

# LATIN AMERICA AND THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER

DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES  
IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

edited by **Antonella Mori**  
introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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**ISPI**

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Via Alamanni, 11 – 20141 Milano – Italy  
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First edition: March 2020

*The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.*

Print ISBN 9788855261883

ePub ISBN 9788855262255

Pdf ISBN 9788855262262

DOI 10.14672/55261883

Cover Image: Francesco Fadani

ISPI. Via Clerici, 5

20121, Milan

[www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it)

Catalogue and reprints information: [www.ledizioni.it](http://www.ledizioni.it)

## 4. The First Year of the Bolsonaro's Foreign Policy

Guilherme Casarões

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When former army captain and lawmaker Jair Bolsonaro was elected President of Brazil, many thought they would watch a rerun of a sad Latin American soap opera from the 1970s, which starred presidents in military uniform and contained scenes of violent suppression of civil liberties<sup>1</sup>. While he has never hidden a nostalgic admiration for the military dictatorships of the region, which he often (mistakenly) pictures as an era of orderly societies and economic prosperity, time has shown that Bolsonaro's image is not quite that of the leader of a junta. Despite having many generals in his cabinet, including Vice-President Hamilton Mourão, Bolsonaro is, above all, a culture warrior<sup>2</sup>.

As such, he is engaged in a crusade to bring God, the nation and the (traditional) family back into the political mainstream. More than undertaking liberal reforms or fighting corruption, the centrepiece of Bolsonaro's strategy is to reconstruct Brazilian culture as a mixture of nationalism, religious fundamentalism and an old-fashioned hatred of communism. As his most popular slogan goes, "Brazil above everything, God above everyone".

To this end, Bolsonaro needs to warp the basic rules of the democratic game in Brazil, otherwise known as a secular,

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<sup>1</sup> "Jair Bolsonaro, Latin America's Last Menace", *The Economist*, 20 September 2018.

<sup>2</sup> C. Liyanage, "The Rise of a Culture Warrior: Jair Bolsonaro's far-right revolution", *CARR Blog Series*, 2 December 2019.

peaceful and pluralistic country. In the far-right parlance, Bolsonaro is playing the game of “metapolitics” – which may be broadly defined as an attempt to bring about profound and lasting political transformation by spreading ideas and cultural values across society<sup>3</sup>.

## Foreign Policy as the Centrepiece of Brazil's New Identity

Foreign policy, as much as education and arts, lies at the heart of the metapolitical game. A new Brazilian culture requires projecting a new identity to the world. Brazil's renewed identity, in turn, redefines the fundamental aspects of its international relations, including priorities, allies and enemies.

Bolsonaro's foreign policy envisions a world of strong and sovereign nations as opposed to one marked by multiculturalism and open borders. It places Brazil solidly in the (cultural) West and aspires to join the battle to regenerate its Judeo-Christian foundations; it seeks to forge alliances with other far-right governments in the world, starting with Trump's America, Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel and Viktor Orbán's Hungary; and it has declared war against the spectres of globalism and socialism.

The members of the so-called “anti-globalist” troika are Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo, Presidential Adviser Filipe Martins and Bolsonaro's son and lawmaker Eduardo Bolsonaro, who is also the chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee. Under the influence of philosopher-turned-guru Olavo de Carvalho<sup>4</sup>, they have been responsible for the most thorough departure from Brazil's diplomatic tradition since the Republic began. From the United Nations to Greenpeace, from Leonardo di Caprio to Greta Thunberg, Bolsonaro's Brazil wishes to break off with any institution, ideology or value that might threaten

<sup>3</sup> B. Teitelbaum, “Daniel Friberg and Metapolitics in Action” in M. Sedgwick (ed.), *New Thinkers of the Radical Right*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> B. Winter, “*Jair Bolsonaro's Guru*”, *Americas Quarterly*, 17 December 2018.

what they claim is the true conservative nature of the Brazilian people.

Oddly enough, this rupture seems to include the wholesale rejection of climate change and basic human rights, dismissed by Bolsonaro's foreign policy team as "globalist" and "leftist" conspiracies. As deforestation rages and indigenous people are killed by illegal loggers, miners and land-grabbers, the international community holds its breath<sup>5</sup>. For one, the government's decision to turn a blind eye to the massive fires in the Amazon rainforest led to some strong international reactions such as claiming that Brazil was "a bigger threat than either Iran or China"<sup>6</sup> and asking who would "invade Brazil to save the Amazon"<sup>7</sup>.

## A Tug of War within the Government

Anti-globalists, in charge of reconstructing Brazil's identity, sit uncomfortably alongside free-market advocates from the administration's economic team. Led by Finance Minister Paulo Guedes, they work closely with Brazil's agribusiness giants, which constitute the country's most profitable sector, and have been struggling to pass liberalising reforms and boost Brazilian exports. The only ideology they care about is unchecked liberalism.

Bolsonaro's free-marketeers know very well that Brazil cannot broker any major free trade agreement – as the one between Mercosur and the European Union – without a clear commitment to human rights and environmental standards. Moreover, they are aware that growing alignment with the United States and Israel might hamper good trade relations with

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<sup>5</sup> A. Pagliarini, "*The Amazon is burning – and it's Bolsonaro's fault*", *Jacobin*, 25 August 2019.

<sup>6</sup> T. Bellstrom, "Brazil is a bigger threat than either Iran or China", *The New Republic*, 26 July 2019.

<sup>7</sup> S. Walt, "Who Will Invade Brazil to Save the Amazon?", *Foreign Policy*, 5 August 2019. After the controversy sparked by the article's title, it was later changed to "Who Will Save the Amazon (and How)?".

some of Brazil's most important partners, like China and Arab countries.

The government's top military officials have also been disgusted at the ideological paranoia of anti-globalists. Despite initial attempts by Vice-President Mourão to put foreign policy back on track<sup>8</sup>, Bolsonaro's generals have been downgraded to a secondary status after several clashes with the president's closest aides, including Bolsonaro's sons and Presidential Adviser Filipe Martins. Perhaps the most dramatic episode of this estrangement was the firing of (retired) General Santos Cruz, who served as Bolsonaro's secretary of government, over accusations of him being a traitor and a "globalist"<sup>9</sup>.

There seems to be a lot of wishful thinking as to whether Bolsonaro's military and economic aides would be the "adults in the room"<sup>10</sup> in checking the international affairs team, which is sometimes jokingly referred to as the government's "lunatic fringe"<sup>11</sup>. To be sure, Guedes and other pragmatic government officials have been trying to advance an ambitious trade and investment agenda with European, Chinese and Arab officials, while the military have temporarily prevented Brazil from openly supporting regime change in Venezuela and moving the Brazilian embassy to Jerusalem. But the fact is that anti-globalism remains as the key driving force of Brazil's new foreign policy, reflected in Bolsonaro's attitudes toward new and old partners, his growing suspicion of multilateralism and his efforts to change South America's regional order.

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<sup>8</sup> "Não é o caso de comprar brigas que não podemos vencer, diz Hamilton Mourão" , ("It's not a case of buying fights that we can't win, says Hamilton Mourão"), *Folha de S. Paulo*, 23 November 2018.

<sup>9</sup> "Bolsonaro fires key moderate who warned of dangers of 'extremism'", *The Guardian*, 13 June 2019.

<sup>10</sup> O. Stuenkel, "How Bolsonaro's Rivalry with His Vice President Is Shaping Brazilian Politics", *Americas Quarterly*, 18 April 2019.

<sup>11</sup> "Brazilian diplomats 'disgusted' as Bolsonaro pulverizes foreign policy", *The Guardian*, 25 June 2019.



## The Two Pillars of Bolsonaro's Foreign Policy Design

*Deus Vult!* Bringing christianity back in

Bolsonaro's conservative, anti-globalist foreign policy has overlapping religious and ideological elements. Sometimes it is presented as a purely Christian endeavour, a view consistent with his recurring claims that Brazil is a "Christian nation" and with the (loose) alliance of Catholic and Evangelical conservatives that backed Bolsonaro's election bid<sup>12</sup>. The new president's decision to hand the ministry of Human Rights over to an Evangelical pastor, Damares Alves, was a clear sign that the transformation of Brazil's human rights policies would start at home.

Such changes had to be in line with a renewed diplomatic strategy. Ambassador Ernesto Araújo's willingness to be at the forefront of Brazil's "spiritual rebirth"<sup>13</sup>, which involved "talking about God in public" and forging an unlikely pact with the world's major Christian powers – the US and Russia<sup>14</sup> – are said to have been decisive for his appointment as Foreign Minister. In his inaugural speech, Araújo, a practicing Catholic, said that the hatred of God in Western societies, or "theophobia", was destroying mankind<sup>15</sup>.

As a result, two of Bolsonaro's foreign policy goals were to promote Christian values and to protect Christians across the world. These objectives have had a direct impact on Brazil's

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<sup>12</sup> C. Osborn, "Bolsonaro's Christian Coalition Remains Precarious", *Foreign Policy*, 1 January 2019.

<sup>13</sup> E. Araújo, "*Now We Do*", *The New Criterion*, January 2019.

<sup>14</sup> "*Futuro Chanceler Propôs a Bolsonaro Pacto Cristão com EUA e Rússia*" ("Future Chancellor Proposed Bolsonaro Christian Pact with USA and Russia"), *Folha de S. Paulo*, 16 December 2018.

<sup>15</sup> *Discurso do ministro Ernesto Araújo durante cerimônia de Posse no Ministério das Relações Exteriores – Brasília, 2 de janeiro de 2019* (Speech by Minister Ernesto Araújo during the inauguration ceremony at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Brasília, 2 January 2019), Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Speeches.



multilateral policies, especially regarding human rights. Departing from Brazilian traditionally progressive positions, the new president chastised non-governmental organizations and humanitarian activists, and reversed its UN vote on reproductive health rights, gender issues and Israeli human rights violations against Palestinians<sup>16</sup>.

“Our votes at the UN will be in accordance with the Bible”, declared Bolsonaro at a meeting with evangelical leaders, adding that his decisions would be guided by the verse John 8:32: “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”<sup>17</sup>. The same verse was also quoted in Bolsonaro’s UN speech, as it is in most of his public statements.

The Christian turn of Brazil’s foreign policy has also affected its strategic partnerships. Brazil allied with Poland in negotiations that led to the establishment of the “International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief”<sup>18</sup>. A few months later, the Bolsonaro administration wholeheartedly supported the Alliance for Religious Freedom, an initiative spearheaded by President Trump and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. It also promoted the event “Rebuilding Communities: ensuring a future for persecuted Christians” together with Hungary. Once again, Araújo blamed the cultural atmosphere in the West, which “does not care about Christianity”, for the persecutions of Christian populations worldwide<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> J. Chade, “Viés ideológico transforma votos do Brasil na ONU”, *UOL*, 26 September 2019.

<sup>17</sup> “Bolsonaro diz que Brasil passou a votar na ONU seguindo a Bíblia”, *O Globo*, 11 April 2019.

<sup>18</sup> J. Chade, “Governo Bolsonaro denuncia na ONU perseguição contra cristãos” (“Bolsonaro government denounces persecution against Christians at UN”), *UOL*, 7 September 2019.

<sup>19</sup> *Palavras do Ministro Ernesto Araújo no evento “Rebuilding Communities: Ensuring a Future for Persecuted Christians” – Nova York, 27 de setembro de 2019* (Remarks by Minister Ernesto Araújo at the event “Rebuilding Communities: Ensuring a Future for Persecuted Christians” - New York, 27 September 2019), Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Speeches.

Finally, religious beliefs might partly explain Brazil's immediate recognition of Senator Jeanine Añez as the interim President of Bolivia after Evo Morales fled the country under pressure from the armed forces. Amid popular turmoil over allegations of electoral fraud, Añez took office brandishing a giant leather-bound Bible and announcing that "the Bible has returned to the presidential palace", in clear defiance of Morales's attempts to do away with the Christian foundations of Bolivia.

Añez was backed by charismatic far-right politician and civic leader of the wealthy Santa Cruz province, Luis Fernando Camacho. With constant mentions of "the power of God", he rose to prominence as "the Bolivian Bolsonaro" and was one of the key figures behind Morales's ousting<sup>20</sup>. A few months before the controversial Bolivian elections, the regional Catholic activist held a meeting with Brazilian anti-globalists Araújo and Martins, and a leaked audio of Camacho suggested that he might have received instructions from Brazil on how to organise the opposition against Morales<sup>21</sup>.

Conservatives of the world, unite!

Most of the time, however, Bolsonaro's foreign policy displays an ultraconservative ideology that goes well beyond defending the Christian faith. Perhaps the most visible feature of Bolsonaro's international strategy is teaming up with other conservative leaders around the world. During the presidential campaign, Bolsonaro clearly advocated stronger ties with the United States and Israel, primarily for electoral reasons. After all, he wanted to associate his own image to Donald Trump's, as the nation-loving underdog who ultimately spoke on behalf of the silent majority, and the relationship with Israel seemed critical for Bolsonaro to charm Evangelical voters.

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<sup>20</sup> "How Bolivia's Evo Morales Was Brought Down With the Help of an Obscure Conservative With a Bible", *Time*, 15 November 2019.

<sup>21</sup> "Opositor boliviano esteve no Itamaraty e no Planalto" ("Bolivian opponent was at Itamaraty and Planalto"), *Valor Econômico*, 12 November 2019.

As Bolsonaro got elected and formed his foreign policy cabinet, however, it became clear that relations with Washington and Tel Aviv were part of a more sophisticated design, which involved the establishment of a conservative front with other far-right leaders such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Poland's Andrzej Duda and Italy's Matteo Salvini.

If Bolsonaro's guru Olavo de Carvalho was the mastermind of the Brazilian anti-globalist thinking, it was former Trump adviser and far-right ideologue Steve Bannon who turned it into a full-fledged international strategy. Their fingerprints are all over Bolsonaro's international alliances, whose main goal is to wage a permanent war against globalist and socialist forces across the planet<sup>22</sup>.

The best antidote to globalism, so the theory goes, is nationalism. Therefore, another objective of Bolsonaro's international plan is to strengthen the role of nations as opposed to supranational values and institutions. Araújo and other foreign policy makers never hid their fascination for the ultranationalist governments of Israel, Hungary and Poland. "We admire those who fight for their country and those who love themselves as a people [...]. The problem of the world is not xenophobia, but oikophobia – to hate one's own home", philosophised the Foreign Minister as he took office<sup>23</sup>.

Bolsonaro's Brazil went as far as to propose, again together with Orbán's Hungary, that the national identity be considered a fundamental human right. "Global or transnational issues cannot serve as pretext to impose policies detrimental to national institutions or that violate national identity", both countries stated in a joint communiqué<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> G.R. Tsavkko, "*Bolsonaro and Brazil court the Global Far-Right*", *NACLA*, 21 August 2019.

<sup>23</sup> "Discurso do ministro Ernesto Araújo durante cerimônia de Posse no Ministério das Relações Exteriores" "Speech by Minister Ernesto Araújo during inauguration ceremony at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 January 2019.

<sup>24</sup> "*Comunicado Conjunto Brasil-Hungria – Visita Oficial do Ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros e Comércio Exterior da Hungria, Péter Szijjártó – Brasília, 8 de outubro de 2019*", ("Brazil-Hungary Joint Communiqué - Official Visit of the Hungarian

Religious and nationalist worldviews explain Brazil's unprecedented contempt for multilateralism. The basic claim is that most policies set forth by multilateral institutions are formulated and implemented by a globalist bureaucracy that utterly disregards national interests, values (including religious ones) and particularities. UN-led agendas of multiculturalism and migration would permanently endanger these values.

Bolsonaro's negative attitude towards international organizations was already clear in the presidential race, when he launched one of his most remarkable anti-UN rants: "If I am elected president, I'll leave the UN, which is a useless institution. It is a gathering of communists". The then candidate was furious at a UN Human Rights Committee decision requesting that Brazil take all necessary measures to ensure that his arch-rival Lula could fully exert his political rights – and therefore run for president from prison.

As the campaign progressed and his anti-globalist rhetoric became more consistent, Bolsonaro specified that he would not pull out from the UN, only from its Human Rights Committee, as well as from some international treaties supposedly damaging to Brazilian sovereignty, such as the Paris Agreement and the UN Global Compact for Migration. While pressure from economic groups ensured that Bolsonaro would adhere to the climate deal, he withdrew from the migration pact – which had been signed by the previous administration just a few weeks earlier – as his first foreign policy decision. By so doing, Brazil joined a group of five conservative countries that had rejected the pact from the outset – the US, Israel, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.

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Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Péter Szijjártó - Brasília, 8 October 2019"), Nota 255, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## **Bolsonaro's New Global Friends (and Some Accidental "Frenemies")**

A blessed friendship with Israel

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was the first nationalist leader Bolsonaro tried to court. As presidential elections approached, Israel became Bolsonaro's strongest link with Evangelical voters, who generally consider support for the Jewish state as part of the Biblical prophecy of the second coming of Christ. Trump's decision to transfer the US embassy to Jerusalem, in December 2017, gave Bolsonaro a tangible foreign policy platform to campaign in Evangelical churches across the country<sup>25</sup>.

Not only did Bolsonaro's vow to move the Brazilian embassy to Jerusalem resonate strongly with his Evangelical base, but it also provided Netanyahu with a potential diplomatic breakthrough. Almost a year after Trump's announcement, only Guatemala and Paraguay had followed his lead, while other allies like Hungary, Australia and the Czech Republic remained reluctant. Brazil's recognition of Israeli claims over the Holy City could be a game changer for the Prime Minister as he ran for re-election<sup>26</sup>.

In a clear sign of goodwill, Netanyahu was one of the few foreign leaders to attend the Brazilian president's inauguration, together with Viktor Orbán. The Israeli premier also rushed to send humanitarian aid to the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais following the Brumadinho dam disaster in late January 2019.

But the pinnacle of this blossoming relationship was Bolsonaro's trip to Jerusalem, just one week before Israel's general elections. Both sides were enthusiastic about it. By

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<sup>25</sup> G. Casarões, "Eleições, política externa e os desafios do novo governo" ("Elections, foreign policy and the challenges of the new government"), *Pensamento Propio*, vol. 24, 2019, pp. 49-50.

<sup>26</sup> Y. Trofimov, "Global Positioning Helps Israel's Netanyahu in Election and Beyond", *Focus on Israel*, vol. 19, no. 16, 2019.

choosing Israel for one of his first international presidential trips, the new Brazilian President, whose approval ratings at home were falling, hoped to convey the image of a responsible statesman with a robust foreign policy agenda. Netanyahu, on his part, thought that the Brazilian embassy transfer would be the trump card to secure his stay in power. Bolsonaro even became the first foreign leader to be accompanied by the Israeli Prime Minister on a visit to Jerusalem's Western Wall<sup>27</sup>.

However, thanks to pressure from the agribusiness and military sectors, which were dismayed at Arab and Islamic threats to boycott Brazilian halal products, Bolsonaro fell short of announcing the embassy move. Instead, he promised to open a trade and investment office in Jerusalem, along the lines of other conservative governments.

While the Brazilian president's decision frustrated Netanyahu, who since then has experienced a long and turbulent period of political indecisiveness, both countries have decided to maintain good relations. At the launching ceremony of Brazil's trade and investment office in Jerusalem, in mid-December 2019, Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro cited a Biblical verse to reiterate his government's pledge to relocate the embassy, "because we do believe that whoever blesses Israel will be blessed, and whoever curses Israel will be cursed"<sup>28</sup>.

"The United States and Brazil above all"

No nationalist leader fascinated the Bolsonaro administration more than Donald Trump. Bolsonaro and his closest aides have always looked up to the US President as the man who challenged the political establishment on his path to the presidency. As a presidential hopeful, Bolsonaro enjoyed promoting himself as the "Tropical Trump" and mimicked Trump's electoral tactics, rhetoric and mannerisms<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> "Brazil's Bolsonaro Visits Western Wall with Netanyahu", *Haaretz*, 1 April 2019.

<sup>28</sup> "Brazil opens trade office in Jerusalem, hailed as harbinger of embassy move", *The Times of Israel*, 15 December 2019.

<sup>29</sup> "For Trump, Brazil's President is Like Looking in the Mirror", *The New York Times*,

Foreign Minister Araújo went as far as to hail him as the saviour of Western civilisation. In a controversial article published in late 2017, Araújo, then an unknown diplomat, claimed that Trump's vision of a "world of sovereign and independent nations" was the key to saving the West from its moral decline and to restoring the West's faith in God, the family and the nation<sup>30</sup>.

It came as no surprise that relations with Trump became the cornerstone of Bolsonaro's foreign policy. As soon as Bolsonaro won the elections, he rushed to announce that his first international presidential trip would be to the US<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, the new president's much-acclaimed trip to Washington, which took place in mid-March 2019, had a deep symbolic function, as Bolsonaro hoped to showcase – primarily to his own political base – the alignment between the two far-right leaders.

Yet, the extreme optimism with which the new Brazilian government sought to establish a special relationship with Washington was in stark contrast with the pragmatism of President Trump, to whom Brazil was not exactly a priority. Knowing that Bolsonaro would go great lengths to nurture this friendship, the US President successfully brokered the use of the Alcantara rocket launch base, over which negotiations had been stalled for almost two decades, and swayed Brazil into forgoing its special status at the World Trade Organization. In exchange, Trump promised to support Brazil's bid to join the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and to reopen US markets to Brazilian beef<sup>32</sup>.

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19 March 2019.

<sup>30</sup> E. Araújo, "Trump e o Ocidente", *Cadernos de Política Exterior*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2017. A fully translated version to English is available at <https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2019/01/07/brazils-new-foreign-minister-gives-profound-philosophical-base-to-trumpian-populism/>

<sup>31</sup> In fact, Bolsonaro's first trip abroad as President was to Davos, Switzerland, where he attended the annual World Economic Forum meeting.

<sup>32</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Statement from President Donald J. Trump and President Jair Bolsonaro", 19 March 2019.



Besides the bilateral give-and-take, the US saw Brazil as an important pawn in the regional geopolitical chessboard. This explains Trump's decision to grant Brazil the status of a major non-NATO ally. Despite this being a primarily symbolic move, it seemed sufficient to ensure Bolsonaro's long-term loyalty. At the end of the state visit, then National Security Advisor John Bolton tweeted: "We're proud to make Brazil a Major Non-NATO Ally, and look forward to working with them on Venezuela, Iran, and China. A great meeting with a strong new strategic partner!"<sup>33</sup>.

Bolton's tweet was revealing of what the Trump administration wanted from Brazil: an ally to overthrow the Maduro regime in Venezuela, to bring to an end Iran's activity in the region (especially through Hezbollah, which is considered an Iranian proxy) and to curb China's growing trade and technology presence in Latin America.

Bolsonaro diligently adhered to US policies towards Venezuela and Iran. As for the former, during his trip to Washington, the Brazilian President seconded Trump in asserting that "all options were on the table" for addressing the Venezuelan crisis. While Brazil's military and diplomatic establishment rejected the use of force against Nicolás Maduro, Bolsonaro, his son and Congressman Eduardo<sup>34</sup> and some close aides often flirted with the possibility.

Since Bolsonaro did not consider Iran a strategic priority, he thoroughly supported US policies to curb the Islamic Republic's actions. It could even be useful for strengthening ties with Israel while at the same time pleasing Iran's Arab rivals in the Gulf. So, in early February 2019, Foreign Minister Araújo attended the US-led Middle East peace conference in Warsaw, which in practice was a controversial gathering of Trump's allies to exert

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<sup>33</sup> John Bolton on Twitter, 19 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/ambjohnbolton/status/1108099037536882688>.

<sup>34</sup> "Eduardo Bolsonaro fala sobre força militar na Venezuela e causa polêmica" ("Eduardo Bolsonaro talks about military force in Venezuela and causes controversy"), *Jornal Nacional*, 22 March 2019.

diplomatic pressure to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions. Brazil was so eager to jump on the US bandwagon that it offered to host the 2020 "anti-Iran" conference<sup>35</sup>.

On top of this, Eduardo Bolsonaro, who chairs the House Committee on Foreign Relations, suggested that Brazil should start considering Hezbollah, a close Iran ally, as a terrorist organization. Earlier in 2019, under Washington's influence, both Argentina and Paraguay had done the same<sup>36</sup>. The suggestion caused dismay among Bolsonaro's military and diplomatic aides, who believed confronting Iran could make Brazil a target of international terrorism.

### The best friend Chinese money could buy

China, in turn, was a much more delicate issue for Bolsonaro. Not only had China been Brazil's largest trading partner for a decade, with commerce reaching US\$100 billion annually, it was also responsible for Brazil's massive trade surpluses. Brazilian diplomats, military officials and farmers did not hide their anxiety when Bolsonaro, who was already leading the polls in the 2018 presidential race, made repeated attacks on China for trying to "buy Brazil".

Earlier that year, a parliamentary trip to Taiwan had infuriated the Chinese government, which claimed Bolsonaro and his fellow lawmakers had challenged China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Even though the Xi administration acted very carefully once Bolsonaro got elected, the state-owned newspaper *China Daily* published some editorials painting a bleak picture of the future of Brazil-China relations if the new Brazilian President kept borrowing from Trump's playbook<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> "Brasil sediará evento do governo Trump sobre paz no Oriente Médio" ("Brazil to host Trump administration event on Middle East peace"), *Gazeta do Povo*, 13 September 2019.

<sup>36</sup> "Paraguay recognizes Hamas, Hezbollah as terror groups, drawing Israeli praise", *The Times of Israel*, 20 August 2019.

<sup>37</sup> "China part of the solutions not part of Brazil's problems", *China Daily*, 2 January 2019.

Caught in the tug of war between his foreign policy and economic teams, Bolsonaro remained largely silent about China for his first months in office. But he did not seem to censure his fellow anti-globalist advisers, who kept denouncing the “Chinese threat”. Foreign Minister Araújo for one, in a keynote speech to Brazilian diplomats, declared that Brazil would not “sell its soul” to maintain soybean and iron ore exports, and suggested that the long stagnation of the Brazilian economy was somehow related to the trade partnership with China<sup>38</sup>.

Conversely, other government officials have struggled to keep a direct line open with the Chinese government. With an eye on shoring up exports to China and other Asian markets, Agriculture Minister Tereza Cristina went twice to Beijing in a matter of months. Vice-President Hamilton Mourão also visited the Chinese capital, with a promise of attracting more investments to Brazil’s technology, communications and infrastructure sectors<sup>39</sup>.

Such overtures toward China were particularly meaningful as they attempted to reposition Brazil amid growing tensions over the trade war between Washington and Beijing. Since Bolsonaro could well tip the balance in the race for the 5G rollout in Latin America, China began courting the Brazilian president<sup>40</sup>. As fires raged in the Amazon and European leaders started to criticise Bolsonaro over his commitment to the environment, the Chinese ambassador to Brazil went to his defence claiming that the Amazon crisis was “a bit fabricated”<sup>41</sup>.

A month later, Bolsonaro went on an official tour of Asia, and the meeting with President Xi was the highlight of the trip.

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<sup>38</sup> “A novos diplomatas, Araújo diz que país não venderá alma para exportar minério de ferro e soja” (“To new diplomats, Araújo says that the country will not sell souls to export iron and soybeans”), *Folha de S. Paulo*, 11 March 2019.

<sup>39</sup> O. Stuenkel, “Can VP Mourão Fix Brazil-China Ties?”, *Americas Quarterly*, 21 May 2019.

<sup>40</sup> A. García-Herrero, *Bolsonaro’s Pilgrimage to Beijing*, Bruegel, 29 October 2019.

<sup>41</sup> “China Keeps Quiet About the Amazon Crisis Despite Its Leverage Over Brazil”, *The News Lens*, 10 November 2019.

In a departure from the Brazilian President's reluctance to build stronger ties with China, Bolsonaro said at a Beijing forum that the two countries "were born to walk together" and that the two governments are "completely aligned in a way that reaches beyond [their] commercial and business relationship"<sup>42</sup>.

### Trapped between Washington and Beijing

Brazil's renewed enthusiasm towards China was in sharp contrast with President Trump's string of broken promises. Two weeks before Bolsonaro's trip to Beijing, in a leaked letter from Mike Pompeo to OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría, the US secretary of state said that Washington only backed the membership bids of Argentina and Romania as part of the group's enlargement efforts<sup>43</sup>.

Although Trump rushed to dismiss the content as "fake news" and to reaffirm his administration's support for Brazil's candidacy, the letter dealt a blow to Bolsonaro's expectations of a special alliance with Washington. In early November 2019, disappointment again ensued as the US refused to lift the veto imposed on Brazilian fresh beef in 2017<sup>44</sup>.

When Xi Jinping went to Brazil for the 11th Brics Summit, it seemed clear that Bolsonaro had abandoned his adamant pro-US narrative. At a private meeting with other BRICS countries, the Brazilian President apologised for criticising China during the presidential race. Bolsonaro also signed numerous agreements with his Chinese counterpart and said that China was "increasingly a part of the future of Brazil"<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> *Bolsonaro Meets China's Xi in Bid to Balance Ties With U.S.*, Bloomberg, 24 October 2019.

<sup>43</sup> *Trump Says He Still Supports Brazil in OECD, Despite Letter*, Bloomberg, 10 October 2019.

<sup>44</sup> "Agriculture Minister Leaves USA Without Definition on Brazil's Meat Exports", *The Rio Times*, 21 November 2019.

<sup>45</sup> "Com afagos mútuos, Bolsonaro e Xi Jinping assinam nove atos" ("With mutual strokes, Bolsonaro and Xi Jinping sign nine acts"), *Correio Braziliense*, 13 November 2019.

A few days after the BRICS Summit, Bolsonaro met with the Brazil head of Huawei, the Chinese tech giant spearheading the development of 5G networks<sup>46</sup>. This was in clear defiance of the position adopted by the US, which had imposed sanctions on Huawei and was still trying to pressure Bolsonaro to ban the company from Brazil's 5G spectrum auction<sup>47</sup>.

Moreover, bowing to China and Russia's position on Venezuela and on the ousting of Evo Morales in Bolivia (which took place as the BRICS heads of state gathered in Brasilia), the Brazilian delegation avoided bringing up the subject during the meetings. As a result, no mention of the turmoil in South America was made in the final declaration<sup>48</sup>.

Trump did not hide his disgust at Brazil's change of heart. On 2 December 2019, in a message on Twitter, he accused Brazil and Argentina of manipulating their currencies and hurting American farmers. In response, the US would impose tariffs on steel and aluminium from both countries, a move that shattered previous agreements with them<sup>49</sup>.

Unwilling to admit that the unconditional alignment with Washington was starting to hurt the Brazilian economy, the Bolsonaro administration dismissed Trump's tweet as electoral hot air. Deep down, they knew that the US President would be increasingly difficult to please as impeachment proceedings advanced and elections approached.

### The European Union: An uneasy globalist friendship

Out of all of Brazil's strategic partnerships, the relationship with the European Union was the one that raised the greatest

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<sup>46</sup> "Depois de afagar China, Bolsonaro recebe Huawei" ("After stroking China, Bolsonaro accepts Huawei"), *Folha de S. Paulo*, 16 November 2019.

<sup>47</sup> O. Stuenkel, "In Spite of Bolsonaro, China Quietly Deepens its Influence in Brazil", *Americas Quarterly*, 12 November 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Ministério das Relações Exteriores, "11th BRICS Summit – Brasília Declaration", 14 November 2019.

<sup>49</sup> "Trump Says U.S. Will Impose Metal Tariffs on Brazil and Argentina", *The New York Times*, 2 December 2019.

doubts. In clear contrast with his fascination for the United States and Israel, and with his antipathy towards China, Bolsonaro had largely kept silent about his views on the EU. “We know nothing about Brazil’s new government”, said Cecilia Malmstrom, the European Commissioner for Trade, a few days after the elections in Brazil.

Fearing that a Bolsonaro administration would step out of Mercosur, European and South American leaders even rushed to broker the inter-bloc agreement – then in its final stage – before the end of the year, but without success<sup>50</sup>.

Meanwhile, the choice of Ernesto Araújo as Foreign Minister sent a gloomy message to Europeans. In the same 2017 article in which he had praised Trump, Araújo criticised the very existence of the EU as an attempt to “sanitise” the continent’s past, and called Europe “just a bureaucratic concept and a culturally empty space governed by abstract values”<sup>51</sup>. Brazil’s growing closeness to conservative leaders who opposed EU policies, such as Hungary’s Orbán and Poland’s Duda, as well as the Bolsonaro administration’s apparent enthusiasm for Brexit, also raised European concerns over the future of the relationship with Brazil.

It soon became clear that Bolsonaro’s anti-globalist foreign policy would strain relations with European leaders. His insistence on abandoning the Paris Agreement, a move that once again seemed to mimic Trump’s playbook, led French President Emmanuel Macron to declare that Brazil could not quit the climate deal if it wanted to go on with the EU-Mercosur talks. It was not personal, since Macron had proposed that France should not sign trade agreements with countries that did not commit to environmental standards well before Bolsonaro got elected.

Still, some members of the new Brazilian administration seemed eager to pick a fight with the French president. In a reference to the outbreak of the *gilets jaunes* protests,

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<sup>50</sup> “União Europeia se nega a ceder para atender Bolsonaro” (“European Union refuses to yield to meet Bolsonaro”), *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 9 November 2018.

<sup>51</sup> E. Araújo (2017), p. 346.

Bolsonaro's international affairs adviser Filipe Martins tweeted: "Before defending the Paris Agreements, how about defending Paris first? Make an agreement with your own people before criticizing the Brazilian government's decisions and interfering disrespectfully with our domestic issues"<sup>52</sup>.

### Enemies over environmental concerns

Since Bolsonaro's inauguration, his attitudes towards the environment have been at the heart of disagreements with European leaders. Although the President eventually decided not to quit the Paris Agreement (the announcement was strategically made on the eve of his trip to the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2019), Brazil's decision to withdraw its offer to preside over the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference with claims of "budget constraints" was seen as troubling news<sup>53</sup>.

Moreover, Brazil's new Environment Minister Ricardo Salles sparked controversy as he suspended all partnerships and agreements with non-governmental organizations and slashed staff and funding from programmes and agencies such as Ibama, Brazil's environmental monitoring and enforcement agency, upon taking office<sup>54</sup>. A few months in, Germany and Norway decided to halt donations worth US\$70 million to the Amazon Fund, a conservation programme they have supported since 2008, over Salles's attempts to change the fund's rules and prevent NGOs from participating.

An infuriated Bolsonaro went public, suggesting that Europe was not in a position to lecture his administration. "Isn't Norway that country that kills whales up there in the north pole?", questioned the Brazilian president. "Take that money and help [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel reforest Germany"<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> F.G. Martins on Twitter, 3 December 2018, <https://twitter.com/filgmartin/status/1069645597316182016>

<sup>53</sup> "Brazil backs out of hosting 2019 UN climate summit", *Climate Change News*, 28 November 2018.

<sup>54</sup> "Brazil environment chief accused of 'war on NGOs' as partnerships paused", *The Guardian*, 17 January 2019.

<sup>55</sup> "Norway halts Amazon fund donation in dispute with Brazil", *The Guardian*,



Tensions between Bolsonaro and his European counterparts mounted as the world turned its eyes to the devastating fires ravaging the Amazon forest, many of them started intentionally in order to clear land for farmers. A few weeks before, Bolsonaro had sacked the head of Brazil's National Institute for Space Research over the publication of a report showing that deforestation was rapidly increasing. He had also cancelled a meeting at short notice with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to get a haircut – which he broadcast live on Facebook. The French Minister had met with some Brazilian NGOs the day before to discuss the Amazon fires.

Macron's response to Bolsonaro's snub came as he prepared to attend the G7 Summit in Biarritz, when he called the fires a "global crisis" that had to be addressed by world leaders. What followed was an embarrassing exchange of personal insults. Bolsonaro accused his French counterpart of having a "colonialist mindset" and told him to stay out of Brazil's domestic affairs. Macron then accused the Brazilian President of lying about his commitment to climate change and threatened to block the EU-Mercosur deal, which had been announced a few weeks earlier. Resorting to well-known tactics of social media populism, Bolsonaro and his close aides began offending Macron and even went as far as to mock the appearance of his wife Brigitte. "I hope that very quickly [Brazilians] will have a president who behaves like one", Macron said at Biarritz<sup>56</sup>.

With the major trade deal on a tightrope, Germany's Angela Merkel tried to appease Brazil. Even before the feud between Bolsonaro and Macron, she had already declared that isolating Brazil would not be the best answer to halt deforestation, while still recognising the "dramatic" nature of the Brazilian environmental situation. At the G7 summit, she offered to mediate further negotiations with the Bolsonaro administration over the Amazon crisis.

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16 August 2019.

<sup>56</sup> "Disputes Over Amazon Gets Personal for Bolsonaro and Macron", *The New York Times*, 26 August 2019.

Merkel's conciliatory gesture did not prevent Bolsonaro from once again attacking Europeans, this time at the UN General Assembly. In his speech, the Brazilian President compared Brazil's use of land for agriculture with France's and Germany's and dismissed criticisms over his Amazon policy as "colonialism". "We [...] condemn the attempts at instrumentalizing the environmental matter or indigenous policies toward external political and economic interests, especially those disguised as good intentions", the Brazilian President said<sup>57</sup>.

### **Brazil's Regional Puzzle: Dealing with "Socialist" Enemies**

Jair Bolsonaro's regional policies are primarily driven by anti-communism, which translates into breaking with everything associated with former President Lula da Silva and his Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT). In his campaign platform, Bolsonaro pledged to "redirect Brazil's axis of partnerships" in Latin America, placing the emphasis on "bilateral relations and agreements". First of all, it meant that Brazil would move away from former allies like Argentina, Bolivia and especially Cuba and Venezuela, while moving closer to the conservative, pro-US governments of Chile and Colombia.

On a broader regional level, Bolsonaro was willing to do away with the integration mechanisms that had become associated with the PT's foreign policy, notably the Union of South American Nations (União das Nações Sul-Americanas or Unasur), a political bloc launched by Lula and Chávez in 2008.

Bolsonaro and his aides viewed Unasur as nothing but a façade to advance Venezuela's Bolivarian interests in South America, backed by Havana's socialist regime. In April 2018, in response to the bloc's inability to address the escalating political

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<sup>57</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Speech by Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro at the opening of the 74th United Nations General Assembly", 24 September 2019.

and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, six countries with centre or right-wing governments – Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru – suspended their participation in Unasur and went on to form the Lima Group, some months later, to pressure Maduro to step down.

In late March 2019, seven presidents, including Bolsonaro, met in Chile's capital Santiago to launch the Forum for the Progress of South America (Foro por el Progreso de América del Sur or Prosur) as a substitute for Unasur, based on flexible mechanisms and a lightweight organizational structure<sup>58</sup>.

Under the guise of defending democracy on the continent, Prosur, which came into force six months after the presidential summit, was a means to isolate Maduro and Bolivia's Evo Morales from the new regional architecture, as well as to dismantle the ambitious political integration structures that existed when there was a prevalence of left-wing governments in South America. It seemed clear that the goal of the Prosur founding members, which were working closely with the United States and the Organization of American States (OAS), was to exert further diplomatic pressure on the Maduro regime.

### Venezuela, Cuba and the São Paulo Forum: Bolsonaro's perfect external enemy

Bolsonaro nonetheless decided to take the relationship with Maduro to a new level of hostility. Soon after getting elected, Bolsonaro broke with Brazil's diplomatic tradition and refused to invite two countries alone to his inauguration: Cuba and Venezuela. Moreover, among his first foreign policy actions were recognising Guaidó and providing humanitarian aid to Venezuelans on the border, not to mention the staunch support for Trump's aggressive rhetoric toward the Maduro regime.

This new approach to Venezuela and Cuba was based on what Bolsonaro's government saw as a quasi-conspiratorial plot

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<sup>58</sup> "South America Attempts to Unite, Again - This Time Led by a Resurgent Right", *World Politics Review*, 18 April 2019.

by the São Paulo Forum, or Foro de São Paulo, a conference of Latin American leftist parties and movements. The Forum was established in 1990 at the initiative of Lula and Fidel Castro as a platform to devise collective strategies for the left in Latin America, and came as a response to the end of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberal presidents across the region.

With the triumph of left-wing presidents in the 2000s, some far-right commentators and politicians began seeing the Foro as an all-powerful institution with hegemonic intentions. Unsurprisingly, Olavo de Carvalho was among the first to denounce it as “the greatest criminal plot of all time” as early as 2001. Ever since then, he has almost single-handedly warned of the alleged dangers posed by the “narco-communist” collusion between Lula da Silva, Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro to Latin American politics<sup>59</sup>.

The permanent association between Venezuela, Cuba and the Foro has served Bolsonaro in two ways. Firstly, by claiming that it was the Foro that guaranteed Maduro’s survival, he took the weight off of China and Russia’s shoulders. That was a strategic move, since admitting that Chinese and Russian geopolitical and economic interests in Venezuela were largely responsible for Maduro’s permanence in power could further damage Brazil’s relationship with two major BRICS countries.

Secondly, and most importantly, by constructing the image of an omnipotent entity, the new President found his perfect external enemy. The spectre of Foro’s socialism was totally identified with Nicolás Maduro, the fiery strongman who sat right across the border, and with the Cuban regime. Maduro’s frequent collusion with Lula’s PT also gave Bolsonaro an excuse to threaten his political adversaries at home.

As a result, since the new Brazilian President came to power, he and his foreign policy team have blamed Maduro and the Foro for spilling oil along Brazil’s north-eastern coastline<sup>60</sup>; for popular

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<sup>59</sup> F. Moura Brasil, “Conheça o Foro de São Paulo, o maior inimigo do Brasil” (“The São Paulo Forum, Brazil’s biggest enemy”), *Véja*, 24 March 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Jair Bolsonaro on Twitter, 26 October 2019, <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1188120331350937600>

demonstrations and riots that caused turmoil and violence in Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador<sup>61</sup>; for supporting armed guerrillas at the Colombian border<sup>62</sup>; for paving the way for the return of Cristina Kirchner in Argentina; and for radicalising politics in Brazil after Lula was released from prison in early November 2019.

These accusations have been made primarily on social media, mostly without backing evidence, and rapidly formed a narrative that spread among Bolsonaro's supporters<sup>63</sup>. Some have even made it into official documents issued by Itamaraty and, more recently, by the Lima Group<sup>64</sup> and the OAS<sup>65</sup>. They also appeared in Bolsonaro's first address to the UN General Assembly, roughly 20 percent of which was spent attacking the PT, Venezuela, Cuba and the São Paulo Forum<sup>66</sup>.

### A rough start with Argentina

Although it has been Brazil's most important partner for decades, Argentina did not rank as a foreign policy priority for Bolsonaro. On the night of Bolsonaro's victory, his soon-to-be Finance Minister Paulo Guedes gave an interview in which he bluntly stated to an Argentinian journalist that neither Argentina nor Mercosur would be priorities for the new government, as Brazil "would not be a prisoner of ideological [Bolivarian] relations"<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> "Foro de São Paulo tenta desestabilizar Equador, diz Ernesto" ("São Paulo Forum tries to destabilize Ecuador, says Ernesto"), *Folha de S. Paulo*, 12 October 2019.

<sup>62</sup> "O Foro de São Paulo tem relação com os recentes protestos na América do Sul?" ("Is the São Paulo Forum related to the recent protests in South America?"), *Gazeta do Povo*, 23 October 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Ernesto Araújo on Twitter, 7 November 2019, <https://twitter.com/ernestofaraju/status/1192538229024669696>

<sup>64</sup> "Declaração da XV Reunião de Ministros de Relações Exteriores do Grupo de Lima [Espanhol]" ("Declaration of the XV Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Lima Group"), Nota 191, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 23 July 2019.

<sup>65</sup> "OAS Blames Chile Protests on Maduro and Cuba", *Chile Today*, 27 October 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Speech by Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro at the opening of the 74th United Nations General Assembly".

<sup>67</sup> "Future economy minister says Mercosur not a priority for Bolsonaro's Brazil",

Bilateral ties, therefore, seemed to get off to a bad start. Breaking long-standing traditions between the two countries, Macri did not attend Bolsonaro's inauguration, and the new Brazilian President chose Chile for his first presidential trip in the region<sup>68</sup>. When Macri paid a visit to Brazil in January 2019, the press even called it a "reset" after an awkward beginning<sup>69</sup>.

Bolsonaro's animosity toward Argentina and Mercosur was short-lived – and rather puerile. One of the administration's promises in its first 100 days was to remove the Mercosur emblem from the cover of the Brazilian passport and replace it with the seal of the republic, as part of the Foreign Ministry's anti-globalist rhetoric. However, after a few months of neglect, the Bolsonaro administration realised that the South American bloc could be the source of tangible foreign policy advantages, as in the case of the EU-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement.

Things only seemed to get back on track when Bolsonaro went to Buenos Aires in early June 2019, at a time when Brazil and Argentina shared a much more complex set of interests, from energy cooperation to the Venezuelan crisis, but with a focus on economic issues. Both presidents were eager to advance a liberal Mercosur, acting closely with the Pacific Alliance, and supported each other's bids to join the OECD<sup>70</sup>.

With plummeting approval ratings at home, both Macri and Bolsonaro attempted to strengthen bilateral ties in search of a positive agenda, particularly for businesses. That was even more urgent to the Argentinian president, who was running for re-election against a dire economic backdrop, marked by soaring

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*Mercopress*, 30 October 2018.

<sup>68</sup> "Bolsonaro and Macri Look for Better Ties to Distract From Their Domestic Troubles", *World Politics Review*, 28 June 2019.

<sup>69</sup> *All Smiles in Brasilia as Macri and Bolsonaro Reset Relationship*, Bloomberg, 16 January 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Declaração Conjunta Presidencial por ocasião da visita de Estado do Presidente Jair Bolsonaro a Buenos Aires" ("Presidential Joint Declaration on the occasion of the State Visit of President Jair Bolsonaro to Buenos Aires"), 6 June 2019.

inflation and fears of a new default<sup>71</sup>. Macri, however, worked tirelessly to get the EU-Mercosur agreement through, which was announced with pomp and circumstance later that month.

But the foreign policy victory did not prevent Macri's defeat by the left-wing Alberto Fernández/Cristina Fernández de Kirchner ticket in the August 2019 primary elections. Fearing that the leftist comeback in Argentina could energise other left-wing leaders across the continent, including Lula (whose political fate was still subject to a Supreme Court ruling), the Bolsonaro administration began actively campaigning against Fernández. The day after Macri's defeat in the primaries, Bolsonaro warned supporters in Brazil's southernmost state, which borders Argentina: "if this leftist scum returns to Argentina, we might have a refugee crisis here, as we had [with Venezuelans] in the state of Roraima"<sup>72</sup>.

In the same week, Finance Minister Guedes threatened to leave Mercosur if Kirchnerism triumphed on the other side of the border. Finally, in an awkward metaphor, Foreign Minister Araújo compared Fernández to a Russian nesting doll: "you open it and out pops Cristina Fernandez, again you open it and out pops Lula, and again, Hugo Chavez"<sup>73</sup>.

If interfering with elections was absolutely unusual for a historically neutral Brazil, so was challenging electoral results in neighbouring countries. Enraged at a picture of Fernández celebrating his victory with an "L" hand sign that stood for "free Lula", Bolsonaro said he was "concerned and afraid" of Argentina's new president. Adding insult to injury, Araújo tweeted that "evil forces" were celebrating the Argentinian election results, whereas

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<sup>71</sup> [Fears of Argentina Default Loom Large as Traders Dump Everything](#), Bloomberg, 12 August 2019.

<sup>72</sup> ["Bolsonaro diz que volta da 'esquerdalha' na Argentina pode gerar crise de refugiados no Rio Grande do Sul"](#) ("Bolsonaro says return to the 'left' in Argentina may generate refugee crisis in Rio Grande do Sul") *Estado de Minas*, 12 August 2019.

<sup>73</sup> ["Alberto Fernández is like a matryoshka doll, you open it and out pops, Cristina, Lula, Chavez..."](#), *Mercopress*, 20 August 2019.



“the forces of democracy” were mourning for Argentina, for Mercosur and for all of South America<sup>74</sup>.

Following the spat with Argentina's president-elect, Bolsonaro did not want to attend Fernández's inauguration, scheduled for early December 2019, nor was he willing to send a senior government representative. That was just the right opportunity for Rodrigo Maia, the speaker of Brazil's House of Representatives, to fill the political vacuum. Maia, who has been acting as an informal Prime Minister to ease Bolsonaro's strained relationship with Congress, has struggled to contain Bolsonaro's authoritarian leanings and to dispel his foreign policy paranoia.

A few days before Fernández took office, Maia met him and, in a gesture of reassurance, told him that the bilateral relationship would remain a priority for Brazil. This made Bolsonaro backtrack at the eleventh hour and send his Vice-President Mourão to the swearing-in of the new Argentinian president<sup>75</sup>. It came as a relief to lawmakers, businesspeople and diplomats, who feared that Bolsonaro's hostility towards Fernández could thwart future agreements with Brazil's top regional ally.

## **Final Remarks and Policy Recommendations**

One year into the Bolsonaro administration, many of the trends observed during the campaign and the period of cabinet formation have taken a much clearer shape. When it comes to foreign policy, three groups struggled for space: the military, free-market liberals and anti-globalists. While the former quickly lost power as Bolsonaro started to see Vice-President Mourão and other cabinet generals as a threat to his own

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<sup>74</sup> Ernesto Araújo on Twitter, 28 October 2019, <https://twitter.com/ernestofaraujo/status/1188864329141104641>

<sup>75</sup> “Brazil's Bolsonaro Backtracks on Argentine Inauguration”, *The New York Times*, 9 December 2019.

political ambitions<sup>76</sup>, Brazil's international agenda fell into the hands of the powerful conservative ideologues in charge of foreign policy making.

Anti-globalists have been the ones to pick the fights in Bolsonaro's culture wars. So far, they have only made a few (albeit significant) policy concessions to the government's economic team on China, the Arab countries and Argentina, who are among Brazil's largest trading partners. Aside from that, Brazil's entire foreign policy strategy is built upon Christian fundamentalism, nationalism and anti-communism. These values have been laid out in the manifesto of Bolsonaro's newest political party, Alliance for Brazil, and have also inspired many domestic policies pushed forward by the government.

It now seems clear that, in a departure from previous years, Brazil is no longer swinging between the Brics and the OECD. In other words, Bolsonaro's foreign policy does not follow Brazil's decades-old pattern of being closer to the Global South at times and closer to the West at other times, but always keeping a collaborative and pragmatic stance towards global affairs.

Aside from the emerging conservative axis that the Bolsonaro administration has attempted to build, other countries and regions of the world will only matter as long as they can offer any trade or investment benefit. Cooperation in multilateral regimes will also follow the same ideological pattern. Issues that Brazil has traditionally been engaged in, such as climate change, human rights and Security Council reform, have simply been dropped from Bolsonaro's diplomatic concerns.

Brazil's new foreign policy represents a particular challenge to European policymakers. Bolsonaro has demonstrated that he is not afraid to confront his European counterparts, especially when he feels cornered by accusations over his policies on the

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<sup>76</sup> B. Winter, "*It's complicated: inside Bolsonaro's Relationship with Brazil's Military*", *Americas Quarterly*, 17 December 2019.

environment, indigenous peoples and human rights. As the feud with Macron neatly shows, anti-globalists are using a shrewd strategy of bullying world leaders and portraying themselves as the victims to supporters at home. This, incidentally, is one of the sources of Bolsonaro's stable (yet low) popularity.

Yet, the EU-Mercosur trade agreement might still be considered a lifeline to positive relations with Bolsonaro. As Brazil starts to bear a striking resemblance to Orbán's Hungary, key European leaders might use trade as a means to pressure Bolsonaro whenever he seems to be undermining Brazil's democratic institutions and/or cooperation on urgent global issues such as climate change. The natural channel of communication with the Brazilian government is Paulo Guedes and officials in the economic team.

Another means to foster cooperation is through Congress. This is novel to Brazil, as presidents and diplomats have always had the upper hand in foreign policy. However, European policymakers might benefit from the uneasy but intense relationship between Bolsonaro and the Brazilian parliament. Rodrigo Maia, Brazil's unofficial Prime Minister, was successful in convincing the President that he should be more constructive towards Argentina. A few days later, he travelled to Geneva to meet representatives of the World Trade Organization and the UN Human Rights Commission. While it is too early to tell whether this will be an effective approach to relations with Brazil, this is surely a path to explore as Bolsonaro enters the second year of his tenure.