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The last bastion against Trump

Brazil's election is a test of sovereignty in an age where political, family and business power are converging

In April, André Marinho, who is close to Brazilian presidential candidate Flávio Bolsonaro, travelled to the United States, where he met Vice President JD Vance. In his luggage was a 22-page strategy paper with an ambitious proposal. If Bolsonaro becomes president, Brazil will make its vast reserves of rare earth metals and critical minerals more accessible to the US, as part of a strategic alliance against China's dominance in the processing of raw materials. The paper envisaged – among other things – faster approval procedures and closer integration of Brazilian extractive industries with Western supply chains.

A new president will be elected in Brazil in early October. The candidates are familiar and according to the polls they are running more or less neck and neck. A Bolsonaro will thus be on the right-wing ticket for a third time, this time around son Flávio after his father Jair was condemned to 27 years in prison for his failed coup. The progressive candidate is incumbent president Lula da Silva, now 80, in a bid for a historic fourth term. But as our opening anecdote shows, this goes well beyond a duel between two camps that have been at daggers drawn for years. The US is also in the background as a third powerful player.

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Donald Trump has cast his shadow over the Brazilian election, along with a geopolitical project. Within the framework of its global rivalry with China, Washington would like to bring its 'Latin America backyard' back under its control. The new US National Security Strategy issued in December 2025 – which some refer to as the Donroe Doctrine – does not mince words: Trump wants to restore US 'pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere' and to deny rivals access to strategic resources.

And he has been remarkably successful in a short period of time. Trump has interfered with foreign election campaigns via social media, for example, in Honduras. In Argentina he arranged financial support for his favoured candidate, Milei, in the run up to a decisive election. And in the meantime in many countries a veritable army of PR disinformation strategists are operating with a direct line to Washington. One of them is Argentinian Fernando Cerimedo, recently arrested in Bolivia for attempted murder. His bot farms have supported not only the Bolsonaros and Milei but also the current right-wing presidents of Bolivia and Honduras.

As a result, all elections held in Latin America in recent months have been won by right-wing candidates, albeit often by a very narrow margin. If this now happens in Brazil, too, it would represent another milestone victory for Washington.

Disciplining an unruly partner

Apart from tiny Uruguay, with its progressive president, there is now only one country in South America still resisting Trump's hegemonic ambitions: 'Só sobrou o Brasil' [now only Brazil remains], as Brazilian political scientist Octavio Amorim Neto of the *Fundação Getulio Vargas* puts it. Latin America's largest economy is regarded as the crown jewels of this strategy and with good reason.

Brazil has the second biggest reserves of rare earth metals in the world, at around 21 million tonnes. On top of that are its offshore oil reserves in the Atlantic, vast tracts in the Amazon and in Cerrado, as well as one of the biggest fresh water reserves in the world, the Guaraní aquifer. Whoever rules Brazil will have a strong say in who has most access to these raw materials.

What worries Washington is that China is already one step ahead. It is not only Brazil's biggest trade partner, but is now building strategic infrastructure, such as railways, ports, satellites and also electricity and mobile phone networks. The two countries, furthermore, are not conducting their trade in US dollars, but in their own currencies. Indeed, as BRICS members they are promoting an alternative to the dollar-centred payment system. In Trump's view this threatens US dollar hegemony in the international payment system. Trump is also furious about the Brazilian central bank's digital payment system, called Pix. It has rapidly become so popular that it has now overtaken credit card payments, dominated by major US corporations.

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In response to all of this Trump has imposed punitive tariffs on Brazil, even though the US has run a cumulative trade surplus of over 400 billion dollars with it over the past 15 years. This makes no economic sense, but politically there is a discernible logic. The aim is not economic but rather to use the tariff stick to discipline an unruly partner. The measure's partisan slant is also striking. The list of applied tariffs makes sure to spare the agriculture and energy sectors, whose elites are already sympathetic to Bolsonaro and the US. Rather it targets high-value-added industry, in other words the economic sector traditionally aligned with Lulism.

This suggests that Washington has the current president in its sights. Lula da Silva, from the left-wing Workers' Party, is a statesman of the old school and committed to maintain an independent foreign policy, in keeping with Brazil's diplomatic tradition. Through the BRICS, the G20 and organising the recent COP30 climate summit Lula is pursuing a policy of 'active non-alignment', trading with everyone, but being tied to no one. This has been evident recently with regard to the expansion of AI infrastructure: contracts were deliberately distributed between Chinese suppliers such as Huawei and US firms such as Nvidia. But as far as Washington is concerned, such neutrality is tantamount to covert support for Beijing.

Ideology and business

The Bolsonaro clan has taken a very different approach. The family – long known primarily for the antics of backbencher Jair Bolsonaro and for dubious dealings with criminal right-wing militias in the state of Rio de Janeiro – forged an alliance with the new US right-wing movement centred on Donald Trump as early as 2018. During his father's presidency Carlos Bolsonaro, one of Flávio's brothers, worked closely with Trump campaign strategists such as Steve Bannon to establish a right-wing disinformation network in Brazil. Another brother, Eduardo, spends most of his time in the US acting as an informal liaison with the Trump administration and as a lobbyist.

They justify their close ties to Washington on economic grounds: they claim they want to reduce Brazil's allegedly one-sided dependence on China, attract foreign investment and technology transfer to the country, and enable the domestic raw materials industry, which to date has often

been merely an exporter of raw materials, to play a more central role in value creation. They argue that diversifying Brazil's partnerships would be in the national interest. In response, critics point out that, under the constitution, mineral resources belong to the state and that several of the raw materials agreements already negotiated – for example, in the state of Goiás – were concluded without the involvement of the federal government.

It is important to emphasise that, from Trump's perspective, the Bolsonaro family is an ideal partner not *despite* that fact that it is embroiled in numerous legal cases and shady dealings, but *because* of it. After all, that makes it susceptible to blackmail. But the stakes go beyond Brazil. The Chilean-Argentine China expert Francisco Urdinez has warned that, in the long term, the Brazilian election is likely to have more far-reaching consequences for neighbours such as Uruguay than the US mid-term elections. This is because Brazil sets the economic and political pace in the Cono Sur, the southern part of South America. If the last major regional power still attempting to forge its own path were to fall, smaller states would be left with little option other than to align themselves with Washington or Beijing. What the US is therefore aiming at in Brazil is to bury the option of 'active non-alignment' for Latin America.

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Beyond this grand geopolitical game of alliances and raw materials, however, there is a second, more informal level. This is a private geopolitics in which ideology has no role but which is strictly business. Brazil's agri-export sector has now become so globally powerful and so deeply intertwined with the US that it follows its own logic, more or less regardless of who happens to be in power in Brasília or Washington. The Batista brothers of meat-packing giant JBS have mastered this game like almost no one else. Although in 2017, they were fined 10.3 billion reais for bribing nearly 1900 politicians – although a judge provisionally suspended this at the end of 2023 – the company had been raking in billions in loans from the state-owned development bank BNDES for years. No matter who is in power in Brazil the Batistas always get their way.

The pattern is repeating itself in the US. In January 2025, JBS subsidiary Pilgrim's Pride made the largest single donation to Trump's campaign

committee. At five million dollars, the donation was even higher than those of Meta or Amazon. Lo and behold, Washington shortly afterwards suspended enforcement of the FCPA anti-corruption law, and in due course, after a ten-year wait, JBS was finally given the go-ahead for its IPO in New York.

In the wake of this, Joesley Batista has also been able to wield political influence. For instance, he acted as informal mediator in the trade dispute and was behind the bilateral meeting between Lula and Trump at the White House. Shortly before the US intervention in Venezuela, he flew to Caracas by private jet to persuade Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro to relinquish power peacefully – on whose behalf, it is unclear.

This kind of private, 'buddy' diplomacy has of course been actively promoted by the Trump administration. It fits right in not only with Trump's style, but also with the aims of the New Right. It is reactive and erratic, undermines long-term geopolitical strategies, prioritises corporate interests, sidelines professional diplomats and thus reduces the ability of states and societies to pursue their own objectives.

The election in Brazil can thus also be seen as a test of how much sovereignty is still possible in a world order in which politics, family clans and private business interests are increasingly merging.



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