



A diplomatic dwarf

Jair Bolsonaro's far-right government is leading Brazil into a risky and uncertain future internationally as well as at home.
RAPHAEL TSAVKKO GARCIA reports

A decades-long diplomatic agenda to secure Brazil as a world player has unravelled rapidly since far-right president Jair Bolsonaro took office on 1 January last year. Under Lula da Silva's presidency (2003-2011), Brazil was instrumental in creating the BRICS group of emerging economies alongside Russia, India, China and South Africa. It also helped to implement a series of South-South initiatives and played a significant role in negotiating international agreements. Bolsonaro's government, in contrast, has bet on obscurantism and sought to align itself with the global far right, including through informal partnerships with Islamic dictatorships such as those of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The approach echoes Brazil's new domestic agenda. In June 2019, for example, foreign affairs minister Ernesto Araújo ordered that any reference to 'gender' be removed from official documents and made an uncompromising defence of the term 'family' as including a father and mother only, following a conservative and homophobic Christian mentality. These moves translated into several votes at the UN Human Rights Council against sexual and reproductive rights, made alongside conservative and fundamentalist states in clear divergence from traditional allies and Brazil's own diplomatic tradition.

As Geneva-based journalist Jamil Chade has reported, 'In negotiations at the UN Human Rights Council, Brazil vetoed terms such as "gender" in several draft resolutions. It was warned that its position would represent a 25-year setback in the international arena. For Brazil, there would be no "gender equality", but only "equality between men and women"'. The shift follows decades of hard-right opposition to 'gender ideology' – a catch-all phrase used to accuse feminists of attempting to destroy family values. It was a clear

indication that everything was about to change in terms of foreign policy as well as domestically.

International alliance

Given the figures involved, it should come as no surprise. Araújo sees himself as a crusading defender of supposed traditional Christian values. Bolsonaro has also recently launched a 'crusade' against progressives, who he claims threaten 'Judeo-Christian civilisation'. Prior to Bolsonaro's election, Araújo proposed that Brazil join a Christian pact with the US and Russia. He stated that such an alliance would present a 'challenge to the globalist China-Europe-American left axis', proposing a rapprochement with Donald Trump and leaders of the European extreme right.

'The group that came to power is talking about the need to purge what previous governments have done. Not by chance, all those who participated in the post-1985 Brazilian democratic arrangement are considered communists by the administration,' explains the Rio-based international relations professor Tanguy Baghdadi. Brazil's foreign policy is 'not exempt from the perception that everything must be reconstructed from scratch, without commitments to previous actions, not even to the traditions of Brazilian diplomacy'.

Bolsonaro has sought, from the beginning of his presidency, to get closer to Donald Trump and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. At a March 2019 'master class' for new diplomats at the Rio Branco Institute, Araújo argued that Brazil's foreign policy should be determined by the 'Christian faith' and defended forging closer ties with Israel. Bolsonaro visited Israel last April and while there, both he and Araújo referred to Nazism as a 'leftist phenomenon'. At the same time, he sent his son, Eduardo, to strengthen ties with Italy's Matteo Salvini and Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán. There,

in what has become a customary anti-semitic dog whistle, Eduardo joined the right-wing European leaders in criticising the billionaire philanthropist and pro-democracy funder George Soros.

Non-liberal democracies

Tanguy Baghdadi notes that Orbán, Trump and Netanyahu share the common goal of 'constructing non-liberal democracies'. For journalist José Antônio Lima, 'Donald Trump is the main leader of a movement of right-wing populists and proto-fascists who have won important electoral victories worldwide and in general act to change the rules of the game and demolish the structures of liberal democracy.'

In relation to Brazil, Lima says: 'During the electoral campaign, Bolsonaro made numerous statements indicating his desire to follow the same path. It is not yet clear how much power he will have to do so – the result will depend on the strength of Brazilian institutions. What is certain is that the shift in foreign policy indicates the intention to act in the same way as these ideological partners.'

For Guilherme Casarões of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, the words of his foreign minister are revealing: 'Araújo proposes a conservative turn that he himself calls foreign policy "with a soul" that has God as its main reference,' Casarões explains. He

identifies the confluence of three blocs in Bolsonaro's rise to power: 'the anti-Workers' Party (PT) group, who are disillusioned with previous PT governments and use a profoundly moralistic discourse; the conservative evangelicals; and elements of the nationalist extreme-right, opposed to what they see as "globalism" and "cultural Marxism"', a unifying theory popular with the alt-right and promoted by Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik.

Fundamentalist evangelicals have had a particular influence on Brazilian foreign policy in Africa. 'Congressmen linked to neo-Pentecostal groups have been occupying spaces to lead Brazil's agenda with African countries,' explains BBC correspondent João Fellet. Their aim is to facilitate the entry of churches and pastors to fundamentalists' target countries – a strategy that perfectly aligns with the new direction of Brazilian foreign policy, which has begun to adopt their particular version of Christianity as a guide.

Diplomatic discomfort

Araújo's outspoken positions and the new conservative direction for Brazilian diplomacy he is overseeing has caused discomfort even among members of the Brazilian diplomatic corps. For Casarões, this approach presents three fundamental

problems. First, 'at the bilateral level, it enormously restricts our range of partners, as it positions Brazil alongside the few countries in the



Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro meets US president Donald Trump, June 2019

world that have foreign and domestic agendas similar to ours, generally translated into a commitment to the regeneration of Judeo-Christian western civilisation’.

Second, ‘it creates unnecessary friction and opposition with countries such as Germany, China, and some Arab and Muslim nations, since it is not a matter of conciliatory diplomacy, but divisive’. And third, ‘this conservative diplomacy, at a regional level, is essentially centrifugal, creating incentives for regional disintegration, starting with what is identified as the legacy of the PT, such as UNASUR’. The Union of South American Nations is an intergovernmental organisation founded in 2010 under the da Silva administration and initially composed of 12 South American countries with the objective of promoting regional economic integration and development. Brazil withdrew from UNASUR in 2019.

Another sign of profound changes in Brazilian foreign policy was the country’s immediate alignment with the US following the assassination of Iranian general Qassim Soleimani. In an action seen as ‘disastrous’ by analysts, the Brazilian foreign ministry expressed ‘support for the fight against the scourge of terrorism’ in response to the killing, which led Iran to immediately summon the Brazilian ambassador to provide explanation.

The current position contrasts greatly with the pioneering role Brazil played during the da Silva administration in 2010, when then-foreign minister Celso Amorim negotiated, with Turkey, a first version of the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme that laid the groundwork for the 2015 agreement announced by then-US President Barack Obama. Such activities reflect that government’s efforts to establish an independent role for Brazilian diplomacy on the world stage.

Enormous risk

José Antônio Lima sees Brazil as inserting itself into ‘an insurgent bloc whose durability is still unknown. In terms of trade, the same is true. The US is undoubtedly extremely important, but the economies of Brazil and the US are to a large extent competitors, which hinders gains in this sense.’ Tanguy Baghdadi agrees, and is, ‘sceptical about the possibility of the Trump government seeing Brazil as a global ally’.

Guilherme Casarões adds that ‘there is enormous risk in building an alliance on a personal basis. If Netanyahu or Trump loses, Brazil will have difficulties in regaining the trust of the new partners.’ It is also possible that the conservatism espoused by Bolsonaro will ‘cause irreparable damage to the country’s international image’, says Casarões. ‘The tendency,’ Baghdadi concludes, is ‘that Brazil will be seen as exotic in its positions and unreliable in its commitments.’

Brazil is becoming a diplomatic dwarf. This may get even worse if alienation of traditional allies and subservience to US interests becomes the norm. As Rodrigo Santoro, international relations professor at Rio’s State University puts it: ‘Bolsonaro has made an exaggerated bet on ideological affinity, to the detriment of the search for long-term national interests.’

While Bolsonaro seeks alliances with populist and extremist governments abroad, his government continues to be widely contested and involved in scandals at home. This includes the alleged involvement of the Bolsonaro family with armed militias in Rio and the firing of his culture secretary for going a step too far in echoing Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels in a recent speech. The question is what will go wrong first: Brazil’s fragile international alliances or Bolsonaro’s domestic political base. □

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