
The United States and Brazil Aligned? Opportunities and Challenges

Matias Spektor

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This paper examines the historical background and current state of U.S.-Brazil relations at a time when administrations on both sides are trying to produce some form of foreign-policy alignment.

We argue that the current move on the part of the Trump and Bolsonaro administrations to converge around a set of common approaches to regional and global politics is likely to bump up against both domestic and international challenges and constraints. From this, at least three sets of policy implications do follow:

- The White House and Palácio do Planalto are likely to struggle to sustain any serious attempt at alignment as long as Brazil remains peripheral to the geopolitical concerns of the United States, and as long as Brazilian incumbents do not need American economic and political support to secure their own domestic political survival.
- For the foreseeable future, Washington and Brasília will likely operate under domestic political constraints. There is little appetite among the major constituencies within each country to embark upon costly policies of foreign-policy convergence. Leaders will therefore have to be prepared to handle the disagreements that are bound to emerge constructively.
- It is far from preordained that the growing geopolitical footprint of China and Russia in Latin America will translate into tighter ties between Brazil and the United States. A deep-seated history of mutual suspicion may provide for a hemisphere that grows increasingly divided moving forward.

BACKGROUND

“I look to Trump as a role model”, professed candidate Jair Bolsonaro on the campaign trail. When he sealed his victory in the polls, Donald Trump congratulated him effusively, while National Security Advisor John Bolton hailed the new Brazilian president as a “like-minded” leader. Former presidential advisor Steve Bannon went on to endorse Bolsonaro as a leading figure in the global, anti-globalist movement. From the very outset, officials in Washington and Brasília went out of their way to profess admiration for one another and lay out plans for the single most ambitious attempt at foreign-policy alignment in generations.

Bolsonaro signaled his willingness to align through a series of policy announcements during his first months in office. Firstly, he promised to push back against Chinese encroachment in the region. He then went on to become South America’s most militant voice against the chavista regime in Venezuela. He also expressed willingness to move the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem like Trump had done before, and uttered words to the effect that Brazil might follow the United States in withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council and from the Paris Accords on climate change. Bolsonaro also hinted at the possibility of severing diplomatic ties with Cuba, and his administration has turned Israel, Poland, and Hungary into new flagship relationships that the president wants to cultivate. Brazil for the first time adopted the language of the Trump administration to refer to the WTO, where it also relinquished upon American demand its long-cherished status as a developing nation.

In return for these signals, the Trump administration granted Bolsonaro several concessions. The U.S. government publicly came out in support for a place for Brazil at the OCDE, gave the country “Major Non-NATO Ally” status, cleared the passage in the U.S. Congress of a long-pending safeguards agreement for the Alcantara Air Base, and set out to coordinate Venezuela more closely with the Brazilians. Trump became on occasion deferential to Bolsonaro, and it publicly supported the possibility that the Brazilian president might appoint his own son as ambassador to Washington (Bolsonaro decided not to make the appointment in the face of Congressional opposition).

For all the verbal commitment to alignment, however, it remains to be seen whether this is a policy that the two countries can sustain in practice. The record of the first year and a half calls for caution. On a range of issues from China to Venezuela, Bolsonaro has been either unable or unwilling to follow in the steps of the United States. Likewise, Trump has on occasion behaved in ways that frustrated his Brazilian counterparts deeply.

What are the actual odds of alignment?

History offers several clues. At least on five occasions did incumbents in the United States and Brazil try to make their policies converge. These variously include episodes like U.S. support for the political group who unseated Emperor Pedro II in 1889, the understanding between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Getúlio Vargas as Brazil entered the war effort in 1942, the Kennedy administration's initial (and short-lived) support for João Goulart's progressive reforms in 1962, Lyndon B. Johnson's support for the military coup of 1964, and the interpersonal relationship between George H. W. Bush and Fernando Collor de Mello as Brazil transitioned to democracy in 1989.

Looking at those historical attempts at alignment comparatively is instructive in that it brings to surface the core conditions for successful alignment in U.S.-Brazil relations, and it provides insight into the types of dynamics that can easily derail such an alliance or ensure that it never develops in the first place.

From the standpoint of the United States, the necessary condition for bilateral alignment is that whoever administration is in office develops the belief that Brazil matters significantly for American geopolitical interests. It is only when the geopolitical stakes for the White House are high that the policy world in Washington develops the discipline and commitment to actually sustain a policy of alignment with Brazil. The single best illustration of this dynamic is Franklin D. Roosevelt's firm commitment to alignment with Vargas in the face of mounting costs, given the perceived need to secure preferential access to air bases in Northern Brazil as part of America's war effort in the Atlantic Ocean.

From the standpoint of Brazil, the necessary condition for successful alignment is that incumbents feel insecure enough in their domestic political positions to actually perceive the need to secure material and political help from the president of the United States in their quest for survival in office. Goulart's early days in power illustrate the point, as the president turned to the Kennedy administration for economic aid and political support in the face of powerful domestic challengers.

It follows that if history is any guide to the future, the odds of Bolsonaro and Trump succeeding in their professed commitment to alignment will be highly dependent on two core factors. First, alignment will work to the degree that U.S. policymakers see that Brazil matters geopolitically. In a context of growing competition between the United States on the one hand and China and Russia on the other, this dynamic might under specific circumstances actually ensue. Second, alignment will work to the degree that Bolsonaro fears the rise of domestic enemies to be threatening enough to merit the effort to actually trade compliance for material and political support from the United States. The deepening of the sanitary, economic and political crisis in the future could create powerful incentives for Bolsonaro to more actively trade compliance for the provision of goods that assist him in his own domestic political battles. The core lesson to be derived from this analysis is that alignment between Brazil and the

United States has very little to do with incumbents professing admiration for one another or even with self-identification between them. Rather, if it is to take off at all, alignment will result from the successful matching of Brazilian compliance for American side payments.

Critics of this line of reasoning may argue that this is too high a bar to judge change in U.S.-Brazil relations. They would have a point. There is much that the two countries can actually do together in the world and on behalf of the bilateral relationship short of a sustained policy of alignment. These opportunities include both low-hanging fruit waited to be harvested, and more ambitious initiatives that require presidential leadership on both sides to take off.

It is to these that we now turn.



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