

DISPATCH

BRAZIL IN THE “SECOND” COLD WAR: NAVIGATING THE US-CHINA FAULT LINES

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In 1961, at the height of the Cold War (1947-1991), Brazilian president Jânio Quadros announced his so-called Independent Foreign Policy (IFP) in [a piece published in the magazine *Foreign Affairs*](#): “We have not subscribed to treaties of the nature of NATO, and are in no way forced formally to intervene in the cold war between East and West. We are, therefore, in a position to follow our national inclination to act energetically in the cause of peace and the relaxation of international tension.” Quadros’ ephemeral administration ended in a failed self-coup, but the IFP continued to be implemented by his successor João Goulart (1961-1964). [Its primary objective](#) was the preservation of peace through the reaffirmation of the principles of non-intervention and self-determination of peoples. It also expanded trade relations with all countries, including socialist ones, and supported the emancipation of non-autonomous territories, the self-formulation of economic development plans, and the provision and acceptance of international aid.

Fast forward to 2023, and President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is taking a page from the IFP’s playbook to define how Brazil deals with mounting United States-China rivalry in the [Second Cold War](#). Since his inauguration, Lula’s independent stances on key global issues has caused [unease in Washington](#). For example, he initially suggested equal responsibility between Moscow and Kyiv for the war in Ukraine, later [condemning Russia’s actions](#), and proposed a neutral “[peace plan](#)” supported by both Russia and Ukraine. Lula blamed arms-supplying countries for the war, implicitly criticizing the US and Europe, and has

emphasized strengthening Brazil-China relations. Furthermore, he has worked to revitalize the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) to counter US influence, advocated for [alternatives to the US dollar in trade](#), and [finalized a direct trade deal with China using their respective currencies](#).

Making Sense of Brazil's International Behavior: Institutional, Ideational, and Material Factors

Institutional, ideational, and material factors condition Brazil's international behavior. The two most important foreign policy actors are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (known as "Itamaraty") and the President of the Republic. Itamaraty is known for its charismatic ministers and highly qualified diplomatic staff that hail predominantly from the national elite. It has historically enjoyed substantial autonomy in designing and executing a consistent Brazilian foreign policy from the late 19th century until the early 1990s. However, two competing factions within the Ministry have struggled for prominence in foreign policy formulation: the "Americanist" and the "independentist" factions. Both factions see the US as the central axis of Brazilian foreign policy and defend their approach to policy towards the US as a way of elevating Brazil's power resources and international outlook. Like Jânio Quadros and João Goulart, Lula has traditionally appointed Foreign Ministers who belong to [the "independentist" faction](#).

Since the return to democracy in Brazil and its integration into the global economy, [foreign policy has become an arena of competition among influential political and economic actors](#). Among these new stakeholders competing to shape Brazilian foreign policy, the President of the Republic has emerged as a pivotal figure influencing its formulation, tone, and direction. [Lula's presidency \(2003-2010\)](#) was marked by an active strategy toward South America, Africa, and the Global South. Meanwhile, [Brazil's dual identity as a Latin American and a Western country](#) has allowed policymakers across the political spectrum to continually question Brazil's approach to the ongoing Second Cold War. In this context, Brazil has sought to defend its autonomy – especially from the US – while asserting its role as an essential participant in international affairs and enhancing its

reputation as a [credible intermediary between the Global North and South](#).

Between the US and China: Brazil's Omni-Alignment Disguised as Non-Alignment

[Schindler et al.](#) distinguish the Second Cold War from the original Cold War by its spatial logic – rather than a competition to integrate countries into blocs, the US and China compete for centrality in infrastructure, digital, production, and financial networks. Brazil is a field of competition as the US and China struggle to shape the external orientation of these networks, while it also forges its own connectivity strategy that is best described as omni-alignment. Indeed, rhetoric of remaining non-aligned has been accompanied by policy that has deepened engagement with the US, China, and other countries.

Concerning the US-Brazil relationship, there have often been cordial relations between presidents, with shared interests and a recognition of Brazil as a regional power. However, [according to Anthony P. Spanakos & Mishella R. Rivas](#), the relationship between the two countries has consistently failed to advance further due to Brazil's political and economic instability. Furthermore, the costs associated with doing business in the country [diminish Brazil's appeal to US business](#).

Conversely, Brazil's relationship with China is marked by several tensions. In terms of trade, relations are substantial and growing. Yet as [Dawisson B. Lopes explains](#), Beijing remains ambivalent towards Brazil's major foreign policy goals. In addition, power imbalances continue to plague the relations between China and Brazil. Brasília perceives the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) as a Beijing-led institution and fears that the inclusion of new members would dilute its influence within the group. [It only warily accepted new entrants](#) in the 15th BRICS Leaders Summit due to Chinese pressure. Brazil has not formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), despite the prospect of modernizing the country's infrastructure connectivity and future investment. [Brasília has proceeded cautiously](#), citing the BRI's legal frameworks as open to multiple interpretations

and insufficient strategic information for the Brazilian productive and political sectors. Ultimately, [there is a sense of uncertainty surrounding the benefits of engaging in BRI-related agreements](#), which would additionally likely sour Brazil's relationship with the US.

In conclusion, Brazil's nuanced approach to foreign policy, influenced by historical precedents, domestic factors, and current geopolitical dynamics, reflects a strategic omni-alignment in the context of the US-China rivalry. Reviving the principles of the Independent Foreign Policy, [President Lula da Silva](#) has pursued a balanced engagement with major global powers, navigating the complexities of the Second Cold War. This approach aims at reinforcing Brazil's role as a [global middle-power committed to peace, self-determination, and economic development](#) while cautiously managing its relationships with both the United States and China. Brazil's stance in international affairs, therefore, is a blend of pragmatism and strategic autonomy, in which it aims to overcome its material limitations by seeking to position itself as a key mediator in international affairs. For this reason, the country's international behavior has to continue to be closely watched in an age of growing [Chinese clout in the Global South](#). As rivalry among major powers escalates, the demand for actors that can ease the tensions across the world's developmental and political divides grows increasingly urgent.

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