



Brazil's Contentious Recent Road to Building a Strategic Partnership with China

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Sino-Brazilian relations during the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011) were defined by his administration's aim to diversify alliances in the Global South and to promote Brazil's regional leadership. It was also characterized by presidential diplomacy, relying on leader-to-leader contact at international summits and during official visits, as opposed to relationships at the ministerial level.¹ This approach led to the creation of several bilateral initiatives, including the Sino-Brazilian High-Level Coordination and Cooperation Commission, the main mechanism for bilateral coordination created in 2004, and, in the Brazilian Senate, the founding of the Brazil-China Parliamentary Group.²

Five years later, on the heels of the global financial crisis, Brazil and China expanded their partnership through their co-participation in the BRICS, an association of the five major emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which holds an annual leaders' summit with a rotating presidency. In 2012 both the Global Strategic Dialogue between the countries' respective Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Ten-year Cooperation Plan (2012-2021) were established, and China elevated its relationship with Brazil to the level of "comprehensive strategic partnership."

Under President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), Brazil was a founding member of two new China-based financial institutions: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank. Both institutions were promoted by China as alternatives intended to reshape the Western dominated financial system and to help manage the country's growing demand for investments. During this period, although Brazil maintained a constructive and functional relationship with Beijing, it was unable effectively to diversify its cooperative agenda with China, given the Brazilian industrial sector's negative response to having to compete with Chinese products, which raised fears of deindustrialization. The resulting domestic turmoil added to political instability in Brazil and paralyzed more robust China-focused foreign policy goals.

Following the removal of Rousseff as president, on his first day in office new Brazilian president Michel Temer (2016-2018) flew to Hangzhou, China, to take part in the G20 Leaders' Summit. His center-right neoliberal coalition viewed China in pragmatic terms, as a key economic partner and potential investor in efforts to privatize infrastructure projects composing Brazil's Program for Partnerships and Investments. But Temer's term was short, and the legitimacy of his administration contested, which meant that he was obliged to focus most of his attention on the home front.

Sino-Brazilian relations have since become more complex over the last decade, entering a new phase with the election of far-right Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro (2018-), and the onset of the trade war between China and the United States. Bolsonaro had engaged in anti-China rhetoric for years and became the first Brazilian presidential candidate to visit Taiwan since relations with China were established in the 1970s. On the campaign trail he promised to “reorient the partnership axis” of the country’s foreign relations towards a rapprochement with the US.

Soon after Bolsonaro’s inauguration, a group of Brazilian lawmakers who were also members of the new president’s Social Liberal Party, were invited to China, where they participated in a demonstration of new Chinese facial recognition technology. Upon their return, one of these legislators introduced a bill requiring that such technology become mandatory in all public places as a tool for Brazil’s security forces.³ Other parliamentary exchanges with China followed, regardless of political affiliation.

Throughout this period, however, conservative anti-communist rhetoric spread throughout the Brazilian deep web and social media, a scenario aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Brazil’s online population is the largest in the region,⁴ nearly double that of Mexico and eight times the size of Argentina’s. Measures to combat the pandemic, such as social isolation and remote work, significantly boosted internet engagement. SARS-CoV-2 was labeled a “Chinese-virus” by public figures and the term circulated widely online. Simultaneously, conspiracy narratives regarding the virus’s origin and vaccine skepticism proliferated.

Since cooperation with Brazil’s federal government became increasingly problematic and inefficient, despite diplomatic channels remaining open, Chinese diplomats, local and state-level government officials began to cultivate other options. Because Brazil’s federal system allows for a degree of local autonomy, Brazilian governors and mayors began to travel to China and engage Chinese representatives, with the goal of developing partnerships. In August 2019, the state of Sao Paulo opened its first office in China. The state’s representative in Shanghai ended up playing a role in negotiating agreement around Chinese vaccines, despite opposition at the federal level.

As of January 2020, Bolsonaro suspended Brazil’s participation in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which Beijing sees as a privileged interlocutor for its engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean. By the following June, Brazil had become the epicenter of the pandemic, with the highest daily mortality rate in the world. The country currently has the world's second highest Covid-19 death toll.

During this same period, the state of Sao Paulo was a site for clinical trials of the Sinovac vaccine, which were conducted by the state’s Butantan Institute. The state signed a contract with Sinovac Life Science to develop the Coronavac vaccine at the Butantan Institute and secured 46 million doses, 6 million of which were to come already prepared for use. And it received an initial 120,000 ready-for-use doses and a million doses to be packaged in Brazil.⁵ Despite these developments, Bolsonaro, referring only to the vaccine from “that other

country,” pushed instead for Brazil’s use of the vaccine developed by British-Swedish pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca in partnership with Oxford University.

Though undertaking a national vaccination campaign was understood to be crucial for easing the pandemic emergency and saving lives, it became the subject of an internal political battle in Brazil. As a result, Brazil’s first Coronavac vaccine shot was administered in Sao Paulo on January 17, 2021, prior to the official rollout but later than other countries in the region, such as Chile, Mexico, Argentina, and Costa Rica.

Despite ongoing political and diplomatic rancor, Brazil’s health minister Eduardo Pazuello announced an agreement with Sao Paulo state to add Coronavac to the national immunization program. The pace of vaccination was heavily dependent on Chinese supplies, since both the Butantan Institute and the federal Fiocruz biomedical center in Rio de Janeiro producing AstraZeneca’s vaccine had to slow or suspend production pending Chinese export approval.⁶ These options represented the main Covid-19 vaccines available in Brazil during the first half of 2021. Meanwhile, amid both international and internal competition for medical supplies, Maranhao state imported 190 ventilator units directly from China, after a delivery of ventilators from a Brazilian provider was seized by the federal health ministry.⁷

A media battle and ideological dispute ensued about the safety and effectiveness of different vaccines, and regarding what vaccine would be available first. Beijing demanded an explanation after Brazilian Education minister Abraham Weintraub suggested on social media that Covid-19 was part of an intentional geopolitical plan on the part of China. China’s Embassy condemned the post, calling it “highly racist,” “absurd and despicable.”

Chinese public diplomacy in Brazil was especially active during the pandemic and sought to engage with local audiences. It relied on the participation of non-state actors, including civil society associations, Chinese companies, and members of the Chinese diaspora. Huawei alone donated oxygen-making machines and software for hospital information systems to help healthcare works on the frontlines. The public relations efforts on the part of China’s four consulates notably increased, including donations of PPE and other medical equipment. China’s representatives became more visible and accessible, participated in events, reached out to local figures, published in the local media, and stayed active on social media.

During this period China’s successful response to the pandemic, vaccine donations, and public health cooperation, were the main topics of Chinese diplomats’ digital communication in Brazil, especially on Twitter. China’s pandemic response was explored in six of 48 opinion pieces reviewed for this project and signed by Chinese diplomats in Brazilian media outlets. A column titled “The US Political Farce about the Origins of Covid-19 in China” appeared in the daily *Estado de São Paulo* in September 2021.⁸ That same month, the Chinese Consulate in Rio de Janeiro was the target of a bomb attack.⁹ China’s Consul General in Rio de Janeiro, Li Yang, reacted to President Bolsonaro’s son Eduardo’s tweet about the “Chinese virus” in an opinion column in the major newspaper *O Globo*, saying, “Appreciate China-Brazil relations, congressman Eduardo. Are you really that naive and ignorant?”¹⁰

In the midst of a major public health crisis and rising tensions with China, the Brazilian government had to negotiate the delivery of Chinese vaccine supplies, which had been held up. Brazil's Communications Minister, Fábio Faria, went to China in February 2021 to meet with Huawei executives, confirming in an interview that he requested the telecommunication company's support to help facilitate delivery of Chinese the Covid-19 vaccines¹¹. Before the end of that month, the Brazilian government announced the framework for its 5G bidding process, which allowed Huawei's participation.¹² Months earlier, it had appeared that the government would bar Huawei from taking part.

The economic interests of supporters of Bolsonaro's government had played an essential role in keeping channels of communication open with China and pragmatically opting to promote cooperation in building a commercial partnership. Brazil enjoys a trade surplus with China, but its exports are not diversified and rely heavily on commodities. The volume of trade in goods between Brazil and China reached \$125 billion in the first three quarters of 2021, up 44 percent over the same period from the previous year, according to data from Brazil's Institute for Applied Economic Research.¹³

Since 2009, China has been the main trading partner of Latin America's largest economy. Between 2007 and 2020, Chinese companies invested \$66 billion in Latin America, with Brazil the destination of 47 percent of Chinese investments. Main areas of bilateral trade have included electricity (48 percent), oil and gas (28 percent), minerals (7 percent), the manufacturing sector (6 percent), infrastructure (5 percent), agriculture and related services (3 percent) and financial services (2 percent).¹⁴ China now plays a decisive role in maintaining the stability of the Brazilian economy in what has become an increasing asymmetric relation, despite Brazil's trade surplus.

This deepening economic relationship has led to a growing number of additional channels of cooperation, including exchanges between academics, political figures, journalists, and students. Despite the geographic distance and relatively weak cultural ties, over the past decade Brazilian leaders have made at least thirteen visits to China, while Chinese high-ranked officials have made no less than twenty official visits to Brazil, including three visits by China's President Xi Jinping. Brazil currently hosts eleven university-affiliated Confucius Institutes, more than any other country in the region, and Brazil's first Chinese international school intended to serve the local Chinese expatriate community opened its doors in February 2021. As Brazil prepares for a presidential election and China replaces its Ambassador to Brazil, the relationship between these two countries will continue to develop.

¹ See Vigevani, Tullo, and Gabriel Cepaluni. 2007. "Lula's Foreign Policy and the Quest for Autonomy through Diversification." *Third World Quarterly* 28(7): 1309–26; and Amorim, Celso. 2010. "Brazilian Foreign Policy under President Lula (2003-2010): An Overview." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 53: 214–40.

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² 43 Senators are members of the China-Brazil Parliamentary Group.

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³ Portal da Câmara dos Deputados. 2019. “PL 4612/2019 - Projeto de Lei.” <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2216455> (March 9, 2022).

⁴ Statista. “Internet Users in Latin America by Country 2021.” *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/186919/number-of-internet-users-in-latin-american-countries/> (March 1, 2022).

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⁶ DW Brasil. 2021. “China Libera Envio de Insumos Da Coronavac Para o Brasil.” *DW Brasil*. <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/china-libera-envio-de-insumos-da-coronavac-para-o-brasil/a-56344254> (March 1, 2022).

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⁷ “Maranhão Comprou Da China, Mandou Para Etiópia e Driblou Governo Federal Para Ter Respiradores.” 2020. *Folha de S. Paulo*.

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⁸ Wanming, Yang. 2021. “Artigo: a farsa política dos EUA sobre as origens da covid-19 na China - Internacional.” *Estado de São Paulo*. <https://internacional.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,artigo-uma-farsa-politica-sobre-rastreo-das-origens-do-virus-pela-inteligencia-dos-eua,70003828433> (February 1, 2022).

⁹ Folha de S. Paulo. 2021. “Homem Lança Explosivo Contra Consulado Da China No Rio.” <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2021/09/homem-lanca-explosivo-contra-consulado-da-china-no-rio-veja-video.shtml> (March 1, 2022).

¹⁰ Yang, Li. 2020. “Valorize as Relações China-Brasil, Deputado Eduardo.” *Jornal O Globo*. <https://oglobo.globo.com/opiniao/artigo-valorizeas-relacoes-china-brasildeputado-eduardo-24350358> (February 1, 2022).

¹¹ Londono, Ernesto, and Letícia Casado. 2021. “Brazil Needs Coronavirus Vaccines. China Is Benefiting. - The New York Times.” *New York Times*.

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¹² Agência Nacional de Telecomunicações. 2021. “Anatel Aprova o Edital Do Leilão de 5G.” *Ministério das Comunicações*. <https://www.gov.br/anatel/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/anatel-aprova-o-edital-do-leilao-de-5g> (March 1, 2022).

¹³ Ipea. 2021. “Comércio Bilateral Brasil-China Cresce 44% e Alcança US\$ 125 Bilhões Em Negociações.” https://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=38718&catid=4&Itemid=2 (February 2, 2022)

¹⁴ Ipea. 2021. “Comércio Bilateral Brasil-China Cresce 44% e Alcança US\$ 125 Bilhões Em Negociações.” https://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=38718&catid=4&Itemid=2 (February 2, 2022).