

Bolsonaro's Russia trip highlights rising geopolitical tensions in South America

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Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro concluded a three-day trip to Russia and Hungary last Friday in the face of virtually unanimous condemnation from the corporate media and major political forces in Brazil. The trip was attacked for undermining Brazilian relations with the imperialist powers, as they engage in hysterical accusations against the Russian government aimed at provoking a war in Ukraine.

In his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Bolsonaro declared Brazil to be "in solidarity" with Russia. The declaration drew immediate criticism from White House press secretary Jen Psaki, who said Brazil "appeared to be on the opposite side of the global community." On the following day, Bolsonaro met Hungary's far-right leader Viktor Orbán, declaring their common values as "God, fatherland, family and liberty"—an open celebration of their shared fascistic orientation.

Bolsonaro's visit had been agreed on in December and was announced as focusing on unspecified military cooperation agreements, bilateral trade and investments and, in particular, reassurances on Russia's supply of fertilizers to Brazil's crucial agribusiness sector. Grain and meat production have been virtually the only sectors of the Brazilian economy to experience any economic growth in the last 10 years, and are seen as responsible for avoiding an even sharper GDP downturn since 2015.

The corporate press, fully aligned with the US political establishment and especially the Democratic Party, attempted to minimize the objective contradictions driving the trip. The assessment by major newspapers ranged from portraying it exclusively as an attempt to "provoke" US President Joe Biden to the absurd claim that it was driven by Putin's and Bolsonaro's shared "male chauvinism." Significantly, pundits were keen to minimize the commercial relations between Brazil and Russia. A typical assessment widely shared in the press came in the ultra-right *Veja* magazine, which wrote "Bolsonaro prefers to upset the US, the world's largest economy, by visiting an economic partner of little importance."

The fact remains that Brazil imports 90 percent of its fertilizers, and Russia is responsible for a quarter of that. Crippling sanctions imposed on Belarus, another key fertilizer supplier, coupled with pandemic shortages and export restrictions in China and India have made fertilizer prices shoot up 300 percent in 2021. Already hit by a massive drought driven by global warming, Brazilian meat and grain industries are facing a perfect storm, and Brazil's agriculture minister was forced to travel to Russia in December 2021 to seek

more supplies.

As Bolsonaro's travel date approached, the US-led war threats intensified, and Bolsonaro's arrival date, February 16, was even declared by the White House as the day for a Russian invasion. Editorials in Brazil begged Bolsonaro to delay the trip, warning that it would undermine stated goals of his administration—deepening ties with NATO and entering the OECD. Foreign Relations Ministry officials reportedly insisted that Bolsonaro delay the trip or at least include a stop in Ukraine in order to show "neutrality," which Bolsonaro rejected. Reports also multiplied citing US concerns over the trip.

The media furor did little to illuminate the real tensions underlying Bolsonaro's defiance of both US imperialism and the apparent consensus within Brazil's political establishment. The Brazilian statement after the meeting emphasized Brazil's "historic independence in military technology" and how "Russia has always been a technological reference, especially in nuclear issues." Such declarations have ominous implications.

There is no doubt that Bolsonaro's Russian trip amid the US warmongering expresses deep divisions and concerns within the Brazilian ruling class and across South America. The incapacity of the corporate press to discuss those objective tensions, focusing instead on a personalistic narrative, is in itself an expression of extreme nervousness and disorientation. As the semi-official narrative goes, with the mindless Bolsonaro gone after the October elections, Brazil will return to a democratic, peace-loving and fraternal relationship with the world and a whirlwind of foreign investment will ensue.

Reality couldn't be further from this daydream, as international tensions reach a boiling point. Bolsonaro's trip to Russia amid the frenzied US war drive goes well beyond the considerable degree of ambiguity that has marked Brazilian foreign and military policy after World War II, despite its general alignment with the US against the Soviet Union and both countries' joint anti-communist military actions across the continent.

At the root of these conflicts is the historical decline of US imperialism, which is growing increasingly aggressive as it attempts to offset its diminishing economic power with military force.

Bolsonaro's Russian trip follows what had been a series of breakthroughs in US-Brazilian relations during his term, with unprecedented joint military drills involving US forces on Brazilian territory, the promotion of the country as a "NATO

special partner” and growing collaboration with the US in space technology.

Those early developments in Bolsonaro’s presidency marked a reversal of a historic reluctance of the Brazilian military to offer unconditional cooperation with the Pentagon. On the key issue of military and nuclear industries, the Brazilian military has historically sought to preserve room to maneuver against US and even UN pressure. Famously, senior Brazilian military figures have cited the national nuclear industry, and especially the capacity to mine and enrich uranium for its two power plants outside Rio de Janeiro, as a military deterrent, preserving the capacity to develop a nuclear arsenal. Brazil has never let the UN fully inspect its nuclear infrastructure.

Under the PT’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the military chose the Swedish Gripen fighter jets on the explicit basis that they would allow independence from NATO technology. The PT relentlessly boasts of signing a deal with France making Brazil the only non-nuclear country able to build and operate a nuclear-powered submarine. The AUKUS pact has finally given Australia the same capacity.

The PT always sought to cast its massive rearmament program in the language of “multilateralism,” that is, of an armed deterrent, or an “armed peace.” Defying this bankrupt nationalist logic, the Brazilian military crowned the PT rearmament program with the first National Defense Strategy white paper of the Bolsonaro presidency, which declared for the first time “inter-state” conflicts, and not guerrilla warfare or “drug dealing,” as the main concern for South American security and the chief strategic concern of the Brazilian armed forces.

That designation followed closely the 2017 US strategic shift from the “war on terror” to “great power conflicts,” which has included the Pentagon’s commitment to countering Chinese and Russian influence in Latin America.

Tensions have escalated on the continent. Bolsonaro took office amid the frenzied US offensive to overthrow Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro. At the time, the Brazilian press was filled with concerns that the country’s armed forces were falling behind NATO-armed Colombia, and could not engage Venezuela’s Russian-supplied fighter jets during or in the fallout from US regime-change attempts.

The intensification of cooperation with Russia on key issues in defiance of US foreign policy and amid the hysteria over Ukraine flows directly from an assessment that unconditional alignment with a United States that is suffering declining global hegemony doesn’t offer sufficient guarantees for the interests of Brazilian capitalism.

Such an assessment extends far beyond Brazil, with Argentine President Alberto Fernández—Bolsonaro’s nominal “left” rival—making his own trip to Russia just days before Bolsonaro, and facing the same internal pressures in his own country.

Further north, in Colombia, the most reliable US ally in the region, such tensions are raising the specter of a coup in case the new administration to be elected in May does not continue to toe Washington’s line. In a recent trip to the country, the diplomatic engineer of the 2014 anti-Russian coup in Ukraine, under-secretary of state Victoria Nuland, charged Russia with interfering in the

Colombian elections—to the benefit of the front-runner, Senator Gabriel Petro.

Latin American nations, having lived the entire 20th century under Washington’s domination, viewed as US imperialism’s “own backyard,” will not escape imperialist war through a bankrupt “military deterrent,” or by means of maneuvering with Washington’s Russian, Chinese or European rivals.

Twice in the 20th century, Brazil was drawn into world wars on the side of the US and Britain. In 1942, in declaring war on the Axis, Brazilian corporatist dictator Getúlio Vargas not only sent 25,000 troops to Italy, but was also forced to cede control of the country’s northeast as a platform for US aviation to attack Axis forces in western Africa. Vargas reached a deal with the US in the face of threats that the Germans themselves would assault the region and use it for the same purposes.

Needless to say, the spiraling international conflicts of the 21st century would immediately bring Brazilian infrastructure under an even more direct threat. Brazil’s grain and meat terminals loading Chinese cargo ships would be only the first target. Attacks on Argentina would cripple Brazil, given the two country’s economic integration, and the opposite would be no less true.

There is not a single political force in any South American country remotely willing to tell the public the truth about this reality, let alone able to act on it. In Brazil, Lula and the PT leadership were thrown into disarray by Bolsonaro’s trip. Having concentrated its entire opposition to Bolsonaro on foreign policy issues and the need to be more assertive in seeking concessions from the US, the PT has been bitterly split and disoriented by the trip.

Lula’s former Foreign Relations minister Celso Amorim openly complimented Bolsonaro for defying the US. On the other hand, the party’s 2018 presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad, a hero of identity politics purveyors in the country, fully aligned himself with US imperialism, declaring that Bolsonaro went to Moscow to learn how to improve his “fake news” operations in Brazil—thus lending credibility to the entire anti-Russian hysteria in the press.

Haddad meant his reactionary pro-imperialist tirade as a condemnation of Bolsonaro’s threats to the October elections, exposing that the PT itself has nothing more than an appeal for imperialist backing, in the form of “Russian interference” charges, to counter a Bolsonaro coup.

Brazilian workers must reject the war drive and the PT’s reactionary pro-imperialist response to Bolsonaro’s coup threats, and build a new revolutionary leadership to put an end to the root cause of the drive to war and dictatorship, the capitalist system.



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