

The Dumb Giant: Brazilian Foreign Policy under Jair Bolsonaro

Written by Fabrício H. Chagas-Bastos and Marcela Franzoni

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FABRÍCIO H. CHAGAS-BASTOS AND MARCELA FRANZONI, OCT 16 2019

After a shy (or disastrous) premiere in the World Economic Forum in Davos earlier this year, Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's new president, finally presented his diplomatic credentials to the world. The speech in the United Nations General Assembly, on the 24th of September, showed how he sees the world: with paranoid Cold War-like lenses, lack of political sophistication, and a blind-folded alignment with Donald Trump's efforts to 'make America great again'. Earlier in September, for almost a week, Brazil stayed in the spotlight due to the fires threatening the Amazon forest, but mostly because of the presidential verbiage against France's Emmanuel Macron and other G7 leaders criticising Brazil's inaction to fight the wildfire. These were only the most recent disharmony episodes of an almost year tenure in office that is reinventing Brazilian foreign policy.

Sharp criticism — coming from politicians, bureaucrats, foreign service officers, scholars, to name a few — has been directed at Bolsonaro's foreign policy. It is described as an attempt to systematically dismantle what Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB); 1995-2002) and Lula da Silva (Workers Party (PT); 2003-2016) achieved over the past two decades: an international profile as a reliable mediator, skilled negotiator, and a potential voice for those in the South.

With less than a full year in office, Brazilian diplomats of different ranks say that these first nine months have caused more damage to Brazil's international image, status, and prestige than any other period in the country's history. By the end of 2018, right after the presidential elections, Spektor (2018) put forward some questions to understand Brazilian foreign policy under the new president: what is the diagnosis Bolsonaro and his entourage make about Brazilian foreign policy? Which are the relevant actors in the president's cabinet? What is the impact of the sharp changes the president wants to imprint on Brazil's international relations during his mandate? We briefly advance in this article what Jair Bolsonaro means to Brazilian foreign policy.

We must warn the readers that because of the nature of the task and the ongoing political developments, the reflections recounted here are limited in scope, while they do follow the recent literature (e.g. Chagas-Bastos, 2019; Barros, 2019; Fausto, 2019; Hunter and Power, 2019; Nobre, 2018; 2019; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2018; Ramos and Gontijo, in press; Singer, 2018; Spektor, 2018). The research uses primary sources found in the media and interviews conducted since October 2018, complemented by some theoretical reflections. It should be read more like a puzzle with missing pieces that history will parsimoniously add.

Brazilian foreign policy under Bolsonaro cannot be explained without examining first the foregrounds of domestic politics —and this is not due to any two-level game sophistication, but precisely the opposite: from the outset it is a mere appendix of domestic political disputes.

2018 Presidential Elections: Critical Juncture and Political Realignment

The Brazilian state had never been structured to be nurtured by society, but rather to exert tutelage over the citizenry (Faoro, 2001). This top-down profile, with very low representation and accountability, led to multiple obscure links between private and state-run businesses (see Lazzarini, 2010), creating an environment in which the act of taking

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from the state —in short, corruption— was a widely accepted and worthwhile practice. Within this environment, the 2018 presidential elections took place and showed how fragile the political system was.

Pundits and analysts have portrayed the presidential race as the most unpredictable since 1989. On the surface, the polls told a relatively clear story of a simple contest between the left and the right. One side righteously defending morality, the other advancing progressive social policies; both portraying their vision as irreconcilable with the other. In fact, the political structure that has dominated the *Nova República*^[1] [New Republic] landscape ended on 28 October 2018 when Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right candidate, was elected president. That put an end to the social-democratic pact established after the military left power.

Bolsonaro was the embodiment of those who viewed the 13 year-long PT government as a travesty of abject corruption and kleptocracy. Some have called him 'the Trump of the Tropics', or a Latin American version of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Although correct in characterising him as a populist politician with an authoritarian flavour, the analyses were biased by Donald Trump's electoral victory.

Contrary to the US president, Bolsonaro does not have the same negotiation skills and insertion in national mainstream politics and business. He is a captain who was forced into retirement from the Army in 1988 after he threatened to bomb army barracks to obtain salary increases and then turned into an unsophisticated and mostly irrelevant federal deputy. In twenty-seven years in Congress, he religiously collected the substantial benefits paid to Brazilian Congressmen in exchange for producing absolutely nothing besides controversial and aggressive rhetoric. Over almost three decades, Bolsonaro presented 150 bills, with thirty-two favouring the military, only one in favour of educational matters, and two others about healthcare-related issues. Only one of these bills eventually passed: PL 2.514/1996, for reducing taxes on industrial goods (see also Marini, 2018).

Since 2013, Brazil's economy has been shrinking, 12.9 million people have become unemployed, and corruption scandals have achieved the banal status of daily news. Those problems, however, are very different from the sentiments of social disquiet and dislocation behind Trump's 'make America great again' motto (see Mutz 2018). Indeed, Trump's logic and its appeal to those in the United States that feel excluded by globalisation cannot be applied to Brazil. Throughout the 2000s Brazil's economy grew as it fed the world's appetite for commodities. Millions were lifted out of poverty and elevated to the amorphous and ill-defined 'new middle class' (Neri, 2011; Pochman, 2012; Souza, 2009; 2010). The last numbers show that Brazilian families indeed impoverished over the past decade.

Strategy and Action: Social Media Tug Of War to Sustain Political Capital

Brazil's far-right overtly used the spread of misinformation and 'fake news' through social media to advance its discourse. For instance, the disgust mobilised and weaponised by Bolsonaro is not limited to the figure of the 'criminal'; it is applied just as vigorously to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, blacks, indigenous people, and feminists. These fake threats to society have nothing to do with crime or corruption but are powerful emotional drivers — as are the memes circulating on Brazilian WhatsApp groups associating the PT involving child abuse, female nudity, and the like.

Social media was a major player in the 2018 elections. Up until then, TV political advertising was the primary means to reach out to Brazil's electorate. Bolsonaro's tight-budgeted campaign committee, however, relied heavily on political microtargeting via social media —and focused especially on professionalising a 'fake news' industry. In a country in which 70% of the population is functionally illiterate, the effect of fake news disseminated via WhatsApp has been perverse. While other candidates were unable to respond to the misinformation campaign launched through WhatsApp, Twitter, or Facebook, Bolsonaro's campaign remained on the offensive, and he never came under pressure to defend his ideas while consolidating his lead in opinion polls. In the end, the assault on Bolsonaro, in September 2018, unwittingly boosted his TV exposure, just as his social media campaign took off.

The alt-right message was multi-pronged, spreading social-status fears among those who felt (or could feel) their living standards dropping: the newly prosperous, the middle-class, and those in the upper classes. Their appeal relies upon the anger and disquiet felt by those who benefited from the economic boom during the 2000s, but who

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have subsequently seen these gains evaporate. A recent survey conducted by Mutz (2018) found that those who changed their minds and voted for Trump were not guided by concerns for their economic status, but instead followed their underlying racist and misogynistic thoughts.

That is precisely the psychological mindset that Bolsonaro and his allies consistently tapped during the electoral campaign — and kept using as a mobilisation strategy during his first year in office. The connection is straightforward: creating an environment of fear and segregation leads to a competition between social and disgust-related threats. In this context, the first-round majority for the conservative candidate was ensured, while other options in the ranking of fears seem to be blurred. Social psychologists have shown over the decades that tension and violence between social groups can enhance the tendency to make judgments based on group stereotypes, promoting nationalistic attachment, and support for nationalistic leaders.

Bolsonaro's whole campaign was, and his administration still has been, built upon exploiting a political behaviour tied into a sense of fear — fear of being shot, of crime, of unemployment — that ends up creating space for the acceptance of authoritarian feelings latent in society. Research shows that, in a social environment in which structural and symbolic violence — among other threats — produce acute social constraints, left-wing political orientations are less likely to take root (Sibley et al., 2012). In the same context, research shows that individuals tend to rationally respond aggressively to threats, which would lead to conservative shifts (Jost et al., 2003; 2009).

The alt-right vote in Brazil can be seen as a muted protest by those who cannot understand the drastic changes in the country over the past two decades, and do not have emotional and cognitive skills to accept that they do not know why their reality has changed. The cognitive dissonance levels between what such voters have in their minds and the real world have become extremely high, and an authoritarian discourse offers security and comfort, providing the illusion of immediate economic rewards, reducing their anxiety. To be noted is that the left has a special degree of guilt in Bolsonaro's quick rise. Its response to the alt-right is reminiscent of the reaction by the Latin American left to Trump. All doom and gloom, but not engaging with the root causes that led to Bolsonaro's victory and instead of doubling down on apocalyptic rhetoric.

Fuelled by Resentment

When asked about matters related to public administration during the campaign, besides reaffirming his lack of knowledge, Bolsonaro promised he would name technocrats to his cabinet. After all, although he did not understand anything about governing, he would surround himself with qualified people who would help him to do so. The problem is that the supposed 'best and brightest' that were to fill his cabinet turned out to be far from public service's cream of the crop.

Bolsonaro's ministerial appointments fell under three categories. The first are the 'anti-globalists', in line with polemicist Olavo de Carvalho — an eccentric YouTuber who became the ideological beacon for Bolsonaro and his sons — such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ernesto Araújo. In the second group are the military men who were early supporters of the president and who provided him with his ticket partner (and now vice-president) — the retired four-star general Hamilton Mourão. In the third group are the technocrats invited by Bolsonaro to legitimise his ignorance towards the markets (Scrivano and Ribeiro, 2018), the Congress, and public opinion — this category includes the two almost-super Ministers Sergio Moro (Justice and Public Order), and Paulo Guedes (Economy).

During the campaign, deep-seated fears of a return to military rule resurfaced across the Brazilian left. Diniz argues that there is a politicisation of those in the Armed Forces who resent the social progress seen since 1985, including Jair Bolsonaro and many of his generation. They entered the military academies during military rule, expecting to participate in it and enjoy its benefits, but it came to an end before their chance to govern came around. This means that some of those men had to live thirty years of resentment for not taking part in the privileges of military power. Diniz aptly observes that this is why "these soldiers were eager to seize power, democratic power" (Oliveto, 2018) — in short, the opportunity to return to power under Bolsonaro seemed irresistible. Those public servants and military officials share a prevailing feeling of resentment with the political and economic establishment.

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Can We Call It A 'Foreign Policy'?

The case of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (FA) is peculiar. It was a surprise to the Brazilian diplomatic corps. Ernesto Araújo was promoted to the rank that would allow him to be appointed as Ambassador eventually only recently. He did not have the stature, or the experience needed to lead the Ministry at Itamaraty — and it is precisely his lack of experience that led to his appointment.

Araújo saw the opportunity to take on Itamaraty's rigid hierarchical structure and play a new role in the cabinet becoming a political shield to the new president, domestically and abroad (Brazilian Diplomat B, 2018).

Burges and Chagas-Bastos (2017) have shown that foreign policy is unattractive for those seeking to share in the political pork. Araújo understood that by refraining from playing the political game — where he would not receive much attention or power — and transformed himself into Bolsonaro's echo abroad. For example, when the president travelled to Israel, Araújo came up with the bizarre claim that Nazism was a left-wing ideology, following a similar statement Bolsonaro made during the 2018 campaign (see Dieguez, 2019).

On the bureaucratic side, Araújo understood that he could climb up the ranks at lightspeed if he aligned himself with the zeitgeist — even if this meant sacrificing some coherence, given that he had been a long-standing PT supporter, and enthusiast of Celso Amorim's foreign policy (Brazilian Diplomat A, 2019).

Critiques of Bolsonaro's foreign policy address its unpredictability because it breaks with Brazilian historical diplomatic baselines (Burges, 2009; 2017; Cervo and Bueno, 2011). He wants to promote a new image of the country abroad, intrinsically connected to domestic politics and the agenda of reforms (such as the pension system and an anti-crime bill). Which image, however, the president has not decided yet, leaving diplomats with no instructions rather than the one of defending the president himself — not Brazil — from international criticism (Brazilian Diplomat C, 2019).

Bolsonaro's administration seeks to demonstrate that the former public policy paradigms are outdated and need to be broken to implement a pragmatic and 'free of ideological aspect' policy. The president stresses what he considered former unsuccessful ideological practices and reemphasises economic dimensions. There is no distinction though between domestic or foreign policies: the aim is to present Brazil as a renewed environment for foreign investment and trade, nothing else.

Development and multilateralism, both long-standing and crucial topics in Brazilian foreign policy, have almost completely disappeared in this scenario. The relations with the United States gained a new impetus instead of South and Latin America, or the Global South relations privileged in recent years. The new preferences and the impacts of the domestic political and economic crises also indicate a decline in Brazil's regional leadership role.

These new directions in Brazilian foreign policy might be felt in the country's Mercosur's pro-tempore presidency. The perspective includes an emphasis on open trade and economic integration with developed countries, such as the United States and the European Union. For instance, Bolsonaro tried to promote the recent agreement between Mercosur and the EU as an achievement, and expression of these new foreign policy directions — the agreement had been under negotiation for more than 20 years (diplomats indicate that former president Michel Temer was really responsible for advancing the negotiations towards the end), and still needs to be ratified by EU members.

The deal will not be easy to be sold to European parliaments. Earlier in 2019, EU leaders conditioned the final signature to the Mercosur-EU agreement to specific measures on Brazil's environmental protection policies and its participation in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron severely criticised Bolsonaro's environmental policy when pictures of the Amazon fires went viral. In a politically ignorant response, Bolsonaro (and his Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes), offended Macron's wife, Brigitte Macron, aggravating the diplomatic crises with France, the EU, and damaging even more Brazil's image abroad.

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During his campaign, Bolsonaro threatened to leave the Paris Agreement to preserve national sovereignty. That is also the rhetoric used by the president to contest international organisations when criticised for his environmental policy. Leaving the Paris Agreement after Trump did so in January 2017 is a measure of Bolsonaro to reaffirm his unconditional alignment with the US. It is also an opportunity to deny multilateralism and to reaffirm the rhetoric of change [2] when compared, especially with Lula da Silva and Rousseff's 'subservient' foreign policy.

Last but not least, it was expected that Bolsonaro would strike a conciliatory tone in the UN General Assembly, but he opted to promote his domestic agenda. He kept his aggressive rhetoric to contest his critics at both international and domestic levels. The success of his strategy depends on the economic recovery and Araújo's ability to negotiate bilaterally with a handful of allies — to prove that Brazil can succeed without acting on the multilateral stage.

The insistence on a confrontational strategy does not help to open new economic opportunities and to ensure to the international community that Brazil is on the right path after a period of centre-left governments. Bolsonaro can end up being even more isolated, in particular, if the future of US politics (impeachment or elections) does not favour Trump.

So What?

The running joke to exemplify Bolsonaro's incoherent foreign policy orientation is that either communism is a failure, or communists/globalists dominate the world — both happening at the same time is impossible — as the president and his FA minister seem to believe. The emerging South American giant now is just a dumb giant: with no direction or strategy.

The South American giant wound up electing a captain who was expelled from the army, a deputy who did nothing useful while in Congress, and an opportunist with a talent for repeating common-sense prejudices. Bolsonaro's push to the right has, however, deep roots in Brazilian history, and it has not happened overnight. Democracy and citizenship were achieved for the wealthy and white; while the black and the poor have never been integrated to receive its benefits. Brazil — like many of its South American neighbours — remains a veiled authoritarian and racist country.

Bolsonaro has been in office for more than nine months without an objective government platform and no congressional coalition. Its political capital is the result of its own image. All in all, his tenure might be as dark as the sibyls foretold, or, in the best-case scenario, just a shameful episode of a sad comedy. He leans more to the dark side than the comic.

As one political commentator neatly summarised: one part of Bolsonaro's administration does not move governmental engines ahead because they want a minimum state, another because the Treasury is broke. There are also those who would not even know how to do it. The president and his cabinet's erratic movements indicate improvisation and lack of planning. The only solid plan Bolsonaro has is a crusade against the left, communism and the destruction of the Christian values — a bad adaptation of the Cervantine quest.

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NOTES

[¹] *Nova República* [New Republic] is the period in Brazilian history starting in 1985, when the civilian government was restored after a 21-year-long military regime.

[2] It is noteworthy the fact that Brazil played an important role in Rio 92 conference and hosted the Rio+20 in 2012.

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