

ARGUMENT

Bolsonaro's Failed Diplomacy Leaves Brazil Isolated as Pandemic Rages

Ideological fixations have been a diplomatic and a public health disaster.

BY **HUSSEIN KALOUT** | JULY 7, 2020, 11:32 AM

The way Brazil's leadership is dealing with the coronavirus pandemic is puzzling. The president and his most loyal followers remain in denial, even as the president himself **may have** fallen victim to the virus, questioning the need for social distancing and stay-at-home policies in the face of what they call "a little flu"—even after more than 65,000 deaths and over 1.6 million infections in Brazil alone. Two ministers of health have already been fired for going against the president.

Disastrous as President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the coronavirus has been, his record in other areas is no brighter. One of the most important structural weaknesses of the

Bolsonaro government undoubtedly lies in its foreign policy, where a once-respected diplomatic corps has been spoiled by the president's ideological fixations.

The fundamental axes on which the decision-making strategy for foreign policy should be organized must always include three central pillars: pragmatism, realism, and the national interest—especially for a country like Brazil. Brazil has a large network of intercontinental diplomatic relationships that have to be meticulously balanced. Brazil of course wants to maintain a good standing with the United States, but its status as a member of the BRICS group alongside Russia, India, China, and South Africa means that it should also carefully navigate its connections with U.S. adversaries such as China and Russia rather than simply antagonizing them. Instead of strengthening these pillars, Brazilian foreign policy is chasing ghosts in Bolsonaro's fight against climate science and imagined threats of cultural Marxism and globalism. This misrepresentation of reality explains the lack of direction and purpose behind the thick fog of old-fashioned and anachronistic anti-communist language. For example, Bolsonaro's foreign-policy stance holds that Chinese communism is an existential threat to Brazil, even though China is the country's largest trade partner, buying nearly 30 percent of all Brazilian exports. High-ranked members of his cabinet have insulted the governments of European powers such as France and Germany, claiming that the Europeans know nothing about climate change.

The lack of strategy and the declining image of Brazil around the

world are undeniable. Brazil has placed itself in a dangerous diplomatic isolation due to Bolsonaro's inability to understand the world realistically and to manage the country's interests pragmatically. Brazil has experienced multiple recent foreign-policy failures in Latin America, such as the unsuccessful attempts to get rid of the Venezuelan autocrat Nicolás Maduro and the sidelining of Brazil's influence in Bolivia with the breakdown of Evo Morales's government. Bolsonaro's administration adopted from the start a hostile diplomatic stance toward the new government of Alberto Fernández in Argentina, Brazil's most important geopolitical partner in South America, for no apparent reason other than a capricious ideological antipathy due to Fernández's left-leaning tendencies.

It took two decades to eliminate mutual distrust in the relationship between Argentina and Brazil. Bolsonaro is throwing it away in months. Over the course of multiple administrations since Brazilian President José Sarney and Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín in the late 1980s, the two countries put an end to the frictions between them. A particularly important turning point came when both countries agreed to put an end to their mutual military nuclear programs in order to deescalate the tension between them. It was one of the most important steps in Brazilian diplomacy since World War II.

As a direct result of this improving relationship, Mercosur, South America's trade bloc, was born. The relations between Brasília and Buenos Aires since then have followed a path of constant

improvement in institutional cooperation as well as a number of other important areas. Both countries were able to overcome past rivalry and build a true strategic partnership, turning the page of the pervasive historic mistrust and moving toward perennial cooperation. Reducing divergence and overcoming disagreements has been a winning strategy for leaders of both countries and has served to advance their mutual interests.

In the realm of regional cooperation, Brazil under Bolsonaro gave up leadership and has now been sidelined by others such as Chile and Colombia. Even right-wing governments are now keeping a safe distance from Brazil's diplomatic disruptions. Most Latin American states perceive Bolsonaro's government as an unreliable actor in the region. Brazil has become toxic—and the pandemic failure isn't helping. Paraguay and Uruguay have both closed their borders with Brazil in order to restrain the spread of the coronavirus into their territory.

Brazil's playing field has become tiny. In South America, Brazil is adrift. Argentina has already detached itself from negotiations within Mercosur, which had grown to become the region's preeminent customs union and trade bloc—completely ignoring Brasília. Brazil burned bridges with European powers by antagonizing the governments of France and Germany with personal attacks and reckless quarrelling, limiting its ability to negotiate. To irritate China, Brazil began a reckless partnership with Narendra Modi's India, aligned itself with the United States on a vast array of issues, and embarked on anti-Chinese diatribes, even though the country's commercial dependence on

China is practically absolute.

Brazil has renounced its autonomy when it comes to foreign policy, narrowing the number of ways that it could interpret its national interest. The strategic result is the inclusion of Brazil as an obedient follower in a new, empowered Western world led by U.S. President Donald Trump. In order to ensure that Bolsonaro's new foreign policy could gain approval from countries such as the United States, an automatic alignment with a sense of pro-Western cultural superiority and relentless praise of Trump became central tenets of the president's strategy. It is an alignment more serious than even the preferential relationship established under the governments of Eurico Gaspar Dutra (1946-1951) and Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco (1964-1967).

The historical circumstances of the Cold War had an immense effect on the strategic choices of Dutra and Castelo Branco. But the subservient role that Brazil now adopts in relation to Trump's United States does not stem from these same factors.

Concessions made to Washington in the past were strategically calculated and did not violate the national interest nor the constitution—unlike Bolsonaro's threats that he could unilaterally endorse a war against Venezuela if he so desired or his unasked-for invitation for the United States to establish a military base on Brazilian territory. Nor did the decision-making of the past privilege one country above all others. The Brazilian Constitution is clear: Brazil must respect the sovereignty of other countries, avoid interference in the internal affairs of others, and

pursue the peaceful resolution of crises in all possible cases.

In ordinary times, extreme right-wing populism could become outlandish in its rhetoric, but its policies would be tolerated to a certain extent in the name of democratic legitimacy. But these are no ordinary times. Under a state of calamity and in the midst of a public health emergency, democratic institutions and the system of checks and balances have become even more important as a guarantee against populist irrationality. If populism is allowed to go unchecked, the whole country will certainly suffer the consequences. So far, these checks and balances have worked relatively well to moderate economic and health policies, but there is still work to be done on the international front.

Congressional oversight and judicial control of constitutionality are also badly needed to avoid a completely ideologically driven Brazilian foreign policy that will cause even more damage to the country's international standing. Brazil has nothing to gain from being Trump's lapdog, harassing the U.S. Democratic Party and its presidential nominee or antagonizing China just to show that it is part of a free world led by the United States. I'll state a truism, but one highly appropriate in these circumstances: Brazil needs to pursue its own national interest abroad in keeping with certain long-standing traditions. Among them are a commitment to international law, peaceful settlement of disputes, and multilateralism. Anything other than that can only distance the country from its goals, including obtaining secure access to the strategic items needed to tackle the pandemic.

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