argentina’s rejection of membership under its new president. It places democratic countries in the minority while bringing in more autocracies, such as Saudi Arabia (which is hesitating to join, to not antagonise the US) and Iran, in addition to some of the world’s major air polluters. And it risks becoming a China-led club. For these reasons, Brazil has helped create a membership category called “BRICS partners”, now comprising 10 countries, including Cuba, Bolivia, and Turkey, the latter of which Brazil supports in becoming a full member.

Despite these concerns, it would be premature to conclude that BRICS is losing its utility for Brazil. To start with, BRICS has already brought tangible political benefits: it granted the Brazilian government privileged, high-level access to the Chinese leadership, for example. Thanks to BRICS, Brazil has also increased its prestige within the global south, fostering closer relations with countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

BRICS is particularly dear to the current government. Not only was it established during Lula’s earlier presidency but it also became, in a way, a successor to his own initiative of building closer relations among India, Brazil, and South Africa (the so-called IBSA forum). Still, the significance of BRICS for Brazil goes well beyond personal attachments. Notably, even Jair Bolsonaro recognised the group’s importance, in another display of continuity in Brazil’s foreign policy.

As a country that aspires to reform the global order, Brazil may see BRICS as a useful forum to coordinate efforts with non-Western countries. After all, according to one of our interlocutors, “BRICS is not a group of countries that are supposed to agree on everything. But they do at least agree on one thing: that the current global order is unfair”.

South America

A final vehicle of Brazil's global influence relates to its regional leadership – a dimension of power projection whose importance it seems to have underappreciated until recently. Despite its ambition to be a global player, Brazil has been historically reluctant to bear the costs of representing its region.

Comparison of Latin America's largest countries

	Brazil	Mexico	Argentina	Colombia
GDP (2024, in billions of USD)	2.19	1.85	0.6	0.4
Population (2024, in millions of people)	212.54	132.27	47.16	52.7
Country size (in millions of square kilometres)	8.5	2.0	2.8	1.1
Number of land neighbours	10	3	5	5
Number of diplomatic posts abroad	205	161	150	117
Number of times as a non-permanent member of UN Security Council	11	5	9	7
Military budget (2023, as per cent of GDP)	1.08	0.66	0.47	2.87
Membership of BRICS	YES	NO	NO	NO
Membership of G20	YES	YES	YES	NO
Membership of OECD	NO	YES	NO	YES

Source: IMF, UN, Global Diplomacy Index
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Geography and politics arguably present two potent barriers to integration in this region. The Amazon rainforest, several mountain chains, and diverse climate zones make it very difficult to establish infrastructural links among South American countries – as compared to Europe or south-east Asia, for example. It's the Portuguese-speaking exception in a continent dominated by Spanish-speaking countries; it's also a giant – geographically, economically, and demographically – compared to its 12 neighbours. It accounts for roughly half the region's GDP and borders almost every other country except for Ecuador and Chile. Brazil's size has

often created imbalances in regional initiatives it has co-authored, including Mercosur (an economic bloc created in 1991 with Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay) and Unasur (a political organisation established in 2004 among the region's left-wing governments).

In addition, largely due to the legacy of the cold war, cooperation has also been difficult in a region divided between left-wing and right-wing governments. Some scholars point to an inherent contradiction between rhetorical emphasis on greater regional integration and the strong political attachment of most countries in the region to a rigid understanding of national sovereignty. Having experienced European colonialism and US interference, the region tends to display strict opposition to military interventions.

However, an important evolution on this last point must be acknowledged. In 2004, Brazil reframed its position to one of “non-indifference” to situations that threaten international peace and security, which justified its involvement in the UN's stabilisation mission in Haiti. And in 2011, under President Dilma Rousseff – and in reaction to a NATO-led intervention in Libya – it proposed the concept of “responsibility while protecting”, as a middle-ground between the principles of “non-intervention” and “responsibility to protect” that would make civilian protection interventions more accountable and proportionate.

At that time, Brazil sought to position itself as a constructive international player, capable of engaging in peace operations. However, the 2011 proposition was met with scepticism internationally, with many in the West seeing it as a means to block all interventions. Today, Brazil's earlier talk of non-indifference raises global expectations of its involvement on Venezuela and Haiti.

According to one of our interlocutors, Brazil acts as if it wanted to “be a global actor but without bearing the costs of regional leadership”. But this seems to be slowly changing. Lula's effort, albeit unsuccessful, to revive Unasur after the organisation practically fell apart in 2019 because of partisan enmity, is one example of the shift. Despite the difficulties it faces in acting as a regional consensus-builder, Brazil is beginning to understand that it needs to make that effort on certain issues, such as the management of natural resources – especially considering its role as the host of COP30 next year.

But tensions between Venezuela and Guyana, along with the new phase in Venezuela's political crisis – triggered by Nicolas Maduro's stolen election earlier this year – pose a major test for Brazil's regional influence, and potentially a barrier to its ambitions to play a more prominent global peacekeeping role.

Departing from his historical stance and despite the Workers Party's sympathy for the

Bolivarian regime of Caracas, Lula has refrained from accepting Maduro's victory. Later, Brazil blocked Venezuela's bid to join BRICS. According to some observers, this signals a "strategic reorientation" in Lula's perspective on Brazil's regional role. But this new approach still needs to yield tangible results if it is to become a lasting practice. Seen from the outside, Brazil's handling of the Venezuelan crisis – where Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico unsuccessfully urged Maduro to publish detailed election results – exposed the limits of the country's power in its own backyard. At the UN General Assembly, Lula faced criticism for failing to mention Venezuela in his speech, thereby missing another opportunity to demonstrate regional leadership. And as Russia extends its influence over Venezuela and geopolitical tensions between the US and China reach the region, Brasilia's space for regional diplomacy may shrink even further.

Obstacles on Brazil's road to global influence

Big hype, little outcome

Brazil's activist diplomacy as a non-aligned country has yielded limited results beyond the attention that it has received.

While its desire to mediate conflicts is a means to enhance its prestige, Brazil is often seen as lacking the necessary influence in high-stakes global security issues. Its unsuccessful mediation between Iran and the West in 2010 – when other countries, especially the US, didn't consider its contribution as useful or even trustworthy – highlights Brazil's tendency to overextend itself. The same can be said about the war in Ukraine, where Brazil initially pushed for peace negotiations, but then refused to participate in the peace conference organised by Switzerland. Being part of BRICS alongside Russia and relying on imports of fertilisers from that country and exports of food and raw materials to China, limits Brazil's credibility as honest broker in the eyes of Ukrainians and the EU.

Another area where results are lacking is Brazil's proposals to reform multilateral institutions and international governance. Brazil continues to insist on a seat at the UNSC, an unlikely prospect as demonstrated by Germany and other countries attempts. That path is completely blocked by veto-wielding countries, including not just the US but also Brazil's BRICS partners, China and Russia. Brazil's attempt to reform the "agendas" of international governance – by making multilateral bodies, for example, more responsive to issues like climate change and social inclusion – holds promise, but Brazil must demonstrate its commitment to prioritising that goal over the never-ending discussions about securing a permanent UNSC seat. If

anything, it needs to show it can build coalitions to support that objective.

Finally, the cost-benefit balance of Brazil's close political relationship with China raises important questions. Economically, Brazil has significantly benefitted from its booming trade not only with China but all of Asia. However, this success appears more reflective of Brazil's strong position as a leading producer and exporter of various commodities, especially minerals and agricultural products, than a direct result of BRICS membership or of a political rapprochement with Beijing. There's no inherent reason that a booming economic relationship with China should require any major political alignment. Beijing seems pragmatic in its dealings with Latin America, seeking open markets for its products and access to commodities rather than expecting solid diplomatic alliances. Some of Brazil's neighbours, such as Chile, demonstrate this separation, maintaining strong economic relations with China despite differing views on major foreign policy questions, such as Ukraine and Venezuela.

Some of our Brazilian interlocutors insist that the country's current "bias in favour of China" is driven by the left-wing government's political affinity with the Chinese regime rather than by economic calculations. However, seen from the distance, economic factors do sometimes seem to weigh on Brazil's foreign policy. This was visible under Bolsonaro, when Brazil's reluctance to condemn Putin over Russia's invasion of Ukraine was linked, according to the Brazilian president himself, to his country's reliance on Russian fertilisers. Or when pressure from the agricultural sector forced him to revisit his approach to China and Taiwan.

This warrants the question as to whether Brazil isn't self-restraining its autonomy on foreign policy issues that it considers sensitive to China – or, conversely, whether its ideological alignment with China on Ukraine, Gaza, and criticism of the Western-led world order is truly beneficial for Brazil. For example, Brazil's apparent political alignment with China, whether economically driven or not, prevents the development of deep trust with the EU. From the European perspective, Brazilians, who historically prided themselves on their pragmatism, currently appear less pragmatic in their approach to both China and Europe.

Internal contradictions of Brazil's diplomatic activism

Brazil has, like other middle powers, focused its diplomacy on enhancing international presence and status. For Brazil, getting a seat at the table and achieving recognition as a middle power has involved two sets of strategies, corresponding to what scholar Arnold Wolfers identified as "possession" and "milieu" goals. Possession goals are competitive, seeking to increase one's international influence. Milieu goals are cooperative, aimed at

supporting public goods that a country relies on, such as promoting peace and security, international law or international institutions. These two sets of goals can be complementary but can also be contradictory. In the case of Brazil's activist diplomacy these tensions have been evident.

On the one hand, Brasilia has sought to reform the world's current order, arguing, not without reason, that it is unfair due to asymmetries of power, Western dominance, double standards in international law and the use of force, and insufficient attention to providing public goods that would benefit the global south. This is a typical milieu goal. By emphasising south-south cooperation, peace, mediation, and supporting more inclusive international institutions, such as the G20, Brazil has given voice to the legitimate concerns of the post-colonial nations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, thus gaining influence as a defender of a fairer international order.

In parallel, Brazil's dealings within the BRICS reflect a very classical and realist practice of international power and diplomacy, which, due to its zero-sum nature, corresponds to a very typical possession goal.

At the beginning, Europe did not perceive the BRICS as a direct challenge to the international system, and considered that Lula, during his first stint as president, was simply seeking recognition and a place at the table. At that time, G7 members recognised the value of south-south cooperation and believed they could accommodate BRICS through different strategies, such as trade and development cooperation (many EU countries, after all, welcomed and signed up to the Belt and Road Initiative).

However, after the invasion of Ukraine, which was preceded by a "limitless" alliance between China and Russia, Brasilia could no longer ignore that the BRICS' capacity to positively transform international relations has become increasingly questionable. Brazil prefers that BRICS sticks to its original goal of opening world governance to other actors and giving voice to the largest representatives of the global south; this is why it was so uncomfortable with BRICS's enlargement. But the pressures from China and Russia to turn it into an anti-Western platform may be impossible to stop.

Brasilia's current drift away from milieu goals and the predominance of hard-nosed possession goals is best seen than in its diplomacy on Ukraine. In its dealings with Russia and China, Brazil repeatedly fails to centre international law in its proposals. While Itamaraty argues that lambasting Russia would thwart its diplomatic efforts to obtain a ceasefire and open peace negotiations, Lula's statements on Ukraine (similar to those by other regional

leaders, such as Colombian president Gustavo Petro) show that the problem is not a difference of views about the means to negotiate a peace deal (for example, by bringing China in or not). Instead, Brazil's government disagrees with European governments in seeing the war in Ukraine through an "East vs West", cold-war lens, rather than focussing on international law and recognising it as a colonial war of aggression.

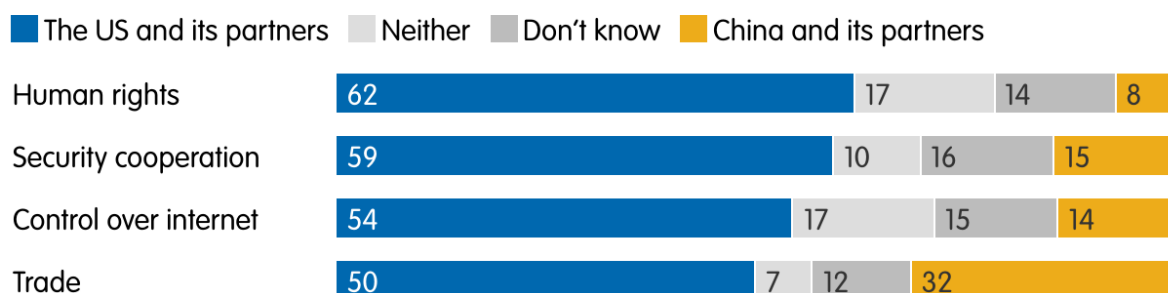
Ultimately, Brazil's problems in fine-tuning its activist diplomacy have to do with the evolution of the world order. In a multipolar world, there is ample space for pragmatic strategies and flexible alignments, allowing countries to adopt, as our colleagues have argued, "polyamorous" strategies. But as the world drifts towards a bipolar confrontation between the US and China – a development that Donald Trump's re-election is only set to accelerate – other countries and other policy dimensions (such as trade, technology, and energy) are sucked into this dichotomy. In that context, the margins for manoeuvre for middle powers – not just Brazil but also the EU – tend to shrink. Brazil's diplomacy, which at a times sought to counter Western dominance of the international order (which, as many other powers, it rightly saw as drifting towards unipolarity), may now have to recognise that the next threat it faces is bipolarity. In countering it, Brazil may need to develop a new sort of activism, not only with the EU but with some of the other middle powers too – acting jointly for a renewed, even if more realist and power-based, multilateralism.

Politicisation of foreign policy

A final challenge to Brazil's foreign policy positions concerns the role of the public opinion – and of the polarised domestic political situation more broadly.

There appears to be a disconnect between the government-level idealisation of Brazil's close relations with China and public sentiment, which indicates that many Brazilians, if given a choice, would prefer closer ties to the US rather than China on issues such as human rights, Internet governance, or even trade cooperation – according to ECFR's 2023 poll. This, in some ways, highlights a potential opportunity for an improved cooperation between Brazil and the West – assuming that Brazil's decision-makers were to listen to public opinion on such abstract issues as foreign policy.

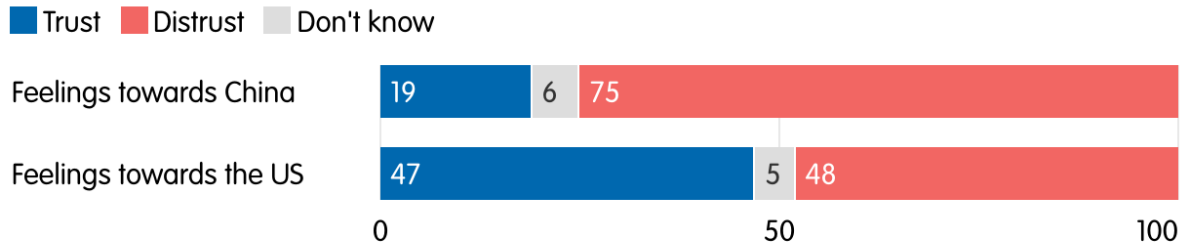
On each of the following issues, do you prefer Brazil to be closer to the United States and its partners, or China and its partners? In per cent



Source: ECFR-commissioned poll by Gallup International Association and Voices!, September 2023
 ECFR · ecf.eu

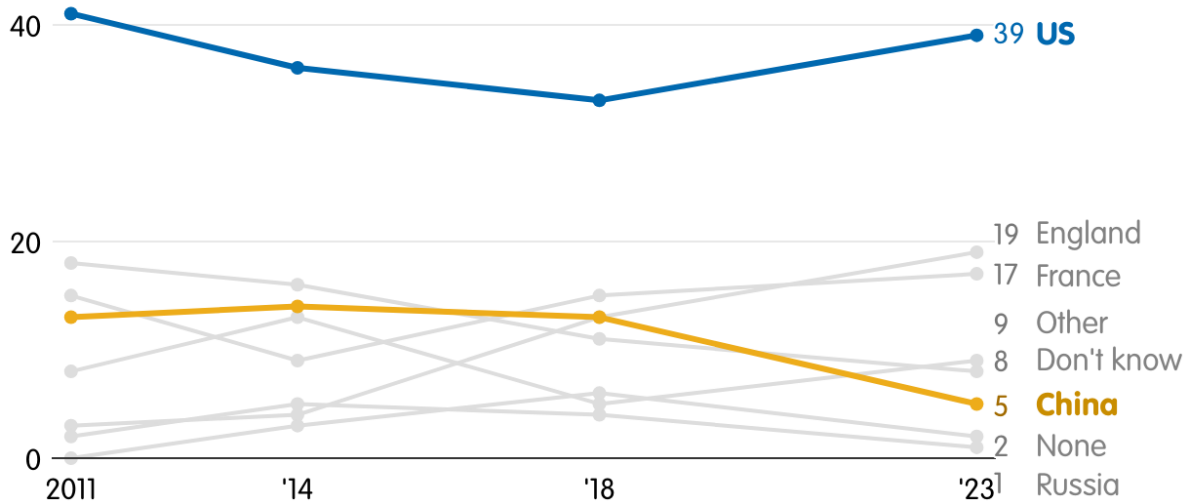
Brazil also has a sizeable Western-oriented middle-class, with correspondent values and aspirations. A close alignment with China or Russia or, for that sake, an equidistant role in Venezuela, does not resonate with this demographic. An opinion poll conducted by Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI) in 2023 shows that Brazilians trust the US more than China, and that the US inspires more confidence than China when it comes to maintaining world peace. While Brazil’s foreign policy is influenced – and stabilised – by the continued presence of economic interest groups, right now it appears that the public opinion is emerging as a new part of the equation, perhaps capable of motivating the government to adjust its geopolitical course.

Of the following words, which one best describes your feelings towards China and the United States? In per cent



Source: CEBRI, 2023
ECFR · ecf.eu

Which of the following countries inspires you with the greatest confidence in maintaining peace in the world? In per cent



Source: CEBRI, 2023
ECFR · ecf.eu

At the same time, however, over the past decade, Brazil has become a country that is deeply polarised politically, with foreign policy increasingly drawn into that divide – as is evident in the radically different approaches of Lula and Bolsonaro regarding the Gaza war, or with Bolsonaro’s initial efforts to steer away from BRICS and towards Donald Trump’s America.

Other foreign policy matters, like climate change, trade policies, or even relations with China, risk falling prey to that polarisation too. This dynamic risks undermining the pragmatism of Brazil's foreign policy in the coming years, subjecting it to Latin America's pendulum to which it previously seemed to be relatively immune.

Brazil's last governments – both *lulistas* and *bolsonaristas* – have pursued foreign policies that cater more to their narrow political bases rather than those of the broader population. Some analysts also suggest that the demographic and socio-economic developments in Brazil, such as the growing influence of evangelical churches, point to a structural right-wing turn. This might diminish the country's commitment to BRICS but also its dedication to the fight with climate change, thus undermining some of the tenets of the country's current global positioning. At the same time, this could also convert Brazil – as Bolsonaro attempted during his term – into an active player in regional conservative politics, aligning closely with the Trumpian US establishment and opposing the liberal international order (albeit from the opposite side of China and Russia). With Donald Trump's re-election, *bolsonaristas* might believe that their return to power is within reach.

Conclusions

Since 2007, the EU has recognised Brazil as a “strategic partner”, a vague designation that both sides have since struggled to fill with meaning. Meanwhile, the world has changed. We have witnessed the establishment of BRICS, the emergence of G20 as a major forum of global economic governance, and the continued rise of China, which now positions itself as a serious contender to the US for global leadership. All these developments have benefitted Brazil – a close economic and political partner of China, a member of both BRICS and the G20, and a country with credibility among both Western and global south countries.

Meanwhile, the EU's share of global GDP has continued to decline. Reliable partners to protect a global rules-based order became ever scarcer. The US, mired in domestic political turmoil and focused on a systemic rivalry with China, has become less reliable in that regard. Europeans find themselves increasingly alone on several fronts, from climate to trade and security policies.

From this perspective, Brazil stands out as a middle power that shares many of the EU's concerns, goals, and values, while also having unique attributes that the EU lacks. As such, it should be a top priority for Brussels in terms of partnership development. Indeed, a 2023 confidential briefing suggested that this perspective is shared by the EU's institutions. However, to engage Brazil as a partner on safeguarding multilateralism, Europeans need to

identify feasible areas for collaboration as well as concrete ways to strengthen the relationship.

A good place to start is by recognising each other's structural differences that predispose them to different orientations in global policy. For example, while Brazil is located far away from major conflicts, Europe is surrounded by wars, making it much more dependent on the US for security. Also, Brazil is underrepresented in multilateral institutions, whereas Europe enjoys a strong presence in them; this disparity makes the issue of voice central to Brazil but underappreciated from Europe's perspective. Brazil has both a Western and a global south hat (and does not want to be perceived as too much in any of these camps) whereas Europe is firmly in the West (even when it tries to differentiate itself from America). And finally, Brazil is both post and anti-colonial, while Europe's global credibility continues to be tarnished by its colonial legacy, posing obstacles in its relations with the global south.

In light of these differences, similarities between the EU and Brazil become even more prominent. Both depend, for different reasons, on a well-functioning multilateral system. Both are subject to democratic pressures for a values-based foreign policy, even if that may clash at times with interest-based pressures from industry. Both display high levels of economic dependence on China. And both are currently seeking space for autonomy amid the growing US-China systemic rivalry, championing progressive values in contrast to the offerings of an ultra-liberal America or a repressive China.

Europe's approach to Brazil should be tailored to acknowledge their structural differences while leveraging shared goals, values, and needs. Europeans need to create conditions for their economic relationship with Brazil to benefit the partnership. Even if they cannot replace China as an economic partner, they can be a valuable additional option, and vice versa. Europe is already a major investor in Brazil, alongside the US. But trade exchange between the two remains below potential, and the EU-Mercosur saga exemplifies this stagnation, which needs to be overcome.

Apart from this trade deal, Europe should also encourage Brazil to resume its efforts to join the OECD. This process, initiated in 2017 and actively pursued by the Bolsonaro administration, was put on hold after the return of Lula. If Brazil were to join the club, that would favour a closer economic and political relationship with Europe. But the economic advantages of OECD membership need to be spelt out more clearly to Brazil and Brazilians.

Europe should see a closer relation with Brazil as a gateway to the global south and a means to boost its own credibility in Latin America and Africa. The Brazil-EU relationship could serve

as a basis for a buffer against the more radical confrontations arising from the ongoing rivalry between China and the United States. It could provide a stabilising influence in international relations.

When discussing Ukraine with Brazil, Europeans should defend their positions in a non-moralising way. Instead, they should emphasise that, from Europe's perspective, this war is existential. The need to champion international law is also in Brazil's interest. But there are limits to what one can expect from Brazil, as German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, learned very quickly when he tried to convince Lula to sell German-made air defence tanks and munitions to help Ukraine's war effort. Rather than exposing themselves again to an easy rebuke, Europeans should engage in an honest exchange about Brazil's peace-making effort – pointing to its limited results and suggesting ways in which it could be more successful.

Europeans should show their support for Brazil's constructive ideas on the reform of the multilateralism's "agendas" as part of G20 discussions. They should also work closely with Brazil in international forums on global challenges that both sides prioritise, such as climate action and climate financing, especially with Brazil set to host the COP30 in 2025. This collaboration should also help shield those topics from domestic changes inside Brazil.

By supporting Brazil's role within the G20, the EU can effectively counterbalance its criticisms of Brazil's endorsement of the BRICS' Kazan Declaration – an assertion that claims to strengthen "multilateralism for just global development and security," even as Russia continues to pose a significant threat to Europe's security. It is essential for Europeans to engage Brazilians in recognising that these statements are neither neutral nor harmless; rather, they help legitimise Russia's aggressive actions and reveal that the global south also has its troubling double standards regarding international law and security.

In other words, Europeans have an interest in seeing Brazil focus more on G20 than on BRICS – which Brazilians might also conclude is necessary, given the direction in which the latter group is heading.

Ultimately, Europeans need to show respect for Brazil's global aspirations. Only then could they really engage in meaningful discussions with Brazil on where they find their engagement inadequate (such as on Ukraine and Venezuela), and create a true partnership, based on mutual recognition of the need and benefits of working together.

But that requires efforts from both sides. While Europeans need to revise their approach to Brazil, they will need to convince Brazilian decision-makers to update their approach to Europe too. As things stand today, decision-makers do not seem to recognise the EU as a go-to

partner to advance a revitalised multilateralism or a vision of global order that aligns with the country's goals and challenges. And this stems from not only Europe's shortcomings but also from Brazil's own illusions and misconceptions, such as its belief that it can continue using the US-China rivalry to its political and economic advantage. Also, Brazilian leaders need to recognise how damaging their poorly designed peace initiatives for Ukraine have been for the EU-Brazil bilateral relations.

Europe might have been a secondary partner for Brazil in the first two decades of the 21st century, dominated by the "rise of the Rest". But as BRICS undergoes a major transformation, the US-China rivalry heats up, and multilateralism crumbles, Europe has strong cards to position itself as Brazil's much-needed partner for decades to come. But it will need to respect Brazil's own needs and aspirations. If it wants to dance with Brazil, it first needs to learn the samba steps.

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[1] Online interviews conducted by the paper's authors with experts and policymakers from Brazil and other Latin American countries, September 2024.

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