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POLICY BRIEF



BRAZIL AND THE U.S. IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE BRICS+ SUMMIT

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This paper analyzes the impact of the BRICS+ Summit of July 2025 on the evolution of the bloc, as well as on the relationship between the bloc and the U.S. under President Trump. It also tackles the aftermath of the summit and in particular the impact it had in the souring of Brazil-U.S. relations. Before the paper analyzes the impact of BRICS+ on Morocco, it goes over the consequences of the events that resulted from the summit on the Brazilian political sphere.

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INTRODUCTION

What a roller-coaster year 2025 has been for President Lula of Brazil. The year began with successive crises—some self-inflicted, others accidental—that eroded support for his government, lowered his personal approval ratings, and cast a shadow over next year's presidential elections. Then, in July, Brazil hosted the BRICS+ Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and in a curious twist of "all politics is local," the political prospects of the Brazilian President began to shift.

Why? U.S. President Donald Trump reacted negatively to the summit, viewing some of its resolutions as a direct threat to U.S. interests while dismissing the bloc as a whole. That reaction, coupled with lobbying efforts by Brazilian Chamber of Representatives member Eduardo Bolsonaro—a son of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who temporarily moved to the U.S. to influence Trump's circle in favor of his family and political movement—led to the imposition of the highest tariffs on many Brazilian exports to the U.S.

Although these sanctions were significantly damaging to the Brazilian economy, they allowed President Lula to frame the issue as a defense of national sovereignty against U.S. interference. As a result, a consistent majority of Brazilian public opinion rallied the government and its President. The negative news that had previously dragged down Lula's popularity and approval ratings was replaced by a positive cycle of coverage favorable to him, repositioning him as a frontrunner for the October 2026 presidential elections.

Of course, one year in politics is an eternity, and unexpected developments could still reshape Brazil's political landscape. Nevertheless, the second half of 2025 has posed greater challenges for the Lula government, with the July BRICS+ summit marking a key turning point in this shift in fortunes.

In this report, the circumstances of the BRICS+ Summit of July 2025 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, will be examined and placed in a global context. The subsequent deterioration of Brazil-U.S. relations will then be analyzed, with particular attention to the initial impact of the BRICS+ summit on that decline. The report will also discuss the effects of this episode on Brazilian domestic politics. Finally, Morocco's positioning regarding the BRICS+ will be assessed.

THE BRICS+ SUMMIT IN RIO DE JANEIRO: FROM BUILD-UP TO IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

It is important to note that, initially, prospects for the BRICS+ Summit did not look very promising. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that he would not participate in the Rio de Janeiro summit for reasons that were never clearly explained. His absence compounded that of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who faces an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court (ICC)—of which Brazil is a member—and has largely avoided international travel, particularly to countries that are signatories of the Rome statute, which could in principle detain and extradite him for trial.

Those two absences—especially that of President Xi—dampened expectations of the summit and simultaneously reduced the potential gains in international prestige that President Lula and his team might have leveraged.

It is also important to note that, as an international organization, BRICS+ has lost some of its initial distinctiveness. In the first decade of the century, it symbolized the search for an agenda different from that imposed by the West and the rise of significant new international players from what was then referred to as the Global South. However, the decision to enlarge the bloc at the Johannesburg summit of August 2023—through the addition of new members—as well as the rise of China as the informal but uncontested leader of the group, symbolized by this enlargement and its essentially Chinese agenda, changed the nature of BRICS+.

While some of these changes promoted further institutionalization—such as the establishment of the New Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai and currently presided over by former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff—this growth in the number of members also created challenges in decision-making, with consensus harder to achieve among a larger set of states. Moreover, the sheer size of the Chinese economy relative to the other BRICS+ members, combined with its apparent dominance over the bloc and its ongoing global rivalry with the U.S., have contributed to a perception of BRICS+ as a tool for Chinese influence and hegemony. Consequently, the notion that being a member of BRICS+ equates to aligning with China and opposing the West, in general, and the U.S., in particular, has become an easy association to make—rightly or wrongly.

However, zero sum games were not part of the agendas of many member states: India, Brazil and South Africa—not to mention some of the group's new members, such as Egypt and the UAE—sought primarily to diversify their partnerships rather than remain exclusively dependent on the U.S., while simultaneously maintaining strong political, economic and trade relations with it.

Prime Minister Modi of India, for instance, had diligently worked to strengthen his country's relations with the U.S., both politically and economically. From his perspective, India's historically tense relations with China had to be balanced by a robust U.S.-India relationship.¹ South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa shared a similar approach. He judged that South Africa's interests were best served by maintaining strong, multifaceted relations with both China and the U.S. As an illustration, despite President Trump's repeated criticisms of his country, President Ramaphosa did not hesitate to visit President Trump at the White House—only to face public humiliation on global television.

As for the UAE, it was part of President Trump's first international tour in his second term during which it lavishly hosted the U.S. President and committed to hundreds of billions of dollars of investments in the U.S. economy. In Brazil's case, while China has been the country's primary trading partner, the U.S. has remained second, highlighting a subtle and ongoing effort to maintain equilibrium between the two powers. Notably, Brazil has sustained strong economic and trade relations with the U.S. despite consistently running trade deficits. In other words, these deficits have not hindered Brazil from maintaining robust ties, reflecting a strategic choice to avoid overdependence on either economic superpower.

For countries like India, South Africa, and Brazil, BRICS—and later BRICS+—represented a dual opportunity. On one hand, it provided a forum where alternative voices, priorities, and strategies could be heard, discussed and formulated. On the other hand, it served as a venue for the consolidation of multilateralism.

1. It should be noted that several successive U.S. Presidents have regarded strengthening the country's multifaceted relations with China as a vital geopolitical necessity and have pursued this agenda diligently.

Since its inception, BRICS has offered a platform to voice concerns that Western powers had consistently marginalized. In a modern reimagining of the Bandung spirit, BRICS allowed countries often referred to—sometimes abusively—as the “Global South” to develop an agenda distinct from that imposed by the West, its triad economic multilateral organizations (IMF, World Bank and WTO), and the ongoing so-called Washington Consensus. Rather than focusing solely on deficit control, liberalization, and privatization, BRICS members prioritized economic growth and development, South-South cooperation, and investment. This was not an attempt to abandon the IMF, World Bank or WTO, but rather to avoid remaining hostage to their agendas, impositions and conditionalities.

At the same time, BRICS offered a means to strengthen multilateral institutions in which these countries could wield more influence, in contrast to the Bretton Woods organizations, where power remained concentrated in the hands of the West in general, and the U.S. in particular. In essence, they did not just want a seat at the table of the major players—they also wanted a say in the menu. Over the last decade, there have been two significant BRICS decisions. The first concerned the creation of a New Development Bank, which was agreed upon in 2013 and formally approved in 2014. The group has also explored initiatives such as a BRICS Pay platform and the use of their respective Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), aimed at facilitating exchanges in national currencies and reducing reliance on the U.S. dollar.

The second major decision occurred in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2023, when member states decided to enlarge the group’s membership and formally invite several countries that had expressed interest in joining: Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Following the election of President Javier Milei, Argentina withdrew its membership, while Saudi Arabia, though invited alongside other new members, has still not formally joined the bloc.

The membership enlargement significantly strengthened the group’s economic weight. According to the official website of the 2025 summit (<https://brics.br/en>), the group’s share of the world economy rose from 26% before expansion to nearly 39% after including the new members, even with Saudi Arabia not yet officially part of the bloc. This expansion also introduced potentially significant new contributors to the New Development Bank and brought a substantial presence in the Middle East, a key region of the so-called “Global South,” all while maintaining a global geopolitical balance. On one hand, Iran, a traditional U.S. adversary, became a member; on the other, two close allies of the U.S., Egypt and the UAE, joined the group, with Saudi Arabia potentially following.

In this sense, the BRICS+ Summit acquired particular relevance: it was not only the first to include the new members but also the first held during President Trump’s new mandate, in which his mistrust of multilateralism was matched only by his aggressive “America First” stance in world affairs. The key question then was: how would BRICS+ leaders react to these new developments?

An initial answer, as noted earlier, was disappointing: President Xi of China was a no-show at the Rio Summit. A second response came through the final communiqué, which offered wishy-washy positions on several issues—from the genocide in Gaza to the war in Ukraine, as well as the Israeli-led military attack against a member state (Iran) and the tariffs war. Many observers attributed the group’s mild and middle-range positions to its enlargement and the resulting need to accommodate diverse, often contradictory interests. This assessment was partly accurate, the clearest example being that Iran and the UAE hold sharply opposing views on Israel’s action in Gaza—even if the UAE did condemn the Israeli

attack on Iran. However, regarding the war in Ukraine, the group's weak stance cannot be blamed on enlargement, since Russia is a founding member.

It must also be noted that neither Russia nor China can be considered champions of multilateralism. Russia acted unilaterally in Chechnia with no regard for human rights or universal values, annexed Crimea in 2014, and invaded Ukraine in 2022—hardly the record of a country committed to upholding international norms. China, for its part, shows little respect for democratic principles or human rights in Tibet, among its Muslim Uighur population, or even in Hong Kong, and it is unlikely to seek UN approval or act multilaterally should it decide to move on Taiwan.

India, which has often invoked multilateralism in its diplomacy, can likewise not be seen as a steadfast defender of the cause under Prime Minister Modi's leadership. Nonetheless, collectively—and thanks in large part to the firm insistence of Brazil and South Africa—the group was expected to reaffirm the importance of multilateralism at the Rio Summit, which it ultimately did (Rafael Balago, Exame, "Por que o Brics defende tanto o multilateralismo — e como isso confronta Trump", July 6, 2025, <https://exame.com/mundo/por-que-o-brics-defende-tanto-o-multilateralismo-e-como-isso-confronta-trump/>).

More significantly—and perhaps most provocatively, from President Trump's perspective—was the mention of strengthening trade among member states without relying on the U.S. dollar. The relevance of this resolution was enhanced by the fact that it took place in the absence of the Chinese leader from the summit. This decision did not imply that the group was adopting a common currency—although the project remains under consideration—nor that it intended to use a single member's currency for intra-BRICS trade. Rather, the idea of establishing a future common payment platform, which would allow member states to conduct transactions independently of the U.S. dollar, gained real momentum at the 2025 Rio de Janeiro Summit.

This move was not without consequences. President Trump interpreted it—rightly—as a potential threat: it could diminish the role of the U.S. dollar among those countries and reduce global demand for it as a reserve currency, thereby undermining U.S. hegemony in the medium to long run. President Lula of Brazil underscored this point during the final press conference, effectively turning himself into a lightning rod for President Trump's anger toward the bloc.

BRAZIL AND THE US: ACTIONS AND REACTIONS

Before delving into Brazilian-U.S. relations, it is important to note that although President Trump spared Russia to some extent from his punitive actions—even if he repeatedly threatened to impose severe sanctions against it—all the other early BRICS members were targeted with high tariffs and other punitive measures. This might be a coincidence, but it is certainly a striking one.

Indeed, while President Trump extended a warm welcome to President Vladimir Putin of Russia, hosting him in August in Alaska—thus breaking the Russian president's isolation—he gave a harsh, unprecedented, and undiplomatic reception to President Ramaphosa of South Africa, surprising him by dimming the lights in the Oval Office and projecting videos supporting his allegations of a "white genocide" taking place in South Africa (Kate Bartlet, PBS, "Trump ambushes South Africa's president with false claims of 'white genocide'",

May 21, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/21/nx-s1-5404667/south-africa-white-house-visit-ramaphosa-trump-tensions>).

Shortly before that, and although he was cracking down on migrants and refugees in the U.S., he offered exile to white South Africans whom he falsely claimed needed protection from genocide. As if all these actions were not aggressive enough, he imposed 30% tariffs on South African products entering the U.S. market (Khanyisile Ngcobo, BBC, "Trump hits South Africa with 30% tariffs—no African country has a higher rate," August 1, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cr74v1dzzxdo>).

In the case of China, President Trump initially announced a 145% increase in tariffs on Chinese goods (Ana Swanson, The New York Times, "Trump Has Added 145% Tariff to China, White House Clarifies", April 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/10/business/economy/china-tariffs-145-percent.html>). After a round of bilateral negotiations, these tariffs were temporarily reduced for 90 days to allow both countries to reach an agreement. It is relevant to note that the tariff hike against China was part of a broader effort to decouple the U.S. economy from China's—an effort that began during Trump's first mandate, was maintained and expanded under President Biden, and deepened again during Trump's second term.

Finally, India was also taken by surprise when it was targeted by a tariff hike. For decades, successive U.S. Presidents had worked to strengthen U.S.-Indian bilateral relations, including during Trump's first mandate. Moreover, in 2020, President Trump received a hero's welcome in India, which greatly pleased him. In this sense, Trump and Prime Minister Modi shared similar worldviews and were expected to maintain a warm and strong relationship. Thus, when President Trump threatened to impose 50% tariffs on India for buying discounted Russian oil, it was a surprising decision—and it became an unpleasant one when the threat materialized³⁴while China, which also purchases discounted Russian oil, faced no such sanctions. This double standard sent an awkward message: foes could do what friends could not. For a proud partner like India, that double standard was reminiscent of the treatment of a vassal state—something India was unwilling to accept.

Brazil's mistreatment by Mr. Trump was therefore not an isolated case when compared with the other early BRICS members. Still, the Brazilian case was a peculiar one, as it combined sanctions through tariffs—as in the cases of India and China—with interference in Brazil's internal affairs, as in the case of South Africa. Regarding tariff hikes, President Trump imposed what was then the highest tariffs on all Brazilian imports—50%. He cited three reasons for his decision, in no specific order: what he described as a "witch hunt" against former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, the alleged unfair trade treatment of the U.S. by Brazil, and the supposedly discriminatory treatment of U.S. big tech companies by Brazil. However, none of these claims were accurate.

Former President Bolsonaro had been indicted by Brazil's highest judicial court and found guilty by its highest electoral court. Given the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances enshrined in the Brazilian constitution—just as in the U.S.—the executive branch has no authority to overrule or interfere with the judiciary. In other words, President Trump was asking the Brazilian President to take an unconstitutional action, which the latter obviously could not and did not do.

As for the supposed unfair treatment of U.S. goods, the U.S. has in fact maintained a consistent trade surplus with Brazil for years. Finally, regarding the alleged discrimination against U.S. tech firms, Brazilian courts have required such companies to moderate debates

and remove unlawful, discriminatory, or racist content—quite the opposite of the more permissive regulatory environment that has prevailed in the U.S. Moreover, Brazil's banking system has long operated a nationwide digital payment platform called Pix, which enables secure money transfers through multiple channels, including smartphones. This system has become so widespread that platforms like Google Pay, Apple Pay, and PayPal have failed to gain a strong foothold in the Brazilian market. That particular law of capitalism did not sit well with President Trump, who sought to misuse U.S. power to change it.

Based on those erroneous, mistaken, and misplaced considerations, Mr. Trump imposed high import tariffs on most—but not all—Brazilian goods and rebuffed several attempts by Brazilian authorities and lawmakers to engage in negotiations. He also imposed sanctions on specific individuals within both the Brazilian judiciary and the executive branch. Some of those sanctions were economic in nature—such as the suspension of banking services for a member of the Brazilian Supreme Court—while others included the suspension of visas and travel restrictions on members of the executive. One notable case was that of Health Minister Alexandre Padilla, who was denied permission to travel to Washington D.C. for a conference. His movements in New York City were also to be restricted to a small, specific perimeter around the U.N headquarters, a condition he refused, ultimately cancelling his trip.

IMPACT ON BRAZILIAN POLITICS

President Trump's actions were immediately and widely considered as undue and unacceptable U.S. interference in Brazil's internal affairs, triggering broad public demonstrations of rejection and condemnation. President Lula, while remaining courteous and respectful toward the U.S. President, adopted a firm stance in defense of national sovereignty and the independence of Brazilian institutions. This "rally around the flag" moment significantly benefited him politically, reversing his declining fortunes as he became widely viewed as the defender of national sovereignty.

The Brazilian public also viewed the actions of Eduardo Bolsonaro—the son of the former President, currently in the U.S. lobbying the Trump team—as unacceptable. The prevailing perception was that he was privileging his family's interests at the expense of large segments of the Brazilian population, who risked losing their jobs and businesses as a result of the U.S. tariff hike. Combined with a controversial vote in the Chamber of Deputies in late September (the Lower Chamber of the Brazilian legislative) that granted legislators immunity from legal prosecution—widely condemned by public opinion and followed by large demonstrations across the country—these actions reinforced the notion that Mr. Bolsonaro and his family were motivated solely by personal gain. In contrast, President Lula appeared as the only statesman committed to defending national sovereignty. Consequently, Lula's approval ratings, along with public support for his administration, improved markedly, as did his electoral prospects against all potential challengers in the October 2026 presidential elections. While much can still happen in the year leading up to the vote—and his political fortunes could yet shift—President Lula is, for the time being, riding a positive wave that places him in a favorable position for next year's presidential elections.

IMPACT ON MOROCCO

Morocco has been pursuing a careful balancing act between the U.S. and several prominent BRICS+ members. Since the start of President's Trump second administration, Morocco has witnessed a clearer U.S. position on the Sahara dispute, with multiple statements by U.S. officials reaffirming support for Morocco's autonomy plan as the only viable basis for resolving the conflict. At the same time, Morocco has continued to strengthen its ties with China, including through several new Chinese investments. Relations with Russia have remained positive, with Morocco maintaining neutrality on the war in Ukraine.

Brazil has also been a key trade partner of Morocco, ranking second only to Spain. Morocco and India have maintained close economic and political relations for decades. The country has traditionally held strong ties with some of the new BRICS+ members, including the UAE and Egypt, and potentially Saudi Arabia if it joins the group. In sum, with the notable exception of South Africa, Morocco has maintained strong relations with BRICS+ member states.

It is also noteworthy that Morocco has engaged positively with both the U.S. and most BRICS+ members, strengthening relations on both sides while avoiding clashes or actions that might be portrayed negatively. However, the intensification of disputes between the U.S. and BRICS+ members could make Morocco's cautious balancing act more difficult. Maintaining this equilibrium might become particularly challenging if President Trump pressures third parties to take sides. For the time being, that has not occurred, but it remains a potential risk for Morocco's current diplomatic positioning.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Domestic and international politics are often closely linked. Internal actions can have significant international repercussions—as illustrated by the election of President Trump in the U.S., or the support he has provided to Argentina's President, Mr. Milei, to help him maintain power and preserve a reliable U.S. ally in a region historically wary of their powerful northern neighbor. Conversely, international developments can profoundly affect domestic politics. The impact of foreign wars and international crises on domestic affairs has been widely documented, but so too has the influence of global values on national agendas: only a few years ago, inclusion was a major political keyword, with countries emphasizing respect for diversity, whereas more recently there has been pushback against so-called wokeness and "woke" language.

In the particular case discussed here, an international event—the BRICS+ summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—placed the country in the spotlight and drew the ire of President Trump. The U.S. responded with sanctions against Brazil, both in the form of tariffs and targeted measures against specific individuals, with the potential to significantly influence the Brazilian political landscape in both the short and medium term.

However, President Trump's humor, temper and decisions remain mercurial. After successive aggressive statements from the U.S. President and several members of his team against Brazil, a brief encounter in late September between both presidents—reportedly lasting less than 40 seconds—at the annual United Nations General Assembly in New York was described by President Trump as positive, with good chemistry. Consequently, an invitation was extended to the Brazilian President for a follow-up meeting with his U.S. counterpart,

which is currently being arranged. Whether this meeting will take place and, if so, whether it will unfold positively or turn into a negative episode—similar to encounters with Ukraine’s President Zelensky or South Africa’s President Ramaphosa—remains uncertain.

The actions of Eduardo Bolsonaro and his allies behind the scenes, aimed at preventing the meeting or turning it into an embarrassing situation for President Lula, cannot and should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, the potential exists for a breakthrough between two leaders who pride themselves on their negotiating skills, which could transform a difficult moment in Brazil-U.S. relations into a positive one. As for the BRICS+, its trajectory extends far beyond Brazil and is shaped more decisively by China than by Brazil.

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The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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