

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF MULTILATERALISM IN A MULTIPOLAR
ORDER:
the role of China and Brazil**

By

Isabela Muller dos Santos

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*Para os que caminham comigo,
e fazem do caminho um lugar possível.*

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and that all sources used have been properly acknowledged.

This dissertation has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or qualification at this or any other institution.

Signed: **Isabela Müller dos Santos**

Date: 01/20/2026

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This work represents more than the conclusion of an academic stage; it is an act of gratitude. A gratitude to the dreamer Isabela, who never gave up on her dreams and who, with courage, placed her life (and a cat) into a suitcase and said goodbye to everything she knew about herself, about life, and about the world. It was through this choice, filled with fear, that she discovered she could become whoever she wished and create what she desired.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the transformation of contemporary multilateralism in the context of the erosion of the Liberal Order and the growing diffusion of power in the International System. Rather than treating multilateralism as a structure in decline, the study argues that it is undergoing a process of reconfiguration driven by emerging powers that engage with global institutions in distinct and asymmetrical ways. The central objective of this paper is to analyze how China and Brazil contribute to the transformation of Multilateralism through their respective strategies of international engagement.

Methodologically, this dissertation adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, based on an extensive review of academic literature and the analysis of foreign policy practices, diplomatic discourses, and institutional behavior. The theoretical framework draws on realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism.

The analysis demonstrates that China promotes a transformation of multilateralism through pragmatic contestation, institutional diversification, and the mobilization of alternative sources of legitimacy, while remaining formally engaged in core multilateral institutions. Brazil, by contrast, pursues an incremental and legalistic strategy aimed at reforming global governance from within, grounded in international law, multilateral diplomacy, and coalition-building. The dissertation concludes that contemporary multilateralism is not being replaced, but reshaped through multiple coexisting paths, reflecting a more plural, fragmented, and multiplex international order.

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Introduction

Multilateralism has been one of the central pillars of international order since the end of World War II, structuring cooperation between states through international institutions, norms, and regimes. However, in the first decades of the 21st century, this model has been called into question in the face of weakening institutions and broad cooperation, with increased competition between major powers, regulatory fragmentation, and the emergence of new centers of power. Phenomena such as China's growth, the repositioning of middle powers, global financial crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent armed conflicts have highlighted the weaknesses and limitations of existing multilateral institutions.

In this context of systemic transformation, academic debate has begun to question whether multilateralism is in decline, in crisis, or in the process of adaptation. Part of the literature emphasizes the exhaustion of the Western-led liberal order, while other approaches point to a gradual reconfiguration of multilateralism, marked by the pluralization of norms, practices, and centers of power. This dissertation falls within the latter analytical field, based on the premise that contemporary multilateralism is not simply disappearing, but being transformed by actors who reinterpret and use it in different ways.

Given this context, this article questions how China and Brazil are transforming contemporary multilateralism in a context of crisis in the liberal international order. It hypothesizes that China and Brazil contribute to the transformation of multilateralism through distinct and asymmetrical strategies. It argues that China promotes a transformation of multilateralism based on pragmatic contestation, institutional diversification, and the mobilization of alternative sources

of legitimacy, while Brazil seeks incremental transformation from within existing institutions, anchored in legalism, multilateral diplomacy, and the defense of gradual reform of global governance. These differences reflect their specific positions in the international system, as well as their political and historical identities.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, combining theoretical analysis and empirical examination of the multilateral practices of both countries. The theoretical framework draws on realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism, allowing multilateralism to be understood not only as a set of formal rules, but as a social practice shaped by interests, identities, and normative disputes.

The dissertation is organized into four chapters, in addition to this introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical and conceptual framework on multilateralism, legitimacy, and international order, situating the contemporary debate on the crisis and transformation of global governance. Chapter 2 analyzes the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy and develops the concept of multilateralism with Chinese characteristics, highlighting its philosophical foundations, its critical reading of the liberal order, and its role in the transformation of multilateral institutions. Chapter 3 examines the Brazilian case, addressing the historical, normative, and identity foundations of Brazilian multilateralism, as well as its diplomatic practice and structural limitations as a middle power. Finally, Chapter 4 conducts a comparative analysis between the two cases, highlighting convergences, divergences, and implications for the future of global multilateralism.

By comparing China and Brazil, this dissertation seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary multilateralism, demonstrating that its

transformation occurs through multiple paths, rather than from a single normative or institutional model. Thus, the work argues that the future of multilateralism will depend less on the preservation or collapse of the traditional liberal order and more on the ability to accommodate different practices, values, and projects in an increasingly pluralistic international system.

Multilateralism and the Liberal International Order

The transformation of the International Order

The international order that governs relations between states and guides global coexistence is undergoing profound changes. This topic has been the subject of study by analysts and researchers in different parts of the world, especially considering the changes that have taken place in recent decades and the future possibilities for this system. The so-called Liberal International Order, built after the end of World War II with the implementation of large international organizations and their values, is now facing a crisis of credibility, action, and intense participation.

Institutions created to promote stability, cooperation, and development see their legitimacy questioned in the face of the rise of new powers, the advance of nationalist agendas, and the inability to respond effectively to global challenges such as climate change, major current conflicts, and economic inequalities. It is in this context that multilateralism - as the basis of this system - is also changing.

However, before discussing the current situation and its crisis, it is necessary to understand the concept of multilateralism, which occupies a central place in this international order. Jokela (2011) states that the era of globalization has led both policymakers and scholars to recognize the importance of multilateral cooperation. The growing interdependence between states after the Second World War has made it clear that many contemporary challenges, such as economic stability, wars, poverty, the environment, energy, and security, can only be addressed collectively. Thus, regional and global institutions based on multilateral treaties have come to be seen as fundamental pillars of the world order, representing an effort to go beyond the traditional logic of power and narrow national interests.

Theoretical perspectives on Multilateralism

The concept of multilateralism is, by nature, abstract and open to different interpretations within international relations. Ruggie (1992) defines it as the organization of relations between three or more states based on generalized principles of conduct, that is, shared rules that guide collective behavior without depending on the interests of each country. This concept served as the basis for the consolidation of the Liberal International Order created in the 20th century, in which multilateral institutions began to play a central role in promoting peace, stability, and global cooperation.

From a critical perspective, Robert Cox (1996) argues that multilateralism is not a neutral principle, but a political instrument that reflects and reproduces existing power relations, serving to legitimize the hegemony of the great powers and preserve the order built under Western leadership.

In contrast, G. John Ikenberry (2009) understands multilateralism as one of the pillars of the Liberal International Order, expressing a worldview based on common norms, free trade, international institutions, collective security, shared sovereignty, and problem-solving through international law. For the author, this order would be flexible enough to accommodate the emergence of emerging powers, such as China, on the assumption that it would accept and incorporate the liberal norms that underpin the global system.

The concept of Multilateralism is important for this article because this type of conduct is used by West Countries since the end of The Second World War, and

now, we have countries like China and Russia using multilateralism for their interest too in a world in a huge transformation.

The crisis of legitimacy

The post-Cold War international order, structured around United States hegemony, has progressively lost stability amid profound geopolitical, security, and systemic disruptions, including the expansion of transnational terrorism, the war between Russia and Ukraine, the global shock generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and a missing organization for leading with other countries with other values.

According to Cervo & Lessa (2023), one of the central components of the crisis of multilateralism lies in the inability to incorporate the diversity of values, identities, and perspectives of non-Western countries into the international system. The norms and institutions created within the Liberal International Order remain, to a large extent, guided by Western principles and values - such as democracy, market economies, and cooperation through international law - which limits the representativeness and legitimacy of its actions in the face of a much more pluralistic world due to the increased participation and growth of emerging countries such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Mexico.

It is important to highlight that in this dissertation, legitimacy is understood as a socially constructed and context dependent concept, rather than a fixed or universally agreed standard. As Acharya (2014) argues, in a plural and increasingly multiplex international order, legitimacy is no longer monopolized by liberal democratic norms, but is contested and reshaped by diverse historical, cultural, and

political experiences. This analytical approach allows for a differentiated assessment of how states construct legitimacy within multilateral institutions, without assuming liberal democracy as the sole benchmark.

Another decisive factor is the intensification of competition between the United States and China, which has been accentuated by Donald Trump's election in 2016 and the redefinition of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping. The Asian giant has shifted from an accommodating stance to a more prominent global role, marked by an increased military presence in the South China Sea and more assertive action in international forums. This intensification of relations contributes directly to the crisis of multilateralism, although it is not limited to it, by affecting the functioning of institutions and paralyzing decision-making mechanisms. The case of the UN and, above all, the World Health Organization (WHO) during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this dynamic well, when the United States accused the organization of ideological bias and announced its temporary withdrawal (Cervo & Lessa, 2023).

According to authors Cervo & Lessa (2023, p. 7)

“The crisis of multilateralism can be defined, in general terms, as the inability of multilateral institutions and mechanisms to offer solutions to a range of issues relating to peace and security, pandemics, sustainable development and climate change, human rights and economic governance, to name the most relevant [...] This was already visible before the COVID pandemic, but after it, by being unable to respond satisfactorily to collective demands, multilateral

instruments incurred a crisis of legitimacy, which translated into a loss of trust and credibility in institutions" (author's translation).

Thus, although linked to the broader crisis in the international order, the crisis of multilateralism manifests itself in a specific and systemic way. Complex issues such as the realignment of global power, competition between the major powers, economic uncertainty, the crisis of liberalism, and the rise of right-wing and far-right governments are thus the main drivers of the contemporary global crisis. Added to these factors are health, immigration and environmental emergencies, which have become major transnational threats in the wake of the pandemic.

The fragility of the system that existed before 2020 became even more evident after the COVID-19 pandemic, generating a profound crisis, marked by a loss of trust and credibility in international organizations. In the face of this institutional paralysis, there is a tendency to replace universal multilateral forums with informal and restricted cooperation mechanisms. Instead of seeking reform and strengthening existing institutions, States have focused on bilateral cooperation and selective coalitions to circumvent the global decision-making impasse.

As Farah et al. (2023) analyze, in times of global crisis, states tend to turn inward, prioritizing their national agendas, which weakens the legitimacy and effectiveness of the multilateral system. This proliferation of alternative forms of governance reveals a structural transformation in the practice of multilateralism, which now coexists with parallel arrangements of limited scope. In addition, there is a rise in nationalist ideologies that blame globalization and the current system for the economic, social (with increased immigration, for example), and political crises.

The transformation of the Global Order

The movement toward institutional fragmentation, however, does not necessarily indicate the end of multilateralism, but rather its reconfiguration in the face of a changing global landscape. This post-war system, centered on universal institutions and Western leadership, may begin to give way to new, more flexible forms of cooperation, with their own specific and regional themes.

During the crisis of this system, there are countries and actors fighting for more voice and space within international institutions, often led by emerging powers or pluralistic coalitions seeking a more diversified distribution of power. Thus, the current crisis can be interpreted not only as a process of weakening, but also as the possibility of a transition to a new model of global governance, in which multilateralism becomes more fragmented, dynamic, and representative of different voices.

Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) exemplify this transition, in which new forces are shaping global governance and redefining the role of multilateralism in the 21st century.

From this perspective, Amitav Acharya (2014) proposes an interpretation that goes beyond the narrative of the decline of the US-led order. For the author, the question is not whether this order will survive, but how the current world is radically different from the Eurocentric system of the 19th century, with emerging powers now more diverse, geographically dispersed, and mostly non-Western. For the author, the current world is better understood as a multiplex order:

“The emerging world order is better described as a multiplex world. As with a multiplex theater, there would be a variety of plots (ideas, worldviews), actors, producers, and directors of world politics. A multiplex world comprises multiple key actors/producers/directors (including shape-shifting villains like terrorist groups) whose relationships are defined by complex forms of interdependence (Acharya, 2014, p.653)”.

Acharya (2014) describes this new configuration as a metaphor that refers to the idea of a multiplex cinema, where different plots, directors, and actors coexist, that is, multiple worldviews and ways of exercising power. Unlike simple multipolarity, the multiplex order involves not only major powers, but also regional actors, international organizations, transnational corporations, and non-state actors, whose relationships are shaped by complex economic, technological, and social interdependencies.

The advancement of countries such as China, India, and Brazil illustrates this historic transition: multilateralism is no longer the monopoly of the West and now expresses a plurality of centers of power and values, a movement that will be explored in the following chapters.

The rise of China and multilateralism with Chinese characteristics

John Mearsheimer (2001) argues that international institutions have minimal influence on the behavior of states and therefore offer little promise for global stability in the post-Cold War era. In contrast, Amitav Acharya (2014) argues that multilateralism plays an active role in promoting normative change in international politics, driven by increased economic interdependence, the emergence of transnational challenges, and the redistribution of power in the global system.

This tension between realist skepticism and liberal confidence in the transformative potential of international institutions is key to understanding China's ambiguous position in the contemporary order: a country that has grown and benefited from the existing liberal system but also seeks to reform it according to its own values and interests (Carty & Gu, 2021).

Chinese multilateralism reflects a dual trajectory of integration and contestation. To fully grasp this dynamic, it is necessary to examine both China's historical engagement with multilateral institutions and the theoretical and normative foundations that underpin its distinctive approach to multilateralism. The following sections therefore analyze China's rise within the international system, the conceptual bases of multilateralism with Chinese characteristics and the ways in which this approach translates into concrete practices of global governance.

From integration to affirmation: the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy (1978-2025).

The trajectory of Chinese foreign policy since the late 1970s reflects a process of gradual transformation from a peripheral and cautious actor to a global

power with growing ambitions in international governance. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated a transition with his policy of “reform and opening up,” marking China’s shift from ideological diplomacy to pragmatic engagement in the international economy and politics. At that moment in history, China’s priority was to promote national development and avoid the isolation that had characterized previous decades. Thus, the strategy of “hiding capabilities and biding time” sought to ensure the country's stability and growth without provoking external mistrust (Zhao, 2004).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Beijing understood that international economic integration could be a way to access markets, attract investment, and acquire foreign technology without renouncing political autonomy. Cheng (2017) notes that by participating in regional and international forums, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) – which it joined in 1991 – China sought to legitimize its rise through procedural engagement, while constructing an image of a responsible power within existing multilateral frameworks. This engagement also served as a diplomatic shield: by adhering to the rules of the international game, Beijing reduced the perception of threat among its neighbors and gained time and space to develop.

However, the Asian country did not consolidate itself regionally without resistance. Cheng (2017) states that the lack of trust and rivalry between China and Japan is probably the biggest obstacle to regional cooperation. Regional disputes and rising nationalism in both countries have prevented significant progress in building a cohesive Asian community.

Considering this rivalry, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has emerged as a key player in regional stability, defending: “the principle of open and non-exclusionary regionalism so as to retain its leadership role, but like

China, it insists on non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states” (Cheng, 2017, p. 6). This point is fundamental, as it highlights how China has used ASEAN to defend non-interference and national sovereignty - principles that structure the Chinese vision of regional and global governance.

It is important to note that at that time, the United States’ stance was also ambiguous. Washington sought to integrate China into the Order through a process of conditional engagement, as explained by Cheng (2017, p. 6): “inducing China to develop in a way which is compatible with American interests through encouragement and incentives as well as making certain options extremely costly.” The strategy behind US actions was to ensure that the country developed within the values and parameters of the Western order.

A significant turning point in China trajectory occurred during the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Unlike other regional powers, Beijing chose not to devalue its currency and provided financial assistance to countries severely affected by the crisis, such as Thailand and Indonesia. This decision contributed to consolidating China’s image as a stable and cooperative actor. As Cheng (2017, p. 19) observes, “the Chinese authorities’ attitude toward regional security and economic multilateral organizations changed from suspicion, to caution, and to supportiveness,” reflecting a broader shift from defensive diplomacy toward more active and institutionalized regional engagement.

China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 symbolized the formal recognition of its entry into multilateralism. For Cheng (2017), as a member of the WTO, China had to accept the existence of a global economic order and that the concept of sovereignty would have to comply with the Organization’s

rules. This formal acceptance of multilateral rules represented a historic milestone: China incorporated aspects of the international liberal system, but reinterpreted them in a pragmatic way (Zhao, 2004).

The major shift in Chinese foreign policy began in 2010 under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The principle of keeping a low profile and waiting for the right moment, was gradually replaced, and China started to act with protagonism, signaling a shift from more discreet diplomacy to more assertive and global action (Carty & Gu, 2021).

Carty and Gu (2021, p. 16) state that “President Xi Jinping believes the nation is rightfully entitled to play a part in the future shaping of this order.” It is important to note that this change reflected not only the self-confidence derived from China’s economic success, but also the perception that China was ready to influence the rules of global governance.

The creation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 symbolizes the maturity of this new phase. Both projects represent the strategic use of multilateralism as an instrument of economic expansion and soft power. The BRI seeks to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure and trade, creating a network of interdependence centered on Beijing, while the AIIB reshapes international financial governance by giving more voice to the Global South (Carty & Gu, 2021). Thus, China has gone from being a mere participant to an architect of new multilateral institutions, shaping norms and practices according to its own vision of order.

Starting in 2015, Xi consolidated the concept of the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” which began to guide all foreign policy. According to the GATE

Center (2023), the strategic focus of Chinese diplomacy during this period shifted from economic integration to global power projection, articulating growth, security, and identity. This agenda, referred to by analysts as “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy,” argues that China should contribute to the reform of the international order and offer “Chinese solutions” to global challenges. The goal is to reposition the country not only as a participant but as a provider of global public goods through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) (Lowy Institute, 2024).

At the same time, Xi has deepened the concept of comprehensive national security, which unifies domestic and foreign policy under the same logic. According to BeHorizon (2024), Chinese diplomacy now acts in close coordination with domestic priorities: such as political stability, technological development, and economic self-sufficiency. This perspective of “integral security” reinforces the quest for strategic independence in the face of Western attempts at containment and the vulnerabilities exposed by the trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Xi’s policy is also characterized by a balance between competition and cooperation with the West. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2025), China has intensified dialogue with countries in Southeast Asia, Europe, and Africa to reduce its dependence on the United States, promoting a multisectoral diplomatic network. This action aims to build a “balanced multipolar order,” in which China appears as a defender of multilateralism, but from a non-liberal logic. This strategy is reflected in a more assertive diplomacy - often referred to in the West as “wolf-warrior diplomacy” - in which Chinese diplomats publicly respond to criticism and defend the legitimacy of Beijing’s policies (Modern Diplomacy, 2025).

Another central element of Chinese foreign policy between 2015 and 2025 is the strengthening of technological and productive self-sufficiency. The “Made in China 2025” plan seeks to reduce dependence on foreign inputs and consolidate Chinese leadership in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, green energy, and artificial intelligence (Financial Times, 2024). This orientation is linked to global economic diplomacy, in which the state promotes agreements and investments aimed at ensuring secure, stable, and China-centered value chains.

The Theory of Chinese Multilateralism

Normative Foundations of Chinese Multilateralism

Chinese multilateralism is based on a conception of international order founded on the classic principles of the United Nations Charter. According to Carty and Gu (2021), Beijing believes that international law should be guided by sovereignty, equality among states, and non-intervention, elements that are essential to ensuring stability and justice in a multipolar global system. However, despite declaring formal adherence to international law and the core principles of the UN, China asserts that international law does not provide all the answers to contemporary challenges, due to the major changes in a globalized system that includes countries with such diverse cultures and societies that interact daily due to the globalized multilateral system. Therefore, the appropriate path would be to “seek consensus while reserving differences,” echoing the Chinese diplomatic tradition (Carty & Gu, 2021, p. 7).

Within this framework, the most visible and contested divergence between China and Western countries emerges in the field of human rights. Western interpretations often associate limitations on civil and political rights in China with its one-party political system, generating persistent mistrust toward Chinese governance and international behavior (Carty & Gu, 2021). From Beijing’s perspective, however, human rights should not be approached through a single universal model. As Carty and Gu (2021) argue, China advances an alternative understanding that emphasizes state sovereignty, social stability, and economic development as foundational conditions for the realization of rights.

These normative divergences become even more pronounced in debates surrounding intervention. While Western interpretations typically restrict the notion of intervention to armed force or material support for insurgent groups, the Chinese approach adopts a broader definition, encompassing political pressure, media campaigns, and international actions that may “undermine the authority and social stability of the state” (Carty & Gu, 2021). This divergence generates recurrent tensions in multilateral forums such as the United Nations Security Council, where Western actors frame certain interventions as legitimate instruments for protecting universal values, whereas China views them as violations of sovereignty and non-interference.

Another area worth highlighting among Sino-Western differences is the concept of developmental peace. The debate revolves around the priority between economic rights and political rights in the context of the Global South. Although China does not officially declare a hierarchy between these rights, “in practice it considers peace and stability to be the result of solid economic infrastructure and social development” (Carty & Gu, 2021, p. 9). This explains why Beijing is one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations but resists promoting liberal political institutions in developing countries, which it considers an exclusively domestic matter (Carty & Gu, 2021).

Thus, the differences between China and the West in the field of international peace and security are not limited to differences in strategy, but reflect distinct normative conceptions of development, sovereignty, and political legitimacy, anchored in their own ideological and historical traditions. These differences will be explored in greater depth in the next topic.

Ideological and philosophical differences: liberalism and Confucianism in multilateralism.

Chinese multilateralism draws upon a complex set of philosophical, historical, and normative references, including elements associated with Confucian philosophy, critical readings of international law, and a pragmatic interpretation of the global order. These references should not be understood as deterministically shaping Chinese foreign policy, but rather as intellectual and discursive resources selectively mobilized by Chinese policymakers.

To fully grasp the specificity of China's approach to multilateralism, it is therefore necessary to move beyond foreign policy practices alone and consider the broader worldview through which international norms and institutions are interpreted. As Carty and Gu (2021) argue, China does not reject the liberal international order per se but engages with it through a perspective distinct from that which historically informed European political thought. The result is a hybrid conception of multilateralism that combines selectively appropriated philosophical traditions, contemporary theoretical interpretations, and strategic pragmatism.

A first point to highlight is the difference regarding the role of the individual and the origin of norms in the political order. Within Western liberal philosophy, rules arise from contract agreements made between individuals who are considered autonomous, rational, and holders of innate rights. This logic, which is deeply influenced by European Contractualism, gave rise to international law that manifests itself primarily through formal treaties, written documents, and explicit accountability mechanisms.

In contrast, Confucian political thought offers an alternative understanding of norm formation. As Carty and Gu (2021) explain, within the Confucian tradition, norms are not primarily derived from voluntary contracts, but from rites: social practices that evolve gradually over time and are transmitted through repetition, social interaction, and historical continuity. From this perspective, individuals are not conceived as fully formed rights-bearing subjects prior to society; rather, moral agency and social responsibility are cultivated through progressive integration into social relationships.

It is within this philosophical framework that a second key element of Chinese political thought emerges: the emphasis on the coexistence of law and virtue in governance. Rather than advocating a purely legalistic model, the Chinese Communist Party has articulated an understanding in which the rule of law and the rule of virtue operate in parallel. As summarized by Carty and Gu (2021), “law and virtue coexist,” reflecting the view that social stability depends not only on institutional strength, but also on the moral conduct and credibility of political leadership (Carty & Gu, 2021, p. 20). In this conception, legal norms are more likely to produce order when they are embedded within a broader moral framework capable of fostering trust and social cohesion.

This perspective helps illuminate how elements associated with Confucian political thought inform Chinese interpretations of multilateralism, without implying a direct or deterministic relationship between philosophy and foreign policy behavior. Whereas liberal approaches tend to conceptualize international institutions as rational contractual arrangements among sovereign states, Confucian-inspired interpretations emphasize the gradual emergence of norms through accumulated practices, relationships of trust, and shared historical experience. In this view,

multilateral norms are understood less as externally imposed universal contracts and more as products of sustained interaction among states.

Chinese multilateralism, therefore, does not reject rules, but considers that rules only work when rooted in consolidated social practices and mediated by leaders capable of preserving harmony. This understanding reflects a selective articulation of philosophical traditions with pragmatic considerations, rather than a wholesale transplantation of Confucian principles into foreign policy.

It is important to note that this philosophical understanding also could help explain how China views international law in historical terms. Authors such as He and Sun (2019) argue that international law is not neutral and universal, but rather a cultural product deeply rooted in the European experience. Key concepts for the West, such as sovereignty, self-determination, and territorial integrity, were formulated within specific political contexts, such as the European religious wars, the Westphalian system, colonial expansion, and others.

For the authors, international law represents a unity of opposites between national interests and global values with cultural particularities and universalizing pretensions (He & Sun, 2019, p. 19). It is at this point that Chinese thinking meets Hans Morgenthau's classical realism, in which the author, like He and Sun (2019), rejects the idea that the international legal order can create states or establishing universal norms independently of power and history (Morgenthau, 1978).

This difference in perspective helps explain the dilemma faced by countries such as China, Brazil, and India. He and Sun (2019) argue that for these countries, fully accepting international laws conceived by the West would be to deny their historical experiences and identity; however, rejecting it would be to isolate

themselves from the global system. Countries in the Global South, even those with a long diplomatic tradition within the liberal order - such as Brazil - operate within norms that they did not create. Accepting liberal international law without reservation would mean denying their own historical trajectories and identities; rejecting it completely, on the other hand, would imply isolation. The solution, the authors argue, is “critical acceptance,” in which states actively participate in the international order while working to balance it culturally and normatively. This strategy of “critical acceptance” is at the heart of Chinese multilateralism and explains why Beijing is deeply engaged in existing institutions while building alternative arrangements that incorporate its own practices and values.

In this sense, Confucianism can be understood as an interpretive lens through which Chinese approaches to multilateralism may be articulated, rather than as a direct blueprint for institutional behavior. Drawing on this perspective, Chinese multilateral engagement tends to emphasize processes of interaction over rigid institutional design. Much like Confucian rites, which operate as norms internalized through repetition and social coexistence, multilateral practices are conceived as evolving through sustained engagement, gradually generating shared expectations and informal rules: a form of “international rite” emerging from the collective experience of states.

This process-oriented logic allows for flexibility, adaptability, and pragmatic adjustment to changing circumstances. At the same time, it can generate uncertainty for actors accustomed to formal legalism and procedural clarity associated with Western liberal institutional frameworks (Carty & Gu, 2021).

China and the Transformation of Global Multilateralism

China's consolidation as one of the major powers of the twenty-first century has unfolded alongside a broader transformation of multilateralism itself. Grounded in a historically informed skepticism toward universalist legal norms and shaped by a pragmatic reading of international politics, Beijing's engagement with multilateral institutions reflects both participation in and contestation of the existing liberal order. Rather than rejecting multilateralism outright, China has sought to reshape its norms and practices in ways that better accommodate plural civilizational models, state sovereignty, and developmental priorities.

This transition is part of what Acharya (2014) calls the aforementioned "multiplex order," in which the system is characterized by the coexistence of multiple centers of power, diverse regional norms, and distinct models of institutionality. However, this construction does not occur without tensions, and critics of Asian multilateralism point out that part of the Western academic community expected an evolution like that of the European Union—highly institutionalized and supranational, which is impossible at this stage (Cheng, 2017, p.6).

In addition, the role of the United States contributes to this limitation, although Washington does not openly oppose mechanisms such as ASEAN plus three (APT) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as Cheng (2017, p.6) states: "it would presumably closely monitor their activities to ensure that its interests would not be compromised."

However, even in this scenario, China has been able to expand its institutional leadership through projects such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and active participation in regional

mechanisms. It is important to note that these initiatives seek to offer alternatives to the Bretton Woods institutions, promoting a style of cooperation based on financing without political conditionality (Carty & Gu, 2021).

Another essential platform when discussing the transformation of multilateralism led by China is BRICS, which has regained prominence after the entry of several members in recent years. According to Cheng (2017), Chinese literature identifies the group as “a significant international actor,” whose influence extends beyond the economic field. Chinese experts argue that BRICS should “continue to deepen cooperation and expand its collective influence,” using the platform as an instrument of balance against the West (Cheng, 2017, p. 23), something that has become evident with the entry of non-Western countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Iran. Chinese policy toward the group is essentially realistic: it is a space to project power, strengthen alliances with emerging powers, and promote the “democratization of international relations.”

However, China's discourse on global democratization faces a clear limitation: the absence of democratization in its own domestic political system. As Cheng (2017) observes, “the international community cannot help noticing that there is not much democracy in China, in contrast to India, Brazil, and South Africa” (p. 23). This contradiction weakens China's ability to claim moral legitimacy to lead reforms in the international order due to the lack of trust in an autocratic government. Furthermore, the lack of respect for human rights within the country is something that, according to Cheng (2017, p. 23), “tarnishes its international image and weakens its appeal for a harmonious world.”

While China's limited domestic democratization undermines its legitimacy according to liberal normative standards, this does not imply the absence of legitimacy altogether. Rather, China constructs legitimacy through alternative mechanisms, particularly procedural engagement in multilateral institutions and performance-based outcomes related to economic development and stability. As Acharya (2014) emphasize, legitimacy in international politics is socially constructed and varies according to the normative frameworks adopted by different actors. Recognizing these multiple dimensions of legitimacy allows for a more nuanced interpretation of China's multilateral behavior, avoiding the assumption that legitimacy is synonymous with liberal democratic governance.

Nevertheless, on the geopolitical front, the strengthening of mechanisms such as BRICS, SCO, and G20 allows China to coordinate coalitions of emerging countries and articulate agendas for global governance reform. This action reinforces the perception of China as a representative of the Global South, even if such leadership is received with caution by some countries that fear power asymmetries. As Carty and Gu (2021, p. 26) summarize, "multilateralism is an absolute priority for China," as it is through multilateralism that Beijing seeks to shape the norms, structures, and agendas of the international order.

In short, multilateralism with Chinese characteristics reflects China's evolution from a pragmatically inserted actor in the liberal system to an active reformer of the international order. The country combines alternative institutions, civilizational narratives, and geopolitical strategies to mediate its rise and expand its leadership role. Thus, China becomes a central player in the transition to a multiplex order, in which different models of multilateralism—liberal, developmentalist, and Asian—coexist and challenge each other.

Brazil and the Multilateralism

Unlike Beijing, whose international trajectory is characterized by an ambiguous relationship with the Liberal Order and tensions between domestic values and Western norms, Brazil has developed a foreign policy historically aligned with the central principles of contemporary multilateralism. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Brazilian diplomacy has been guided by the normative standards of the International Order.

As Cervo and Bueno (2008) observe, Brazil's international integration is based on building prestige, credibility, and international cooperation, rather than on rigid alliances or power struggles. Thus, while Chinese multilateralism asserts itself as a contestatory project, Brazilian multilateralism emerges as a strategy of participation, consensus, and the pursuit of autonomy within the rules of the liberal order, as more as reformist legalist multilateralism.

This chapter examines the historical evolution of Brazilian diplomacy, its normative foundations, and its role in global multilateralism, highlighting the continuities and ruptures that have marked successive governments - from Rio Branco and Rui Barbosa to FHC, Lula, Dilma, Temer, Bolsonaro, and Lula III. Based on this trajectory, it is possible to assess Brazil's role in the contemporary transformation of the international order and understand how its normative vision dialogues, converges, or diverges from the global dynamics analyzed in the previous chapter.

Brazilian foreign policy: autonomy, tradition, and international projection.

Brazilian foreign policy has its historical roots in the early 20th century, when Brazilian Foreign Minister Barão do Rio Branco defined three permanent vectors for the country's international integration: defense of its territory, pragmatic coexistence with major powers, and regional priority. These principles gave rise to an approach marked by the peaceful resolution of disputes, respect for international law, and universalism, which became defining features of Brazilian foreign policy (Fonseca, 2019).

Rui Barbosa's participation in the second Hague Conference in 1907 deepened this vision by defending sovereign equality among states, inaugurating an idea of international recognition of Brazil as a participatory country and a rising power. Thus, from early on, Brazilian foreign policy has viewed multilateralism as a tool for overcoming material limitations and enhancing external prestige (Stuenkel, 2010).

The re-democratization after the military governments in the 1980s and the advent of the post-Cold War order intensified this movement. Foreign policy came to understand multilateralism as a privileged space for strengthening autonomy, development, and international presence, leaving aside the traditional dependence on bilateral alliances (Fonseca, 2019).

At the end of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's second term (1995-2002), due to the international situation, such as the financial and currency crisis of 1999 and the strengthening of the unilateral stance of the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Brazilian government increased its multilateral approach and diversified its relations, drawing closer to other regional powers. The FHC administration opened doors to consolidate democracy and project Brazil's image

abroad as a country that adheres to universal norms and values and peaceful conduct in international forums. As Celso Lafer (2000) states, multilateral forums represent the best platform for the country to exercise its competence in defending national interests.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's first two terms in office are widely recognized as the period of Brazil's greatest international prominence since re-democratization, often described as a phase of Brazilian global ascendance (Ribeiro, 2024). Under the guideline of an “active and proud” foreign policy, a concept defended by Amorim (2022), Brazilian diplomacy articulated international leadership with the strengthening of domestic capacities, driven by a favorable economic environment and the construction of a stable political base at the domestic level (Ribeiro, 2024).

During this period, Brazil moved from the strategy of autonomy through participation, typical of FHC, to autonomy through diversification, expanding alliances with the Global South, reducing traditional dependencies, and seeking greater symmetry in its external relations (Fonseca, 2019). As Hurrell (2009) observes, Lula's foreign policy combined a critical view of the international system with a deep optimism that there was room for assertive diplomacy by an emerging country.

This strategy resulted in simultaneous action in various formal multilateral mechanisms such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the United Nations Security Council, and the Human Rights Council, as well as smaller ones such as BRICS, IBSA (the South-South cooperation group between India, Brazil, and South Africa) , BASIC (a coalition of Brazil, South Africa, India, and China in climate negotiations), and G4 (an alliance between Brazil, Germany, India, and

Japan to support UNSC reform), forming coalitions aimed at expanding the influence of emerging powers and reforming governance structures (Casarões, 2022). The complementarity between multilateralism and minilateralism sought to overcome the rigidity of post-World War II institutions, where Brazil still did not have representation commensurate with its international ambition.

Brazil's engagement in Haiti symbolized this moment of external projection. At the request of the United States, Lula assumed military leadership of MINUSTAH. Between 2004 and 2017, Brazil employed about 37,000 military personnel and invested approximately R\$2 billion in the operation, a third of which was reimbursed by the UN, strengthening its legitimacy in international security (Ribeiro, 2024).

In the regional arena, the creation of UNASUR in 2008 represented the main instrument of Lula's strategic project for South America. The organization was structured as an alternative to the Organization of American States (OAS), prioritizing political integration, infrastructure, health, security, and education, in a clear break with the liberal regionalism centered on trade in the 1990s (Ribeiro, 2024). This regional project expressed a more ideological and revisionist South-South diplomacy in relation to the asymmetries of the international system.

There was also a significant increase in spending on international cooperation: investments in technical cooperation rose from around R\$10 million in 2005 to approximately R\$120 million in 2010, representing the largest increase ever recorded at that time (Ribeiro, 2024, p. 114). The goal was to position Brazil as a provider of global public goods and a preferred partner of the Global South, reinforcing solidarity diplomacy and normative leadership.

Brazilian revisionism, although moderate, focused especially on the areas of international security and finance. In the first case, activism for the reform of the UN Security Council stood out, articulated within the G4 on the basis of the argument that the current composition reflected the geopolitics of the Cold War (Casarões, 2022). In the latter, the structuring of BRICS in 2009 represented a decisive move to challenge the exclusive protagonism of the Bretton Woods institutions, especially after the 2008 crisis.

In addition, Brazil took a leading role in the WTO as the voice of developing countries through the G20 trade group, directly confronting the protectionist policies of the United States and the European Union. Issues such as combating hunger, reducing poverty, social equality, sustainability, and human rights also took center stage, reinforcing the coherence between domestic values and international positions (Flemmes, 2010).

After years of ascendance under the Lula administration, the following period was marked by a retraction in Brazilian foreign policy, frustrating Brazil's ideals of becoming one of the power centers of a new global order (Ribeiro, 2024). An international economic crisis, internal political crisis, and the rise of the right wing in a world completely different from the 2000s forced the retraction of Brazilian foreign policy. Fonseca (2019) states that there were no changes in the content of foreign policy itself, but there was a decrease in its intensity, given the presidential indifference attributed to this domain.

Despite representing different political projects, the governments of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) and Michel Temer (2016-2018) followed a similar trajectory in the multilateral field. In both cases, Brazil's international actions were conditioned

by the domestic economic crisis, internal political instability, and an increasingly adverse geopolitical environment (Casarões, 2022).

At the systemic level, multilateral forums lost momentum after the 2008 crisis, and the growing geopolitical rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia emptied agendas that were previously priorities for Brazil, such as cooperative security, climate change, and human rights. The UN Security Council has once again been paralyzed in its decision-making, while multilateral and regional trade blocs have fragmented in the face of the global recession (Casarões, 2022).

Internally, Brazil faced severe economic deterioration and political conflicts that resulted in the rapid loss of its international standing; as Casarões (2022) emphasizes, this scenario buried Brazil's desire to become a world power. The decision not to renew its candidacy for the Security Council after the 2010–2011 biennium was interpreted as a clear sign of renouncing the G4's ambition. At the same time, there was a reduction in engagement in peace operations and conflict mediation initiatives, contributing to Brazil's withdrawal from areas where it had gained credibility in previous years (Casarões, 2022).

At the normative level, Dilma Rousseff's governments resumed more forceful positions in the field of human rights, especially in relation to the condemnation of violations committed by other states in multilateral forums, which generated friction with traditional partners in the Global South and undermined part of the coalitions built during Lula's government (Cervo & Lessa, 2014). Although Brazil played a leading diplomatic role in the 2015 Paris Agreement climate negotiations, domestic environmental policies began to move in the opposite direction, given institutional

weakening and the advance of more predatory agribusiness interests, a contradiction quickly noticed by the international community (Calixto, 2017).

Under Michel Temer, the downturn worsened: budget cuts, delays in paying contributions to international organizations, and successive absences from high-level meetings reinforced the perception of abandonment of regional leadership and multilateral engagement (Casarões, 2022). The country adopted a reactive and technocratic profile, prioritizing economic normalization and avoiding initiatives that would require diplomatic costs or political resources.

Thus, the Dilma–Temer period represented a structural change in Brazil's international project: the country ceased to seek revisionist protagonism and turned to a low-profile foreign policy, marked by a reduction in the scope of diplomatic action and the erosion of the reputational capital accumulated in the previous decade.

The Jair Bolsonaro administration (2018–2022) represented an unprecedented break with the historical tradition of multilateral engagement in Brazilian foreign policy. Since the presidential campaign, Bolsonaro's speeches have focused on the ineffectiveness of the United Nations and what Bolsonarism calls “globalism.” Multilateral institutions were portrayed as threats to Brazil's national values and sovereignty, with criticism that aligns with the rising far-right populist rhetoric in the West (Casarões, 2022).

According to Casarões (2022), this change marked the phase of “multilateralism as antagonism”: a foreign policy that not only distanced itself from multilateral institutions but openly rejected them as part of an ideological project. This stance was driven by the leadership of Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo, when Brazil left the global pact on migration, refused to host COP-25, and took

conservative positions on human rights, aligning itself with authoritarian regimes and ultra-nationalist governments in the United Nations (Casarões, 2022).

At the same time, Bolsonaro's criticism of multilateralism had direct consequences for the functioning of diplomacy: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was stripped of its role as the formulator of foreign policy, losing ground to internal pressure groups with fragmented and often contradictory agendas. This shift in diplomatic authority contributed to the disorganization of the country's international integration and weakened Brazil's traditional place in global governance (Casarões, 2022).

However, despite the disruptive rhetoric, influential sectors within the Bolsonaro government sought to preserve their agendas, such as the military, which advocated Brazil's return to the CSUN; religious groups, which began to occupy international human rights forums to defend domestic agendas; ruralists, who pressed for agricultural liberalization and greater activism in the WTO; and economic liberals who insisted on closer ties with the OECD (Casarões, 2022).

Thus, as Casarões (2022) summarizes, in the Bolsonaro administration, multilateralism was combated in rhetoric but instrumentalized in practice in a fragmented and poorly coordinated manner. The contradiction between discourse and behavior did not, however, prevent the erosion of Brazil's international reputation, the loss of political influence, and diplomatic isolation, especially in the areas of climate, environment, and human rights, which were once pillars of Brazilian soft power.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's return to the presidency in 2023 has put the reformist legalist multilateralism back at the center of Brazilian foreign policy after

years of retrenchment and antagonism. However, the current international landscape is significantly more complex than the one that favored the president's first two terms. The 2020s are marked by strong geopolitical polarization and growing competition between the United States and China, which narrows the possibilities for the autonomous rise of middle powers such as Brazil (Ribeiro, 2024).

In this context, Brazil faces material and strategic limitations that affect its international credibility. In 2023, the country declined an invitation to once again lead a peacekeeping mission in Haiti, a role it had performed with distinction for 13 years in MINUSTAH. According to Ribeiro (2024), the refusal indicated a low capacity to sustain international security commitments, weakening Brazil's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

In terms of emerging coalitions, BRICS was expanded with new members and began to play a more ambitious role in reforming the global economic order, especially under Chinese influence. Brazil's presence in the bloc, although it ensures international visibility, now plays a more moderating role, acting as a possible bridge between the West and the East, and no longer as a central coordinating actor (Ribeiro, 2024).

Regionally, Lula sought to relaunch UNASUR as part of a South American reintegration project aligned with South-South cooperation. However, Chile and Uruguay's public refusals to return to the organization revealed a more fragmented regional scenario and less receptivity to Brazilian leadership, even among politically aligned governments. The crisis between Venezuela and Guyana also highlighted Brazil's military limitations, reducing its ability to influence its priority surroundings (Ribeiro, 2024).

On the global security agenda, the war in Ukraine has placed Brazil in a delicate position. Although it was the only BRICS country to vote in the UN General Assembly to condemn the Russian invasion in 2023, the government rejected requests to send ammunition to Kyiv, seeking to preserve its policy of non-intervention and maintaining dialogue with all sides. The joint peace proposal presented by Brazil and China in May 2024 reinforces Brazil's image as a diplomatic mediator, albeit with limited influence in the global balance of power (Ribeiro, 2024).

Despite these efforts, Lula also missed opportunities for normative leadership in the Global South, such as in the Palestinian crisis and episodes of regional sovereignty violations, in which Mexico, Turkey, and South Africa took stronger and more visible stances (Burges, 2015).

At the same time, US domestic politics represent an additional challenge. Donald Trump's return to the White House intensifies the crisis of multilateralism and may generate political and economic risks for Brazil. Recent tariff measures adopted by the United States against Brazil illustrate how unilateral decisions by major powers, often associated with internal political disputes and external perceptions of domestic democratic stability, can restrict the room for maneuver of middle-power countries, even when they are fully integrated and committed to the multilateral order. Meanwhile, Trump's unilateralism reinforces the need for Brazil not to depend exclusively on the West and to expand partnerships with China, Russia, and the Global South.

Brazil's diplomatic strategy seeks to avoid direct confrontations with Washington, while maintaining flexibility to take advantage of international disorder as an opportunity for autonomous projection.

On the other hand, normative issues, especially the fight against hunger and poverty, have once again taken on an identity-defining role in Brazilian diplomacy. The Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty, launched during Brazil's presidency of the G20 in 2024, reinforces the country's tradition of leadership in global social agendas. The success of this initiative, however, will depend on Brazil's ability to mobilize international resources compatible with its proposed ambition (Ribeiro, 2024).

In summary, Lula's third term combines a resumption of international ambition with severe restrictions on power. Brazil remains an advocate for reforms in global governance and the valorization of the Global South, but its ability to convert discourse into concrete influence depends on more things than he expected.

The theory of Brazilian multilateralism

Foundations of Brazilian multilateralism

Unlike China, Brazil has built its foreign policy because of early and relatively continuous involvement in the central institutions of the liberal international order. It shares fundamental elements of the Western political philosophy that underpins this order, such as the centrality of legality and international law, the value of individual freedoms, property, and normative predictability (Lafer, 2017).

This normative orientation is formally supported by the 1988 Federal Constitution itself, which establishes the principles governing Brazil's international relations. Among them are the prevalence of human rights, self-determination of peoples, non-intervention, equality among states, the defense of peace, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, cooperation among peoples for the progress of humanity, and the granting of political asylum. The incorporation of these principles into the constitutional text gives Brazilian foreign policy legal weight and internal legitimacy, reinforcing the country's historic commitment to multilateralism, international law, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. In this sense, Brazil's actions in the international system are not based solely on strategic choices made in response to specific circumstances, but on an institutionalized normative basis that guides and limits the State's foreign policy.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Brazilian diplomatic tradition has consolidated international law as a central instrument for asserting national sovereignty. The actions of Barão do Rio Branco at the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a pattern of dispute resolution based on negotiation, arbitration, and recourse to international legal norms, allowing national borders to be defined without resorting to war. This legacy gave peaceful dispute resolution a foundational status in Brazilian foreign policy and contributed to the formation of a diplomatic ethos marked by legalism, moderation, and the pursuit of international legitimacy (Ricupero, 2000).

This legalistic orientation explains Brazil's historical engagement in multilateral institutions. The country participated in the League of Nations, has been present since the founding of the United Nations, and maintains, to this day, the tradition of opening the UN General Assembly's General Debate annually. These

elements reflect a fundamental belief in multilateralism as a privileged space for political mediation, the construction of legitimacy, and the expansion of international influence. For a country that does not have significant military power, multilateralism is conceived as a rational strategy for international integration, capable of expanding its margin of action in a system marked by profound power asymmetries (Lima, 2005).

From a theoretical point of view, this conception brings Brazil closer to a liberal-institutionalist tradition in international relations, according to which international society, although anarchic, is regulated by shared norms, institutions, and practices. International law is understood as the common language of diplomacy and as a mechanism for predictability and stability, even though it is acknowledged to be permeated by inequalities and selectivity. In this sense, Brazil's commitment to multilateralism does not imply naive adherence to the liberal order, but rather a conscious bet on the possibility of gradual reform of international institutions through normative and institutional engagement (Lafer, 2017).

At the same time, Brazilian foreign policy has developed a critical reading of the asymmetries of the international order. The defense of multilateralism coexists with the perception that norms and institutions can be instrumentalized by developed countries to justify selective interventions in developing states. For this reason, Brazil's commitment to international cooperation is inseparable from the defense of sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention, understood not as isolation, but as protection of decision-making autonomy in the face of external pressures. Multilateralism, in this sense, is conceived simultaneously as a mechanism for cooperation and as an arena for dispute, especially relevant for countries in the Global South (Cervo, 2010).

More than a principle, Brazilian multilateralism can be interpreted theoretically as a strategy for projecting power and expanding international autonomy. For countries with medium power and limited material resources, active participation in multilateral institutions is a central instrument of international integration, allowing them to expand their negotiating capacity, visibility, and legitimacy in the international system (Saraiva, 2010). In this reading, multilateral engagement stems not only from shared values, but also from the perception that these forums offer privileged channels for reducing power asymmetries and expanding diplomatic room for maneuvering.

This interpretation is supported by readings that combine a critical view of the structure of the international system with a commitment to active diplomacy. Andrew Hurrell (2009) observes that, during the Lula administrations, there was, on the one hand, a clear perception of the inequalities and asymmetries of the international order and, on the other, a belief that there was still room for an assertive foreign policy capable of exploiting institutional and normative loopholes. Similarly, Stuenkel (2010) points out that the limitation of Brazilian military power led the country to repeatedly resort to multilateralism as a mechanism for projecting influence, expanding international visibility, and exercising soft power.

In this sense, Brazilian multilateralism combines elements of liberal institutionalism with a fundamentally realistic pragmatism. International norms and institutions are not seen as capable of eliminating power asymmetries, but as instruments that can partially reduce them and expand the state's negotiating autonomy. It is, therefore, a strategic multilateralism, in which institutional engagement is guided by the search for greater room for maneuvering and international recognition.

In summary, Brazilian multilateralism can be understood as an approach that combines belonging to the liberal international order, critical awareness of its structural asymmetries, and a strategic practice aimed at expanding autonomy and international influence. By relying on international law, multilateral institutions, and diplomacy as central instruments of foreign policy, Brazil seeks to assert itself as a reformist actor committed to the gradual transformation of the current international order.

The philosophy of Brazilian multilateralism

Beyond its normative and legal foundations, Brazilian multilateralism can be understood from its own ideological basis, built historically and deeply related to the country's international identity. Unlike the central powers of the international system, Brazil has not established itself as a hegemonic formulator of the norms of the liberal order, but neither does it position itself as an external or revisionist actor in relation to it. This intermediate condition has shaped a conception of foreign policy that combines belonging to the current international order with a critical reading of its structural asymmetries.

In this sense, Amado Luiz Cervo (2008) argues that Brazilian foreign policy is guided by its own concepts, formed from national historical experience and its qualified peripheral insertion into the international system. From a constructivist approach, this orientation can be understood as the result of a process of social construction of Brazilian international identity. As Mesquita (2016) argues, identities and interests are not exogenous or fixed, but are formed endogenously and intersubjectively, as states participate in collective meanings and position themselves

in specific institutional contexts. Brazil's international identity, therefore, does not stem solely from its material capabilities, but from shared beliefs, expectations, and meanings that can be divided into certain dimensions (Mesquita, 2016).

The first dimension outlined by the author is referred to as socioeconomic and can be considered the basis of Brazilian politics. According to Lafer (2009), economic development is a goal sought equally by the state and the population, becoming the profound force that has most marked Brazilian identity. The issue of economic and social development is not unique to Brazil, but also to the rest of Latin America and the underdeveloped world, which has first and third world realities within its borders. Thus, the goal of development appeared on the Brazilian diplomatic agenda in the 1930s, based on two points: preserving a space for national autonomy and identifying external resources that could be mobilized to meet development needs (Lafer, 2009).

The political dimension is another point studied by Mesquita (2016) to better understand the international identity of the Brazilian state. The literature points to political autonomy as an objective of Brazilian foreign policy, which has been used in different ways at different times in the country's history. The author states that from the perspective of peripheral countries, which deal with hierarchical constraints in the international system, the concept of autonomy is linked to a political project of autonomous formulation and implementation of foreign policy (Mesquita, 2016).

In the Brazilian case, the Brazil-US relationship has been used as an indicator of the degree of autonomy or alignment, even though Brazil professes a Western affiliation. However, with the plasticity of the concept of the West, Brazil can

navigate between North and South – or the West and the Global South – according to circumstances and interests (Mesquita, 2016).

Mesquita (p.16, 2016) states that:

“It can be concluded that the road to autonomy had its peaks and valleys of rapprochement with hegemonic countries, due to external causes (World War II and the Cold War) and internal causes (the military coup in 1964, the financial crisis, and neoliberal reforms in the 1990s). However, over the last 70 years, the country has shown a pattern of moving away from automatic alignments as its economic prosperity allowed. Thus, economic development and political autonomy can be seen as two sides of the same coin (author's translation).”

One consequence of this constant transition between autonomy and alignment is the crisis of political belonging in the Brazilian state. As a middle power, the South American giant does not belong to the category of either a great or a small power, possessing an ability to mediate that has been widely used by Brazilian diplomacy (Mesquita, 2016).

Another dimension addressed by the author is the ethnic-cultural dimension. Miscegenation is one of the defining elements of Brazil, with a population of racial matrices that were transplanted and generated a new people (Ribeiro, 2006). Given this, Brazilian diplomatic discourse does not fail to extol miscegenation and its virtues, such as pluralism, multi-ethnicity, openness to cultural integration, and the syncretism of diversity (Mesquita, 2016). Thus, a recurring appeal to multicultural

credentials in presidential speeches is used to legitimize and naturalize rapprochement with peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Another profound force that defines Brazil and that should be mentioned is its territory and region, the so-called continental dimension. The “Giant of the Southern Cone” is among the so-called continental countries, along with the United States, Russia, India, and China. This dimension is valued in Brazilian diplomacy through the idea of physical grandeur and preserved unity, despite its vastness and heterogeneity. For the state, greatness implies grandeur and explains how Brazil sees itself as an important force in the international system (Mesquita, 2016).

The normative dimension occupies a central place in understanding Brazilian multilateralism and constitutes one of the most stable elements of its foreign policy. As Cervo (2008) points out, principles such as the peaceful resolution of disputes, legalism, normative multilateralism, cooperative and non-confrontational foreign policy, and cordiality in dealing with neighbors constitute “historical accumulations of Brazilian diplomacy” that have shaped the country’s international actions over time. These traits are not merely circumstantial choices, but consolidated patterns of conduct, transmitted institutionally and reinforced by diplomatic practice. In this sense, Brazilian multilateralism is not limited to a short-term instrumental strategy, but takes on a normative character, anchored in the appreciation of international law, legal predictability, and cooperation as the foundations of the international order.

Lafer (2009) complements this interpretation by highlighting that the pursuit of regional peace has always been a permanent objective of Brazilian foreign policy. The fact that Brazil shares extensive borders with several South American countries and yet has not experienced any interstate armed conflicts for over a century

reinforces its image as a long-standing actor committed to regional stability. Added to this representation are other structuring principles, such as the promotion of multilateralism, international law, and peaceful conflict resolution, which are enshrined in the Brazilian Constitution. Thus, the normative dimension of Brazilian multilateralism not only guides its international insertion but also contributes to the construction of an external identity associated with legality, moderation, and institutional legitimacy.

This normative and identity-based foundation provides the backdrop against which Brazil projects its concrete actions in multilateral forums. By combining a historical commitment to international law, a commitment to multilateralism, and the defense of peaceful dispute resolution, Brazilian foreign policy has built a reputation that enhances its capacity for dialogue, even if it does not eliminate the structural limitations arising from its position in the international system. It is from this combination of normative principles, international identity, and strategic calculation that it becomes possible to understand how Brazil acts, in practice, in contemporary multilateralism.

Brazil's role in multilateralism

Brazilian multilateralism can be understood as a strategy for international integration marked by an intermediate position in the international system. Brazil is part of the liberal international order, actively participates in its institutions, and shares core normative principles such as the value of international law, multilateral cooperation, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. At the same time, its status as a middle power imposes clear limits on its ability to influence the formulation and

application of global rules. This ambiguous position means that multilateralism functions, for Brazil, as a space for belonging to the existing order and as an arena for contesting structural asymmetries (Fonseca, 2019).

Unlike major powers, Brazil does not have sufficient coercive instruments to project power. In this context, multilateralism operates as a strategic compensation mechanism, allowing the country to increase its international visibility, build political coalitions, and exert influence through norms, institutions, and legal practices.

Within the United Nations, Brazil's participation is marked by its defense of universalist multilateralism and its pursuit of international legitimacy through engagement in broad normative agendas, such as human rights, development, and international security. Brazil's leadership of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) between 2004 and 2017 exemplifies this strategy, combining practical contributions to peacekeeping with the strengthening of Brazil's credentials as a responsible actor in the international system (Visentini & Reis da Silva, 2010). Although this engagement has not translated into concrete advances in Security Council reform, it has reinforced Brazil's image as an advocate for the peaceful resolution of disputes and the legitimate use of multilateral institutions.

In addition, Brazil's multilateral action has been marked by its ability to navigate between the major Western powers and rising emerging powers, such as China, maintaining cooperative relations with both poles. This intermediate position allows Brazil to engage in dialogue with different centers of power simultaneously, reinforcing its image as a moderating actor and legitimate interlocutor in an increasingly fragmented international system. At the same time, this strategy

highlights the limits of its structural influence, since the capacity for mediation does not automatically translate into decision-making power or lasting institutional leadership.

Similarly, Brazil's actions in the WTO highlight the strategic use of economic multilateralism as a collective bargaining tool. Its leadership in the creation of the G20 trade group allowed Brazil to articulate the interests of developing countries and confront the protectionist practices of central economies, expanding its negotiating capacity in an institutionalized environment (Visentini & Reis da Silva, 2010). These initiatives reinforce the centrality of legalism in Brazilian foreign policy by demonstrating how international law can be mobilized by countries with limited material capacities to expand their room for maneuver in the international system.

At the same time, Brazilian multilateralism is distinguished by its strong sensitivity to domestic dynamics. As a democratic country, Brazil's foreign policy is significantly conditioned by changes in government, which results in important variations in the orientation, intensity, and content of its multilateral actions. Unlike China, whose foreign policy has greater strategic continuity, Brazilian multilateralism takes different forms depending on the political project in power, oscillating between a more active and reformist stance and moments of retraction or antagonism towards international institutions (Casarões, 2022).

This characteristic makes Brazilian multilateralism less stable and predictable, but also more permeable to internal normative and ideological disputes. Under governments such as those of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, multilateralism was mobilized as an instrument of reformist leadership, with an emphasis on South-South cooperation, the democratization of global governance, and the expansion of

international autonomy. In contrast, periods of less engagement or rhetorical confrontation with multilateral institutions have highlighted the limits of this strategy when not accompanied by domestic consensus and sustained material capacity (Ribeiro, 2024).

Presidential diplomacy plays an important role in this process by acting as a political amplifier of Brazil's multilateral engagement. The direct involvement of the head of state in international summits and forums helps to increase the country's visibility and signal strategic priorities, although it does not replace the professional diplomacy conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During Lula's third term, there was an attempt to reposition Brazil as a reformist actor and mediator, especially on issues such as combating hunger, sustainable development, and global governance reform, albeit in a more fragmented and less favorable international context than that of the 2000s (Ribeiro, 2024).

In short, Brazil's role in multilateralism reflects the tensions inherent in the condition of a country that belongs to the international liberal order but does not occupy a central position of power within its structure. By shifting between normative compliance and political contestation, and by adapting its foreign policy to changes in government, Brazil uses multilateralism as a strategy to project influence and seek relative autonomy, even though it remains exposed to the asymmetries and limitations imposed by the contemporary international system.

Considering these elements, Brazilian multilateralism can be conceptualized as a form of reformist multilateralism. Rather than rejecting the liberal international order, Brazil has historically sought to reform it from within, advocating greater inclusiveness, legal equality, and representativeness in global governance structures.

This reformist orientation reflects Brazil's dual position as a country that belongs to the liberal order while remaining critically aware of its structural asymmetries. Multilateral institutions are thus understood not as fixed expressions of power hierarchies, but as arenas open to negotiation, contestation, and gradual transformation through normative engagement and coalition-building.

China and Brazil in the transformation of contemporary multilateralism.

Distinct patterns of multilateral engagement

A comparative analysis of Chinese and Brazilian multilateral engagement strategies reveals distinct patterns of action, deeply conditioned by their relative positions of power, historical trajectories, and relations with the liberal international order. Although both actively participate in multilateral institutions and formally defend principles such as sovereignty and non-intervention, China and Brazil use multilateralism in different ways, reflecting divergent forms of transformation of the contemporary international order.

China, with its Confucian philosophy, presents a pattern of engagement characterized by strategic continuity, centralized decision-making, and normative pragmatism. Its actions in the international system are guided by a realistic interpretation in which norms and institutions are functional instruments, subordinate to the preservation of sovereignty, internal stability, and the gradual projection of power. In this context, Beijing participates in existing institutions but simultaneously promotes alternative mechanisms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative, contributing to the institutional diversification of multilateralism without openly breaking with the existing order, but showing that there are alternatives beyond those known and used by the West.

Brazil, for its part, has a pattern of engagement marked by the pursuit of normative legitimacy, mediation, and internal reform. Integrated into the liberal international order since its formation, the country relies on universalist multilateralism as its main instrument of international projection, compensating for material limitations with international law, diplomacy, and relationship building.

Unlike China, Brazilian multilateralism is not based on the creation of alternative institutions, but also on attempts to increase the representativeness and equity of existing institutions, as evidenced by its recurring defense of reform of the United Nations Security Council and collective action.

Another key difference lies in the stability of these strategies over time. While Chinese foreign policy is highly consistent, anchored in a centralized political system and long-term strategic guidelines, Brazilian multilateralism is deeply conditioned by changing governments and the internal dynamics of a democracy. As a result, the intensity and orientation of Brazil's multilateral action vary according to the government in power, oscillating between periods of reformist leadership, retraction, and institutional antagonism. This variability contrasts with the relative predictability of Chinese action and is a fundamental element in understanding the limits and scope of the Brazilian strategy, which deals with fluctuations in its international performance.

Despite these differences, both countries contribute to the transformation of contemporary multilateralism by challenging, albeit in different ways, the idea of a static and homogeneous international order. China does so through pragmatic contestation and institutional diversification; Brazil, through mediation, discursive reform, and the expansion of normative agendas. Thus, a comparison between the two cases shows that the transformation of the international order does not occur exclusively through rupture or replacement, but also through gradual adaptations, alternative practices, and reinterpretations of the role of multilateral institutions.

Transformation through contestation and reform

A comparison between Chinese and Brazilian strategies for multilateral engagement shows that the transformation of contemporary multilateralism is neither uniform nor does it follow a single pattern of action. On the contrary, China and Brazil contribute to this transformation in different ways, which can be understood, respectively, as processes of pragmatic contestation and incremental reform of the current international order.

In the Chinese case, the transformation of multilateralism occurs mainly through the **selective contestation of norms and institutions**. Although Beijing actively participates in core organizations such as the United Nations, WTO, and WHO, its actions are guided by an interpretation in which norms such as democracy, human rights, and other topics have no intrinsic value but are values subordinate to broader strategic objectives. In this sense, China seeks to expand its influence not only within existing institutions, but also through the creation of alternative and complementary mechanisms, such as development banks and infrastructure initiatives, which diversify the global institutional ecosystem without implying an open break with the existing order.

This strategy allows China to gradually and pragmatically expand its ability to shape multilateral practices, while limiting its exposure to norms considered intrusive, especially in the fields of human rights, political governance, and international intervention. The transformation promoted by China, therefore, does not translate into a rejection of multilateralism itself, but rather a reconfiguration of its normative and operational foundations, privileging sovereignty, non-intervention, and economic development as central axes of legitimacy.

Brazil, for its part, contributes to the transformation of multilateralism through a distinct strategy, centered on reform from within existing institutions. Unlike China, Brazil does not systematically invest in the creation of alternative multilateral structures, focusing instead on expanding the representativeness, legitimacy, and equity of global governance. This stance reflects both Brazil's historical insertion into the international liberal order and its dependence on international law and multilateral institutions as its main instruments of external projection.

The transformation promoted by Brazil is thus manifested predominantly in a discursive, normative, and coalition-based manner. By articulating agendas such as development, combating hunger, sustainability, and democratization of international institutions, the country seeks to redefine priorities and amplify voices within multilateralism, albeit without substantially altering its power structures. This is a gradual transformation, based on consensus building and mediation between divergent interests, but one that remains conditioned by the structural asymmetries of the international system.

The difference between these two strategies reveals that the transformation of contemporary multilateralism should not be understood only in terms of institutional rupture or replacement of the liberal order, but also as the result of differentiated practices of adaptation, contestation, and reform. While China expands its capacity for influence by diversifying institutions and relativizing universal norms, Brazil seeks to transform multilateralism by reinforcing its inclusive and reformist character, albeit within the limits imposed by its position as a middle power and its domestic political dynamics.

Limits and implications of the transformation of contemporary multilateralism

A comparative analysis of Chinese and Brazilian strategies for multilateral engagement shows that the transformation of the contemporary international order is occurring in an uneven and fragmented manner, conditioned by structural asymmetries of power. Although both countries contribute to reconfiguring multilateral practices, discourses, and institutions, their strategies reveal clear limits in terms of their ability to promote profound and lasting changes in the global governance architecture.

In China's case, the transformation of multilateralism has greater material and institutional reach, driven by its economic weight, financial capacity, and growing political influence. The creation of alternative institutions and complementary mechanisms expands China's room for maneuver and offers additional options to countries dissatisfied with the limitations of the traditional liberal order. However, this strategy also has significant limitations. The coexistence of traditional and alternative institutions tends to produce a more fragmented multilateralism, in which global coordination becomes more complex, and the universality of norms is progressively relativized. In addition, China's emphasis on sovereignty and non-intervention restricts the ability to build broader normative consensus, especially on sensitive issues such as human rights and political governance.

Brazil, in turn, faces different but equally relevant limitations. Its incremental reform strategy depends heavily on the willingness of major powers to accept changes in global governance, which reduces its ability to promote structural transformations. Its commitment to universalist multilateralism and international law

strengthens the country's legitimacy and visibility but does not guarantee access to the main decision-making centers of the international order. Furthermore, the variability resulting from democratic alternation of governments weakens the continuity of Brazilian foreign policy, hindering the consolidation of a long-term multilateral strategy.

These limitations reveal that the transformation of contemporary multilateralism does not necessarily imply the overcoming of the liberal international order, but rather its progressive adaptation to a context of greater plurality of actors, interests, and normative conceptions. The coexistence of strategies based on pragmatic contestation and incremental reform contributes to a more heterogeneous international system, in which different models of multilateral engagement operate simultaneously, without any one of them imposing itself definitively.

In this sense, the comparison between China and Brazil shows that the transformation of the international order does not occur solely through the replacement of rules or institutions, but through the multiplication of practices, arrangements, and interpretations of multilateralism itself. While China expands its influence by diversifying the multilateral instruments available and relativizing universal norms, Brazil seeks to redefine priorities and increase inclusion within existing institutions. Both cases indicate that multilateralism remains central to global governance, albeit in more flexible forms, contested and adapted to the realities of an international system in transition.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine how China and Brazil, as emerging powers with distinct historical trajectories, contribute in different ways to the transformation of contemporary multilateralism. Set in a context marked by the erosion of the liberal international order and intensifying disputes over global governance norms, the study sought to broaden interpretations that treat multilateralism as simply being in decline, highlighting instead the processes of reconfiguration through actors such as China and Brazil.

The central argument developed maintains that the transformation of multilateralism does not occur through a single model by a specific group of actors. On the contrary, it manifests itself in a plural and fragmented way, shaped by power asymmetries, historical experiences, domestic political structures, and identity understandings of the international order. China and Brazil illustrate this process by actively engaging in the current system and order, while adopting distinct strategies compatible with their position within this scenario.

In the case of China, analysis has shown that Beijing's engagement with multilateralism combines pragmatic contestation, institutional diversification, and a selective reinterpretation of existing norms. Far from directly rejecting the liberal order, China seeks to adapt it by promoting principles such as non-intervention, the centrality of development, and multipolarity, while creating parallel or complementary institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. This approach, defined in this dissertation as multilateralism with Chinese characteristics, reflects a realistic reading of international politics, in which institutions are instrumentalized to increase

legitimacy, stability, and influence. It is important to note that Chinese legitimacy in the multilateral sphere is not primarily based on liberal-democratic standards, but on alternative mechanisms, such as procedural participation and performance-based outcomes, especially with regard to economic development and the provision of public goods.

In contrast, Brazil's approach to multilateralism follows a different path. Rooted in a long-standing legalistic diplomatic tradition and reinforced by constitutional principles, Brazilian foreign policy has historically relied on international law, multilateral institutions, and peaceful dispute resolution as central instruments of foreign action. At the same time, Brazil has developed a critical reading of the structural asymmetries of the liberal international order, especially with regard to developing countries and middle powers. This combination gives rise to what this paper conceptualizes as legalistic reformist multilateralism: an approach that seeks to gradually transform global governance from within existing institutions through normative engagement, coalition building, and advocacy for institutional reforms, without resorting to systemic rupture.

The comparative analysis shows that the differences between China and Brazil are not only strategic, but also normative and ideational. While Brazil anchors much of its international legitimacy in liberal normative foundations, such as democracy, legalism, and institutional compliance, China mobilizes alternative sources of legitimacy based on procedural inclusion and performance. These distinct conceptions of legitimacy do not indicate the presence or absence of legitimacy per se but reflect competing normative frameworks through which multilateralism is practiced and contested in an increasingly multiplex international order.

By analyzing the Chinese and Brazilian cases together, this dissertation contributes to the literature on multilateralism by demonstrating that emerging powers do not relate to global institutions in a homogeneous way. On the contrary, they reinterpret, reformulate, and redefine multilateralism according to their identities, interests, and historical experiences. In this sense, the work questions the premise that the future of multilateralism will be determined exclusively by the preservation or collapse of the liberal order, pointing to a more complex scenario marked by coexistence, negotiation, and normative plurality.

Finally, this study acknowledges some limitations. The analytical approach adopted restricted the depth of certain empirical dimensions, such as sectoral analyses or specific regional variations. Future research may expand on these contributions by examining other emerging countries or middle powers, as well as by exploring the interaction between different models of multilateralism in areas such as climate governance, global health, or international security. Nevertheless, by highlighting the differentiated contributions of China and Brazil, this dissertation argues that the transformation of multilateralism is already underway, and that it is being shaped not by a single hegemonic vision, but by multiple coexisting paths.

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