

Explaining Brazil's Stance on the Ukraine War

FELIPE KRAUSE 

University of Oxford, UK

Brazil's diplomatic stance on the Ukraine War should be understood within the context of broader geopolitical tensions. Brazil's position goes beyond geopolitical hedging and represents a strategic alignment with the global South based on a vision aimed at stimulating economic development through cooperation. This article highlights Brazil's reluctance to criticise Russia, articulates its grievances with the West and explains the Brazilian government's conviction that a stronger alliance with the global South can result in economic gain. Ultimately, Brazil's new foreign policy is shifting from its historical commitment to non-alignment and pragmatism and reveals a growing inclination to challenge liberal international norms.

Keywords: Brazil, Global South, international order, Ukraine war.

The Brazilian government's neutral stance on the Ukraine War has been a source of controversy, not only among Western powers but also within Brazil and elsewhere. The prevailing explanation for Brazil's stance suggests it aligns with the country's traditionally multilateralist, pragmatic and peace-seeking foreign policy. Such a position seems rational in the context of heightened tensions between global powers, as was the case during the 1950s when Brazil's foreign policy converged with the Non-Aligned Movement. However, this paper contends that Brazil's current position is less about balance and equidistance between the US and competing powers like Russia and China, as some have suggested, and more about a strategic focus on national development. This new strategy favours a particular understanding of the global South as a catalyst for growth through trade and investment. In this scenario, Brazil's reluctance to side against Russia reflects a deliberate and intensifying preference for alliances with non-Western powers, prominently led by China.

President Lula of Brazil, his main foreign policy advisors and his ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, Workers' Party) have been clear that Brazil is reluctant to toe the Western line on the Ukraine War. Officially, Brazil's position is that it condemns the Russian invasion as illegal, but has denied requests to sanction Russia or send weaponry to Ukraine (Spignariol and Nicas, 2023). President Lula claims he is eager to mediate a solution for the conflict, but has also suggested that Ukraine is partly to blame for the war, that Western powers are prolonging it, and that Ukraine may have to cede Crimea to Russia (Euronews, 2023). Lula sent his main foreign policy advisor, Celso Amorim, to meet with Vladimir Putin in Moscow, in an attempt to induce peace talks. However, when Amorim later visited Ukraine, he questioned evidence gathered by the UN of crimes against humanity committed by Russian troops (Mello, 2023). At one point, Lula even suggested Brazil might ignore an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court against President Putin (Jazeera, 2023). In light of what is considered effectively a pro-Russian stance, Brazil's peace plan has not been warmly received by Ukraine or the West.

Brazil's complicated refusal to take sides, Stuenkel (2023) argues, derives from the fact that Russia is a 'low intensity' ally and major source of fertilisers, essential to the country's booming agricultural sector. In this sense, Lula is no different than his far-right predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, who similarly calculated that any censure of the Russian invasion would be detrimental to Brazilian interests. Another commentator has suggested that Brazil's position is a rational form of 'hedging' (Spektor, 2023).

According to this perspective, in the context of escalating tensions between Western and non-Western powers, Brazil feels it is best to remain on the sidelines, and possibly even score points with both sides by acting as a mediator. Brazil knows its position would never be fully acceptable to Ukraine, but believes that brokering a successful termination of hostilities would be well-regarded by both Western and non-Western powers alike. Russia would have the chance to save face, and both China and the West would benefit from decreased tensions in Eastern Europe.

Placing Brazil's stance in the wider context of global geopolitical rivalries provides valuable insights. But 'hedging' suggests a degree of cautious distance, which does not seem to reflect the evidence. That the request for weaponry was denied and that Lula did not simply adopt a pro-NATO narrative are explicable by existing analyses. But many of the Brazilian government's statements are inconsistent with what a risk-averse, 'hedging' actor would do. In fact, the current administration's stance seems a far cry from the relatively subdued response by President Dilma Rousseff, also of the PT, to the 2014 invasion of Crimea (Berlinck, 2014).

Instead, evidence points to Brazil having made a strategic bet that it can gain more by siding with the global South – or at least a particular reading of the South as represented by the BRICS (an expanding group of emerging economies, originally comprised of Brazil, Russia, India and China) group. This approach has historical roots, and Stuenkel (2016) himself has demonstrated how successive PT governments have pursued this 'post-Western' approach since coming to power in 2003. The argument is that South–South solidarity, as a complement to the existing order, can generate more benefits to development than simply following the precepts of the North. It is not, in principle, an anti-Western stance, but an independent one. Indeed, in its original format, the BRICS group was a political talk shop of emerging economies with similar concerns, but which in no way positioned itself as antagonistic to the West.

But, within the Brazilian left, this view seems to have taken a sharper turn, after a number of significant events in the last decade. Some of these events include a nuclear fuel deal with Iran that was scuppered by the West, revelations of US spying in Brazil, and the anti-corruption drive led by Operation Car Wash, which ultimately landed Lula in jail and, many argue, facilitated Bolsonaro's election (Fishman et al., 2020). A significant portion of the Brazilian left believes that Operation Car Wash was undertaken at the request of US authorities, in an effort to undermine Brazilian companies and the Brazilian economy. Indeed, these grievances are probably quite personal to many now in government. In his memoir of the failed Iran deal, Amorim (2017) – who as Lula's chief diplomatic advisor has more authority than the foreign minister – is very candid about his frustration with the US government.

More important, however, is the failure of what is widely perceived as a Western-controlled global economic system to provide the resources that would enable Brazil and the global South to develop (Stiglitz, 2002; Chang, 2020). Without a 'Marshall Plan for the South,' the Bretton Woods institutions, over the past several decades, have provided insufficient development support. To make matters worse, the informal pact whereby the US and Europe respectively monopolise the presidencies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund smacks of undemocratic, if not neocolonial, control. Reform of the World Bank's quota system, which would increase the voting power of developing countries, reflecting relative shifts in gross domestic product among developed and emerging economies, is long overdue, and has been blocked by the US. Above all, development finance is insufficient, given the growing needs of developing economies, especially medium to large ones like Brazil and India, and conditionalities are considered exceedingly restrictive and patronising. For the poorest countries, the debt burden has long been overwhelming, and repayment demands unachievable, leaving them in a chronic cycle of defaults and renegotiation.

In this context, Brazil has made a clear choice. Instead of attending to the preferences of Western-based international economic institutions and global capital markets, the preferred economic development model, especially for spurring investments, is public sector-driven (Mazzucato and Penna, 2015). In this scenario, the Brazilian National Development Bank is a key player, but also Chinese state-owned development banks and new multilateral financial institutions such as the Shanghai-based New Development Bank. South–South trade has soared, with Brazil among its main champions (UNCTAD, 2023). Whether purely by design or not, the figures are clear: over the last 20 years, China became both Brazil's main trade partner and a major source of foreign investment.

Thus, to a significant extent, Brazil's recent development trajectory and growing prestige on the international stage are attributable to its partnership with China (Borges, 2017).

There is, however, an added geopolitical layer to the partnership. As China drifts further away from the international liberal order it was once courting, and as tensions rise over issues such as interventions in the South China Sea and concerns over the Uyghur population, it has become more difficult for Brazil to sustain the traditional equidistance between the competing poles without emitting signals that appear to be increasingly pro-China, or increasingly anti-Western. The 2023 BRICS expansion, which included Iran, among others, and Lula's recent statement comparing Israel's attack on Gaza with the Holocaust, are further signs of Brazil's growing appetite to contest liberal international norms and Western political preferences, if it feels that material gain can be obtained.

In this context, siding with Russia is part of an attempt to create a new world order, rebalanced to include stronger non-Western, and in some cases anti-Western voices. This is a departure from Borges's (2017) authoritative account of the last 30 years of Brazilian foreign policy, which argues that Brazil has sought to influence the global order through a consensual approach, diversifying partnerships to create space and achieve autonomy. In Lula's current third term, these traditional calculations are shifting. Brazil is not so much diversifying, as proactively siding with what it perceives to be a burgeoning non-Western alliance. On the one hand, not taking the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) stance in the Ukraine conflict is part of a longer pattern of attempting to restrain Western military excesses. This was the case, for example, in the context of the Libyan crisis, when Brazil tried to counter Western urges to intervene militarily with safeguards and preconditions, fearing a wider spread of 'regime change' operations, potentially reaching South America. On the other hand, in the context of the Ukraine War, opposing NATO efforts to contain Russia runs the risk of emboldening Putin, with unpredictable consequences. The lenient approach towards Russia also inevitably generates a clear signal to China that its aggressive incursions in the South China Sea – and perhaps elsewhere, in the future – will not be challenged by the South American power.

The shift in Brazilian foreign policy comes with a great deal of risks and costs. For one, as Borges (2017: 14) has suggested, with respect to China, 'assumptions about shared structural ambitions' may ultimately cloud 'more pointed analyses of the nature of Sino-Brazilian collaboration and cooperation.' Neither is a problematic economic dependency on China inconceivable. Whatever its flaws, undermining the international liberal order – to which Brazil is, historically, a key contributor – may also come at the cost of legitimising autocracies, human rights abuses and possible geopolitical instability.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

References

- Amorim, C. (2017) *Acting Globally: Memoirs of Brazil's Assertive Foreign Policy*. Hamilton Books: Lanham.
- Borges, S. (2017) *Brazil in the World: The International Relation of a South American Giant*. Manchester University Press: Manchester.
- Chang, H. J. (2020) 'Building Pro-Development Multilateralism: Towards a "New" New International Economic Order'. *CEPAL Review* 132, 65-75.
- Mazzucato, M. and Penna, C. (2015) *The Rise of Mission-Oriented State Investment Banks: The Cases of Germany's KfW and Brazil's BNDES*. SWPS: 2015–2026. University of Brighton: Sussex.
- Spektor, M. (2023) 'In Defense of the Fence Sitters' in *Foreign Affairs*, April 18. Council on Foreign Relations: New York.
- Stiglitz, J. (2002) *Globalization and Its Discontents*. Penguin: London.
- Stuenkel, O. (2016) *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order*. Polity Press: Cambridge.

Stuenkel, O. (2023) 'How to Understand Brazil's Ukraine Policy' in *Foreign Policy*. May 18. Graham Holdings Company: Washington DC.

Newspapers

- Jazeera, A. (2023) Lula says Putin will not be arrested at Brazil G20 meeting. [WWW document]. URL <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/10/lula-says-putin-will-not-be-arrested-at-brazil-g20-meeting> [accessed 16 April 2024].
- Berlinck, D. (2014) "Brasil não tem posição no caso da Ucrânia", diz Dilma na reunião do G-20', O Globo. [WWW document]. URL <https://oglobo.globo.com/mundo/brasil-nao-tem-posicao-no-caso-da-ucrania-diz-dilma-na-reuniao-do-20-14574699>. [accessed 16 April 2024].
- Euronews (2023) "The world needs tranquillity": Ukraine urged to give up Crimea by Brazil's Lula'. [WWW document]. URL <https://www.euronews.com/2023/04/07/the-world-needs-tranquillity-ukraine-urged-to-give-up-crimea-by-brazils-lula> [accessed 16 April 2024].
- Fishman, A., Viana, N. and Saleh, M. (2020) "Keep it Confidential": The Secret History of US Involvement in Brazil's Scandal-Wracked Operation Car Wash' The Intercept. [WWW document]. URL <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/12/united-states-justice-department-brazil-car-wash-lava-jato-international-treaty/> [accessed 16 April 2024].
- Mello, P. (2023) 'Plano de paz do Brasil pode funcionar com cansaço de países na guerra, diz Amorim'. Folha de São Paulo. [WWW document]. URL <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2023/05/brasil-pode-mediatar-acordo-de-paz-quando-paises-se-cansarem-da-guerra-diz-amorim.shtml> [accessed 16 April 2024].
- Spignariol, A. and Nicas, J. (2023) 'A Problem for Ukraine: Countries Like Brazil Won't Sell It Arms' New York Times. [WWW document]. URL <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/12/world/americas/brazil-ukraine-weapons.html> [accessed 16 April 2024].
- UNCTAD (2023) South-South Trade Agreement Holds Key to More Sustainable and Inclusive Growth', May 9. [WWW document]. URL <https://unctad.org/news/south-south-trade-agreement-holds-key-more-sustainable-and-inclusive-growth#:~:text=The%20GSTP%20promotes%20trade%20among,consumers%2C%20making%20it%20more%20competitive> [accessed 16 April 2024].