



Brazil's Great Power Aspiration and Partnership with China: Limits of the Cooperation

Prince Peter

Jamia Millia Islamia- A Central University, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Brazil is an emerging power from the global south with great power ambition. It sees the present World Order led by the West, especially the United States, as discriminatory to its interests in many ways. Thus, it wants to change the current World Order to secure its interests and achieve long-coveted great power status. It views China, an emerging global power with the same grievances towards the present World Order, as a natural ally in this respect. It engaged with China bilaterally and as part of multilateral organizations to achieve this objective. Given China's significance in Brazilian policy for increasing its leverage in global governance structures and ultimately acquiring Great Power status, this study examines their partnership at the bilateral, regional, and international levels to determine the possibilities and limits of the relationship. The primary focus will be on the presidency of Lula Da Silva in his first two consecutive terms from 2003 to 2010, though sometimes it exceeds this time frame to give a clear perspective. The significance of this period is that it represents the most dynamic phase in Brazil-China relations. The study will approach it from a Brazilian point of view, particularly from its interest in achieving Great Power status. After analysing Brazil-China relations from the vantage points of political, economic, and geopolitical dimensions - the study concludes that despite their convergence of interest in reforming global governance and complementarity in trade, structural discrepancies in power and divergence in domestic politics present significant challenges to increased cooperation.

Keywords: Great Power status, World Order, and global governance

Brazil is an emerging power with great power aspirations. It aspires for a leadership role in global affairs and has sought to shape global governing arrangements to protect its sovereignty and enhance its economic development. It has been committed to an equitable world order based on democratic principles since it suffered throughout its history excesses committed by dominant powers from the west and instability in the global market. It has perceived its partnership with China, another emerging power and the only serious contender for superpower status, as a way to achieve its objectives. China also, like Brazil, sees the existing global governance structure as discriminatory and designed essentially to perpetuate the interests of the west, particularly that of the United States. Both countries over the decades developed extensive political and economic ties and joined their efforts to correct what they perceived as inequities of the existing world order. They joined their fellow emerging countries from the global south in groupings to shape the global governing structures and attempted to build alternative institutions to challenge their hegemony. The tenure of the Lula da Silva government in Brazil (2003–2010) was significant in this partnership. It was the period when Brazilian foreign policy accelerated its scope and depth. Under the Lula government, Brazil launched numerous initiatives both within Latin America and globally. It functioned in the role of a mediator in various conflicts, participated actively in international organizations and governance clubs, involved and influenced discourses regarding global governance. Buttressed by the idea of south south partnership and pragmatism, Brazil played a decisive role in supra-regional groups (Sean 2008, 12-13). Generally, this period is characterized as the period of Brazil's foreign policy ascent. As part of this general trend, Brazil's China policy also underwent substantial change. Once a trade-oriented policy, it increasingly attained political content. Bilaterally and in multilateral forums their partnership strengthened. Given China's significance in Brazilian policy for increasing its leverage in global governance structures and ultimately acquiring Great Power status, this study examines their partnership at the bilateral, regional, and international levels to determine the possibilities and limits of the relationship. The primary focus will be on the presidency of Lula Da Silva in his first two consecutive terms from 2003 to 2010, though sometimes it exceeds this time frame to give a clear perspective. The significance of this period is that it represents the most dynamic phase in Brazil-China relations. The study will approach it from a Brazilian point of view, particularly from its interest in achieving Great Power status. After analysing Brazil-China relations from the vantage points of political, economic, and geopolitical dimensions - the study concludes that despite their convergence of interest in reforming global governance and complementarity in trade, structural discrepancies in power and divergence in domestic politics present significant challenges to increased cooperation.

Brazil China relations: historical perspective

All through its history, Brazil tried hard to attain great power status and power to influence and shape the global order to protect its interests and enhance its prestige. It adopted different strategies at various times towards this end. During the second world war, it allied with the United States for that purpose, and then in the subsequent cold war, in the presence of two superpowers, it adopted an informal non-alliance strategy, without joining non-allied block to

enhance a better bargaining position from both sides. After the cold war, it again allied with the U.S in its unipolar moment. Then in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, when new powers began to emerge, Brazil joined them to chart an autonomous course. Nonetheless, for all its efforts, it was hardly successful in attaining its objective- the great power status. In those periods when Brazil adopted an autonomous course in foreign policy, it found out in China a fellow trawler criticizing the U.S dominated International System, established at the end of the second world war. Brazil established diplomatic relations with the Peoples Republic of China in 1974 under its military government and ended its recognition of the Republic of China (Taiwan) as the true representative of China. In subsequent periods Brazil extended its support to the Chinese view on several sensitive issues and endorsed it in multilateral forums. Such as the One China policy and not recognizing Dalai Lama as the true representative of Tibet. In 1993 Brazil and China elevated their relationship into a “strategic bilateral partnership” initially focused on economic and technological cooperation but later expanding to incorporate political and global governance issues. As explained earlier, both countries joined their efforts to thus correct the inequities of a western dominated international system within and outside the system. To challenge what they perceived as western hegemony, they formed groupings of fellow emerging countries of the global south . Under the initiative of these groupings, such as the BRICS, they come up with alternative institutions to challenge the domination of institutions such as the World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund) . BRICS Development Bank to challenge the former and the Contingency Reserve Arrangement to challenge the latter (Sean 2005, 10-11). An evaluation of Brazilian foreign policy and its basic features from a historical point of view would be helpful to locate Brazil-China relations in its proper context. Brazil traditionally followed a cautious, stable foreign policy. Continuity, unaffected by domestic strife and quarrels, was its hallmark. It was near exclusively the business of its foreign policy elite placed in its all-powerful foreign office ITAMARTY, the Ministry for External Relations.

The primary objective of foreign policy was to enhance domestic economic development. But, a quest for leadership and a promising future was always a burning motive, though kept implicitly. Minor shifts in foreign policy, which rarely occurred in the long period, were primarily due to changes in the developmental strategy since the foreign policy was envisaged as an instrument to cater to the needs of the economy. All these patterns changed in the last decades of the twentieth century. It all began with Brazil's return to democracy in 1985 and the end of the cold war; this period marked a substantial increase in Brazil's involvement in regional and international issues. This process became heightened to another level during the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995– 2002). It was the period when Brazil unambiguously displayed its ability to understand and act in international politics. But still, it was during the term of the subsequent Lula government this process reached its maximum. Then Brazilian foreign policy retained its continuity in some respects, in others, it approached an almost paradigmatic shift. These decades of Brazilian foreign policy outreach also marked its relations with China reached new heights.

Brazil: great power status and role of China

Brazil has long aspired to attain great power status and became one of the great powers which influence and shape the international order. As the largest country in South America by land mass and population, since its independence, Brazilian elites maintained the view that it has the potential to deliver a major role in global politics. Different from the rest of South America by culture, language, and history, this was also a perception shared by its neighbours. They viewed Brazil both as a potential great power, and at times, a threat. Brazil's history also played a crucial role in shaping its great power aspiration (Sean 2005, 12-13). Since its independence in the nineteenth century, Brazil has been conscious of its vulnerabilities to outside pressures. From the beginning on, the European colonial powers pressurized Brazil on issues ranging from trade agreements to residential privileges for their citizens and border disputes to market accessibility of Brazilian products to get a favourable outcome. Discriminatory treatment of the international financial institutions and fluctuations of the global market, which often adversely affected Brazilian exports, also shaped its attitude. As a result, Brazil gradually developed a foreign policy approach that actively sought to protect its sovereignty and autonomy in decision-making unaffected by external pressure.

The great power status with its power to shape the global order, which regulates the conduct of the nations and international institutions and sets the norms and values of global governance, is being considered as a desirable goal to secure this objective. During the Lula period particularly, Brazil tried to change the existing global governing structure to protect its interests and maximize its choices. But it also knew that it alone can't do that and needs partners who also share a critical view of the existing arrangement and hold similar aspirations. It is in this context that an emerging China became a crucial factor in Brazilian calculations. The opening up of its economy, the high economic growth of the last four decades, and the advancement of power and capacities it brought in the military and technological domains made China the only serious contender for the superpower status in the present world (Richard 2008, 12-13). The weakest of the powers who created the post-world war international order, and largely absent from shaping its subsequent development, China also, like Brazil, maintains a critical view of the existing international system. It views it as something which is shaped essentially to protect the interest of the west, particularly that of the United States, and is not reflective of the changed realities of the twenty-first century. China has been in search for a long to find allies and partners to support its view of the international system. To shape or change the existing system according to its vision, and, if that is not possible, create a parallel order to serve its interests has been its desired objective. It is at this point where an aspiring Brazil and a revisionist China find their objectives converge, their interests overlapping though not in complete harmony.

Brazil-China relations: issues of convergence

The creation of multipolar world order is the stated objective of Brazilian foreign policy for global governance. It is a world order characterized by multiple power centres. It is a world where several nations with substantial power and influence will govern the international system and pursue their independent foreign policy unaffected by external pressures. The multipolar system, its proponents argue, unlike a unipolar one where a single state dominates global politics or a bipolar system where two equally powerful states dominate the world affairs, is a system where democratic principles

govern. Both Brazil and China were critical of the post-cold war unipolar world order dominated by the United States (Richard 2008, 35-47). They viewed it as a discriminatory and intrusive system undermining the rights of the countries of the global south. They observed it as disrespectful of their sovereignty while bringing a debilitating effect on their developmental prospects. Thus, both countries began to cooperate bilaterally and in multilateral forums with the objective of change or shape what they view as discriminatory laws and practices of the present global order and, if that is not possible, create alternative structures to challenge their hegemony.

They often adopted the strategy of instituting developing country coalitions to achieve this objective, both inside and outside the multilateral institutions, and promoted the idea of south-south cooperation to buttress these coalitions. Brazil and China joined their efforts at United Nations and G20. They played a crucial role in the creation of groupings such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China). These groupings propose alternatives to the existing order. The Brazil-China relationship is built on a solid economic foundation also. China is Brazil's major export destination. It exports to China agriculture and mining commodities, and Brazil's agriculture sector is one of the largest in the world. On the other hand, China exports to Brazil finished industrial goods, and it sees Brazil as a major destination for its investment. Brazil is already the home of the largest share of Chinese investment in Latin America. It was initially focused on the commodity sector but is now increasingly diversified to massive infrastructure development projects. As a country with vast reserves of natural resources and agriculture production potential Brazil is crucial for China to sustain its high growth rate. China has to feed a large population, and its expanding industrial base requires an ever-increasing amount of raw materials. Massive Chinese investment in Brazil has a political objective also. It is part of its efforts to strengthen south-south corporation. On a global scale, China wanted to develop an alliance of the countries of the global south and make them a counterforce against what it perceived as U.S global hegemony. It believes that its strong economic ties and investments in these countries will facilitate that purpose. In the case of Brazil, China wanted to project its ties with it as a model case of south-south partnership and encourage others to emulate the same. As a political and economic powerhouse of Latin America, Brazil in the Chinese view possesses substantial leverage over other countries in the region and regional organizations and institutions such as the Organization of American States or the Inter-American Development Bank. By partnering with Brazil, China aims to double its capacity to expand its influence in the region. The strength of this partnership will enhance the power of both countries to navigate against the U.S hegemony in Latin America. China has already established platforms such as China- CELAC Forum as early as 2014 to expand its strategic footprint in the region. From the Chinese point of view, its partnership with Brazil has a soft power dimension also. China wanted to project its image as a responsible stakeholder in the global arena. Massive investments and assistance to developing countries and championing their concerns about inequities of global governance, it believes, will massively enhance the image it wanted to project. As a large developing country, Brazil occupies a higher position in these Chinese calculations.

Brazil-China relations: issues of divergence

Having said all this, Brazil China partnership is hardly an all-positive affair. There are structural factors in the relations that pull both countries in different directions. Brazil China partnership is in part enhanced by their shared identity as emerging powers with global aspirations. Their geographical size and prominence in their regions and comparable state of development all added to a shared sense of common belonging with fellow emerging powers in the global south. The idea of discriminated south united against the oppressive north provided an ideological expression to their grievances. Yet, in the last several years, as China advanced in leap and bounds in growth, Brazil with other emerging powers faltered in the course. Thus, despite the rhetoric of south-south partnership, China has increasingly been distancing itself from emerging power grouping and identified itself as a potential superpower and claimant for global prominence with the U.S. Of course, its emerging country partners will remain crucial for China's strategy but, it no longer see itself as belonging to that grouping. And more importantly, it is no more ready to share its privileges with them. For example, it does not support the claim of Brazil's U.N security council permanent membership. It is one of the most contentious issues in Brazil China relations. Another major factor that vitiates Brazil China partnership is the trade. Despite the rhetoric of the win-win nature of the south-south partnership, the patterns of Brazil China trade remember the exploitative north-south relations. Brazil exports to China primary products such as iron ore, oil, and Soybeans and imports from China finished industrial products like machinery and electronic equipment. Brazil's weakened industrial sector, which has long been protected from outside competition, can't stand a chance against increasingly sophisticated Chinese products. The Chinese denial of reciprocal access to Brazilian products into its market makes the issue even more bitter. This issue rallied domestic opposition against ties with China and remains as a major problem in Brazil China relations. However, the most salient issue that has plagued Brazil-China relations in recent years has not been the UNSC membership or trade; it was ideology, even more fundamentally, the challenge of the domestic democratic system of Brazil to its policy toward China (Jim 1981, 12-13). In the recent past, during the presidency of right-wing populist leader Jair Bolsonaro, Brazilian politics was extremely polarised on ideological lines. The direct foreign policy implication was Brazil's drastic shift to the U.S. alliance. Accompanied by a fierce critique of Chinese policy with shrill rhetoric, this turn of events brought an element of uncertainty to the Brazil-China partnership. Though the succeeding Lula da Silva government, in its second turn, brought Brazil-China relations to an even keel, the potential challenge posed by Brazil's liberal democratic system to a stable policy toward China was more than evident.

Brazil-China relations: a challenged future

One of the most significant factors driving Brazil-China relations is the common resentment against the Western-led, precisely the U.S.-led, global order. Both countries consider it discriminatory to their interests and want equitable accommodation in the current order, or in China's case, probably an alternative order. However, notwithstanding their rhetoric, there is no agreement about the shape of a reformed global order or an alternative to the existing one between them. If anything, China is reluctant to share some of its privileges in the current Global order with Brazil, as its refusal to Brazil's demand for permanent membership in the U.N. Security Council shows. This attitude of China is partially the result of the significant power advantage

it maintains vis-à-vis Brazil. China considers itself a global power while views Brazil only as a regional power with global ambitions, thus not belonging to the same league. This variation in power often reflects the reality of the different levels of development of both countries in various sectors, for example, the industry. The interests of China's advanced industrial sector vary from Brazil's relatively less developed industrial sector.

These different interests presented by power variation and different levels of development between both countries are equally applicable to other issues as well, among them are climate change and nuclear proliferation. These varying, often conflicting, interests present a significant challenge for both countries to maintain common positions in various international organizations and regimes in the future, something in which they have succeeded until now. Another significant factor that leads the Brazil-China partnership is bilateral trade. Despite the high volume and complementary nature, the fact that Brazil-China trade is acquiring the pattern of exploitative North-South trade, with manufactured product imports from China and agricultural products and raw material exports from Brazil, presents another significant challenge to keeping the partnership robust. Finally, the different domestic political systems of Brazil and China are what bring an element of uncertainty and constraints to the relationship. Brazil is a democratic market economy, while China is a single-party system with a planned economy. While the Brazilian political system is open to government changes and pulls and pressures of various interest groups with the potential for policy changes, the Chinese system is less open to such pressure. Still, this diversion in political systems can pose a grave challenge to the partnership in many issues, depending on policy changes in upcoming governments or the pressure tactics of the concerned pressure groups. In sum, Brazil's attempt at courting China as a partner in achieving its long-desired Great Power status is filled with structural challenges. As the trajectory of Brazil-China relations revealed during the Lula Da Silva presidency in the first stint (2003 to 2010) and beyond, it requires much more skill and recalibration beyond political rhetoric.

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