

# THE BRICS ENLARGEMENT HAS BEEN A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR SOUTH AMERICA

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*Argentina's refusal to join the BRICS, in the context of its membership expansion, approved at the 15th summit at South Africa, is an indication of the difficult times faced by South American regionalism. Argentina's foreign policy is geared to a 100 percent pro-Western orientation, that which implies immediate cooling off relations with China and the Global South. Within this context, ties with Brazil became and unavoidable geoeconomic necessity. Hence, joining the BRICS, which had parted from a Brazilian diplomatic move, is out of the question. During the late 20th century Brazilian-Argentine bilateralism had translated into unprecedented confidence-building schemes that put South America on track to becoming a pluralistic security community. This trajectory was gradually dismantled, largely as a result of the foreign policy orientations of both countries. At present, Lula da Silva's commitment to reactivate South American multilateralism has not been as successful as Brazil's proactive involvement in global affairs. While Argentina's "no thanks" hardly affected BRICS renewal; it most of all brought costs to South America and to Brazil's aspirations to promote a new wave of constructive regionalism in the area.*

Monica Hirst\*

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\* Monica Hirst is a Full-Time Professor at the Department of Economics at the University of Quilmes (retired in August, 2018), and teaches at the MA Program in International Studies at the Torcuato Di Tella University.

**I**n the context of its membership expansion, Argentina’s refusal to join the BRICS, approved at the 15th summit in South Africa, is not difficult to understand. Groucho Marx’s saying, “I don’t want to belong to a club that would me accept me as a member”, fits as a glove to explain the decision. President Javier Milei announced since day one of his administration his determination to gear Argentine foreign policy priorities, translating into a strong alignment with the United States (and Israel) and little interest, if any, towards the Global South.<sup>1</sup> This involved keeping a distance from all options that could hurt such orientation and adopting a very narrow pick-and-choose approach in foreign affairs. Cultivating relations with China and the Global South is perceived as undesirable, while maintaining ties with Brazil became an unavoidable geopolitical necessity. These are to follow a bilateral give-and-take style, with no sort of team-playing in global or regional affairs. Hence, joining the BRICS, which had parted from a Brazilian diplomatic move, is out of the question. While Argentina’s “no thanks” hardly affected BRICS renewed façade; it most of all brought costs to South America and to Brazil’s regional aspirations.

### *A Decade of Mediocre Performance for South American Regionalism*

Even if Argentina’s empty seat at BRICS may be temporary, it sends a message regarding South American regionalism’s health conditions. During the last decade, this area has shown symptoms of persistent regressive regionalism. South America has receded in its efforts to become a zone of peace, to consolidate itself as a stable democratic neighborhood, and to teamwork in global governance.<sup>2</sup> Besides the paralysis of major regional cooperation initiatives in defense and/or strategic agendas – as those between Argentina and Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia – multilateral innovations - as UNASUR and its Defense Council- were dismantled and interstate coordination experiences abandoned.

Concurrently the region has reached the highest-ever ranking in local violence and public insecurity, which comes hand and hand with widespread humanitarian needs caused by unprecedented intraregional flows of migrants, particularly from Venezuela. South American regionalism has also failed dramatically in a core human security as public health, with special mention to the lack of regional responses during the Covid-19 pandemic. South American deficient economic performance and regressive

1) Bosworth, James “Milei is Planning to shake-up Argentinas` s Foreign Policy, Too” See <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/milei-argentina-foreign-policy/>; Malacalza, Bernabé and Tokatlian, Juan Gabriel “Argentine: avec Javier Milei la diplomatie complotiste arrive au pouvoir”, *Le grand Continent* (November 2023). <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2023/11/19/avec-javier-milei-en-argentine-la-diplomatie-complotiste-aux-portes-du-pouvoir/>

2) See Guadalupe Gonzalez, Hirst, Monica, Lujan, Carlos, Romero, Carlos and Tokatlian, Juan Gabriel, “Critical Juncture, Power Transition and Latin American Vacuum”, *Nueva Sociedad*, Abril 2021, on-line <https://nuso.org/documento/critical-juncture-power-transition-and-latin-american-vacuum>; Barros, Pedro da Silva and Goncalves, Julia de Borba “Crisis in South American regionalism and Brazilian protagonism in Unasur, the Lima Group and Prosur” *Revista Brasileira de Politica Internacional*. on line: <https://www.scielo.br/j/rbpi/a/5mx4T7zmBC6HrZHZzKkpfwb/>

regional integration intertwined with a relentless process of deindustrialization and re-privatization of national economic structures. Within the Latin American context, this region faces persistent impediments to reversing the accumulated slowdown in economic and social development.<sup>3</sup> The reversal of Argentina-Brazil bilateralism speaks highly in this process.

Not too long ago, Argentine-Brazilian close political ties played a central part in the built-up of South American regionalism based upon peace, democracy, and regional integration. A robust list of bilateral collaborative initiatives in trade, defense, technological advancement, and shared foreign policy priorities occurred in close articulation with the democratization processes in the last two decades of the 20th century. Confidence-building regarding national nuclear developments was essential for Argentina and Brazil to lock in their regional peace and non-proliferation commitments. Now, the disarticulation of previous bilateral commitments seriously compromised such achievements.<sup>4</sup> Contrasting foreign policy priorities slowly dismantled diplomatic commonalities in regional and global affairs, shared economic development strategies, and similar autonomous world views. The Right-wing administrations of Mauricio Macri (2016-2019) in Argentina, of Milton Temer and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2016-2022), and now of Xavier Milei in Argentina have generated a de-facto path-dependency dynamic in which a sequence of foreign policy decisions managed to reverse, paralyze and/or suspend preceding bilateralism. In this context, Argentina's "no thanks" to join the BRICS represents an episode of the most recent season of a non-stop Argentina-Brazilian disintegration process. While it undoubtedly indicates the foreign policy intentions pursued by Argentina, only Brazil should take it personally within the BRICS group.

### *The Return of Brazil as a Progressive Voice*

After the four-year-term of the extreme-right administration of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the inauguration of the Lula 3.0 government gave new impetus to the country's projection on multiple international fronts. Since his electoral campaign in 2022, Lula da Silva announced his intention of resuming an assertive presence at the global chessboards, built on the learned lessons of previous governments and the urgency of putting Brazilian activism back on stage.<sup>5</sup> Brazil immediately picked up on a judgmental tone when addressing international finance, climate change, world peace and security. Hence, Lula's international presence became crucial to

3) See "Preliminary Overview of the Economies of Latin American and the Caribbean" 2023. ECLAC, p.66. <https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/bafc36b3-6b27-4afb-a44f-73fd3321d6c5/content>

4) Bernabe Malacalza and Tokatlian, Juan Gabriel "Argentina-Brasil, entre la Desintegracion y el Desacoplamiento" *Revista CEBRI*, No.1 (3) (2022).

5) Lula da Silva's First Presidential Term (2002-2006) and Second Presidential Term (2006-2010).

vindicating an inclusive multipolar world, committed to a reinvigorated, fair and secure international world. Besides, Brazilian foreign policy rapidly disclosed the intention to retrieve discrepancies with Western rule-settings. An adjourned narrative contesting Northern preponderance in the World Order reemerged with special mention to the need of inclusive reforms in global governance, the condemnation of geopolitical worldviews leading to securitized methods and military escalation of local crisis, and the questioning of the Dollar dominance in international trade and finance. Special mention ought to be made to Brazil's attempts to promote inclusive and just peace negotiations to end the war of Russia against Ukraine and in the condemnation of the genocidal actions of Israel in Gaza.

To summarize, Brazil resurfaced as an eager emergent power ready to share its revisionist views with Southern partners and participate in global transformations. This has been the aim behind Brazil's role in multiple arenas, with special mention to: the temporary presidency of the G20, which will culminate in the November 2024 summit in Rio de Janeiro; the presidency of the BRICS and the status of host country for the 30th UN Climate Change Conference, both in 2025.

Notwithstanding, Lula's Latin/South American multilateral initiatives have not moved ahead as swiftly as in global affairs. Initial expectations were raised that Brazil would return to the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), constructive lines of action would take place in MERCOSUR, with the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) and the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone (ZOPACAS). A first summit of South American Presidents organized in Brasília in the first quarter of 2023 did not meet Da Silva's expectations.

Throughout the first year of government, even reconstructing support among other like-minded governments- as those of Chile and Colombia- encountered more barriers than incentives. Besides, purposeful leadership in South America has not incited meaningful domestic support. The ambiguities of Lulas' relations with Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela represent a permanent obstacle to generating positive regional and domestic backing. In this context, teamwork with Amazonian neighbors, provided by the environment and climate change common interests, has proved easier than Mercosur's revitalization.

Putting regional integration back on its feet has become a repeated aim in Brazil's South American diplomatic narrative, with particular attention to Mercosur. The country assumed the temporary presidency of the group last July, having to face a less favorable sub-regional context. This context combined: a significant reduction on intra-regional trade a delicate and unstable political scenario of its main partner, Argentina, and an external agenda dominated by an uneven and worn-out negotiation with the European Union. Brazilian foreign policy officials do acknowledge that

South American regionalism represents a useful platform in articulations between Brazil and the Global South. Brazil's regional leadership could play a crucial part in its efforts to deepen ties with African multilateralism, particularly the African Union, with ASEAN value chains interdependence experience and with the Arab community, stimulated by converging interests in fossil fuel issues and the predisposition of involvement in geopolitical issues in the Middle East. Besides, inter-regional dialogue in the Global South could contribute to strengthening global governance negotiations in the UN system all together..

### ***The Strategic Importance of BRICS for Brazil***

The Brazilian government perceives BRICS as a privileged arena for its emergent multilateral diplomacy. As a founding member of the group, political coordination with BRICS fellows is a valuable tool to promote the reconfiguration of the multilateral architecture, emphasizing its economic-financial institutions in line with a redistribution of global power. When former president Dilma Rousseff was appointed for the presidency of the New Development Bank (NDB)<sup>6</sup> in 2023, intra-BRICS convergent positions were refined in challenging exclusionary financial global normative guidelines, which impose conditionalities and normalize unilateral coercive practices.

During the XV BRICS meeting in South Africa, in August 2023, Brazil found itself compelled to deal with new global challenges. The unprecedented political presence of the Global South in world affairs, in a context of geopolitical turmoil and loss of importance of the international multilateral system, favored the inclusion of new members to the BRICS. The idea of expanding the group gained momentum, particularly in response to the strategic interests of its heavy-weight partners, China and Russia. Hard power logic prevailed over a shared balanced evaluation of pros and cons between its founding fathers. For Lula da Silva government, the incorporation of new members opened a front for domestic questioning regarding the risk that Brazil's could be overstretching its non-western preferences in world affairs. The XVI BRICS Summit will take place in Russia in November 2024, when the group is expected to operate with all of the eleven members. For Brazil, it is essential to advance propositional agendas, especially launching a common currency – the BricCoin – that facilitates commercial transactions in emerging markets.<sup>7</sup> The Group's XVII summit, which will take place in Brazil in 2025, will represent an opportunity to assess the country's capacity to absorb and manage its expanded membership, which

6) Since its creation in 2014, the presidency of the NDB has been held by a Brazilian representative; Paulo Nogueira Batista was the first to hold the position.

7) Monica Hirst and Tokatlian, Juan Gabriel, "The End of the Dollar Supremacy," *IPS Journal*, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/economy-and-ecology/the-end-of-dollar-supremacy-6700/>

will also involve dealing with the tensions generated by global geopolitical turmoil and advancing Global South common agendas..

### *A Loss for All*

Argentina's refusal to join BRICS opens an opportunity to reflect upon the interplay of regional and global dynamics for the Southern world. Regionalism has long been a challenging card of the Global South affairs. Interstate conflicting agendas stimulated by territorial disputes, metropolitan preferences and cultural/religious differences have kept different regions in the developing world from building strong neighborhood environments. Collective initiatives based upon common interests and shared resources have seldom prevailed in post-colonial foreign policies during and after the Cold War

South America is of marginal strategic importance in world politics and does not present any threat regarding possessing mass destruction weaponry. This region has stood out for its history of minor inter-state conflicts during the 20th century and has had limited participation in post-Cold War UN Security Council interventionism. Structural asymmetries and strong ascendancy from North to South in the Americas have not kept South America from pursuing autonomy through political initiatives. Such impulse reached a new benchmark in the context of democratic consolidation in the post-Cold war years. This process was led by Brazilian-Argentine bilateralism and the achievement of unprecedented confidence-building schemes and programs in defense, non-proliferation, world, and regional affairs. In the opposite direction, Argentina and Brazil took turns in right-wing oriented foreign policy during the last eight years that fully subscribe to the basic pro-U.S./anti regional integration blueprint. This text overviews the dismantlement of bilateral efforts this vicious sequence produced.

The return of Brazil to the frontfore of progressive global politics since the inauguration of Lula da Silva 3.0 has not been fully successful at the South American front. Most recently, the chances of rebuilding a meaningful South American project have been particularly affected by domestic developments in Argentina. The inclusion of Argentina in BRICS would have contributed to bridging the group's broadening process with the intents of Brazil to promote a new wave of constructive regionalism in South America. In a context of strengthened Global South in world affairs, lacking positive regional echoes reduces Brazilian soft-power attributes in hard-power agendas.

South America must adjourn its connection with the Global South. Bringing Argentina to BRICS would have meant a step forward for Brazil to improve its brokerage capacities and better intertwine its regional and global agendas. Instead, a special dose of strategic patience now becomes for Brazil the best prescription to deal with the complexities of its close neighbor, while keeping the ball in the court to face the challenges placed by global settings. Brazilian president Lula da Silva has become an active Southern player in promoting peaceful negotiations in conflictive scenarios, committing resources and diplomatic engagement to alleviate the severe humanitarian crisis in vulnerable contexts, and the defense of reform of global governance architecture. Teaming with BRICS fellows is crucial to give voice and agency to these efforts, with or without Argentina membership.