

Lula Is Back on the International Stage, or Is He?

Written by Luis Schenoni and Thales Carvalho

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LUIS SCHENONI AND THALES CARVALHO, DEC 5 2022

Brazil transitioned from international stardom to relative seclusion over the last decade, after Jair Bolsonaro made an international pariah of his own country. Not surprisingly, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's electoral victory is expected to change his country's international presence radically. Lula was greeted like a rockstar at COP27, where he pledged to protect the Amazon, hinting at the return of his charismatic diplomacy. Can we expect Lula to bring Brazil back to the central stage of international relations? The question is consequential not only for Brazil but for all Latin America and potential regional partners across the (multipolar?) globe.

To answer this question, we need to differentiate between changes in the short-term popularity of Brazil and long-term foreign policy investments. While the former is expected, the conditions for the latter have probably dissolved. Sadly, bombastic displays of Brazilian diplomatic ambition should now be considered a farce. Happily, they might not end up in tragedy. As one of us argued in the pages of E-IR back in 2019, the overly ambitious foreign policy goals of the last Lula administration were partly responsible for the crisis that followed. In a recent article published with *Foreign Policy Analysis*, this argument is tested empirically, and the extent of such overstretch is measured within different dimensions of foreign policy. Yet, overstretching is less likely to occur this time. As Detlef Nolte and Luis Schenoni show in their article for *International Politics*, even if domestic factors (like the return of Lula) might favor Brazil's diplomatic reengagement, the international economic context and worsening great power competition will create serious constraints for any grandiose foreign policy expansion. To this we should add, as we will see, the Brazilian public disillusionment and potential opposition to an active foreign policy they might associate with corruption and lack of fiscal responsibility.

To comprehend global public opinion's excitement with Lula, we first need to understand the disastrous state of Brazil's foreign image now. Brazilian diplomacy has reduced its proactivity consistently since the Dilma Rousseff administration began to adjust diplomatic expenditures some ten years ago. Since the criminal investigations of 'Operation Car Wash' consumed her government, the decline has been abrupt. Brazil turned inward like never before in its history. Then, when it looked like things could not get worse – Bolsonaro appeared. As Dawisson Belém Lopes and Thales Carvalho summarized, not content with the retreat, Bolsonaro changed Brazil's core foreign policy values and institutionalized practices. He aligned positions with right-wing populist leaders – attacking LGBT rights and giving up its leadership on environmental issues, for example – all whilst antagonizing countries like France through blatantly disrespectful declarations. Equally, on more than one occasion, his first minister for foreign affairs, Ernesto Araújo, and political allies (e.g., Abraham Weintraub and Eduardo Bolsonaro) provoked unnecessary friction with China to the shock of a highly professional diplomatic corps.

Foreign policy and diplomatic scandals eventually rendered Brazil an international pariah. It is thus easy to predict that, under Lula, the Brazilian image will be restored, as well as traditional decision-making positions and long-held diplomatic positions. Lula will use his skills and those of the professional diplomatic corps to pursue a more open and reasonable diplomacy. In some way, he might even be more progressive than before. For instance, his transitional team includes gender and race activists, and a more intense return to environmental activism is also expected. Lula understands that climate change became a key topic in the international arena, promising the return of a Brazilian pro-environmental policy during the COP27 summit in November 2022. There will be a comeback for Brazil, and it will generate excitement. The question is whether the carnival will last. We suggest it will not.

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While in many ways Brazil seems to be back, the permissive international environment that allowed for its formidable foreign policy expansion in the 2000s – unipolarity and a Chinese-led commodity boom – is not. Moreover, Lula's autonomous (“haughty and active”) foreign policy will be much more difficult to sell to the Brazilian public opinion after ‘Operation Car Wash’ unveiled all the wrongdoings associated with direct investments and state activities abroad. At the same time, despite a potential new commodity boom, the country remains with huge fiscal deficits and social problems. As a consequence, although Lula promised the return of something similar to his previous foreign policy, Brazil will not be able to exploit the domestic and international conditions necessary to pursue foreign policy expansion this time.

Renewed attempts to lead Latin American integration will also not be easy. Although left-wing leaders are once again in office across most Latin American states, it is now harder for Brazil to act as the paymaster of this process – which may become more expensive in the context of renewed great power politics in the region. The design of such integration also needs changes, as the demise of UNASUR showed the weakness of the previous attempt. Such a design also needs to be capable of dealing with authoritarian regimes in Nicaragua and Venezuela, contrary to the earlier models based on democratic principles. It is hard to see that the United States will be willing to delegate those issues to Brazil as it attempted to do in the 2000s. Overall, Brazil is not trusted to retake a role it renounced.

Relations with other Global Southern states, especially African ones, may also be different than during Lula's first presidency. Brazil does not have the conditions to provide them with a huge amount of foreign aid and lending potential, or to engage in as many cooperation initiatives as it did before. It is also harder to pay for the costs of multiple diplomatic posts. As a result, South-South cooperation will not be as intense as it was before.

At the level of the BRICS, the prospects of cooperation also seem dim. The president-elect sees relations with these countries, as well as with other emerging states, as a key way to maintain Brazilian autonomy *vis-à-vis* Western powers. Yet, as the chasm between NATO and Russia grows, he will likely be pushed to take sides or be very constrained in the set of policies he can undertake whilst pleasing both sides. To remain trapped in a situation that Diego Leiva and Luis Schenoni call “dual hegemony” is probably not the best of worlds for Brazil, and this form of “autonomy” would come at increasing costs. Lula's attempts to favor a “multipolar” order are thus likely to be channelled through the more neutral grounds of multilateral diplomacy. For example, he will continue to advocate for reforms at the UN Security Council, even if chances are dim in the context of the Ukraine war.

Overall, new is good for both Brazil and the world. Lula will bring back the traditions Brazil has cultivated since democratization: autonomy, proactivity, multilateralism, and the defence of progressive agendas on equality, human rights, and the environment. Its foreign policy will not be quite so ambitious as during Lula's first two terms. A low-cost “Aerolula” will probably try to promote Brazil again on the international stage, but the costs of rebuilding the previous diplomatic infrastructure, plus the absence of available resources to take a big leap, will constrain him greatly. Consequently, Brazil will have to moderate and partner-up. The type of prudence that will come with this might be a blessing in such uncertain times.

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