

Lula talks to Trump amid US escalation against Venezuela

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After US President Donald Trump's speech at the UN General Assembly signaling that he could initiate high-level talks with the government of Brazil's President Lula da Silva (Workers Party – PT) on the political and economic issues of the US's abusive 50 percent tariffs on Brazil, the two held a 30-minute videoconference call on Monday, October 6.

In his conversation with Trump, Lula asked the US government to remove the 40 percent surcharge on Brazilian products and to end the sanctions applied to Brazilian officials. Among these measures is the unprecedented application of the Magnitsky Act against Federal Supreme Court (STF) Minister Alexandre de Moraes. He was the rapporteur for the case that ended in the sentencing of former President Jair Bolsonaro to 27 years in prison for the January 8, 2023, coup attempt. He is also one of the main advocates for the regulation of social media in Brazil.

The tariffs against Brazil added an openly political dimension to Trump's trade war against the world. Trump justified them by claiming that Bolsonaro, a close ally whose plot was inspired by Trump's own January 6, 2021 Capitol coup attempt in the US, is the target of a "witch hunt" by the Brazilian justice system. In addition, Moraes' restrictions on social media platforms, such as the temporary ban on X in August of last year, have been denounced by Trump and the Big Tech oligarchs around him as "censorship."

Trump and Lula, as well as members of their administrations, welcomed this initial conversation, which will continue in the coming weeks and months with the possibility of face-to-face meetings between them. Brazilian media reported that Bolsonaro was not mentioned in the conversation, and *Folha de S. Paulo* quoted a minister in Lula's administration as saying that it "was friendly, but 'superficial.'"

On his social media platform, Truth Social, Trump wrote that the call with Lula was "very good" and that the "main focus [of the conversation] was the economy and trade between our two countries." He added that "Our countries will prosper together!"

In turn, Lula wrote on X, "we recall the good chemistry we had at the meeting in New York during the UN General Assembly," continuing: "I consider our direct contact as an opportunity to restore the 201-year-old friendly relations between the two largest democracies in the West."

The meeting between Lula and Trump behind the scenes at the UN General Assembly and the possibility of a conversation between them were prepared weeks in advance, with high-level

members of both governments in the diplomatic, commercial, and economic spheres holding numerous meetings. An influential layer of capitalists linked to Brazilian manufacturing, the main sector affected by the tariffs, also worked closely with the Lula administration and participated in negotiations with their American counterparts and the Trump administration.

There was also strong pressure from Democratic congressmen and a wing of Republicans, as well as from a powerful American business sector, denouncing the tariffs against Brazil for increasing inflation on products widely consumed in the US, such as coffee. They also argued that they could lead to thousands of US layoffs, and, not least, the expansion of Brazil's trade relations with China, which has already overtaken the US to become the country's largest trading partner.

In September, the second month of the US tariffs, Brazilian exports to the US fell by 20.3 percent compared to the same month in 2024. Brazilian exports to China grew by 14.7 percent in September, mainly driven by soybeans, a product that the Asian giant began to buy more from Brazil at the expense of US agribusiness.

The strong interdependence of the Brazilian and US economies, as well as the political nature of the tariffs imposed on Brazil, had already led to 43 percent of Brazilian products exported to the US being exempted from the 40 percent surcharge. Economic sectors of both countries hope that talks between Lula and Trump will lead to a reduction or elimination of the tariffs imposed by Washington.

The Lula administration hopes that negotiations will be guided by a "win-win logic," as the Brazilian president recently stated, and lead to US investment in Brazil. Vice President Geraldo Alckmin, who is responsible for negotiations with the US, has stated that the two countries could establish partnerships in data centers and critical minerals, among other areas.

Brazil has ample reserves of critical minerals, particularly rare earths, which are essential to electronics and military industries. More importantly, they are behind the US trade war against China, which controls much of the reserves and refining of these minerals. A possible Brazil-US partnership in this sector would help the US reduce its dependence on China.

In a behind-the-scenes report on the events leading up to the meeting between Lula and Trump at the UN General Assembly, the daily *Estado de S. Paulo* reported that in mid-September, Richard Grenell, the US special envoy for special missions, met with Vice President Alckmin and Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira.

According to the report:

In these conversations, Minister [Vieira] reportedly made gestures indicating that the Lula administration had no intention of rivaling or challenging the US. The Brazilian foreign minister reportedly emphasized that, within BRICS, Itamaraty acted to balance and minimize anti-Western bias; Lula distanced himself from [Venezuelan President Nicolás] Maduro (and did not recognize the rigged election in 2024); the country did not join the New Silk Road, even under pressure from China. For this reason, Lula has said that Trump made decisions based on misinformation. Vieira also gave the government's version of the attempted coup after the 2022 elections and the 2025 trial.

The claim that the Trump administration may be mistaken about Brazil is not only a dangerous self-delusion that ignores Washington's escalating offensive against Latin America, particularly Venezuela, but also obscures the real causes of Trump's trade war against Brazil and the world.

As the WSWS has insisted, there is a militarist agenda behind Trump's trade war. It is one of the fronts in a war aimed at reversing by military means the loss of US hegemony with the rise of China in recent decades. In the drive toward a military conflict with the Asian giant, the Trump administration views Latin America as a future battlefield.

The US offensive against the region has intensified dramatically in recent weeks. Washington's series of extrajudicial killings in missile strikes against small boats off the coast of Venezuela, based on unproven claims that they were transporting drugs, has been accompanied by bellicose statements from Trump, who threatened Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro: "leave America in peace, or be blown up in fire and fury never seen before."

The Lula administration's response to this development has been a combination of concern and accommodation with US imperialism, as the recent conversation between Lula and Trump showed. Lula remained silent about the first US attacks on boats off Venezuela's Caribbean coast, so as not to jeopardize the ongoing negotiations that led to his recent phone call with Trump. At the same time, in addition to not recognizing Maduro's reelection, as the *Estado* report noted, the Lula administration was responsible for blocking Venezuela's entry into the BRICS.

A central concern of the Lula administration is that a US invasion of Venezuela could spill over into Brazil, which shares a border of more than 2,000 km with Venezuela in the sensitive Amazon rainforest region. Since Venezuela's claim to Essequibo in December 2023, the Lula administration has militarized this border. Now, the Brazilian armed forces are conducting the largest military exercise in their history, involving 10,000 troops and the use of their most advanced military equipment in the Amazon region.

The Trump administration may be considering Brazil a potential ally in its plans for a regime change war against Venezuela. In this

sense, the rapprochement between the Lula and Trump administrations is a central component of the ongoing US offensive.

This was also indicated by the fact that Trump requested that US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, take over the negotiations with the Brazilian government. Previously, the negotiations were led by special envoy Richard Grenell, who was also leading negotiations with the Maduro government and represented a wing of the Trump administration opposed to an immediate invasion of Venezuela to remove Maduro from power. On Monday, the *New York Times* reported that last week Trump asked Grenell to halt all diplomatic negotiations with Venezuela.

There has been much speculation in the Brazilian media about how negotiations between the US and Brazil will unfold with Rubio leading the American side. An article in *Exame* magazine wrote that "The impact of Rubio's appointment has divided analysts, who point out that it increases the chances that the US government will seek to convince Brazil to take action against Venezuela."

The report quoted political analyst and editor-in-chief of *Americas Quarterly* magazine, Brian Winter, who wrote on X: "Brazilians think it went well [the conversation between Lula and Trump], but appointing Marco Rubio as Trump's point man is the most difficult path for Brazil. He is a longtime skeptic of Lula and may insist on demands related to Venezuela, China, and more."

The Lula government is staging a difficult and delicate balancing act between China and the US with the illusion that it can benefit from the emerging conflict between these global giants. This orientation only exposes the Lula government's inability to offer a progressive response to the growing crisis of global capitalism, of which Trump's tariff war and Washington's escalation against Venezuela in preparation for a war against China are both parts.

The insistence that the Trump administration's offensive against Latin America can be stopped at the negotiating table only serves to disarm workers across the region as they confront the necessity of carrying out a unified struggle against capitalism across national borders.



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