



Brazil's Lula will pose challenges for the US

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Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's sort-of concession after his reelection loss to former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva should provide a sigh of relief for democracy backers. It paves the way for a peaceful transition of power in the world's seventh most populous country.

Bolsonaro is vowing to follow the constitution, and his team is reaching out to Lula. With the military simultaneously scoffing at suggestions that it intervene for Bolsonaro, his protesting supporters will likely now return to their homes. This is no small deal: the election was very close. Bolsonaro is the first incumbent president in Brazil's 34-year modern democracy to lose re-election, and he previously alleged fraud in its voting system.

Nevertheless, Lula's victory will nourish a growing challenge for the United States. It means that the region's seven largest countries now all have leftist governments. Washington will not be able to navigate regional politics through its traditional strategy of trying to isolate far-left regimes. This U.S. challenge, moreover, comes as China, Russia, and Iran — a growing axis of anti-American activity — are increasing their economic, military, and diplomatic influence across the region.

China is South America's biggest trading partner, investing throughout the region. Beijing has strengthened its military ties with Venezuela and other nations. Lula's victory could further nourish China's regional influence since he likely will be more enthused about Chinese-Brazilian ties than was Bolsonaro. Russia, too, is working more closely with authoritarian governments in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Moscow has propped up the besieged Nicolas Maduro, who Washington sought to isolate, providing him with military arms. Russian troops and equipment also operate within Nicaragua. At the same time, Iran is building stronger economic ties to South America to sidestep U.S. and other Western sanctions. Both Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah have a strong presence in the lawless tri-border area at the intersection of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. The terrorist group uses this presence to raise funds through narco-trafficking.

Once upon a time, U.S. policy toward Central and South America focused heavily on isolating the far left, whether the Castro regime in Cuba for decades, Nicaragua's Sandinistas in the 1980s, or the autocrats in Venezuela more recently. With Lula's victory, however, Washington faces a growing risk of its own hemispheric isolation. Driven by the economic distress imposed by COVID-19, voters across South America have taken a consistently leftist turn in recent years.

In July 2021, Peru elected a Marxist, Pedro Castillo, as its president. That December, Chile elected leftist Gabriel Boric Font, a former student protester, as its president. In June of this year, Colombia elected its first leftist president in Gustavo Petro, a former guerilla. Also this past June, President Joe Biden refused to invite the authoritarian governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela to the Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles. That prompted Mexico's leftist president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, to skip the event and Chile's Boric to criticize the U.S. for not engaging with the autocratic regimes.

Now returns the 77-year-old Lula, a former union leader and Brazil's 2003-2010 leftist president.

To be sure, Lula's victory gives Washington and Brasilia opportunities for cooperation, particularly on environmental issues, since he supports strong action to combat climate change and almost certainly will reverse Bolsonaro's policies enabling deforestation of the Amazon rainforest. Still, Lula's victory will further complicate Washington's approach to the region. The longtime leftist firebrand is likely to contribute to efforts by mainstream leftist governments to work more closely with the autocrats in Havana, Managua, and Caracas. And, like them, he is likely to draw closer to U.S. adversaries Russia, China, and Iran.

Washington, then, faces a new challenge in the Americas. It must find a way to continue promoting freedom and democracy without losing its influence.

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