

Trump and Bolsonaro: Much Ado About Nothing?

Written by Rafael R. Ioris

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RAFAEL R. IORIS, APR 18 2019

Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, the presidents of the two largest countries in the Americas, met in Washington in March, arousing high expectations. In Brazil, the event was presented as the clearest indication of the country's main foreign policy realignment aimed at repositioning the nation along clear pro-Western, namely US lines. Once all was done, however, beyond the renewed iteration of the nationalist and conservative rhetoric consistently professed by the region's two most vocal representatives of the right-wing winds blowing over the continent in recent years, there was very little that was actually achieved in what could have been a rather consequential gathering for both countries, the American hemisphere, and the world as a whole.

Trump has never really shown any real interest in Latin America. In effect, he has consistently portrayed the region in reductionist and derogatory tones – such as the misleading narrative about the growing hordes of illegal immigrants moving across the US southern border. These are skillfully deployed to mobilize his political base in specific electoral moments, such as during the most recent US mid-term elections. It was thus not entirely clear what the American president expected to achieve from a meeting with his recently-elected South American counterpart. What was more certain was that Trump seemed genuinely excited to potentially close ranks with someone he saw as a close ally in a region where US actions, especially overt political, economic and above all militaristic encroachments, have historically been received with a large degree of local skepticism and often concerted resistance.

Trump's enthusiasm for his Brazilian counterpart was shown right after Brazil's presidential election last October, when Trump cherished the fact his counterpart was being called the 'Trump of the Tropics,' stating that he looked forward to working closely with someone he considered well attuned to the goal of making their respective countries *great again*. But despite what some have initially referred to as a potential "bromance", beyond the symbolism of stated ideological alignments, Bolsonaro's visit to DC was largely defined by poor diplomatic achievements, especially for Brazil. Some of this was to be expected considering Trump's views on trade. In fact, whereas Trump has consistently repudiated free trade agreements and pushed for strong protectionist positions to purportedly defend the US economy, Bolsonaro was elected on the basis of a strongly reenergized neoliberal platform of free trade and open borders for business that caused so much social pain in Latin America in the 1990s. Much in the same way, in key economic sectors of the US and especially of the Brazilian economy, such as in exports of commodities and steel going primarily to the Chinese market, Brazil and US are staunch competitors. In fact, both countries have sued each other multiple times in global judicial and trade fora, such as the WTO, over alleged trade protections put in place by both countries.

Aware of some of these challenges, the Brazilian delegation to the DC meetings centered their agenda on supplementary lines of collaboration. In effect, Brazil's current administration was looking to increase its military capabilities by means of a closer alignment with the US military and counted on American support for the country's intention of joining the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In return for promised support on both fronts, Brazil delivered with concrete concessions. Namely, the Brazilian administration waived its visa requirement for American tourists, slashed tariffs for US wheat imports – in a move that is likely to upset Argentina, Brazil's main economic ally in South America and main provider of wheat to the Brazilian market

Brazilian authorities also extended access to its huge off shore oil reserves to US investors, and allowed access to its strategically placed air force base in the northeast of the country to the US, for the purpose of cheaper satellite and

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rocket US launching missions, without asking for any kind of technological transfer in return, a move that may upset more nationalist sectors in the Brazilian military. What is more, confirming the frustrating visit insofar as advancing Brazil's commercial interests, Brazilian diplomats failed to gain any concession on the existing quotas imposed on Brazilian sugar exports to the US market and were not able to convince their American counterparts to overturn an on-going US ban on fresh Brazilian beef – both major demands of the Brazil's economically central and politically powerful farming sector.

These latter points of contention are likely to come back to haunt the Bolsonaro administration, which is really constituted by a strange political alliance hastily coalesced over the past year from free-market neoliberal economic ideologues, powerful economic elites, sectors of the military and old guard cultural and evangelical conservatives. While the first group was ready to support the decision to strengthen ties with the US on economic grounds and the latter was willing to support the same decision on ideological grounds, the more consolidated forces in the military and agribusiness may soon become disillusioned with an automatic alignment done on more symbolic than material bases of interest.

Brazil's deeply ideologically conservative foreign minister, Ernesto Araujo, has repeatedly claimed that aligning closely with the Trump administration was a matter of protecting the Western civilization from attacks of globalist forces. However, the all-powerful economic minister Paulo Guedes, despite being a staunch free-trade ideologue, has stated that Brazil expects true economic commitments from the US; otherwise Brazil would look to alternatives in the global economy, namely China.

Pertaining to the dramatic events currently unfolding in Venezuela, despite Araujo's effusive support for a more confrontational approach defended by Elliot Abrams and John Bolton, it is unlikely that Brazil will embark on a perilous path of military involvement in the continent. To be sure, Araujo's enthusiasm for intervention in Venezuela was quickly curbed by Brazil's vice president General Mourão, the senior member of the administration more closely aligned with the military establishment's traditional and more moderated geopolitical positions, who is quickly becoming more active in taming some of the ideological excesses of Bolsonaro's crusaders.

Bolsonaro's ideological views, political style and path to the presidency of Latin America's largest country seems to reflect many similarities to Trump's trajectory, underlining logic and rhetoric. In theory, this reality could have been conducive to a closer and more productive alignment between the hemisphere's two largest societies. Yet, this was not what was seen in DC last week. Should more consequential outcomes, especially positive ones be actually achieved, the two countries would have to engage in more effective and mutually respectful partnerships beyond the superficial political proximity of their current leaders. In fact, though it would be naïve to expect that a meeting between the two main leaders of the extreme right movement rapidly unfolding over the Americas in the last couple of years could result in actual gains for the majorities of the populations on either side, US and Brazilian societies should nonetheless continue to pursue closer engagement.

It should be remembered that this is not the first time that the two countries believed to be ready to pursue closely aligned paths, only to later discover that true cooperation requires more than rhetorical statements of friendship. This was, in fact, the pattern that defined much of the course of US-Brazil relations for much of the Cold War era. And while there are ways Trump and Bolsonaro can get on the same page, as in their vocalized desire to go after what they claim to be a return of socialist ideals in the region and beyond, the more fundamental question remains unanswered: What would closer relations between these two leaders mean for the people of the US, Brazil and the world? The unfortunate reality is that common people are likely to lose either way.

If Trump and Bolsonaro were to collaborate further, it would likely be on the basis of an authoritarian, environmentally destructive, elitist agenda. In a minimalistic sense then, the much ado about nothing meetings in DC last week may actually be good news for Brazil, the US and region as whole. Conversely though, by not managing to find more common ground, especially in areas that more fully matter to people's lives, such as employment and social inclusion, this leaves the Western Hemisphere with yet another missed opportunity for its two biggest powers to work together for the benefit of all. In the end, one of the main conclusions from this much celebrated gathering among conservatives is to remind policy makers that ideological affinities are not necessarily the most indicative sign of

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effective, and especially constructive, cooperation in international politics.

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