

Opinion – Lula’s Foreign Policy

Written by Rafael R. Ioris

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RAFAEL R. IORIS, MAR 3 2024

A lot of saliva and lots of ink has been spent in recent days to criticize the behavior that President Lula da Silva has sustained on the international stage. In effect, even though one of the pillars of democratic rule of law, which is still in force in Brazil only due to Lula’s return to the presidency, is freedom of expression. Much of this criticism is grounded on a mistaken (or politicized) reading of the history of the country’s foreign policy, of what Lula actually did in his first two terms in office in the early 2000s, as well as what Lula is currently pursuing on the international stage.

Brazil has historically supported multilateralism, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the right of self-determination of all peoples. While Lula may have caused some controversy in recent statements, or even on some diplomatic initiatives, none of this contradicts Brazil’s tradition of defending universal principles while also making use of foreign policy to promote the country’s development and positioning.

Even before regaining the presidential seat, Lula was praised for his defense of multilateral and cooperative ways to tackle the climate crisis at 2022’s COP-27 in Egypt. Much in the same way, as his new government took office in January 2023, Lula sought to revive the foreign policy that bore so many fruits during his first time in office. He did this by maintaining an ambitious agenda of international trips, which balanced meetings with traditional partners while expanding on projects linked to the so-called Southern agenda.

His tours began in neighboring Argentina to attend the 7th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. This was followed by a visit to Washington, where he met Biden and jointly made a clear statement in defense of democratic values, which have been under threat in both countries in recent times. A few weeks later, Lula made a visit to China to deepen trade relations, but when there he also tried to promote a peace effort for Ukraine. This initiative did not yield results, something that more reflects the structural difficulties of today’s world rather than a misalignment of Lula’s foreign policy.

Reproducing the great achievements of the so-called proud and active foreign policy of 20 years ago, when Brazil reached an unprecedented level of relevance on the international scene, will be difficult. The world has changed, and Brazil has changed, generally in a negative sense. Liberal democracy faces a crisis as authoritarianism, and even (neo)fascism, present themselves as viable alternatives and political and ideological polarization are on the rise. It is in this rigidly fragmented and increasingly violent world where greater activism from Brazil is needed. Given its historical trajectory, economic weight, and diplomatic tradition, Brazil can serve as an interlocutor between the countries of the Western sphere, Latin America, the Russian-Asian bloc, and the so-called countries of the South.

Lula’s international overtures are only likely to increase as it becomes ever more likely that Trump may return to the presidency in the US – while simultaneously the extreme right advances in Europe and xenophobic authoritarianism deepens in Russia, India, and China.

During his first two terms in office, Lula did not strain relations with traditional partners, such as the USA and Europe. Rather, he sought to expand the range of connections with new countries, particularly those that shared Brazil’s history of colonialism and unfair treatment from established powers. This stance does not contradict what Brazil has sought to do since at least the beginning of the 1960s.

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Under very different types of political regimes, Brazil’s foreign policy has consistently sought to establish new global collaborations with an ever-larger number of nations so that Brazil’s weight within the international realm could be expanded. All of this was done without risking relations with powerful allies. Likewise, Brazil’s international actions recurrently sought to democratize, or at least expand, the spheres of international deliberation so that they could effectively become representative and legitimate multilateral spaces.

Sustaining this course of foreign policy is more challenging in today’s global context. With multiple actors competing for hegemony, a country like Brazil may be able to bargain for even greater gains within the many ongoing disputes. But no success will be achieved if pundits and critics continue to be inspired by dogmatic or ideological positions, refusing to understand the rising international relevance of Brazil and Lula’s unique role in promoting dialogue and inclusion in an ever-more divided world.

About the author:

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