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Eva Borreguero Sancho

Middle Powers and the New Global Disorder: Adaptive Pragmatism in the Trump 2.0 Era

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Abstract:

The return of Donald Trump to the US presidency has reactivated disruptive dynamics in the international system, marked by the extensive use of tariffs, the progressive weakening of multilateral institutions, and intensified great-power competition. This increasingly unpredictable environment has compelled middle powers to recalibrate their foreign policy strategies in order to reduce vulnerabilities and preserve decision-making autonomy. This article examines how India, Japan, Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates—despite their geographic, demographic, and political heterogeneity—have responded to this context through pragmatic strategies aimed at expanding their room for manoeuvre without openly challenging the existing order. By diversifying external ties, developing flexible partnerships, and relying on instruments such as mini-lateral frameworks, market diversification, and selective alignments, these states seek to adapt to systemic instability while avoiding rigid blocs. Rather than pursuing confrontation or systemic transformation, their responses reflect a form of adaptive pragmatism with differentiated expressions: India and Japan strengthen Indo-Pacific supply chains and deepen technological cooperation; Brazil leverages its role as an agricultural exporter and leader in clean energy, particularly within Mercosur and the Global South; and the United Arab Emirates consolidates its position as a logistical, energy, and digital hub, with a growing emphasis on artificial intelligence and global connectivity.

Keywords: *Middle Powers, Strategic Autonomy, Adaptive Pragmatism, Multi-alignment, India, United Arab Emirates, Japan, Brazil.*

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Introduction

Donald Trump's return to the White House has reignited far-reaching disruptive dynamics within the international system. The indiscriminate imposition of tariffs, the progressive weakening of multilateral institutions and the intensification of competition between major powers have created a scenario in which US diplomacy is perceived as increasingly erratic, forcing middle powers to recalibrate their foreign strategies.

Faced with uncertainty that appears set to become structural, these countries are adopting pragmatic responses aimed at reducing the risks arising from excessive dependence on Washington and expanding their autonomy in decision-making. This is not a matter of ruptures or rigid alignments, but of preserving room for manoeuvre in a less predictable and more fragmented order.

This paper analyses how India, Japan, Brazil and the United Arab Emirates—countries that are geographically, demographically and politically diverse—are responding to this situation through strategies designed to strengthen their room for manoeuvre. Through the diversification of ties, the development of flexible alliances and the use of instruments such as the opening of new markets, minilateral frameworks and selective forms of alignment, these middle powers seek to adapt to an unstable environment without openly challenging the existing order.

Far from promoting a head-on confrontation or a radical transformation of the international system, these responses are part of an *adaptive pragmatism* that takes on different forms. India and Japan are strengthening Indo-Pacific supply chains and deepening technological cooperation; Brazil is capitalising on its position as an agricultural exporter and its leadership in clean energy, particularly within Mercosur and the Global South; the United Arab Emirates are consolidating their role as a logistics, energy and digital hub, with a strategic focus on artificial intelligence and international connectivity.

Middle powers facing a new global disorder

The geopolitical and economic agenda of Trump 2.0 has accelerated trends that were already present on the international stage: the rise of protectionism, the use of tariffs, a renewed rivalry with China and explicit scepticism towards multilateralism. The result has been increased friction not only with declared rivals, but also with traditional partners—

including the European Union, Japan, Brazil and India—particularly in sensitive areas such as trade, technology and economic security.

In this context, middle powers—states with regional weight, a degree of autonomy and the capacity to build flexible coalitions, such as India, Japan, Brazil and the UAE—are not seeking an open break with Washington, but rather to diversify dependencies and reduce vulnerabilities. To this end, they are weaving networks of collaboration which, in many cases, operate outside the logic imposed by the great powers.

The concept of *a middle power* has been subject to diverse interpretations in international relations, partly due to its imprecise nature and the difficulty of defining it using strict empirical criteria. Although its use dates back to the period following the Congress of Vienna (1815), it was after the Second World War that it acquired greater analytical relevance, driven by countries such as Canada, interested in distinguish themselves from small states without aspiring to great power status. From a classical perspective (Laurence, 2023), these powers are understood as states which, whilst lacking the capacity to reshape the international order, possess sufficient resources and legitimacy to influence their environment. It is, therefore, a relational category, which can be approached both through material indicators—size, economy, population—and through their recognition as relevant international actors.

Other approaches place less emphasis on quantifiable attributes and more on modes of action (Chaziza and Lutmar, 2025). These powers would perform mediating functions, facilitate consensus and sustain spaces for multilateral cooperation, by interweaving national objectives with broader commitments without aspiring to dominant positions. To this may be added the means to develop niche diplomacies, focused on specific sectors or issues—natural resources, connectivity, technical expertise—which enable them to project influence beyond their material limits.

For the analysis proposed here, the distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers (Jordaan, 2003) is particularly useful, as it allows us to capture variations within this category. The former are typically consolidated, stable democracies with limited regional influence; their behaviour is oriented towards preserving the liberal order through multilateral cooperation and moderate concessions, while maintaining an ambiguous regional role. The latter correspond to semi-peripheral states, often marked by internal

inequalities and recent democratisation processes, but with a more pronounced regional influence. Their actions combine a reformist drive regarding the international order—without adopting disruptive positions—with a desire to distinguish themselves from both the great powers and the weaker states in their immediate vicinity.

This distinction becomes especially relevant in the face of a transforming international order, which compels a rethinking of forms of external engagement. Faced with an uncertain and changing environment, the diversification of alliances, the reduction of unilateral dependencies and the strengthening of internal capabilities emerge as key responses on the part of these middle powers.

Japan, between alliances and *friendshoring*

Japan currently finds itself at an uncomfortable crossroads, affected by cross- cutting dependencies. Since 1952, its alliance with the United States has been the central pillar of national security and the ultimate guarantor of its defence. Any hint of a US withdrawal therefore arouses deep concern among the most conservative sectors of the Japanese security apparatus, who are aware of the limits of the country's defensive autonomy. At the same time, China's economic rise has made Beijing Japan's main trading partner, a key market for its industry and a significant source of opportunities, particularly against the backdrop of an ageing population that is hampering the economy's dynamism.

The coexistence of security dependence on the United States and an increasingly deep economic dependence on China has become more problematic as rivalry between the two powers intensifies. These circumstances have led Tokyo to seek a closer alignment with the United States, one that is no longer limited to territorial defence but extends to broader cooperation beyond its borders (Grano and Huang, 2023), leaving behind the phase in which it prioritised economic relations with China.

Change of leadership

This shift has gained coherence under the leadership of Sanae Takaichi, appointed Prime Minister in October 2025 following the resignation of Shigeru Ishiba. Her authority has been strengthened by calling early elections 110 days after taking office and securing the

Liberal Democratic Party's biggest electoral victory in seven decades, with the additional milestone of becoming the first woman elected as Prime Minister in a society with deeply rooted patriarchal values. Her rise to power coincided with a period of unprecedented weakness for the Liberal Democratic Party, which, following electoral defeats in 2024 and 2025, lost its majority in both houses of Parliament for the first time since 1955. Linked to the party's most conservative wing, Takaichi represents a clear continuation of Shinzo Abe's legacy, centred on economic security, fiscal stimulus and a firm stance against external threats.

Her approach, sceptical of globalisation and centred on the defence of the national interest, seeks to expand the state's room for manoeuvre in tackling economic stagnation, demographic ageing and political fragmentation.

From this perspective, her address to the Diet (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2025) in October can serve as a policy statement. On defence, Takaichi set out two central pillars: the consolidation of the alliance with the United States as a cornerstone of Japanese foreign policy and the strengthening of security cooperation mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific. She emphasised the importance of deepening trilateral and quadrilateral consultations — such as Japan-US-South Korea, Japan-US-Philippines and the Quad — with the aim of strengthening regional deterrence capabilities in the face of persistent challenges, particularly those from China and North Korea.

The domestic agenda calls for a substantial increase in defence spending, to reach 2% of GDP as set out in the National Security Strategy, accompanied by urgent budgetary measures, including within the current financial year. Added to this is constitutional reform as one of the pillars of her political project. Takaichi seeks to accelerate debates in the Constitutional Deliberative Councils and to foster a cross-cutting discussion that transcends party and factional alignments, with active public participation. The aim would be to move towards a reinterpretation—and eventually a rewriting—of the constitutional framework, which defines the identity of post-war Japan as a pacifist nation, adapting it to new demands regarding defence and sovereignty.

One of the most revealing episodes at the outset of her mandate was the rapid deterioration of relations with China, following statements at the end of 2025 in which she asserted that an attack on Taiwan could pose an existential threat to Japan. Beijing's

reaction was immediate: it demanded an official retraction and, faced with Tokyo's refusal, responded with a barrage of retaliatory measures that included the suspension of exports of dual-use goods (Sugiyama and Komiya, 2026) —key to sectors such as semiconductors, drones and electric vehicles—, restrictions on fishery products, the cancellation of cultural exchanges and travel warnings. The incident highlighted the growing intertwining of the economy and security, as well as Japan's vulnerability to external disruptions in its supply chains.

Relations with the United States have also been strained by recent disagreements. In early 2025, the Trump administration imposed a package of tariffs that directly affected Japanese exports, with a general tariff of 10 per cent, additional surcharges and a specific tariff of 27.5 per cent on automobiles. The measure was particularly significant given that Japan maintains a trade surplus with the United States and that, since 2019, it has established itself as the US's leading foreign investor, with a strong presence in the manufacturing sector. Following sustained diplomatic efforts, both sides reached an agreement in July 2025 that partially reduced tariffs on industrial products, although high levels were maintained in sensitive sectors such as steel and aluminium. In return, Tokyo made commitments to invest $550 billion in the United States and to make strategic purchases, including liquefied natural gas, agricultural products and defence- and technology-related equipment. The episode confirmed that, despite the structural value of the bilateral relationship, its functioning increasingly follows a transactional logic that prevents Tokyo from taking stability for granted.

Consequently, Japan accelerated an internal reorientation towards economic protection. In 2025, Tokyo formally incorporated the concept of *economic statecraft*, understood as the coordinated use of regulatory instruments and external alliances to safeguard sensitive sectors against pressure and interference. This approach, which goes beyond conventional trade policy, encompasses areas such as cybersecurity, the protection of critical infrastructure and the control of foreign investment in key industries. A decisive step was the reform of the Foreign Exchange and Trade Control Act (Yamazaki, 2026), which even allows for the retroactive requirement of divestment in sectors deemed vulnerable, aligning Japan with the more restrictive regulatory frameworks adopted by the United States and the European Union in the face of growing risks to industrial autonomy.

With regard to multilateralism, Tokyo has deepened its cooperation with the European Union. The 30th bilateral summit, held in July 2025, took place at a time of increasing state economic centralisation, the weakening of global institutions, and the increasingly frequent use of economic coercion. In response, both parties reaffirmed their commitment to a rules-based order and announced the creation of the Competitiveness Alliance (European Commission, 2025a), aimed at diversifying access to critical minerals and protecting their industrial capabilities in an increasingly politicised trade environment.

At the same time, the trilateral dialogue between Japan, the United States and South Korea, launched at the Camp David Summit of 2023, remains in place, although its medium-term prospects are not without uncertainty. Recent leadership changes in all three countries, coupled with the historical rifts that persist between Tokyo and Seoul, mean that any expectations of automatic consolidation must be treated with caution. Hence the need to foster greater interaction within this framework, particularly regarding shared concerns such as North Korean provocations, China's growing pressure on Taiwan and in the East China Sea, or the security of key maritime routes. Its continuity will ultimately depend on the three countries" ability to maintain a common operational agenda that goes beyond mere statements, including joint exercises, technological coordination, intelligence sharing and ongoing political dialogue (Kanodia, 2025).

By contrast, relations with India have continued to strengthen throughout 2025. Cooperation in defence, innovation and infrastructure has progressed steadily, as reflected in the 15th Annual India-Japan Summit held in Tokyo, which culminated in the adoption of a Joint Vision for the Next Decade structured around eight priority areas. Japan also announced plans to invest up to $68 billion in India by 2035. Initiatives such as the *Dharma Guardian* joint military exercise (Eldon, 2025) and the progress on the high-speed rail link between Mumbai and Ahmedabad illustrate a partnership that is translating into concrete action. Both countries reiterated their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and to the QUAD, alongside the United States and Australia, understood as a flexible coordination framework rather than an exclusive alignment scheme.

Overall, Japan has embarked on a profound reconfiguration of its external projection. Without breaking with its traditional alliances, it has opted for a pragmatic adaptation that combines greater decision-making autonomy, the strengthening of internal capabilities

and a selective expansion of its partners. From this year onwards, Prime Minister Takaichi's historic mandate—which consolidates her legislative capacity following her resounding electoral victory—will enable her to drive forward major, far-reaching reforms.

India: diversification and flexible non-alignment

Throughout 2025, Indian foreign policy has navigated difficult terrain, marked by external pressures, regional challenges and a deliberate reaffirmation of its policy of "flexible non-alignment" in an unstable context. New Delhi has once again drawn upon a tradition of "strategic autonomy" which, as Brookings Institution analyst Tanvi Madan has noted (Madan, 2026), it practised long before the concept was incorporated into the European vocabulary. This approach has enabled it to maintain functional—albeit unequal and complex—relations with actors as diverse as the United States, China, Russia and the United Arab Emirates, without relinquishing its room for manoeuvre. Throughout 2025, Narendra Modi's government operated under a carefully calibrated multi-alignment strategy, strengthening selective ties, containing regional pressures and projecting a diplomatic narrative underpinned by the idea of *Vishwabandhu* ("friend of the world").

2025: India awakens to the reality of Trump 2.0

The start of the year brought an unforeseen reversal in India's bilateral relationship with the United States. Washington imposed 50% tariffs on key Indian export products, such as textiles and chemicals, the highest alongside those applied to Brazil. The blow was particularly harsh given the nature of bilateral relations: over the past decade, both countries had built up growing cooperation in defence, technology and economic security, driven largely by shared concerns over China's rise. Although political dialogue continued—and Modi held several telephone conversations with Trump—trade negotiations stalled when New Delhi refused to open its agricultural market and rejected Donald Trump's role as mediator in the crisis with Pakistan. Added to this were gestures of high symbolic impact: Trump described the Indian economy as a "dead economy" and received General Munir, the head of the Pakistani army, with honours following a serious attack in Kashmir. In India, these episodes were interpreted as a worrying sign of a loss of centrality in Washington's priorities.

Despite this hardening of political rhetoric, cooperation on defence, security and technology has continued to advance. The visit to the United States by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and the Chief of the Indian Navy confirmed the continued existence of channels of dialogue (GK Today, 2026). Although the Quad leaders" summit has been postponed, the framework has maintained its relevance through technical meetings and working groups focused on terrorism, artificial intelligence and supply chains, reflecting a shared commitment to preserving avenues for cooperation even within a more strained bilateral context.

Finally, Donald Trump's statements in February, announcing that the United States would reduce tariffs to 18% in exchange for India limiting its purchases of Russian oil, appear to have put the bilateral relationship back on track. However, in the absence of the text of the agreement, it is difficult to determine the commitments made by Modi. Nor can it be ruled out that the trade agreement signed by India and the European Union in January may have influenced the Trump administration's decision to settle this matter.

On the economic front, there were fears that US tariffs would jeopardise India's narrative as a manufacturing alternative to China, and a potential beneficiary of the "China+1" strategy[1] . However, the impact was less than expected. The economy showed remarkable resilience and estimated growth for 2025–2026 reached 7.4%, even exceeding the range projected by the government itself. This performance was underpinned by a combination of domestic reforms in the fiscal, labour and investment spheres, which cushioned the impact of external pressures and bolstered confidence in the country's growth trajectory (Nikkei Asia, 2026).

Similarly, Narendra Modi's administration has driven a gradual opening of the Indian economy which, in relations with the European Union, culminated in the signing of a historic free trade agreement in early 2026. This treaty joins those already concluded with Australia, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom. Although negotiations began in 2007, were suspended in 2013 and resumed in 2022, the tariff pressure exerted by President Trump has acted as a catalyst and accelerated their conclusion: the EU waived certain environmental requirements that were hindering the negotiations and avoided venturing into controversial regulatory areas. In addition to the trade

[1] 'China+1' (or *China plus one*) is a trade policy that involves *maintaining operations in China*, but diversifying part of production, investment or the supply chain to *another additional country* ('+1') in order to reduce risks.

agreement—still pending ratification by the Council and the European Parliament, as well as the Indian Parliament—both parties agreed on a partnership in defence and security, placing the bilateral relationship on a long-term strategic cooperation trajectory.

At the regional level, 2025 proved to be the principal source of instability for India. Relations with Pakistan deteriorated sharply once again following an attack in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed twenty-six civilians and which New Delhi attributed to armed groups supported from Pakistani territory. The response was swift and deliberately calibrated: temporary suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, closure of border crossings, partial withdrawal of diplomatic personnel and restrictions on the visa regime. In May, the so-called Operation Sindoor raised the level of confrontation through a large-scale night-time air operation—involving more than a hundred aircraft—which included strikes against infrastructure identified by India as terrorist camps and military targets in Pakistan.

Although a ceasefire was subsequently reached, accompanied by the exchange of prisoners and the resumption of commercial flights, the episode once again highlighted the fragility of the security balance in South Asia. China's indirect involvement (Shah and Patel, 2025)—through its political backing and the supply of J-10C fighter jets to Islamabad—added a further layer of concern for New Delhi.

There was also a deterioration on the eastern flank. Relations with Bangladesh took an unexpected turn following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government and the prime minister's flight to India. Her interim successor, Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, has initiated a policy of closer ties with Islamabad and Beijing, including talks on the purchase of JF-17 fighter jets, co-produced with China (Sayeed, 2026). This agreement could mark a turning point in relations with Bangladesh, which has traditionally been closer to India.

Conversely, one of the most significant moves has been the rapprochement with Afghanistan. The visit by the Taliban's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, and the announcement that the Indian diplomatic office in Kabul would be upgraded to embassy status (Bajpaee, 2025), could help New Delhi contain Pakistan's influence, although the very nature of the Afghan landscape—historically conflict-ridden and with established alliances—limits the room for manoeuvre.

Aware of the Sino-Pakistani convergence against its regional interests, India began to explore indirect avenues of compensation. One of the most revealing has been the

strengthening of its economic and technological ties with Taiwan, which has become a discreet but increasingly significant partner. In 2024, bilateral trade exceeded ten billion dollars for the first time (D'Souza, 2025) and, within a few months, key agreements were concluded on semiconductors, artificial intelligence and supply chains, in line with the Act East and Make in India initiatives. Although New Delhi does not formally recognise Taipei, the intensity and depth of these exchanges suggest a relationship managed, in practice, as if it were a sovereign state. At the same time, they reflect a clear interest in preserving the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait, given that any disruption would entail high economic and technological costs for India.

In parallel, New Delhi has maintained its relationship with Russia, even in the face of sustained pressure from Western powers following the war in Ukraine. This stance reflects a careful calculation. On the one hand, India has begun to seek alternatives that will enable it to reduce its technological and military dependence on Moscow, opting for greater diversification of suppliers in defence and energy, a trend that is expected to take hold from 2026 onwards. On the other hand, the ratification of the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS) has enabled a high level of operational cooperation to be maintained, by facilitating mutual access to naval facilities and airspace and providing greater flexibility in joint exercises and regional deployments (Divya A, 2025), including the *Zapad* exercises with Russia and Belarus simulating a war with NATO countries in September 2025.

The underlying reasons remain significant. Over 60% of India's arsenal is of Russian or Soviet origin; Moscow has for decades been a key diplomatic ally in the UN Security Council, particularly on issues relating to Kashmir, and the growing rapprochement between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping introduces an additional factor of caution for New Delhi. In this context, the relationship with Russia is not driven by ideological affinity or an unqualified long-term commitment, but by the need to manage strategic legacies whilst building viable alternatives.

India-United Arab Emirates: shared vision

In 2025, India and the United Arab Emirates translated their sustained rapprochement into concrete results. Aligned on platforms such as the I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-US) and

the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, both countries have built their relationship on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in 2022. A year later, bilateral trade reached $88 billion, making the UAE India's third-largest trading partner and fourth-largest investor (Gupta and Joshi, 2025). Beyond the figures, the relationship is underpinned by a clear convergence of priorities: economic diversification, human capital, technology and multilateral cooperation.

The holding in December of the 16th India-UAE Joint Commission and the fifth Bilateral Strategic Dialogue, co-chaired by Foreign Ministers *S.* Jaishankar and Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, marked this new phase. At these meetings, both sides adopted an "action-oriented" *agenda* (Ani, 2025), with an emphasis on areas such as non-oil trade, defence, connectivity, technological innovation and nuclear energy.

The energy chapter featured prominently. The 14-year agreement between ADNOC Gas and the Indian Oil Corporation, which guarantees the annual supply of 1.2 million metric tonnes of liquefied natural gas, will enable India to diversify its energy sources and reduce its dependence on traditional suppliers, such as Russia (Calabrese, 2025). Added to this is cooperation on nuclear energy (Kumar, 2025): the Emirates, which already generate a quarter of their electricity from this source, have found in India a partner willing to advance decarbonisation through applied science, innovation and knowledge transfer.

The digital dimension will reinforce this framework. The UAE-India Internet Corridor will facilitate cross-border data flows and stimulate digital trade. Following this trend, both countries are advancing regulatory convergence in areas such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things. In parallel, they have begun to conduct around 10% of their bilateral transactions in local currencies, reducing exposure to the dollar and gaining financial leeway (Kumar, 2025).

The Indian diaspora constitutes a structural pillar of this relationship. With over 3.5 million people, it is the largest expatriate community in the Emirates and contributes $21.6 billion in remittances—19.2 per cent of the total received by India—acting as a permanent economic and social link.

Security cooperation materialised through the joint participation of India and the UAE, alongside France, in naval exercises in the Arabian Sea, strengthening interoperability and the protection of key areas in the Indo-Pacific.

This process overlaps with the modernisation of India's defence capabilities. In 2025, the acquisition of weaponry worth some $9.5 billion was approved (Pandey, 2026). Notably, the Barak-8 missile systems, developed jointly with Israel, which have established themselves as the cornerstone of medium-range air defence. The decision is rooted in a dual perception of vulnerability: the persistence of clashes along the border with China and the ever-present possibility of an aerial escalation with Pakistan. This defensive drive has had a maritime counterpart in the parliamentary presentation of the *Report on the Indian Ocean*, coordinated by MP Shashi Tharoor. The document sets out a coherent vision: expansion of the naval presence, strengthening of anti-submarine capabilities and the affirmation of India as a normative benchmark in maritime sustainability.

In conclusion, by 2025, India found itself needing to adjust its foreign policy in the face of an increasingly volatile environment. Disagreements with the Trump administration on trade matters contrasted with the continuation of strategic dialogue, particularly on defence. Relations with Pakistan deteriorated once again following a serious attack in Kashmir, whilst China's indirect support for Islamabad reaffirmed the convergence between the two neighbours against Indian interests.

Faced with these challenges, India adopted a flexible adaptation strategy: it maintained its partnership with Russia, albeit with signs of technical distancing, and deepened its economic and technological ties with the United Arab Emirates, the European Union, Japan and Taiwan, thereby expanding its network of partners without relying exclusively on any one of them.

India's foreign policy in 2025 did not feature abrupt ruptures or dramatic shifts, but rather a pragmatic management of multiple tensions. For 2026, the challenge will be to sustain this agility.

United Arab Emirates: a connecting economy

In recent years, the United Arab Emirates has asserted its status as an intermediary actor with growing influence in the Middle East, through an active, pragmatic and highly specialised foreign policy. In an unstable regional environment, the country has consolidated itself as a pivotal economy between Asia, Africa and Europe, drawing on its location, financial muscle and a sustained diversification strategy.

Although energy continues to play a central role, the UAE has integrated it into a broader agenda focused on high-impact sectors, such as technological innovation, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, culture and sport. This sectoral focus responds both to industrial modernisation and to the quest for greater autonomy within a fragmented international system, and is linked to initiatives such as the Abraham Accords, the I2U2 group—alongside India, Israel and the United States—and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, designed to strengthen interregional connectivity.

Niche diplomacy

The defining feature of the UAE's foreign policy has been the institutionalisation of *niche diplomacy* (Chaziza and Lutmar, 2025), which has enabled it to extend its influence beyond its actual weight and to construct an international identity aligned with contemporary narratives of global governance. Without altering its autocratic domestic political structure, the UAE has promoted an image of modernity, efficiency and openness, integrating itself with remarkable effectiveness into normative networks traditionally dominated by liberal democracies and demonstrating the adaptability of this model to a non-democratic regime.

From a multilateral perspective, the United Arab Emirates has pursued a deliberate diversification of alliances, avoiding exclusive dependencies on Washington or Beijing and prioritising flexible cooperation frameworks with multiple partners. This approach has gained prominence following Donald Trump's return to the US presidency (Al Ketbi, 2025b). In this context, the UAE has viewed the reconfiguration of value chains as an opportunity to strengthen its economic resilience, attract investment and establish itself as a hub linking different blocs (Al Ketbi, 2025a).

Relations with the United States have deepened through a shift from an energy-focused agenda towards areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and digital infrastructure. The presidential visits of 2025 consolidated this transition, resulting in an investment roadmap estimated at 1.4 trillion dollars, which includes the construction in Abu Dhabi of the largest data centre complex outside US territory. This project has positioned the Emirates as Washington's priority technology partner in the Middle East. At the same time, the rapprochement with the European Union—formalised in April 2025

with the start of negotiations for a free trade agreement—reinforces this diversification strategy (European Commission, 2025b). The process, aligned with the 2022 EU-Gulf Strategic Partnership and the 2024 EU-GCC summit, aims to liberalise trade, expand digital exchange and cooperate in critical sectors, laying the foundations for a potential regional trade framework.

At the same time, the United Arab Emirates has strengthened its bilateral cooperation with key European partners as part of its diversification strategy. In February 2025, they signed a $40 billion investment agreement with Italy (Rahman, 2025), targeting sectors such as energy, infrastructure, technology and defence, complemented by more than forty agreements covering areas including civil aviation, agriculture, water management, education, SMEs, artificial intelligence and health, as well as a commitment to expand cooperation with third partners, particularly in Africa. During the same period, relations with France were deepened through a convergence centred on artificial intelligence: the Mohamed bin Zayed University for Artificial Intelligence established an academic partnership with a Parisian institution, and both governments agreed to build Europe's largest artificial intelligence centre in France, with an investment of up to fifty billion euros. Taken together, these initiatives consolidate the UAE as a key European partner in the digital and energy transition, strengthening its integration into high-value-added economic and technological networks.

In line with this projection, the United Arab Emirates has adopted a more assertive and autonomous foreign policy approach, particularly evident in the Middle East and Africa, guided by a clear ideological agenda: to contain the expansion of political Islam and, in particular, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, perceived as a direct threat to the state model promoted by Abu Dhabi. This orientation is clearly reflected in Yemen (Saba, 2025), where, despite the formal withdrawal of troops in 2019, the UAE maintains significant influence through the Southern Transitional Council as a counterweight to the Islah party, linked to the Brotherhood, which has generated friction with Saudi Arabia and exposed tensions between allies. The same pattern is observed in the sustained backing of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's Egyptian government since 2013 and in the adoption of firm stances towards actors it considers allies of political Islamism, such as Turkey and Qatar, including support for the boycott against the latter in 2017 and opposition to Turkish influence in Libya. In Africa, the UAE has expanded its presence through a combination

of infrastructure investment, military cooperation and support for local actors in countries such as Sudan, Chad and Somaliland, where the development of strategic ports and a security presence have consolidated its influence in the Horn of Africa and strengthened its capacity for intervention in a key area of regional competition.

Overall, the United Arab Emirates" foreign policy functions as an instrument for shaping the regional environment according to a vision of order based on centralised authority, an orientation towards secularism and the containment of transnational political Islam, increasing their involvement in highly conflictual regional settings. Throughout 2025, this approach translated into a pragmatic practice aimed at maintaining flexible alignments, avoiding unilateral dependencies and using the technological economy as a vector of power projection, reinforcing the UAE's ambition to establish themselves as a global node in this sector. Looking ahead to 2026, the challenge lies not only in preserving this position, but also in determining the extent to which they can shape a regional environment in competition with other actors, such as Saudi Arabia. Added to this is an unforeseen scenario: the war with Iran has radically transformed the UAE's public diplomacy in a matter of weeks. Abu Dhabi, which had opted for a cautious détente with Tehran, has been pushed closer to the positions of the United States and Israel than it would have wished following the Iranian attacks on its territory. Regardless of the war's duration and outcome, in terms of image, Abu Dhabi's main challenge will be to preserve its reputation as a stable and secure environment for investors and residents, which has been called into question by the attacks.

Brazil's active non-alignment

The return of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to the Brazilian presidency in January 2023 marked a significant shift in the country's international profile. Under the slogan *Brazil is back*—which echoed US President Joe Biden's *America is back'*— Lula signalled not only a symbolic break with the international isolation pursued during Jair Bolsonaro's government, but also a clear desire to reposition Brazil as an influential player in global governance.

Since then, Brazilian foreign policy has been guided by the traditional principles of its diplomacy: multilateralism, adherence to international law, South-South cooperation and

environmental leadership. In this sphere, Brazil has regained visibility on the international climate agenda. The designation of Belém as the host city for COP30 in 2025 and the proposal for the Tropical Forests Forever Facility (TFFF) (Galarraga, 2025) serve both as instruments for the protection of the Amazon and ecological transition, and as mechanisms for building reputation in a context marked by environmental urgency.

Similarly, the government has promoted Brazil's active return to the main regional and multilateral forums. The revitalisation of bodies such as CELAC and UNASUR reflects an effort to rebuild Latin American integration, while Brazil's presidency of the G20 in 2024, the organisation of COP30 and the BRICS+ summit in Rio de Janeiro have served as platforms to project an image of leadership of the Global South and of support for a more plural international order (Ayuso and Gratius, 2024).

This repositioning is embedded in an orientation aligned with Active Non-Alignment (ANA), a contemporary adaptation of the legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement to a scenario characterised by the shift of the economic axis towards the Asia-Pacific, the expansion of South–South trade and the intensification of rivalry between the United States and China (Heine, 2025). Far from passive neutrality, this approach prioritises flexibility and case-by-case assessment, rejecting automatic alignments and promoting active participation in the redefinition of the global architecture. In this context, financial institutions such as the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are offering alternatives to the traditional financial system.

Strategic contradictions and internal dilemmas

However, these advances coexist with contradictions that reveal a gap between rhetoric and practice. In the field of human rights, Brazil's position has been questioned: while Lula has defended democracy in Brazil, he has avoided clear statements regarding violations in authoritarian regimes such as Venezuela or Nicaragua.

Similarly, the economic-energy sphere is marked by a duality between a "green" narrative and a policy of hydrocarbon exploitation. The fact that in 2023 Brazil established itself as

the leading oil producer in Latin America, with sustained growth in 2024 and 2025[2] , reveals the difficulty of reconciling economic development, sustainability and environmental responsibility.

In the context of BRICS+, the inclusion of countries with significant oil reserves such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has raised the bloc's profile, but has also exacerbated its internal contradictions, making it difficult to build a common agenda.

Balancing China and the United States

One of the most delicate aspects of Brazilian foreign policy has been navigating the growing tension between the United States and China, with both of which it maintains significant strategic and economic ties. Over the last decade, China has gained ground as the country's main trading partner, driven by sustained demand for Brazilian raw materials such as soya, minerals and oil. This relationship has deepened through investments in infrastructure, technology and energy, as well as through agreements in emerging areas such as artificial intelligence and semiconductors. However, this asymmetrical relationship has raised concerns about its potential to perpetuate an economic model based on the export of resources without sufficient added value, which could limit Brazil's industrial development (Stuenkel, 2025).

In response, the government has launched initiatives aimed at transforming the country's productive matrix. Among these, the National Energy Transition Policy, presented in 2024, stands out; it seeks to reduce dependence on raw materials and position Brazil as a key player in the global green economy.

The search for a balance of interests has been evident in decisions such as the conditional authorisation granted to Huawei to participate in the roll-out of 5G and the refusal to formally join the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, the unilateral measures adopted in 2025 by Donald Trump—including 50% tariffs— have reinforced the perception of vulnerability and encouraged greater diversification of alliances with the European Union, India and other emerging economies.

[2] This expansion included its accession to the OPEC+ group, with the aim of participating in strategic debates on the global market, despite criticism from environmentalist groups for contradicting its climate rhetoric (Ayuso and Gratius, 2024).

Faced with the limitations of BRICS+ as a heterogeneous bloc—exacerbated by the inclusion of members with authoritarian regimes and divergent priorities (Sabatini, 2025)—Brazil has opted to strengthen bilateral alliances based on shared values and interests. Lula's visit to Japan in March 2025 exemplifies this approach. As part of this initiative, more than eighty agreements were signed, including the Action Plan for the Strategic and Global Partnership (2025–2030), focused on sustainability, science, technology and innovation (Government of Brazil, 2025). Notable commitments include those on fuels, bioenergy, the restoration of degraded land and water management, as well as the aim to expand bilateral trade beyond seventeen billion dollars and to institutionalise biannual presidential meetings.

In summary, Lula's return has revitalised Brazil's international presence through a combination of environmental leadership, South-South cooperation and advocacy for reform of the global order. However, tensions persist between rhetoric and practice, particularly on environmental and human rights domains, as well as the challenge of navigating an increasingly intense rivalry between major powers, especially following the return of Donald Trump and his new National Security Strategy, aimed at curbing Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere. The recent intervention in Venezuela and manoeuvres in Argentina and Panama indicate that the region will face greater pressures. How Brazil manages these contradictions will be decisive in assessing the solidity and sustainability of its renewed international standing.

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*Eva Borreguero Sancho**

Lecturer in Political Science. Department of Political History, Theory and Geography.
Faculty of Political Science and Sociology
Complutense University of Madrid