

Brazilian Climate Leadership and The Cop30: Opportunities and Challenges in a Context of Geopolitical Instability and Multilateralism Crisis

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Abstract

The climate emergency and the growing fragmentation of global environmental governance present Brazil with unique challenges and opportunities as the host of COP30 in Belém, Pará. This article aims to analyze Brazil's potential to consolidate its position as an international climate leader by examining its role as conference host and the interplay between domestic environmental policies and climate diplomacy in a context of geopolitical instability and multilateralism crisis. It is based on the hypothesis that strengthening domestic environmental policies and adopting a proactive climate diplomacy can enhance Brazil's soft power and its contribution to tackling the climate crisis. The methodology combines bibliographic and documentary research with a normative analysis of international environmental instruments (UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, and COP decisions), as well as a critical assessment of Brazil's recent foreign policy. The study concludes that Brazil's climate leadership relies on the integration of internal and external actions, enabling the country to reposition itself as a key actor in global environmental governance, overcome geopolitical constraints, and contribute to building more inclusive and equitable solutions to climate change.

Keywords

Climate Change; Global environmental governance; Paris Agreement; Conference of the Parties; COP30.

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1 _ INTRODUCTION

The changes imposed by humans on the environment throughout history have harmed the regenerative capacity of nature, putting the balance of the global ecosystem at risk. The degradation of local biomes such as the Russian Tundra, the Canadian Taiga or the Brazilian Amazon, directly impacts the balance and health of the global ecosystem (Zhang *et al.*, 2022, p.1), meaning that actions carried out within national territory have significant effects on the continuity of life across the globe. Thus, viewed as a challenge concerning people of all social classes, age groups and nationalities, climate change resulting from anthropogenic activities has become one of the main focal points of international debate.

Needing unprecedented mobilization, global society has worked toward setting targets for reducing deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as for implementing adaptation measures in order to avoid further damage to the environment and populations. According to Castro (2015, p.193), the cross-border nature of environmental issues makes them currently a matter of Human Security and intrinsically linked to a new world order. Within this context emerges the challenge of creating an international regime that enables cooperation among the most diverse actors in the system in order to preserve life and coordinate environmental regeneration efforts.

Parallel to this need, there is a crisis of trust and representativeness regarding those institutions that were meant to serve as major platforms for a multilateral international regime. The United Nations (UN), for instance, still relies on international collaboration and cooperation but finds itself constrained by the actions of major powers (Batista, 2020, p. 3), being unable to generate convergence among actors at a speed proportional to the acceleration of environmental degradation.

In this context, the international community lacks actors capable of inspiring collaboration through harmonious climate diplomacy supported by the implementation of actions that generate real positive impact and drive the global transition to a green economy. It is at this moment that Brazil presents itself to the world as host of one of the largest climate diplomacy mobilizations of today – the COP30, to be held in Belém, Pará in November 2025. Therefore, this article aims to explain the trajectory, challenges and opportunities faced by Brazil as it prepares to host the COP, in terms of environmental governance within the context of the International Climate Change Regime. The methodology used was bibliographic and documentary research, carried out through the deductive method.

2 _ THE INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE REGIME: CONTEXT AND POWER DYNAMICS

The international climate change regime constitutes a space for cooperation, but also for disputes permeated by power asymmetries. Since the Stockholm Conference (1972), when the concept of sustainable development began to take shape, up to the Paris Agreement, its evolution has been marked by complex negotiations between divergent interests that have shaped, and continue to shape, the direction of global climate governance.

In this context, there is a progressive process of normative and institutional construction, in which multilateral conferences and treaties have played a decisive role. After the initial environmental debates at the United Nations, Stockholm consolidated the environmental agenda internationally, and later the *Brundtland Report* (1987) reinforced the need to reconcile economic development and environmental protection. This guideline was expanded by the Rio de Janeiro Conference (1992), which created the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). From it, the basis for subsequent frameworks was established, such as the *Kyoto Protocol* (1997) and, more recently, the *Paris Agreement* (2015), currently the main reference for global coordination in addressing the climate crisis (Laclima; Observatório do Clima, 2025).

At Rio-92, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) produced the UNFCCC, an international legal framework that sought to promote equity in addressing climate change. The convention enshrined the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, based on historical responsibility for emissions (Cunha; Rei, 2015, p.19). This principle rests on three criteria: Responsibility, requiring greater contribution from countries that have historically emitted more greenhouse gases; Capability, determining that efforts must be proportional to the economic, political, technological and social conditions of each country; and Need, ensuring that efforts respect the universal right to development (Metz, 2002, p. 212).

Unfolding from the UNFCCC, the *Protocolo de Kyoto* was approved in 1997, being the first international treaty with legally binding emission reduction targets. Its institutional design reflected a top-down logic, imposing specific commitments only on developed countries listed in Annex I, consistent with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Although it represented progress by establishing quantified targets and flexibility mechanisms such as the *Clean Development Mechanism* (CDM), the Protocol also revealed limitations. The absence of mandatory commitments for developing countries and the withdrawal of key actors, such as the United States, diminished its effectiveness and legitimacy over time.

The Paris Agreement, adopted under the UNFCCC in 2015, sought to overcome the impasses inherited from Kyoto. Unlike the rigid, hierarchical top-down model, it adopted a bottom-up approach, requiring each Party State to present its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). This shift allowed greater inclusion of developing countries and increased the legitimacy of the global climate regime, even though challenges remain in the areas of implementation and ambition of targets (Longuini, 2020, p. 91).

Another aspect that confers diplomatic prestige to the Paris Agreement is its more flexible approach regarding the definition of emission reduction targets and material obligations of States. Unlike the *Kyoto Protocol*, the Agreement does not establish uniform and legally binding reduction targets for all, but adopts a hybrid model. It is legally binding with respect to procedural obligations, such as the presentation of NDCs every five years, their progressive enhancement in ambition, and periodic transparency reports on implemented efforts (Prolo, 2017; Bodansky, 2016; Rajamani, 2016). However, the content of each country's targets is not subject to international sanctions in cases of noncompliance, leading part of the literature to characterize its as soft enforcement³ (Oberthür; Bodle, 2016). This design seeks to reconcile universality of participation with political feasibility by privileging consensus and the inclusion of countries at different stages of development (Rajamani; Bodansky, 2019).

In this sense, the Paris Agreement treats transparency rules as fundamental for assessing compliance with NDCs. It provides for informal “naming and shaming” mechanisms before the international community in cases of discrepancies between declared contributions and actual reductions. Despite its binding procedural commitments, the Agreement's effectiveness relies largely on a bottom-up logic of engagement, inspiring countries to act through voluntary cooperation (Oliveira, 2019).

In a context in which combating climate change lacks implementation proportional to the severity of its consequences (Lago, 2025, s.p.), agreements capable of generating practical effects—such as the Paris Agreement—become essential. The fact that one of the main drivers of its success lies precisely in its flexible approach, allowing each State to define its own contributions, shows that hard power based on coercion is incompatible with current international needs. Instead, soft power has

³ Although the Paris Agreement is often classified as “soft law”, this characterization is only partially correct. Legal doctrine has recognized its hybrid nature: hard law in procedural terms—as it establishes legally binding obligations to submit, periodically update, and report NDCs, as well as to participate in the Enhanced Transparency Mechanism—and soft law in substantive terms, since the content and level of ambition of the targets are not legally enforceable, nor subject to formal sanctions in case of non-compliance (Bodansky, 2016; Rajamani, 2016; Oberthür; Bodle, 2016). This innovative combination seeks to overcome the impasses of the Kyoto Protocol, while ensuring greater universality of adherence and political flexibility.

consolidated itself as an increasingly valuable tool in climate diplomacy—an issue explored in the next section.

Despite the innovative character and growing relevance of the Paris Agreement within the international climate regime, concrete challenges remain. The United States' temporary withdrawal from the agreement in 2017 demonstrates that, although there are no formal sanctions, countries' political commitments can be volatile and subject to immediate national interests. This episode illustrates the symbolic and diplomatic power of the agreement, which, by exposing a country to international scrutiny and reputational pressure, can influence its global stance even without explicit coercive mechanisms. However, this dynamic also reveals the limitations of the regime in guaranteeing full adherence and effectiveness of agreed targets, especially in a context marked by crises in multilateralism, geopolitical tensions, and movements of deglobalization - a phenomenon analyzed by Limongi (2024), who highlights the growing fragmentation of international relations and the retreat of multilateral commitments.

It is within this complex scenario that the need arises to analyze the structural barriers to Brazilian climate leadership, as well as opportunities for proactive climate diplomacy and South-South cooperation strengthening global environmental legal regimes.

According to Ruggie (1992), the quality that makes multilateralism desirable is its ability to guarantee representation of the interests of actors involved, this facet being even more important than the number of measures adopted by an international institution. If only those multilateral institutions capable of ensuring representativeness of the interests of the International System can endure, one can understand the legitimacy crisis faced by the United Nations. The inability of its founding charter to limit the Security Council's action has rendered the institution unable to represent the interests of the Global South (Batista, 2020, p. 3). Thus, the proliferation of top-down approaches in international institutions represents a structural barrier to the consolidation of Brazilian climate leadership, as well as to a cooperative, multilateral regime.

Concomitant with this phenomenon, Limongi (2024) identifies a fragmentation of international relations. Disillusioned with the representativeness of traditional institutions, the Global South has turned to bilateral agreements outside the traditional mechanisms.

Thus, Brazil's credibility as a relevant actor in global climate governance depends, to a great extent, on coherence between international commitments and public policies effectively implemented domestically.

Recent experience shows that when there is misalignment between NDC commitments and the reality of domestic environmental policies, the country risks compromising its reputation and weakening its diplomatic leadership capacity. In Brazil's case, the effectiveness of policies to combat Amazon deforestation, the

implementation of the National Policy on Climate Change, and the adjustment of legal frameworks such as the *Código Florestal* and the new General Environmental Licensing Law (PL n. 2.159/2021, approved in July 2025), known as the “PL da Devastação”, are essential. The objective of this law is to relax environmental licensing rules, representing institutional and environmental backsliding by authorizing self-licensing and dispensing with rigorous assessments (Sánchez & Fonseca, 2025). Under the new rules, Brazil increases the possibility of high-impact climate projects being approved without adequate technical scrutiny, one of several factors that weaken diplomatic leadership potential (Przibiscki, 2025).

Thus, coherence between international commitments and domestic policies is also strategic to prevent both national and international climate litigation, given that civil society and the judiciary have increasingly demanded compliance with climate obligations. Due to insufficient action by the Executive and Legislative branches in environmental and climate policy, civil society has taken legal action to demand implementation of climate commitments and the protection of fundamental rights related to a stable climate. Borges (2020) shows that paradigmatic international cases (such as *Urgenda vs. Holanda*) demonstrate the strength of climate litigation in compelling governments to act, suggesting that the Brazilian Supreme Federal Court may follow a similar path by applying the Constitution and international human rights and environmental treaties.

It is also worth noting that the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in July 2025, issued a historic advisory opinion that consolidated climate change as an existential threat to humanity, affirming that States have a legal obligation, derived from both treaties and customary international law, to protect the climate system from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. The Court emphasized that such obligations are *erga omnes*, binding the international community as a whole, and violations may constitute internationally wrongful acts, triggering consequences such as cessation of harmful conduct, guarantees of non-repetition, and reparatory measures. By recognizing the inseparability of climate protection and the enforcement of fundamental human rights, the ICJ reinforced the normative role of international law in global climate governance and provided legal backing for strengthening climate litigation at both national and international levels (ICJ, 2025).

Within this scenario, the articulation between international commitments and national actions increasingly constitutes not only a matter of legitimacy but also a necessary condition for consolidating Brazil as a climate leader internationally.

3 _ CHALLENGES TO BRAZILIAN LEADERSHIP IN GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE AS HOST OF COP30

Brazil is considered one of the key emerging countries in the fight against climate change, playing an active role in negotiations within the international climate regime (Granziera; Rei, 2015, p.17). In 2023, the country emitted approximately 2.3 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent, representing around 3.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, with most originating from land-use change such as deforestation (Climate Tracker, 2024). The country is home to the world's largest tropical forest, the Amazon, essential for regional and global climate regulation. Additionally, Brazil stands out for its predominantly renewable electricity matrix, with 88.2% of electricity generated from renewable sources in 2024, and an overall energy matrix in which renewables account for around 50%, consolidating its position as a global leader in clean energy, according to data from the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Estimating System of the *Observatório do Clima* (Observatório do Clima, 2024).

Improved Brazilian performance in global climate governance will depend on proactive climate diplomacy capable of articulating strategic coalitions, particularly in a South-South framework. Historically, Brazil has played a relevant role in constructing the international climate regime, from the Rio-92 Conference to leadership in negotiations on forests and bioenergy. Resuming an active stance at COPs can reinforce its image as a mediator between developed and developing countries, connecting it with forums such as BRICS, BASIC, and the *Organização do Tratado de Cooperação Amazônica* (OTCA). This strategy enables the defense of a more inclusive environmental legal regime, encompassing principles of climate justice and equity aligned with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Moreover, initiatives such as leadership in Amazonian bioeconomy, the reactivation of the Amazon Fund, and strengthened technological cooperation with African and Asian countries reinforce Brazil's potential to translate soft power into concrete results. Thus, South-South cooperation emerges not only as an alternative to traditional multilateral tensions but also as an instrument for asserting Brazilian diplomacy amid geopolitical fragmentation.

Addressing the climate crisis has become one of the main issues in contemporary international governance, with legal, political, and economic implications. In this context, Brazil emerges as a strategic actor, both due to its status as an environmental power — home to the largest tropical forest and one of the largest reservoirs of biodiversity — and also its diplomatic capacity consolidated over recent decades. This analysis proceeds from the hypothesis that strengthening domestic environmental

policies, combined with proactive climate diplomacy, can expand Brazil's soft power and consolidate the country as an international climate leader.

Historically, Brazil has played an important role in international environmental law, most notably since the Stockholm Conference (1972) and especially at Rio-92, which gave rise to the UNFCCC. As a megadiverse developing country, it occupies a unique position: while advocating the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in Article 3 of the UNFCCC, it is also called upon to assume greater leadership in implementing robust environmental policies. This intermediary position grants the country legitimacy to lead global coalitions, especially among countries of the Global South, strengthening its voice internationally.

In this sense, the concept of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, is essential for understanding Brazil's opportunity. It refers to the ability to influence through attraction rather than coercion. Brazil, traditionally recognized for diplomacy based on dialogue and multilateral solutions, has significant potential to enhance its influence through the climate agenda. Coherence between domestic policies and international discourse can transform the country's image, often criticized for high deforestation rates, into a positive reference for sustainable development and climate leadership.

However, this strategy takes place in an international context of geopolitical instability and crisis in multilateralism. The retreat of climate commitments by major powers, combined with growing distrust in multilateral institutions, requires new actors to assume leadership. In this context, the realization of COP30 in Belém in 2025 represents a historic milestone for Brazil. The event, held in the heart of the Amazon, places the most symbolic biome of the climate struggle at the center of global debate and offers the country an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen environmental legal regimes both domestically and internationally.

To consolidate itself as a leader, however, Brazil must ensure coherence between international commitments and domestic policies. In this regard, *Lei nº 12.651/2012* (Código Florestal), the National Policy on Climate Change (Law nº 12.187/2009), and the National Environmental Education Policy (Law nº 9.795/1999) are fundamental legal frameworks. Their effective implementation, along with compliance with the targets outlined in Brazil's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the 2015 Paris Agreement, constitutes the basis for the country's diplomatic credibility.

The adoption of technological innovation can further strengthen this agenda. International experiences such as the use of drones for reforestation and blockchain for carbon monitoring may inspire Brazilian policies that integrate environmental conservation and economic development. In this regard, ecotourism and the

bioeconomy emerge as strategic sectors, reinforcing Brazil's image as guardian of the Amazon and a hub of sustainable innovation.

Another crucial point is valuing traditional communities and Indigenous peoples. Several studies show that Indigenous-managed areas have lower deforestation rates. Thus, by expanding the protection of their territories, as guaranteed by the 1988 Federal Constitution, and integrating traditional knowledge into conservation policies, Brazil strengthens both its domestic credibility and its international image.

Environmental governance must also address challenges related to illegality and corruption. Periodic environmental audits, data transparency, and institutional strengthening are essential to legitimize Brazil's diplomatic discourse. Without these mechanisms, international commitments risk being discredited.

The private sector will also play a central role in this trajectory. Encouraging investments in clean energy, sustainable agriculture, and the bioeconomy, alongside globally recognized environmental certifications such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and initiatives like REDD+ (*Redução de Emissões por Desmatamento e Degradação Florestal*), can align economic interests with the climate agenda. Companies committed to socioenvironmental responsibility will reinforce Brazil's image as a country engaged in sustainability.

Internationally, Brazil has room to strengthen South-South climate diplomacy. By forming partnerships with countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Brazil can contribute to solutions tailored to Global South realities, reinforcing climate justice. This engagement also strengthens Brazil's identity as a mediator and consensus builder at a time when multilateral cooperation is increasingly necessary.

Despite the crisis of multilateralism, Brazil can play an important role in its revitalization. Active participation in international forums and leadership in joint initiatives enable the country to project itself as a defender of global cooperation and of the UN's 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 13 (Climate Action) and other related goals.

This soft power strategy is deeply linked to national identity. The image of Brazil as the “lung of the world” should expand to that of an innovative, just and sustainability-driven country. This narrative, if supported by consistent public policies, can significantly increase Brazil's international influence.

Nevertheless, the challenges are significant. Pressures from the export-oriented agribusiness sector, internal political instability, social inequalities, and risks of legislative rollbacks could compromise the coherence of the climate agenda. Overcoming these challenges requires consistent policies, international monitoring, and broad civil society engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

The realization of COP30 in Belém places Brazil in a unique position to reaffirm its leadership in international climate governance. In a context of geopolitical instability and a crisis of multilateralism, Brazilian leadership will depend on its ability to combine internal coherence with external diplomatic engagement. On one hand, the country must align its international commitments with effective public policies, particularly regarding deforestation control and the transition to a low-carbon economy, ensuring credibility and legitimacy before the international community. On the other hand, a proactive climate diplomacy, supported by South-South coalitions and guided by principles of climate justice and equity, can expand Brazil's soft power and consolidate its image as a mediator between developed and developing nations.

It follows that COP30 represents a unique opportunity for Brazil not only to reaffirm its commitment to the international climate regime, but also to contribute decisively to strengthening International Environmental Law. By adopting consistent political and legal strategies, Brazil can transform its environmental potential into effective leadership, playing a central role in building global solutions to tackle the climate crisis.

If Brazil advances in this direction, it may, by 2040, consolidate itself as a global leader in climate diplomacy, with credibility grounded in concrete results: emission reductions, expanded reforestation, strengthened bioeconomy, and defense of climate justice. COP30, in this sense, represents not only an event but a turning point capable of redefining Brazil's role in the international arena.

Brazil possesses unique conditions to lead the fight against climate change. Strengthening domestic environmental policies, combined with proactive and coherent climate diplomacy, is key to expanding its soft power and contributing decisively to the construction of a sustainable future.

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