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SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR

Brazil and the Illiberal Anti-U.S. Alliance

R. Evan Ellis | June 20, 2023



Source: Human Rights Watch.

During World War II, Brazil contributed to the security of allied trans-Atlantic shipping routes and sent a division-sized expeditionary force to Italy to help liberate Europe from Hitler and Mussolini's murderous dictatorships. In 1985, Brazilians rallied around Tancredo Neves and José Sarney to end undemocratic military rule. However, there has been a disturbing shift in Brazil's view of democracy.

In May 2023, Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva rolled out the red carpet for Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro—a man wanted internationally on a wide range of criminal charges. Lula, however, dismissed these charges as “exaggerated” and just a “narrative.” This in spite of the well-established records of Maduro's violations of democratic constitutional order, the law, and the more than 7 million Venezuelans his regime's abuses and mismanagement of the country. While Maduro previously avoided attending the December 2022 Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) meeting in Buenos Aires out of fear that the independent Argentine judiciary would serve an international arrest warrant against him, he apparently did not have similar fears from Lula's judiciary.

Lula's embrace of Maduro was only the opening salvo of the Brazilian populist leftist's convocation of 12 South American leaders in a gambit to resurrect the failed, fundamentally anti-U.S. alliance UNASUR. Lula's agenda was implicitly, if not explicitly anti-U.S.—he railed against the United States and others for their sanctions and other efforts to restore democracy in Venezuela, but more importantly, called for UNASUR to establish its own currency to liberate the region from dependence on the U.S. dollar.

Eighteen days later, Lula's UNASUR gambit is only the tip of the iceberg of his

Russia to [expand BRICS](#) to include his neighbors, the illiberal Peronist government in Argentina the [anti-U.S. Maduro dictatorship](#), as well as [Iran](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#). The latter would be particularly flush with oil money to bankroll anti-Western causes, even as it deepens its economic collaboration with the [PRC](#). Additionally, Saudi Arabia is increasingly resentful of Washington questioning its record on [Human Rights and Democracy](#).

Lula's attempt to rally the region against U.S. policy and a [dollar-based financial system](#) also comes on the heels of his permission for [Iranian warships to dock](#) in the port of Rio de Janeiro. It also shortly after his [240-person delegation](#) trip to the PRC. While in China, Lula went far beyond talking business, signing [15 MOUs](#) including commitments to a new [USD \\$100 million jointly developed satellite](#) as well as [media](#) and military collaboration. Indeed, literally the day after Lula [embraced](#) Maduro in Brasilia, his government hosted a [delegation of 20 generals and other officers](#) from the People's Liberation Army.

Beyond such collaboration, Lula's embrace of the PRC also includes coordination on the expansion of the explicitly political Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) alliance. Additionally Lula is attempting to insert his government and the PRC in a ["peace initiative" in Ukraine](#) that does [not explicitly include Russian withdrawal](#) from Ukraine. Indeed, Lula brought [Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov](#) to Brasilia to [warmly talk of expanded Russia-Brazil trade](#) at a time when most of the democratic world is

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Lula has criticized the West for helping Ukraine to defend itself against Russian aggression as “prolonging the war.”

Although the United States and Brazil have not always seen eye-to-eye, it is hard to remember a time when the South American giant so unequivocally embraced criminal dictatorships or so forcibly sought to leverage extra-hemispheric U.S. rivals and rally the region against U.S. interests. Nor has there been a time in recent memory when so many of the region’s leaders were politically receptive to such a call. This all comes at a time when many are indirectly bankrolled by the PRC, whose economic might eclipses that of Russia during the height of the Cold War, and whose collaboration with Russia, Iran, and other illiberal U.S. rivals continues to expand.

Lula’s work to create a *de facto* anti-U.S. illiberal alliance of Latin American leftist regimes and extra-hemispheric U.S. rivals further comes at a time in which those countries geographically closest to the United States—including Mexico, the Northern Triangle, and parts of the Caribbean—are moving away from political and security cooperation with the US, and toward a deepen embrace of the PRC.

While the United States must respect Brazil’s democratically elected leadership and sovereign right to make its own foreign policy, Washington must demonstrate that it will not give the Lula regime a pass on embracing internationally wanted dictators, extra-hemispheric rivals. That it will not stand idly by while Brazil actively rallies sympathetic leftist regimes to work against U.S. interests, simply because Lula cooperates with the United States and Europe on climate and social justice issues. Washington should increase coordination with the European Union and like-minded democratic actors on the long-term risks played by Lula’s posture, both despite and because of the positive image he enjoys in Europe.

Washington must make its case more clearly to the Brazilian people and elsewhere in the region. It must explain why embracing criminals, dictators, and extra-hemispheric threats is beneath the dignity of the [democracy](#) and respect for human rights Brazil has long espoused. In U.S.-Brazil bilateral discourse, Washington must make it clear that Lula's behavior puts the good faith, commerce, investment, and other collaboration between the two nations at risk. Yet, Washington must also plan for the worst. Brazil is a great nation and friend of the United States. The tragedy of the path it is now on is avoidable, but only if Washington shows it cares.

Evan Ellis is a Featured Contributor with Global Americans and Latin America Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The views contained herein are his own.

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