

Lula's Diplomatic Odyssey: Navigating the Challenges of a New Era

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1) Introduction

In his third presidential term, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, at the helm of Brazil, charts a foreign policy course that clearly diverges from the early 21st-century practices.¹ While certain continuities persist, the discernible differences highlight a revitalized approach to global affairs, responding to the contemporary challenges reshaping the world stage. The once-steady liberal, rules-based international system now grapples with mounting pressures, particularly the ascendance of China as a central concern. The signs of historical struggles between the "Free World" and the "Iron Curtain" reverberate in today's geopolitical landscape, especially amid the war in Ukraine, challenging established legal norms and imperiling the global order. Against this backdrop, uncertainties cast shadows over decision-makers, intensifying the fierce competition for hearts and minds.

Surprisingly, the Bandung generation's trinarism, a concept from decades ago, reemerges as a relevant guidepost. Neutrality, enshrined in international law, becomes a strategic choice for states unwilling to be ensnared by the machinations of war. Autonomy in foreign policy, in this polarized environment, demands unwavering determination and a sense of purpose. The imperative to build harmony between nations, though seemingly distant, requires arduous and costly efforts, especially given the scarcity of great statesmen in the contemporary world, magnifying the challenges and necessitating perseverance.

Lula's proactive foreign policy within just over eleven months since his inauguration marks a decisive departure from past strategies. From Sharm El-Sheikh to Argentina, he emphasizes environmental commitment and regional integration. The revival of CELAC and Mercosur underscores a renewed regional commitment. Engagements with European counterparts, consultations with the U.S. and China, and efforts towards global stability vividly illustrate Brazil's ambitious positioning on the international stage. Contrasting with the sovereigntist discourse of 15 years ago, which emphasized mineral extraction, the current administration champions the green economy

¹ See <https://pp.nexojournal.com.br/ponto-de-vista/2023/A-nova-pol%C3%ADtica-externa-brasileira>.

and environmental governance standards.² And regionalism, though revived, has evolved, with reduced tolerance for left-wing dictatorships and tempered enthusiasm for the "Pink Wave." Lula's approach extends beyond South America, reaching out to Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, signaling a pragmatic stance in dealing with the United States in the hemisphere.

The most significant transformation lies in the recalibration of foreign policy intentions. Lula's administration is bolder, vocalizing a plan to refound the global order. While attempts at international conflict mediation are not entirely unprecedented, the self-confidence exhibited by Lula and his team distinguishes them from the cautious and reactive stance of 2004 during the Haiti mission. This audacious diplomacy represents Lula's vision for a new era, aiming to position Brazil as a proactive player in shaping global affairs.

2) Brazil's Agri-Environmental Power Play

In the aftermath of winning the second round of the presidential election, Lula declared at Egypt's COP 27 that "Brazil was back," unveiling his strategy for global environmental governance. Departing from decades of reactive environmental policies shaped by international pressure, Lula ascribes to Brazil the role of a proactive force in shaping the new global order.

Historically, Brazil's environmental actions were responses to external scrutiny, including the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Even the demarcation of indigenous lands during that period was driven by a need to address global concerns about the destruction of the Amazon and the plight of indigenous peoples. Brazil remained primarily a reactive actor on the global stage.

During Jair Bolsonaro's tenure, the caricatured form of Brazilian sovereigntism escalated, contributing to unprecedented international pressure, especially with rising deforestation rates after 2018. Lula's return to power in 2023 marked a crucial juncture for Brazil, necessitating a strategic shift to avoid economic and diplomatic pitfalls. Facing mounting global criticism and potential economic repercussions, Lula advocated for a new standard of global governance, emphasizing effective climate decisions, representation, and political inclusion. Recognizing that the world no longer tolerates

² See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/dec/02/lula-climate-leader-cop28-brazil-undermined-by-opec-move>.

environmental degradation in pursuit of agribusiness interests, Lula positioned Brazil as an agri-environmental power with a commitment to sustainable practices.

The economic successes of Brazilian agribusiness, fueled by external crises such as swine fever, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine, concealed diplomatic defeats, though. The European Union, concerned about deforestation-linked products since the early 2000s, posed a significant challenge. Lula's administration acknowledges that sustaining Brazil's leadership in agriculture depends on aligning with global environmental criteria.

Looking forward, Brazil aspires to play a prominent role in constructing a new global order encompassing climate, food, finance, and international security. The goal is to leverage the country's vast natural resources, establishing Brazil as a key player in agri-environmental diplomacy on par with other global powers. The challenge lies not only in securing economic interests but in demonstrating a commitment to responsible environmental stewardship on the world stage.

3) The Shadow of the Russian-Ukrainian War

Nineteen months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine's territory, the aftermath remains tragic. Vast Ukrainian cities lie in ruins, casualties number in the hundreds of thousands, and millions are displaced. The Ukrainian economy, absorbing a shock equivalent to approximately 40% of its GDP in 2022, vividly reflects the severity of the inflicted damage. Despite facing the onslaught, President Volodymyr Zelensky, backed by the North Atlantic alliance, exhibits no signs of yielding, and the courageous resilience of local citizens defies predictions of imminent capitulation.

Concurrently, Russia contends with the daily toll of the non-trivial costs of a war of conquest. Western sanctions, while failing to strangle the Russian Federation, have not prevented Russia's economic performance, projected by the IMF to surpass that of the United Kingdom and Germany in 2023. The strategic and commercial blockade, while limiting Moscow's access to technologically advanced goods, does not impede other nations like China, India, and Turkey from continuing to provide alternative support. The war's shadow looms long, with social support for the belligerent states escalating. Amidst this global standoff, the question arises: what role should a relatively peripheral and moderately powerful country like Brazil play? To actively engage or remain on the sidelines of the Slavic fratricidal struggle becomes the Hamletian question haunting Brazil's decision-makers.

Before the invasion, former President Jair Bolsonaro visited Moscow and expressed solidarity with Russia, oblivious to the impending conflict. Faced with the consequences of his stance, Bolsonaro oscillated between truncated, contradictory speeches, attempting a delicate balance to avoid displeasing support groups both domestically and abroad. His attempts to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape involved wavering between condemning the invasion within the UN framework and adopting a notion of "neutrality" towards the contending parties, all while considering domestic economic interests.

While neutrality, in essence, remained elusive, the framing of the issue shifted under the leadership of Lula da Silva. Departing from a sheltered stance, Lula sought to propose diplomatic solutions rather than merely react to the war's side effects. Embracing Brazil's bicentennial tradition of mediating conflicts, Lula positioned the South American giant as a facilitator in the pursuit of world peace. Rooted in constitutional principles and drawing from historical experiences, Lula's diplomatic strategy aimed at rebuilding Brazil's international reputation through a pacifist and autonomous approach. Ambitious yet well-founded, the diplomatic reshaping heralds a distinctive chapter in Brazil's role on the geopolitical stage.³

4) Hemispheric Relations and the Venezuela Conundrum

In recent months, Brazilian media has been rife with discussions, whether original or borrowed from foreign sources, portraying Lula as allegedly harboring "anti-American" or "anti-Western" sentiments. These discussions stem from various factors, including Lula's advocacy for a financial system independent of the American dollar, his critique of the U.S. and Europe's role in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Brazil's refusal to join sanctions against Russia or provide weapons to Ukraine, and Lula's visit to China in April this year.

Brazil's early years were marked by asymmetrical relations with Europeans, but the emergence of the U.S. as a global power in the 20th century shifted dynamics. The U.S. became Brazil's largest trading partner, with a historical alliance solidifying during pivotal moments like World War II. However, as the 21st century unfolded, China surpassed the U.S. as Brazil's primary trading partner, reflecting a changing global order.

³ See <https://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/pacifism-as-pragmatism-brazils-stance-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

Despite occasional disagreements, Brazil and the U.S. have made efforts to reconcile differences, even during periods of criticism by Brazilian leaders. However, the structural differences between the two countries make divergence natural and, in many cases, a healthy sign that each nation is pursuing its own agenda.

Concerning Venezuela, Lula's diplomatic move to rehabilitate Nicolás Maduro during a South American summit in Brasília stirred controversy. Lula's stance aimed to reverse the narrative of Venezuela being undemocratic, emphasizing the need for regional stability. Recognizing that an isolated Venezuela poses numerous problems for South America, including energy supply issues and an influx of migrants, Brazil's leadership sees reintegration as essential. Beyond pragmatic considerations, Lula's diplomatic shield for Maduro aligns with his commitment to diplomacy. Lula envisions himself as a facilitator in the normalization of Venezuelan democracy, offering Brazil's assistance. The challenge lies in extracting symbolic concessions from Maduro to initiate the country's reconstruction. Lula's overt support for Maduro has raised eyebrows, but it underscores a commitment to regional stability and aligns with historical ties between the Workers' Party and socialist governments in Venezuela.⁴

In essence, while Brazil navigates a diplomatic course that may surprise some, the challenge for Lula is to produce a remedy that, while promising a cure, doesn't undermine Brazil's international standing. Balancing nuanced diplomacy with public perception is the delicate task ahead for the Brazilian leader.

5) Conclusion: Brazil's Emergence as a Gentle Revisionist Power

The turning point in Brazil's foreign relations occurred with the advent of left-wing governments in 2003, coinciding with systemic shifts like the aftermath of September 11th and the rise of new global power centers. A notable outcome of this era is the BRICS grouping, a consortium of major Global South nations formalized in 2009, expanding to 10 or 11 members by 2024. Within this alliance, Brazil, India, and China align their foreign policies, presenting alternatives to global governance.

Critics urging Brazil to adopt a less proactive role argue that it lacks the geopolitical attributes of nations like India. While India's emergence is often studied, it's crucial to recognize that this ascent wasn't a natural occurrence. India, a 5,000-year-old civilization with over a billion citizens, underwent a strenuous process to achieve

⁴ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-65750537>.

sovereignty, marked by bloody struggles against British colonial rule. India's journey to nuclear power status was similarly challenging. Refusing to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), India developed dual-use technology against prevailing international norms, facing consequences and stigmas. Its path to global recognition was a complex negotiation marked by resistance, punishments, and sacrifices.

Similarly, the narrative of China's peaceful rise over the last century is debunked by historical evidence. From Japanese occupation to the non-recognition of its government until 1971, and the global condemnation of events like the Tiananmen Square massacre, China faced persistent opposition. The evolution of American public opinion on China, shifting from positive to overwhelmingly unfavorable, underscores the complexities involved in ascending the international hierarchy.

In this landscape, Brazil emerges as a revisionist power, albeit of a gentle nature. Unlike some emerging powers, Brazil, in its revisionism, does not pursue nuclear militarization, regional sub-imperialism, or defiance of international norms. Brazil seeks a universalist approach, aspiring to secure a place at the global table while adhering to international standards. Whether Brazil succeeds in navigating these evolving global configurations remains to be seen, and time will be the ultimate arbiter of its diplomatic endeavors.