

AUTONOMY THROUGH RECONSTRUCTION: THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE THIRD LULA ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The article analyzes the foreign policy of the third Lula administration based on the concept of “autonomy through reconstruction,” which expresses the effort to rebuild foreign policy after Bolsonaro and reform a changing international order. This reconstruction occurs on two levels: internally, with the restoration of a foreign policy committed to democracy; and externally, with a proactive and reformist approach to issues such as climate, social inclusion, and global governance. This occurs through decisive action in preferential forums such as the G20, BRICS, and COP30. With an identity marked by internal democratic reconstruction, the defense of democracy in the global order, and the defense of a reformed multilateral order, the model of “autonomy through reconstruction” combines selective engagement and pragmatic rapprochement with key actors such as Germany, France, and China. Its principles include diplomatic flexibility, strategic prudence, and a commitment to democratic and climate values. The article also acknowledges the limits of this strategy, marked by regional dilemmas and challenges in relation to the major powers.

Keywords: Foreign policy. Autonomy. Democracy. Multilateralism. Climate.

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AUTONOMIA PELA RECONSTRUÇÃO: A POLÍTICA EXTERNA DO GOVERNO LULA III

Resumo

O artigo analisa a política externa do governo Lula III com base no conceito de “autonomia pela reconstrução”, que expressa o esforço de reconstruir a política externa pós-Bolsonaro e reformar a ordem internacional em transição. Essa reconstrução ocorre em dois planos: internamente, com a recomposição de uma política externa comprometida com a democracia; e externamente, com uma inserção propositiva e reformista em temas como clima, inclusão social e governança global. Isso ocorre por meio da atuação decisiva em fóruns preferenciais como G20, BRICS e COP30. Com uma identidade marcada pela reconstrução democrática interna, pela defesa da democracia na ordem global e pela defesa de uma ordem multilateral reformada, o modelo da “autonomia pela reconstrução” combina engajamento seletivo e reaproximação pragmática com atores centrais como Alemanha, França e China. Seus princípios incluem flexibilidade diplomática, prudência estratégica e compromisso com valores democráticos e climáticos. O artigo também reconhece os limites dessa estratégia, marcada por dilemas regionais e desafios frente às grandes potências.

Palavras-chave: Política externa. Autonomia. Democracia. Multilateralismo. Clima.

AUTONOMÍA PARA LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN: LA POLÍTICA EXTERIOR DEL GOBIERNO DE LULA III

Resumen

El artículo analiza la política exterior del gobierno Lula III basándose en el concepto de «autonomía por la reconstrucción», que expresa el empeño por reconstruir la política exterior posterior a Bolsonaro y reformar el orden internacional en transición. Esta reconstrucción se produce en dos planos: internamente, con la recomposición de una política exterior comprometida con la democracia; y externamente, con una inserción propositiva y reformista en temas como el clima, la inclusión social y la gobernanza global. Esto se lleva a cabo mediante una actuación decisiva en foros preferenciales como el G20, el BRICS y la COP30. Con una identidad marcada por la reconstrucción democrática interna, la defensa de la democracia en el orden global y la defensa de un orden multilateral reformado, el modelo de «autonomía por la reconstrucción» combina el compromiso selectivo y el acercamiento pragmático con actores centrales como Alemania, Francia y China. Sus principios incluyen la flexibilidad diplomática, la prudencia estratégica y el compromiso con los valores democráticos y climáticos. El artículo también reconoce los límites de esta estrategia, marcada por dilemas regionales y desafíos frente a las grandes potencias.

Palabras clave: Política exterior. Autonomía. Democracia. Multilateralismo. Clima.

Introduction

The Lula III administration (2023–) is operating in one of the most challenging contexts in recent Brazilian diplomatic history. Domestically, foreign policy has become a constant target of organized opposition that uses it as a tool for political attacks with electoral purposes. Unlike in previous periods when there was a general consensus about the importance of Brazil's international actions, foreign policy has become politicized to an unprecedented degree, becoming a subject of internal ideological disputes. Lula III is succeeding a Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022) that isolated Brazil and discredited foreign policy as a means for the country to gain international recognition.

The situation is equally adverse internationally. The multiple crises affecting the international system—from the growing rivalry between the United States and China to the paralysis of multilateral institutions and the climate emergency—are jeopardizing the reconstruction of foreign policy after Bolsonaro. The benefits of liberal globalization, when the country could expand its international presence in a more cooperative and predictable environment, no longer exist. The current international order is marked by splintering, volatility, and a reconfiguration of alliances. This requires Brazil to adopt a more selective, pragmatic, and adaptive foreign policy amid unprecedented internal polarization.

In this difficult and uncertain context, the idea of autonomy in Brazilian foreign policy inevitably returns to the center of the debate. In a fragmented international scenario, where traditional multilateralism is weakening and rivalry between major powers is intensifying, autonomy is no longer just an abstract principle but once again a strategy that needs to be constantly redefined. This raises the question of not only whether Brazil should maintain its autonomy, but also what kind of autonomy it should seek—and in the service of which national and international projects it should be mobilized.

In this scenario, Lula III's foreign policy does not operate with the stability of a consolidated paradigm, but rather in the midst of competing models, which has required cautious choices, reaffirmed principles, and flexible strategies, not always achieved successfully. In this context, autonomy becomes more than ever a field of flexible reconstruction rather than a repetition of the past.

In view of this, it is important to develop a conceptual framework that will interpret Brazil's current international strategy. We suggest the concept of *autonomy through reconstruction*, which seeks to reposition Brazil in the face of two profound and simultaneous transformations. The first is internal:

overcoming the diplomatic isolation and institutional erosion promoted by the Bolsonaro administration, during which the country aligned itself with a “reactionary international” (Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Benjamin Netanyahu) and abandoned historical principles such as the defense of multilateralism and the diversification of partnerships. The second is external: building an international alliance of democracies and reforming an international system marked by growing rivalry between the US and China, the progressive collapse of the post-1945 liberal order, and the climate and energy crises.

This concept encapsulates the selective nature of the current foreign policy. By rebuilding Brazil’s image on the international stage, it seeks to reposition the country as a normative leader on issues such as climate and democracy. It aims to resume multilateral engagement without subordinating itself to any axis of power or external influence. The reconstruction is multifaceted: shifting from the near diplomatic rupture under the Bolsonaro administration to proactive international engagement; transitioning from a liberal order in crisis to an international architecture undergoing reconfiguration; and evolving from a system centered on liberal globalization to one marked by the dispute over economic models and the environmental crisis.

Thus, on the one hand, *autonomy through reconstruction* is exercised as an instrument to reposition Brazil in the major global agendas undergoing transformation—climate, energy, technology, and geopolitics—and, on the other hand, as a tool to assert a normative place in a world increasingly polarized between democracies and illiberal forces. The defense of reformed multilateralism and democracy as a political regime, the latter somewhat unusual in Brazilian diplomatic tradition, appear side by side in Lula III’s foreign policy. Pressured by Bolsonaro’s rise within Brazil and by far-right forces in the Western world that weaken international institutions, the Lula administration has made the defense of democracy one of its cornerstones, even though this has been fraught with contradictions.

This approach, which is marked by democratic reconstruction and the defense of a reformed multilateral order, seeks to restore the country’s external credibility without rigidly repeating previous models. Its *strategy* involves selective engagement with multilateral initiatives of high symbolic value to Brazil, combining initiatives such as BRICS, G20, and COP30, as well as pragmatic rapprochement with key players such as Europe, China, and the Global South. The guiding *principles* of this model include diplomatic flexibility, institutional reconstruction, commitment to democratic and climate values, as well as strategic prudence in the face of the growing fragmentation of the global order. It is, therefore, a relational and adaptive autonomy that recognizes the

limits of the international context and proposes gradual transitions towards the revaluation of multilateralism and Brazil's active insertion.

This article discusses the concept of *autonomy through reconstruction* in Lula III's foreign policy, emphasizing domestic and international changes, as well as three central aspects of PEB (*política externa brasileira*—Brazilian foreign policy) autonomy: autonomous identity built by the current government, strategic choices, and the principles guiding the country's international action. The first part of the article discusses how the PEB has been autonomous in various ways throughout the 20th century. The second part addresses the proposed model of autonomy through reconstruction, along with its perspectives, expectations, limitations, and contradictions. Finally, the concept is analyzed in light of the PEB's tradition of autonomy.

1. The many autonomies of the PEB

In recent decades, the notion of autonomy has played a pivotal role in the strategic development of foreign policy in countries such as Brazil. Autonomy is used both in rigorous academic debates and as a pillar in the formulation of concrete political doctrines that guide specific foreign policies. From a theoretical point of view, the initial conceptions of autonomy derived from realist approaches and dependency theory (Jaguaribe 1979, Puig 1980, Escudé 1992, Harknett and Yalcin 2012). More recently, however, the concept has been reformulated in relational terms (Russell and Tokatlian 2003), which emphasizes that autonomy is not merely a rejection of external control; rather, it is rooted in national self-images and the mutual construction of roles within the international system.

In the case of Brazil, Spektor (2014) begins with the idea that the country's foreign policy has been guided by an international integration project for over five decades, with the aim of building a national capitalism protected from the asymmetries of the global system. According to the author, the autonomist project does not reject global capitalism, but rather seeks to operate within it with a minimum degree of subordination. To this end, the project proposes strategies such as balancing power, diversifying partnerships, forming coalitions, strategically distancing itself from the US, and striving for membership in global decision-making bodies.

Spektor (2014) shows that autonomism is not only a rational strategy for maximizing gains but also an "identity project" based on deeply held ideas about Brazil's role in the world. Belief in Brazil's exceptionalism, a

sense of peripheral connection to the West, and the desire for international recognition influence the available policy options and help explain why the project has endured through periods of ideological and partisan change. Thus, a contemporary autonomous foreign policy should be understood as the result of a dynamic interaction between fundamental principles, strategic choices, and identity formation processes.

The study of Brazilian foreign policy autonomy must therefore always emphasize this continuous and contingent condition of autonomy. The historiography of Brazilian foreign policy shows that there are at least three dominant models of autonomy: autonomy through distance, shown under the Ernesto Geisel administration (1975–1979); autonomy through participation, seen under the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration (1995–2002); and autonomy through diversification, demonstrated during the Lula administration (2003–2010). Each of these models responded to distinct historical and systemic conditions, reflecting the dilemmas of Brazil's international integration, its material capabilities, and its long-term normative projects.

The first model, autonomy through distance, prevailed in the 1970s, especially during the Geisel administration (1974–1979). It reflected a logic of distance from the major powers, especially the United States, and valued a national development project based on industrial policies, import substitution, and expanded decision-making sovereignty. Autonomy was understood as the ability to make decisions without external intervention, implying a certain distancing from multilateral institutions that could impose conditions on development. This strategy affirmed national sovereignty on issues such as nuclear policy and rapprochement with the Third World, but it had limitations given the growing global interdependence and the difficulty to influence international norms (Fonseca Jr. 1998).

Following redemocratization and the consolidation of the post-Cold War liberal order, a second paradigm emerged: autonomy through participation (Fonseca Jr. 1998), later refined as autonomy through integration (Vigevani *et al.* 2003), adopted by the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration (1995–2002). Brazil maintained historical principles such as pacifism and universalism, but began to value active participation in international regimes to expand its normative influence. Joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), acceding to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and consolidating the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) are examples of this stance. The idea was that the country could protect its interests by participating in the formulation of rules, even with relatively less power. However, the model

proved to be limited in the face of persistent power asymmetries and was criticized for reflecting an excessively adaptive stance to the liberal mainstream.

In response, the Lula I and II administrations (2003–2010) developed autonomy through diversification, maintaining multilateralism but also expanding partnerships through South-South coalitions (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2007). Brazil sought to reduce vulnerabilities and gain room for maneuver in an asymmetric system, bringing initiatives such as IBSA, the G20 trade group, and UNASUR. Despite its symbolic success, this model faced obstacles, such as the lack of robust institutionalism in Southern partnerships, internal difficulties, and the worsening of the global scenario.

The foreign policy of the Jair Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022) represented a significant shift from Brazil's tradition of seeking "autonomy" as the cornerstone of the country's international actions. Unlike classic formulations of Brazilian foreign policy, the Bolsonaro administration was not guided by any systematic notion of autonomy. Instead, it adopted an approach guided by ultra-conservative values, personal alignment with foreign leaders, and active distrust of multilateral institutions (Guimarães and Silva 2021, Guimarães *et al.* 2023).

Under Bolsonaro, foreign policy was built on what Guimarães and Silva (2021) called a "deep conservative identity" aligned with three national roles: anti-globalism, sovereign nationalism, and friend/enemy rhetoric on the international level. This vision did not seek to preserve the country's autonomy, but rather to align it with a presumably "reactionary international," led by figures such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Benjamin Netanyahu. Saraiva and Albuquerque (2022) argue that Bolsonaro's foreign policy not only ignored the tradition of "autonomy" as a historical guideline, but actively worked to dismantle it, promoting a kind of "deinstitutionalization" of diplomacy.

As a result, Brazil suffered profound international isolation. Aggressive rhetoric and environmental denial led to clashes with European countries, stalled trade negotiations such as the MERCOSUR–European Union agreement, and undermined Brazil's credibility in multilateral forums. Even with a few tactical alignments with authoritarian regimes (such as Hungary and Israel), the country lost its ability to engage in dialogue.

In light of historical models of PEB autonomy, the Bolsonaro administration abandoned the idea of autonomy as a value and strategy. Instead, a logic of transnational conservative ideological identity was established. Its foreign policy was not autonomous, but rather dependent on a conspiratorial and personalistic worldview. In contrast, previous governments—even with

different orientations—always tried to preserve a certain degree of strategic maneuvering for Brazil in the international system.

The state of affairs began to change with Lula's election in 2022. In articles written shortly after the elections, Maria Regina Soares de Lima (2024) and Dawisson Belém Lopes (2024) concur in diagnosing Lula III's Brazilian foreign policy as a deliberate effort at reconstruction after the rupture promoted by the Bolsonaro administration. Both authors emphasize that Lula III's foreign policy cannot be read merely as a mechanical continuation of previous PT governments, nor as a simple reversal of Bolsonaro's orientation. Rather, it emerges as a dialectical response to the "bolsonarist antithesis," incorporating elements from the past but reformulated in light of new domestic and international challenges.

2. Autonomy through reconstruction

The current Lula III administration (2023–) operates in a challenging context. Rivalry between the United States and China, the weakening of multilateral institutions (such as the UN and the WTO), the fragmentation of the international system into spheres of influence, and the emergence of the climate agenda as a structuring axis of the global order pose new challenges for Brazilian foreign policy. At the same time, the Lula administration inherited a disarticulated diplomacy, a weakened international image, and an institutional base that was eroded by the previous administration. To make matters worse, foreign policy has become an electoral arena, with the opposition strongly represented in Congress when it comes to international issues. This environment has required not only a return to the tradition of autonomy, but also its reconstruction in light of recent systemic and domestic transformations, with varying degrees of success.

It is important to highlight that the analysis of historical models of autonomy in Brazilian foreign policy has always revealed a trajectory of strategic adaptation to different phases of the international system, marked by tensions between sovereignty, influence, and integration. The originality of the current moment lies precisely in the need to maintain the tradition of autonomy in a scenario where classic instruments—institutional participation, diversification of partners, or strategic distancing—are no longer sufficient on their own. *Autonomy through reconstruction* points to a foreign policy that recognizes uncertainty as a structural condition and seeks to transform the

fluidity of the present into opportunities to reconfigure Brazil's role in the world.

As previously stated, *autonomy through reconstruction* demonstrates the dual and hybrid nature of Brazilian foreign policy under the Lula III administration. Following the isolation of the Bolsonaro administration, which abandoned historical principles such as multilateralism, non-intervention, and diversity of partnerships, Brazilian diplomacy has turned its attention to rebuilding bridges, credibility, and leadership. This reconstruction has been selective and pragmatic: it focuses on agendas with high symbolic and political potential—such as climate leadership in the Amazon, the organization of the G20 in 2024, and the presidencies of BRICS and COP30 in 2025—while observing the limits of regional leadership and the difficulty of repositioning Brazil in its surroundings.

Almost three years into the administration, it is possible to say that much of the effort to rebuild Brazilian foreign policy domestically—in the sense of restoring institutions, reversing setbacks, and reconfiguring guidelines—has already been accomplished. Similarly, the country has achieved partial success in reconnecting with its traditional partners and projecting a more stable, predictable international image that is aligned with democratic values.

However, this is still an ongoing process marked by tensions and uncertainties. The continued presence of Bolsonarism as a relevant political force—influencing both internal debates and transnational far-right networks—prevents the full completion of the foreign policy reconstruction cycle. The clearest expression of this incompleteness is the Lula administration's ongoing attempt to articulate a broad international front of progressives and democrats, notably in Europe (Germany, France, and Spain) and Latin America (Chile and Colombia). As will be seen below, this alliance aims not only to defend the institutional foundations of the democratic regime, but also to function as a preventive barrier or antidote against possible authoritarian advances, reinforcing democratic resilience in the face of the persistent threat from the far right.

At the international level, reform of the global order is even further from concrete achievement. Despite Brazil's speeches and diplomatic efforts in forums such as the G20, BRICS, and COPs, effective progress has been limited. The reality is that Brazil does not have the capacity to reform the structures of the international system on its own. Even so, the strategy of *autonomy through reconstruction* is based on a proactive repositioning of the country, with greater ambitions and willingness to actively contribute to a more multipolar, balanced, and representative order. Here, countries such as

China, Russia, and India are the preferred partners within BRICS. Although this effort depends on exogenous factors and the correlation of international forces, it has been central to repositioning Brazil as a relevant and influential actor on the paths of global governance. But how has this strategy been working in practice?

The document “Climate and International Strategy: New Directions for Brazil,” published in November 2022, just before President Lula took office and the result of the foreign policy core of the government transition team, was the first sign of a major shift in Brazilian foreign policy as it proposed that the climate agenda should no longer be a sectoral issue, but rather occupy a cross-cutting position in the country’s international integration strategy.

Drafted by experts and launched at COP27, the text served as a charter of principles that sought to guide Brazil’s return to prominence in global issues through a new model of sustainable and inclusive development. This ambitious proposal placed central importance on multilateralism, South-South cooperation, and the construction of thematic coalitions led by the Global South, such as the suggested Brazil-Indonesia-Congo alliance on tropical forests. The text also indicated ways to rebuild international trust, advocating a vision of revaluing regional arrangements, such as UNASUR and ACTO (Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization).

However, the concrete implementation of foreign policy showed that the document had important fragile aspects. By proposing a broad and virtuous convergence between climate, development, and democracy, it ended up underestimating the structural dilemmas of Brazilian foreign policy. Nor could it foresee the institutional and operational challenges of implementing this agenda amid interministerial struggles for leadership on climate issues (Poder 360 2023). In short, it was a normatively innovative document that launched the diplomatic cycle of the Lula III administration with strategic depth and sensitivity to the demands of the 21st century, but its effectiveness depended on overcoming internal and international contradictions that were still present.

As President Lula stated in his first international speech at COP27, “Brazil is back on the world stage” (Lula da Silva 2022). The resumption of leadership roles in platforms such as the G20, COP30, and BRICS would indicate a diplomacy that sought to place Brazil back at the center of major multilateral agendas, connecting sustainable development, social inclusion, and democratic stability. The successful organization of the G20 Brazil and the launch of the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty (Lula da Silva 2024), the international mobilization for the Amazon’s protection with

the reconstruction of ACTO (Brazil. Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023), the organization of the BRICS summit, and the defense of multilateral regulation of artificial intelligence² were concrete examples of this symbolic and engaged diplomacy, which combined the universalist tradition of Brazilian foreign policy with highly symbolic themes that could quickly restore the country's credibility.

The Lula administration also pursued a strategic realignment with Beijing, marked by high-level visits and expanded cooperation in trade, energy, digital transition, and infrastructure. In this context, Brazil sought a partnership with China that was structural but not subordinate—while maintaining its scope for autonomous action in other forums, such as the G20 and BRICS. Lula met with President Xi Jinping three times during this period and launched dozens of joint initiatives. On the other hand, the government rejected joining the Silk Road, arguing that the gains pointed out by Beijing were not attractive enough to outweigh the possible costs associated with American retaliation.³

This strategy was also evident in the reevaluation of partnerships with European countries, especially in the context of the MERCOSUR–European Union Agreement negotiations, which have been protracted and are still unresolved. By resuming this dialogue with renewed emphasis, Brazil signaled its search for international integration that would avoid automatic alignment with any of the major powers, using closer ties with Europe as a means of escaping the binary choice imposed by the growing rivalry between the United States and China. It has been an attempt at strategic diversification that reinforces Brazilian autonomy by betting on a cooperation agenda based on values shared with Europeans, such as sustainability, multilateralism, and democracy.⁴

2 The final declaration of the G20 summit, held in November 2024 in Rio de Janeiro, included explicit commitments on AI regulation. G20, *Declaração de Líderes do G20—Rio de Janeiro, November 18–19, 2024* (Brasília: Presidência da República, 2024). <https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/g20-rio-de-janeiro-leaders-em-portugues.pdf>.

3 Although the Brazilian government did not formally join the initiative, it sought to establish “synergies” between national programs, such as the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC), the Ecological Transformation Plan, New Industry Brazil (NIB), and the South American Integration Routes, with the Chinese initiative. This approach aims to take advantage of opportunities for cooperation and investment without compromising the country's strategic neutrality. Débora Bergamasco, *Brasil rejeita Nova Rota da Seda, mas fala em sinergias com projeto chinês*, CNN Brazil, October 23, 2023, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/blogs/debora-bergamasco/politica/brasil-rejeita-nova-rota-da-seda-mas-fala-em-sinergias-com-projeto-chines>.

4 A spokesperson for the European Union stated that reaching a trade agreement with MERCOSUR represents a “great opportunity” for the European bloc, especially given the uncertainties caused by the imposition of new tariffs by the United States. See: “Acordo comercial com o MERCOSUL é oportunidade com tarifas dos EUA, diz EU,” CNN Brazil, April 4, 2025, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/economia/macroeconomia/acordo-comercial-com-o-mercotel-e-oportunidade-com-tarifas-dos-eua-diz-ue/>.

The Ukraine case represented another relevant example of hybrid *autonomy through reconstruction*. The Lula III administration continued the Bolsonaro administration's position by formally condemning the Russian invasion (Brazil. Presidency of the Republic 2023a), but chose not to join the economic sanctions and kept dialogue channels open with Moscow (Brazil. Presidency of the Republic 2023b). This position was criticized by Western sectors as ambiguous or pro-Russia.⁵ However, the launch of the Sino-Brazilian initiative in April 2024, a joint proposal of principles for a political solution to the conflict, articulated by Celso Amorim and Wang Yi (Chinese Foreign Minister), brought Brazil into the discussions about the conflict.⁶ By rejecting the logic of punishment and proposing negotiated solutions, the Lula administration resumed the pacifist and legalistic tradition of Brazilian diplomacy, but adapted it to a context in which power blocs are realigning and Western hegemony is no longer guaranteed. This stance did not seek to please either Russia or the United States, but rather to insert Brazil as a viable actor in a future diplomatic reconfiguration of the conflict, a position that is still quite uncertain and lacking any concrete results.

In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Lula reaffirmed a foreign policy marked by active neutrality and a defense of multilateralism as an instrument of peaceful coexistence between nations. His refusal to automatically align Brazil with any of the major powers was clearly demonstrated in the episode involving German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's request for Brazil to supply weapons to Ukraine. "My friend Olaf Scholz was here, he sat on that couch and asked me to sell him missiles to send to Ukraine. I said I wouldn't sell them, with all due respect, because I didn't want any Ukrainians or Russians to die from a Brazilian weapon." Similarly, Lula called Putin and said, "Putin, I think it's time for you to return to politics. End this. The world needs politics, not war. We need you" (Aderson 2025). Both positions are symptomatic of Lula's non-aligned stance.

5 In April 2023, following statements by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva during visits to China and the United Arab Emirates, in which he suggested that the United States and the European Union were "encouraging war" by supplying weapons to Ukraine, European Union foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stano responded by stating that "Russia, and only Russia, is responsible for the war" and that "there is no question about who is the aggressor and who is the victim." Cf. "EUA e União Europeia rebatem crítica de Lula à guerra da Ucrânia," *Correio Braziliense*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.correio braziliense.com.br/politica/2023/04/5088103-eua-e-uniao-europeia-rebatem-critica-de-lula-a-guerra-da-ucrania.html>.

6 On May 23, 2024, representatives from Brazil and China met in Beijing and released a document entitled "Common Understandings Between China and Brazil on Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis." Brazil, Presidency of the Republic, *Brasil e China apresentam proposta conjunta para negociações de paz com participação de Rússia e Ucrânia* (Brasília: Palácio do Planalto, May 23, 2024).

As for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Lula III’s administration adopted a more assertive stance, aligning itself with international humanitarian law by condemning both Hamas’ terrorist attacks and Israel’s excessive military response in Gaza (Terra 2023). However, the presidential rhetoric, when comparing Israeli action to genocide in February 2024, provoked a strong international diplomatic reaction and internal polarization⁷ (Brun 2024). The decision to join South Africa’s case against Israel at the International Court of Justice further reinforced Brazil’s engagement with the Palestinian side of the conflict,⁸ which positively strengthened Brazil’s image among Arab countries.

The regional dimensions of foreign policy revealed the limits of *autonomy through reconstruction*. Brazil faced concrete difficulties in exercising leadership in South America. The failure of the attempt to relaunch UNASUR in 2023 and the ambiguity regarding the Venezuelan crisis highlighted the obstacles to the reconstruction of a cooperative regional order. Brazilian diplomacy adopted an intermediate stance in the case of Venezuela, avoiding both alignment with the Maduro government and adherence to US pressure, but this position proved insufficient in the face of the authoritarian deepening in Caracas and the Essequibo crisis, which placed Brazilian regional security at the center of the agenda.

In this context, the government’s attempt to create a broad front against the far right in the region became clear. In January 2025, Lula and Chilean President Gabriel Boric reinforced the importance of preparing a meeting of leaders in defense of democracy, as agreed at the event “In Defense of Democracy: Combating Extremism,” held in September 2024, on the sidelines of the 79th United Nations General Assembly in New York (Brazil. Presidency of the Republic 2025a). In February 2025, Lula hosted a dinner for the presidents of Chile, Gabriel Boric, Colombia, Gustavo Petro, and Uruguay, Yamandú Orsi, at the Brazilian embassy in Montevideo, with the aim of “strengthening democracy” (Poder 360 2025). He took part in a

7 In the Chamber of Deputies, Lula’s speech sparked intense debate. Opposition lawmakers criticized the president’s comparison, calling it inappropriate and offensive. On the other hand, deputies from the ruling coalition defended Lula’s speech, arguing that the situation in Gaza constitutes genocide and that Israel’s response is disproportionate to attacks by Hamas. Câmara dos Deputados, “Fala do presidente Lula sobre ação de Israel na Faixa de Gaza repercute no Plenário da Câmara” (Brasília: Câmara dos Deputados, February 20, 2024), <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/1037144-fala-do-presidente-lula-sobre-acao-de-israel-na-faixa-de-gaza-repercute-no-plenario-da-camara>.

8 Minister Mauro Vieira published an article in *Folha de S. Paulo* in January 2024 detailing Brazil’s position and highlighting that Brazil’s support for South Africa’s action aims to protect the Palestinian population, in accordance with the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Mauro Vieira, “Brazil, Gaza, and the Trial at the International Court,” *Folha de S. Paulo* (São Paulo), January 20, 2024, <https://www.gov.br/mre/pt-br/centrais-de-conteudo/publicacoes/discursos-artigos-e-entrevistas/>.

videoconference with the presidents of Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, and Spain, reaffirming his commitment to democracy and the fight against disinformation (Cué 2025).

However, foreign policy also faced the temptation of political alignment in regional electoral disputes. The relationship with Argentine President Javier Milei was emblematic in this regard: deeply deteriorated from the outset due to Milei's aggressive statements,⁹ the relationship was further aggravated by the widespread perception in Argentina that the Planalto Palace had supported the arrival of Brazilian electoral strategists to assist the campaign of Sergio Massa, Milei's opponent.¹⁰ A similar episode occurred in Ecuador, where Lula publicly expressed support for Luisa González, a *correísmo* candidate, who was ultimately defeated by Daniel Noboa (Brazil. Presidency of the Republic 2025b).

Although consistent with its commitment to progressive alliances, this sort of involvement revealed the dilemma between autonomy and partisanship in foreign policy. By favoring candidates with greater ideological affinity, the government risked compromising the stability of its bilateral relations and weakening its ability to act as a regional mediator. Such episodes illustrate the limits of *autonomy through reconstruction* when it is torn between normative values and diplomatic realism.

However, the logic behind autonomy through reconstruction became even more evident in the Lula III administration's interpretation of the international political context regarding the defense of democracy, given the rise of ultra-conservative forces. Amorim stated that "there has never been such growth of the far right since 1945," referring to the results of the European elections in which ultra-conservative parties won in France, Italy, and Austria, and placed second in Germany: "The problem with the far right is not just what it can do in power. It is how it already has an impact today, through alliances." Amorim also expressed President Lula's concern about the impact of the conservative wave on the political balance necessary for multilateral agreements, such as the one between MERCOSUR and the

9 Milei sobre Lula: "Qual o problema em chamá-lo de corrupto? Ele não foi preso?" *CNN Brazil*, October 17, 2023, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/milei-sobre-lula-qual-o-problema-em-chama-lo-de-corrupto-ele-nao-foi-presos>.

10 Based on the available information, there are no records that President Lula sent campaign strategists to Sergio Massa's campaign in Argentina. However, according to a report by *Folha de S.Paulo*, strategists linked to the PT participated in Massa's campaign, using strategies inspired by the aesthetics of Jair Bolsonaro's campaign to contain Javier Milei's advance. Cf. "Marqueteiros de Lula usam experiência com estética fálca de Bolsonaro para barrar Milei," *Folha de S.Paulo*, São Paulo, October 23, 2023, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2023/10/marqueteiros-de-lula-usam-experiencia-com-estetica-falca-de-bolsonaro-para-barrar-milei.shtml>.

European Union. Amorim considered that the rise of the far right placed “a question mark over Brazil’s integration” (Chade 2024) and could push the country more clearly into the emerging bloc.

There is no doubt that the global rise of the far right, which is symbolized by the ideological alliance between the MAGA movement in the US and Bolsonarism in Brazil, has brought a new kind of systemic challenge to Brazilian foreign policy: the contamination of domestic politics by foreign policy. Donald Trump’s return to the US presidency was seen by Bolsonarists as a way to legitimize their illiberal narratives and became a tool for external pressure against the Lula administration.¹¹ Even the Federal Supreme Court—especially Justice Alexandre de Moraes—has been targeted by international criticism from figures linked to Trumpism, accused of restricting individual freedoms and curtailing the freedom of expression of certain Brazilian groups (Metrópolis 2025). Looking ahead to 2026, with new presidential elections in Brazil, there is a looming crisis: a direct confrontation between transnational illiberal projects and the ongoing democratic reconstruction in the country. Foreign policy, in this context, has also become a field of electoral dispute, constantly being activated in clashes that mobilize voters.

In this context, Brazilian diplomacy has not limited itself to reacting to the new global political right—it has sought to build its own space, normatively differentiated and geopolitically pluralistic, that defends the importance of democracy. A fundamental dimension of the Lula III administration’s foreign policy has been its strategic response to the advance of the extreme right and illiberal forces on the international stage through the creation of alliances between progressive countries. This repositioning process has been materialized especially in partnerships with consolidated liberal democracies, particularly with European countries. The relationship with France has been revalued based on a common agenda on defending democracy, protecting the Amazon, and combating disinformation. Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Lula have been in constant dialogue and coordinate positions in multilateral forums, including initiatives aimed at regulating digital platforms and promoting environmental governance based on social justice and equity (Agência Gov 2025). With Germany, the resumption of the Amazon Fund and the commitments made during Olaf Scholz’s administration signal a shared

11 In November 2024, after Trump’s victory was confirmed, Eduardo Bolsonaro participated in a celebratory live stream in which he declared that “the world is becoming more conservative” and that this scenario “could be replicated in Brazil.” Cf. “Eduardo Bolsonaro diz que vitória de Trump ajuda pai e vê chance de barrar Moraes nos EUA,” *Folha de S.Paulo*, São Paulo, November 7, 2024, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2024/11/eduardo-bolsonaro-diz-que-vitoria-de-trump-ajuda-pai-e-ve-chance-de-barrar-moraes-nos-eua.shtml>.

effort to strengthen democratic institutions through ecological transition, as well as close cooperation in combating political extremism and digital radicalization.¹² Another important example of this coordination in favor of democracy was the rapprochement with the social democratic government of Spain, led by Pedro Sánchez, and the discussions surrounding the rise of the far right in both countries.¹³

Another contradiction inherent in *autonomy through reconstruction* lies in the tension between defending democracies against the rise of the far right and the strategic emphasis on rapprochement with countries such as China and Russia. Although this rapprochement can be justified from the perspective of universalism, active non-alignment, and the search for a more balanced multipolar order, it also generates ambivalences that weaken the coherence of Brazil's democratic discourse. As Brazil strengthens ties with authoritarian regimes, its ability to articulate a robust defense of democratic principles at the international level becomes more vulnerable to criticism and perceptions of inconsistency. There is, therefore, a clear clash between two pillars of *autonomy through reconstruction*: on the one hand, the principle of global governance reform, which supports rapprochement with countries that also seek this reconstruction, and on the other, the commitment to democratic values themselves, especially in the face of the transnational advance of the far right, which is often fomented by countries such as Russia.

Finally, the relationship between Lula and Joe Biden, although initially promising, was marked by mutual frustrations. On the one hand, Lula hoped that US support for the defense of Brazilian democracy during the 2022 elections would be followed by a strategic rapprochement between the two countries, with recognition of Brazil as a key partner on issues such as energy transition, combating inequality, and global governance reform. On the other, the Biden administration hoped for a clearer signal of Brazil's alignment with

12 In December 2023, during the Second Brazil-Germany High-Level Intergovernmental Consultations Meeting held in Berlin, Lula and Scholz signed a joint declaration of intent to carry out projects aiming at socially just ecological transformation. On the same occasion, Brazil and Germany formalized a Joint Declaration of Intent on Information Integrity and Combating Disinformation. Cf. "Lula e Olaf Scholz defendem transição ecológica com justiça social," *Agência Gov*, December 4, 2023, <https://agenciagov.etc.com.br/noticias/202312/lula-e-olaf-scholz-defendem-transicao-ecologica-com-justica-social-1>.

13 In March 2024, during Sánchez's official visit to Brazil, Lula emphasized that "Spain and Brazil are two great democracies facing extremism, the rejection of politics, and hate speech, which are fueled by fake news," stressing the importance of uniting all democrats around the world. Brazy, Presidency of the Republic, "Pudemos comprovar a afinidade entre nossos governos," diz Lula sobre visita do presidente da Espanha," March 7, 2024, <https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/noticias/2024/03/201cpudemos-comprovar-a-afinidade-entre-nossos-governos201d-diz-lula-sobre-visita-do-presidente-da-espanha>.

the Western agenda, especially in light of the war in Ukraine and growing competition with China.

Neither side had its expectations fully met. Brazil's rapprochement with Beijing, its refusal to join sanctions against Moscow, and Lula's more assertive rhetoric on Israel caused discomfort in Washington. For its part, Brasília felt that the engagement of the US remained superficial and insensitive to South American priorities (Winter 2024). It is noteworthy that Lula and Biden jointly launched the *Parceria pela Democracia Trabalhista* (US–Brazil Partnership for Workers' Rights), an unprecedented initiative aimed at defending trade unions, collective bargaining, and social justice (The White House, 2023).

Thus, autonomy through reconstruction has represented an autonomy that is not neutral, but rather engaged in the protection of democratic regimes, the reformed multilateral order, and the climate agenda. In direct contrast to the illiberal logic of the previous period, Lula III's foreign policy focused on building international coalitions to resist the rise of global authoritarianism and rehabilitate Brazil as a country interested in reforming multilateralism in its many forms. This response did not take the form of direct confrontation or aggressive rhetoric, but rather selective alliances, institutional reinforcement, and the repositioning of Brazil as a defender of democracy, climate, and reformed governance in a world in transition. After the Bolsonaro administration's ideological alignment with the so-called "reactionary international"—marked by attacks on democratic institutions, multilateral isolation, and affinities with leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Benjamin Netanyahu—Lula III's strategy has sought to establish a new normative framework for Brazil's foreign policy, recovering democratic, multilateralist, and progressive values, although not without significant contradictions and limitations.

Conclusion

The path of Brazilian foreign policy since the 1970s reveals a succession of models of autonomy that reflect both the internal dilemmas of the state and the transformations of the international system. As summarized in the table below, each paradigm—from Geisel's strategic distance to Lula I and II's diversification, including FHC's institutional participation—articulates an *identity*, a set of *strategic choices*, and distinct *guiding principles*. The rupture promoted by Bolsonaro, marked by the deliberate abandonment of the autonomist tradition and ideological alignment with a "reactionary

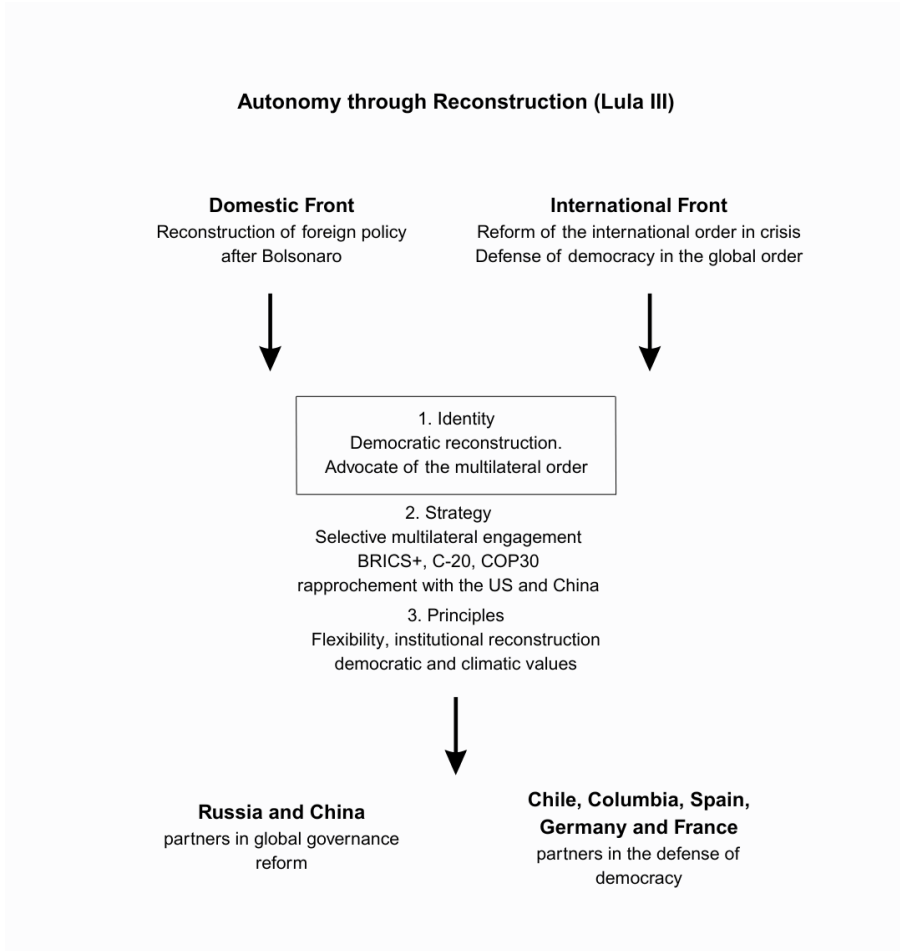
international,” intensified the need for reconstruction. On the other hand, the profoundly changing international order demanded a selective and prudent approach. This is a hybrid, flexible, and contingent strategy that combines systemic caution with normative commitment, aiming to preserve autonomy in an increasingly fragmented world.

Table 1. Comparison of Brazilian Foreign Policy Autonomy Models

Autonomy Model	Model Identity	Strategic Choices	PEB Basic Principles
Autonomy through Distance (Geisel)	National sovereignty, national developmentalism	Rapprochement with Third World countries, independent nuclear policy	Decision-making autonomy, strategic distance, anti-dependence
Autonomy through Participation (FHC)	A liberal-democratic state, influential and a reformer of global standards	Active participation in multilateral regimes, consolidation of MERCOSUR, accession to the NPT	Institutional engagement, advocacy for multilateral rules, adaptation
Autonomy through Diversification (Lula I and II)	Emerging power in the Global South, multipolar leadership	South-South coalitions, IBSA, G20 trade, relations with Africa and South America	Partnership diversification, universalism, leadership in the Global South
Lack of Autonomy (Bolsonaro)	Conservative and anti-globalist identity, ideological alignment with the international right wing	Alignment with the US (Trump), Israel, Hungary, refusal to participate in UN multilateral forums	Rejection of multilateralism, opposition to global norms, conservative foreign policy
Autonomy through Reconstruction (Lula III)	Democratic reconstruction, defense of democracy on a global scale, advocate of a reformed multilateral order	Selective multilateral engagement, BRICS+, G20, COP30, rapprochement with the EU and China	Flexibility, institutional rebuilding, democratic and climate values, strategic prudence

Source: Elaborated by the author.

The diagram below represents the autonomy through reconstruction of the Lula III administration, acting on two levels: domestically, with a focus on rebuilding foreign policy after Bolsonaro, and internationally, with the goal of reforming the international order in crisis. Below are the central elements of identity, strategy, and principles that guide this approach.



The foreign policy of the Lula III administration thus affirmed an international *identity* marked by democratic reconstruction, a revaluation of multilateralism, and the aspiration for inclusive international leadership. After the institutional and normative collapse of the Bolsonaro administration, Brazilian diplomacy sought to rebuild itself as an instrument for the country's repositioning in a changing world. This identity was expressed by defending democracy as a value, a rare position in the history of Brazilian diplomacy, and by symbolic engagement with the climate justice agenda. The Lula administration's diplomacy did not operate solely as a vehicle for material interests, but also as a voice for a narrative about Brazil's place in the world.

In terms of *strategic choices*, the Lula III administration adopted a selective, flexible, and contingent stance, consistent with the fragmented and

multipolar international scenario. The rapprochement with China, without joining the Silk Road project; the effort to maintain dialogue with the United States despite rhetorical tensions; the rapprochement with Europeans on the issue of democracy; the joint proposal with Beijing on the war in Ukraine; and the affirmative stance toward Israel—all these initiatives revealed a pattern of insertion that avoided automatic alignment and favored a non-aligned position. This was a case of “active equidistance” on sensitive issues, combined with close alliances on structural agendas such as climate and democracy. The case of South America, in turn, revealed the limits of this pragmatism: the failure to rebuild regional leadership and bilateral tensions with Argentina and Venezuela indicate that Brazilian autonomy is more effective at the global level than at the regional level.

The *principles* guiding Lula III’s foreign policy combined traditional elements—such as pacifism, international legality, universality, and non-alignment—with new directions, including climate justice, social inclusion, and the active defense of democracy. This updated diplomatic grammar was shaped by a world and a domestic reality in transition, in which Brazil sought not only to adapt but also to influence the direction of the global order.

Finally, preferred partners on these issues can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, China and Russia in discussions on global governance reform. In this regard, the BRICS, G20, and COP30 forums have become the preferred stages for action. On the other hand, Germany, France, Chile, and Colombia are involved in discussions about strengthening democracy, with a view to creating a broad alliance against the “reactionary international” led by Trump.

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