

Lula's 'Back to the Future' Foreign Policy May Be a Bit Dated

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Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva attends a press conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Jan. 23, 2023 (AP photo by Gustavo Garelo).

“Brazil is back, seeking dialogue with everyone and driven by the quest for a world without hunger and with peace,” Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said in December, shortly before being sworn in for a third term as the country’s president on Jan. 1.

Lula’s words and the context in which they were uttered—after a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin—neatly summarize his vision for Brazil’s foreign policy: stay out of global conflicts, maintain good relations with all strategic partners and use international platforms to promote an agenda of peace and social equality. To this can be added the need to recover Brazil’s role as a central actor on environmental issues.

Traditionally, foreign policy in Brazil has been considered a strategic instrument to pursue national development objectives, according to Mojana Vargas, professor of international relations at the Federal University of Paraiba. During Lula’s first two terms in office, between 2003 and 2010, this meant asserting Brazil’s international relevance by being active in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and pursuing South-South cooperation, while also maintaining autonomy from geopolitical heavyweights like the United States and China.

“Now, we have a recovery of this strategic vision,” says Vargas, after four years during which former President Jair Bolsonaro threw out Brazil’s foreign policy playbook, isolating the country to the point that it was widely considered an international pariah.

The sense of déjà vu was evident in Lula’s pick of Mauro Vieira to lead Itamaraty, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is known, which was even deemed unimaginative by some. A career diplomat, Vieira previously served as foreign minister under Lula’s handpicked successor, Dilma Rousseff, from 2015 to 2016. He is also close to Celso Amorim, Lula’s foreign minister during his first two terms in office and now his close adviser.

But Vieira’s appointment drives home the president’s intention of rebuilding Brazil’s international reputation, in line with the principles that guided the country’s foreign policy in the past.

The new Lula administration’s first diplomatic moves also mark a clear break with the positions held by the Bolsonaro government. He has signaled instead a return to a diplomacy focused on human rights and based on the pillars of cooperation, multilateralism and multipolarity, in which Brazil plays the role of a friendly giant.

The government is returning to international forums that Bolsonaro left on flimsy ideological grounds, like the U.N. Global Compact on Migration and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, while withdrawing from the Geneva Consensus, an anti-abortion coalition. Lula is likely to downgrade Bolsonaro’s pursuit of membership in the OECD, the so-called club of rich countries, shifting Brasilia’s focus instead to reviving the stagnant Mercosur regional trade bloc—comprising Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay—and furthering economic cooperation within the BRICS bloc made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Staying out of geopolitical disputes was a key aspect of Lula’s foreign policy during his previous time in office. But it will be a harder line to stand by now than it was then.

This post-Bolsonaro reset has also involved removing diplomats deemed too close to the former president from their posts—such as the ambassador to the U.S. Nestor Forster—and moving to appoint women to senior diplomatic positions, in a long-overdue attempt to address the gaping gender imbalance within the diplomatic corps.

Meanwhile, environmental policy is returning to the central role it played in Brazilian diplomacy before Bolsonaro downgraded it during his four years in power. It will now “certainly become increasingly important,” according to Renata Albuquerque Ribeiro, a senior researcher at Plataforma Cipo, an independent think tank focused on climate, peace and governance.

The appointment of Marina Silva, an internationally respected environmental activist, to lead the rebranded Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, is a clear sign of this emphasis. Alongside Finance Minister Fernando Haddad, Silva represented Brazil at the World Economic Forum in Davos last week, days after the country announced its bid to host the U.N. COP30 Climate Change Conference in the Amazonian city of Belem in 2025. Separately, there has been talk of organizing a

summit of heads of state of Amazonian countries this year to enhance cooperation on protecting the rainforest.

Plans for active international cooperation are also evident in Lula's busy agenda of trips abroad. This week he is visiting neighbor and fellow Mercosur member Argentina, while trips to Europe, the U.S. and China are also on his 2023 calendar.

In line with Brazil's tradition of autonomy, efforts to mend ties with the European Union and the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden after the fraught relations of the Bolsonaro years will go hand-in-hand with maintaining and restoring relationships with the rest of the world. That includes nations viewed unfavorably by Washington, such as Venezuela, with which Lula has moved to reestablish diplomatic relations.

The scheduled visits to both China and the U.S. show that Lula intends for Brazil to maintain a pragmatic middle ground in global power struggles. This logic also applies to the war in Ukraine—Brasilia's opposition to sanctions on Russia is one of the few issues where some continuity with the Bolsonaro administration can be expected. After all, Russia remains Brazil's biggest supplier of fertilizer.

"Brazil is going to continue negotiating with whoever wants to buy [its exports]," says Ribeiro, adding that it cannot afford to get involved in other countries' conflicts.

Staying out of geopolitical disputes and respecting each nation's right to self-determination were always key aspects of Lula's foreign policy during his previous time in office, often invoked when avoiding criticism of leftist Latin American governments as they slid toward authoritarianism. But it will be a harder line to stand by now than it was when Lula first took office 20 years ago.

"The international context is quite hostile and thorny," says Ribeiro, citing the war in Ukraine, tensions between the U.S. and China, and growing inequality amid a dim global economic outlook.

In Latin America, an array of domestic crises among Brazil's neighbors may put the brakes on efforts for greater regional integration. Vargas, the international relations professor, also sees Brazil's presence in Africa shrinking compared with the previous Lula administrations.

Domestically, the Lula government also faces huge challenges, not least the political extremism and unrest laid bare by the Jan. 8 attempted coup in Brasilia. While one line of argument suggests that the troubles at home will distract the Brazilian president from foreign policy, Ribeiro believes that obstacles to Lula's domestic agenda may counterintuitively lead the government to put more emphasis on international engagement. "Foreign policy can actually be an area in which [Lula] has more room to act," she says.

A sense of general goodwill toward the new Lula administration should also favor Brazil's efforts to return to the international stage, at least at the start. Far-right radicals and economic challenges at home may have robbed Lula of the traditional "honeymoon period" usually enjoyed by a new president, but it seems he will still get one abroad.

"Portugal, and the world, missed Brazil," Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa said after Lula's victory last year, a sentiment no doubt shared by many world leaders. Lula is now showing the world that Brazil is glad to be back.

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