

Biden Stoops to Conquer Brazil's Lula

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The tragicomic "insurrection" in Brasilia on Sunday was destined to meet a sudden death. The universal condemnation and, in particular, the brusqueness with which the Biden Administration distanced itself from the protestors, sealed their fate. Certainly, this revolt is no "colour revolution," although it is difficult to make predictions about new protests in the country.

This is a cautionary tale for Latin America, as the "pink tide" is once again on the ascendance. As Brazil's president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva returned to power last week, left-leaning leaders are in control of six of the region's seven largest economies. Nonetheless, the pendulum has been swinging wildly and Lula won by a wafer-thin margin.

Political polarisation is undermining democracy in Latin America, making it harder for many to respect compromise. Since the 1980s, the global model of Keynesian policies gave way to the Washington consensus and the regional states took to borrowing in dollars and liberalising their capital accounts to attract foreign investors.

The genesis of the "pink tide" lies in these lost decades when the neoliberal turn in the region saw stagnation and widespread poverty, deepening social and economic divides in what was already the world's most unequal region, emergence of a rentier class, coups and armed conflict. The region needs a new model of development and more equitable, sustainable growth involving state-led industrialisation and regional integration.

The Latin American economies are no longer bound to the US and are today in a position to recast their partnerships. But it is naïveté to assume Washington is no longer the self-interested neighbour it used to be historically. Geology and geography are intertwined in the destiny of Latin America.

A Guardian [editorial](#) recently noted that with Latin America accounting for 60% of the world's lithium, the white gold of electric batteries, and the world's largest oil reserves, the US carries a "big stick" — to borrow from Teddy Roosevelt's famous phrase "speak softly, and carry a big stick" to describe the US foreign policy, in a 1901 speech.

However, as a researcher at the Institute of Party History and Literature of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, Jin Chengwei wrote in November, “In terms of geopolitics, the US views Latin America as its sphere of influence, and its influence on Latin America can be described as ubiquitous. In the 1980s, it used Latin America as a “testing ground” to promote neoliberalism. To be the alternative to neoliberalism was the driving force for the last round of wave of leftism in Latin America. They made significant achievements in promoting the integration process in Latin America and weakening the influence of the US, accumulating experience for resistance to US hegemony. The failure of neoliberalism and the negative consequences remain the fundamental motive for the formation of the current wave of leftism.”

No doubt, the crisis in US politics exposing the weaknesses of America’s liberal democracy spurred the Latin American countries to search for a non-western path. Also, the inefficient, insensitive response to Covid-19 exposed the flaws of the capitalist path of development. The [Sao Paulo Forum](#) and the [World Social Forum](#) have provided a new platform.

In his two previous terms as president, Lula encouraged people to participate in politics, reconciled economic growth with an increase in social spending and public investment in critical sectors of the economy, introduced regulations for the domestic workforce, providing them with social assistance and higher wages, promoted social justice by expanding employment and proactively participated in the formulation of international rules.

Lula’s biggest challenge today is the current divisions in Brazilian society between left and right and the confrontation between different social camps, apart from the need to push through reforms in a right-wing-majority Congress.

That said, he will lead the growing left-wing tide in Latin America toward a new peak, which will inevitably improve the international environment of leftist countries such as Cuba and Venezuela and enhance the autonomy of Latin American diplomacy. Lula wrote in the government plan:

“We advocate working toward the construction of a new global order committed to multilateralism, respect for the sovereignty of nations, peace, social inclusion and environmental sustainability, which takes into account the needs of developing countries.”

A fundamental change in the political landscape across the continent seems to be under way. Specifically, Lula’s [first major foreign policy move](#) — the decision to attend the Summit of Heads of State and Government of Celac in Buenos Aires on January 24 alongside the leaders of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua — sends a message to Washington that it is going to be difficult to find a fulcrum for its “differentiation-cum- disintegration” strategy in Latin America.

Significantly, the tone of [President Biden’s condemnation](#) of the rioting in Brasilia was most aggressive. Three factors are at work here. First, the politician in Biden sees that the parallel with the January 6 “Capitol riots” in the US works to his advantage as he gears up for the 2024 election. The riots in both Brazil and the US can be traced back to the Conservative Political Action Conference, the annual political conference attended by the world conservative activists and hosted by American Conservative Union. Clearly, whether Lula can contain the flames of the far right is not only crucial for Brazil and Latin America but also can be consequential for US politics.

Second, Lula targeted agribusinessmen for the rioting. According to environmentalist groups, those carrying out deforestation and illegal mining in the Amazon were behind the rioting, after Lula's 180-degree turn in environmental policy with the appointment of Ministers Marina Silva and Sônia Guajajara, a world-renowned environmentalist and an aboriginal activist, respectively.

Lula accused agribusiness and illegal mining mafias of financing this coup. Biden's climate programme and the tragic fate of the Amazon River are joined at the hips.

Third, Lula is expected to make official trips to China and the US in his first three months in office. There is no question that under China's "old friend" Lula, the economic and trade cooperation is set to deepen. The left-wing regimes usually "pull away" from the US and advocate a diversified and balanced diplomacy.

Actually, though, the deepening of China-Brazil relations follows the trend and has a strong internal driving force in terms of the complementarity between the two economies. The bilateral exchanges between China and Brazil have never been demarcated by ideology. Under Bolsonaro, China-Brazil trade still hit the record of about \$164 billion in 2021 despite the pandemic.

Nonetheless, the US will be concerned because Brazil is an international powerhouse and shares extensive common interests and responsibilities with China at a time when the left-wing wave highlights the weakening of US's global leadership and the massive erosion in Washington's control over Latin America. (Argentina has also sought [BRICS membership](#).)

Lula's victory will significantly advance the process of Latin American cooperation to explore a [new alternative world order](#). Against this backdrop, Biden's best hope lies in encouraging Lula to pursue a moderate diplomatic line and adopt a strategy of balance between great powers. The US feels encouraged by Lula's previous two terms in office and his record of being a left-leaning moderate.

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