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Brazil's Role in the Global Order After Bolsonaro

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Cover image: Aerial panorama of Botafogo Bay and Sugar Loaf Mountain, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil by marchello74.

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Introduction

This paper discusses Brazil's role in global order and strategic constraints after the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, who took office in January 2019. Since one cannot know when and in which context the country's transition to a post-Bolsonaro period will take place, this analysis will lay out a series of broader conceptual considerations in the context of the country's traditional foreign policy strategy, emphasizing Brazil's foreign policy identity as a supporter of a rules-based order and a historically strong engagement in multilateral institutions, as well as its rising power identity embraced during the first decade of the 21st century. It will then proceed to assess what this means for Brazilian foreign policy when Jair Bolsonaro leaves the presidency. Four challenges stand out: first, provided that the illiberal and 'anti-globalist' turn of Brazil's politics may outlive Bolsonaro – whose rise looks more like a symptom rather than the cause of the country's democratic malaise – is there still sufficient domestic support for a return to the foreign policy of the pre-Bolsonaro days? Second, how should Brazil react as multilateralism – and global order as a whole – will increasingly be shaped by the rivalry between Washington and Beijing, challenging Brazil's pre-Bolsonaro rhetoric about "benign multipolarity"?² Third, how can Brazil contain or overcome the damage the Bolsonaro presidency has inflicted on its international reputation and the trustworthiness previous governments have invested so much to build over decades, symbolized by president Cardoso's decision to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the late 1990s? Finally, given that Brazil's rising-power identity – providing an at times ill-defined though powerful narrative about the country's growing global role – can hardly be resuscitated for the foreseeable future, what should take its place?

The Roots of Brazil's Support for Multilateralism

Contrary to what decision-makers in Asunción, La Paz, Buenos Aires, and elsewhere in Latin America would believe, Brazilian foreign policy makers have long seen their own country as large yet vulnerable and insecure. Brazilian diplomats therefore traditionally regarded international institutions, rules, and norms as their best option to defend Brazil's sovereignty and national interests. Struggling to control its own borders, particularly in the Amazon forest in the east, northeast, and north, and with very limited means to develop significant hard power, the rules-based international order provided welcome assurances and protection, and enhanced predictability of an otherwise highly unpredictable global scenario. Brazil's desire for international stability precedes the existence of today's institutions, and the country called for treaty-based multilateral cooperation as early as 1907 at the Second Hague Conference, a time when Western nations preferred great power primacy.³ As Marcos Tourinho argues:

On one side, great powers sought to establish, in the classic European form, a system of differentiated prerogatives on the basis of their size and power. On the other, a group of Latin American states led by [the Brazilian diplomat] Ruy

² Antonio Patriota. Discurso por ocasião da cerimônia de posse do Embaixador Ruy Nunes Pinto Nogueira como Secretário-Geral das Relações Exteriores – Brasília, 6 de janeiro de 2011. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/mre/pt-br/centrais-de-conteudo/publicacoes/discursos-artigos-e-entrevistas/ministro-das-relacoes-exteriores/discursos-mre/discurso-do-ministro-antonio-de-aguiar-patriota-na-cerimonia-de-posse-do-embaixador-ruy-nunes-pinto-nogueira-como-secretario-geral-das-relacoes-exteriores>

³ da Silva, Ivo Pereira. "In Defense of State Equality: Rui Barbosa at the Hague Conference." *Bol. Fac. Direito U. Coimbra* 92 (2016): 1187.

Barbosa insisted that international governance arrangements had to be necessarily founded on a regime strictly based on the sovereign equality of all states. Largely because of this dissent, the compulsory international court of justice failed to materialise – but at that point it became clear that international society was not exactly playing by European rules.⁴

Twelve years later, at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, Brazil again emerged as an active voice seeking to strengthen international rules and norms, and Epitacio Pessoa, who led the country's delegation in the French capital, was part of the committee in charge of drafting the Covenant of the League of Nations.⁵ Brazil also sought, without success, to obtain a permanent seat on the body's Council and soon abandoned the body, disillusioned with the prevalence of European great power politics.⁶

Brazil and Multilateralism: The Long Road to Frustration

Yet while Brazil has traditionally been one of the greatest defenders of multilateralism, its experience with international institutions and global rules and norms has also been at times a frustrating one. Brazil's hopes to achieve one of its greatest foreign policy goals after World War II – a permanent seat on the recently created UN Security Council – were dashed after Roosevelt's cautious sympathy for the idea was met with a far less enthusiastic stance by Churchill and Stalin. In the end, the issue was settled even before the San Francisco conference, and Getulio Vargas's diplomatic push was to no avail.⁷ The absence of developing countries from either Latin America or Africa on the UN Security Council struck policy makers as a powerful reminder of the gap between rhetoric about the so-called liberal order and the reality of global politics, still very much shaped by power hierarchies after 1945. A similar dynamic led to frustration in Brazil when, in the 2010s, Western governments refused to put an end to the anachronistic tradition of only allowing a US citizen to head the World Bank and a European to lead the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁸ Brazil's criticism of the contradictions and inconsistencies of US-led order was often seen as evidence of the country's supposed revisionist agenda.⁹ Yet this overlooked that the country's experience with the international rules-based order was decidedly different than that of Western European countries, who benefited from the extraordinary privilege of military protection from the United States paired with the freedom to compete economically with the United States. Latin America, on the other hand, was exposed to a very different reality, involving the US-supported overthrow of democratically elected governments – such as in Chile in the 1970s – and the active US military involvement in Central American Republics. As more recent archival research reveals, however, Brazil's military government also played, along with the United States, a supportive role in the demise of Chile's

⁴ Marcos Tourinho, "Beyond Expansion: Political Contestation in the Global International Society (1815-1960)" (PhD diss., Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies of Geneva, 2015), 24.

⁵ Lafer, Celso. "Brazilian international identity and foreign policy: Past, present, and future." *Daedalus* 129.2 (2000): 207-238.

⁶ Leuchars, Chris. "Brazil and the league council crisis of 1926." *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 12.4 (2001): 123-142.

⁷ Tom Long. Historical Antecedents and Post-WWII Regionalism in the Americas. World Politics, 2020

⁸ Jonathan Masters. Does Kim Signal World Bank Changes? Council on Foreign Relations. April 18, 2012. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/expert-roundup/does-kim-signal-world-bank-changes>

⁹ Stewart Patrick. Irresponsible Stakeholders? The Difficulty of Integrating Rising Powers. Foreign Affairs. November/December 2010. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-africa/2010-11-01/irresponsible-stakeholders>

democracy in 1973.¹⁰

Most recently, debates about a possible US military intervention in Venezuela forced even US allies such as Colombia and Brazil's Bolsonaro government to reluctantly side with Venezuela's dictator, Nicolás Maduro, whom neither of the two recognized as president.¹¹ Seen from Bogotá and Brasília, a US military engagement in neighboring Venezuela would set a far more dangerous precedent than Maduro's continued misrule in Venezuela, which had produced the worst refugee crisis in recent Latin American history. These experiences help explain Brazil's ambiguity vis-à-vis international order. As Matias Spektor writes:

*Read any Brazilian foreign policy college textbook and you will be surprised. Global order since 1945 is not described as open, inclusive, or rooted in multilateralism. Instead, you learn that big powers impose their will on the weak through force and rules that are strict and often arbitrary.*¹²

Brazil's frustration, however, did not lead towards the adoption of a revisionist stance – quite to the contrary, governments from across the ideological spectrum understood that, despite its numerous shortcomings, injustices, and informal hierarchies, there was no viable alternative to proactive engagement and the continued push for reform. Brazil never turned into a spoiler because the seven and a half decades after World War II have been, in many ways, extraordinarily successful for Brazil, suggesting that the existing order positively impacted its capacity to transform itself from a poor rural economy to one of the world's ten largest economies that was able to avoid armed conflict with any external powers.

Two of the perhaps biggest innovations in Brazilian foreign policy of the past decades emerged during the Lula government, which saw Brazil increasingly focus on informal institutions such as IBSA, the G20, and BRICS, yet this emphasis at no stage reduced the country's commitment to strengthening formal outfits such as the United Nations. Secondly, Brazil more aggressively sought to gain a seat at the table of the powerful and embraced risky strategies, such as Lula's controversial attempt to negotiate an Iranian nuclear agreement with Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Turkey's Recep Erdogan in 2010.¹³

Notably, Brazil's overall foreign policy strategy remained the same even though one key element of its foreign policy identity changed in a dramatic fashion: while Brazil actively embraced its rising power identity – enhanced by BRICS membership and Lula da Silva's highly active diplomacy – the country entered an economic crisis which turned the 2010s into a "lost decade" during which Brazil's economy barely grew at all, leading to a catastrophic reversal of expectations and widespread discontent, which is crucial to keep in mind when explaining why the majority of Brazilians voted for an anti-establishment candidate with explicitly authoritarian ideas in 2018. The country's rising power identity – or the notion that Brazil would inevitably

¹⁰ Roberto Simon. *O Brasil contra a democracia. A ditadura, o golpe no Chile e a Guerra Fria na América do Sul*. Companhia das Letras, 2021

¹¹ Oliver Stuenkel. *Four Signs Trump's Venezuela Strategy Is Backfiring*. *Americas Quarterly*. August 22, 2019. Available at: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/four-signs-trumps-venezuela-strategy-is-backfiring/>

¹² Matias Spektor. *One Foot in the Region; Eyes on the Global Prize*. *Americas Quarterly*. April 27, 2011. Available at: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/one-foot-in-the-region-eyes-on-the-global-prize/>

¹³ Matias Spektor. *How to Read Brazil's Stance on Iran*. Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). 2010. Available at: <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/how-read-brazils-stance-iran> See also: VARGAS, João Augusto Costa. *Campanha permanente: o Brasil e a reforma do Conselho de Segurança da ONU*. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2011

play a greater role on the global stage in the future, thanks to its commitment to the rules-based order without the need to accumulate military might – was no longer compatible with reality.

Bolsonaro: The Rise of Brazil's Anti-Multilateral Strategy

When former army captain and far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro celebrated an unexpected triumph in Brazil's presidential elections, his choice of Ernesto Araújo as Foreign Minister – a self-professed "anti-globalist" and Trump admirer – symbolized a profound change in the country's foreign policy rhetoric, particularly considering how strongly Brazil's international strategy had been shaped by continuity and the broad consensus that a rules-based order and strong multilateral institutions were beneficial to Brazil.

Bolsonaro, by contrast, embraced a Trump-like anti-multilateral strategy, warned of the dangers of "globalism," and adopted a nationalist discourse that depicted international institutions, rules, and norms as profound threats to Brazil's sovereignty, rejecting the previous consensus that these very rules protected the country from outside intervention.¹⁴ While it is too early to say whether Bolsonaro represents merely a rupture or a full-blown disengagement, Brazilian foreign policy rhetoric – a key element of foreign policy itself – changed dramatically.

Yet paradoxically, the motivation behind Bolsonaro's anti-multilateral stance was similar to that which had led previous governments to support international multilateral institutions: a concern about Brazil's sovereignty. Yet while all Brazilian governments since democratization in the 1980s identified great powers – above all, the United States – as the major threat, Bolsonaro's main concern seemed to be that multilateral institutions themselves could complicate Brazil's sovereignty and control over its territory. Put differently, while previous governments mostly considered international institutions and multilateral platforms as a means to protect Brazil's sovereignty, the Bolsonaro government saw them as potentially dangerous platforms through which ideas contrary to the country's interests – such as in the realm of climate change – could be imposed on Brazil. This strand of thinking has been strengthened by the ongoing debate about whether "ecocide" should be considered an international crime, as well as international conjecturing about outside intervention in the Amazon.¹⁵ Such concerns are not entirely new – in fact, previous governments have been testy in the face of outside pressure in the realm of the environment, most notoriously the Rouseff administration, which broke off formal relations with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) after the body requested that Brazil halt construction of the Belo Monte dam in 2011 over concerns of environmental standards and the failure to consult indigenous populations. Yet since Bolsonaro's election, they have moved to the center of Brazil's foreign policy rhetoric.

Brazil's Foreign Policy Options After Bolsonaro

Given this historical context, four considerations come to mind regarding Brazil's foreign policy options after Bolsonaro.

¹⁴ Garcia, Ana. "Brazil under Bolsonaro: Social base, agenda and perspectives." *Journal of Global Faultlines* 6.1 (2019): 62-69.

¹⁵ Mehta, Sailesh, and Prisca Merz. "Ecocide—a new crime against peace?." *Environmental Law Review* 17.1 (2015): 3-7.

First of all, even a landslide victory by an opposition candidate against Bolsonaro is unlikely to reverse a series of profound domestic changes that have taken place in Brazil – such as a profound skepticism of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, anti-science sentiment, Sinophobia, and a nationalistic discourse of an intensity unprecedented since democratization, including frequent attacks against the government of Argentina. Politicians from all parts of the ideological spectrum will have noticed the ease with which Bolsonaro used these topics to mobilize his base and divert attention from domestic problems. Such “low-hanging fruit” are unlikely to be ignored, possibly complicating the return to the pre-Bolsonaro days of less vitriolic foreign policy rhetoric. Similar concerns exist in the United States, where the Republican Party’s Trumpian turn will not allow Biden to reestablish a cross-party consensus about the United States’ quest for liberal hegemony. While the comparison to US foreign policy after Trump may be interesting, Brazil's recovery will be far harder: even after four years under Trump and with the theoretical chance that an "America First" candidate will return to the White House, the United States is too relevant to be rejected as an ally. Brazil, on the other hand, naturally brings far less to the table, and is thus likely to take longer to regain the international trust to allow it to engage constructively towards building stronger multilateral institutions; and in the process, achieve what been Brazil's foreign policy goal for much of the past century: a seat on the table of the powerful and recognition of being of a relevant global actor.

Secondly, compared to the first decade of the 21st century, great power politics and growing tensions between Washington and Beijing are set to have a far broader impact on multilateralism in the coming years. Indeed, the lack of international cooperation in the realm of public health during the 2020/21 pandemic stands in stark contrast to the relatively successful coordination that took place during the 2008 global financial crisis.¹⁶ While maintaining constructive ties to both China and the United States was relatively easy until recently, new dynamics such as the so-called 'Tech War' between Washington and Beijing will require continuous, careful adjustments to avoid the kind of problems the Bolsonaro government was facing when domestic anti-China rhetoric threatened to complicate the acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines.¹⁷

Third, one of the major challenges for Brazil's next president on the foreign policy front will be reversing the damage the Bolsonaro government inflicted on the country's reputation. Four areas stand out: the environment, public health, democracy, and multilateralism more generally. While Brazil's stance on environmental issues in previous governments was far from problem-free, the Bolsonaro government transformed Brazil into a diplomatic pariah when it comes to the global fight against climate change. In the same way, Bolsonaro's denialist approach vis-à-vis COVID-19, which complicated efforts to contain the pandemic and contributed to high death rates, created the perception of a rudderless country led by a science-denying radical intent on undermining Brazil's democratic institutions. Irrespective of whether Bolsonaro will leave office just as Trump did (considered to be a positive scenario for Brazil in 2022) or after an additional presidential mandate, convincing the international community that the country is yet again a reliable partner and minimally constructive contributor to global governance will be a core foreign policy goal of any successor in the presidency.

¹⁶ Daniel Drezner. *The System Worked: How the World Stopped Another Great Depression*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁷ Oliver Stuenkel. *Latin American Governments Are Caught in the Middle of the U.S.-China Tech War*. *Foreign Policy*. February 26, 2021. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/26/latin-america-united-states-china-5g-technology-war/>

Finally, while a new commodity super cycle may help Brazil's economic fortunes, the risk of higher interest rates in the United States – which tends to be bad news for emerging markets – and the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the developing world – including the long-term damage in areas such as education – is likely to complicate efforts to rebrand Brazil as a rising power again anytime soon. This will inevitably make it harder for Brazil to secure a seat at the table of the powerful, unless it is involved by definition – such as in the realm of Amazon deforestation and the Venezuelan refugee crisis. Efforts to assume international responsibilities outside of its neighborhood will be more difficult, given that interlocutors no longer assume Brazil is set to play a more relevant geopolitical role in the future. Even if Lula da Silva, who led Brazil between 2003 and 2010, were to become president again, he would struggle enormously to replicate his highly active diplomatic strategy, during which he accepted the United States' invitation to lead the MINUSTAH peacekeeping mission in Haiti, took the lead in nuclear negotiations with Iran, and turned Brazil into an increasingly relevant humanitarian donor and provider of development aid.¹⁸ While economic growth and falling poverty rates at home increased public acceptance and tolerance of a more robust and costly foreign policy, rising poverty rates and growing economic inequality will most likely require Bolsonaro's successor to dedicate more time and energy on domestic challenges. Brazil's capacity to provide global public goods is likely to be very limited; which makes the debate about where to engage even more important than it was during the Lula years when Brazil had abundant resources available to contribute abroad.

¹⁸ Oliver Stuenkel. *Bridge Builder, Humanitarian Donor, Reformer of Global Order: Brazilian Narratives of Soft Power Before Bolsonaro*. In: *Soft-Power Internationalism. Competing for Cultural Influence in the 21st-Century Global Order*. Burcu Baykurt and Victoria de Grazia (eds.) Columbia University Press, 2021