

Brazil and the United States: Will President Bolsonaro Bandwagon?

Written by Matias Spektor and Guilherme Fasolin

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MATIAS SPEKTOR AND GUILHERME FASOLIN, NOV 15 2018

Jair Bolsonaro, the retired army captain who wiped the floor with his opponents and won the presidency of Brazil, the world's fifth largest democracy, says he will honor his main foreign-policy campaign pledge: to bandwagon with the United States. There are no doubts that the ideological context of Bolsonaro's rise facilitates his policy of diplomatic alignment with the United States. From the very outset, Bolsonaro has made a big deal of his admiration for the United States. During a campaign rally for the Brazilian diaspora in Miami, he saluted the American flag while his supporters chanted "USA! USA!". Furthermore, he has on many occasions professed his fascination with Donald Trump. "I look to Trump as a role model". The US president has responded in kind. Upon learning of Bolsonaro's win, Trump called to congratulate his new colleague effusively, while John Bolton, the National Security Advisor, hailed Bolsonaro as good news, going on to praise him as a "like-minded" leader. Steve Bannon endorsed the new president of Brazil as a leading figure in the current right-wing, transnational populist wave.

To be sure, Bolsonaro is far more radical and outlandish than Trump – consider for instance his celebration of Brazil's old-time military dictatorship, murdering militias, and the use of torture as a legitimate tool to combat crime. But the way he crafted his campaign message and went about implementing his strategy to reach Brazil's highest office would not have happened in its current form without the power of Trump's example. An outsider to the mainstream of Brazilian politics, Bolsonaro, too, rose to power by denouncing the rot at the heart of the country's political system, screaming against political correctness, shouting abuse at minorities, and attacking newspapers and TV channels who dare to question him. His use of social media has been effective at navigating a political environment marked by polarization and the widespread dissemination of fake news. And Bolsonaro has stated that minorities ought to bow before the majority, offending blacks, women, gays, and indigenous populations in the process. He is an example of how Trumpism has gone global.

Now Bolsonaro says he wants to jump on America's bandwagon. If this were to happen, it would be a radical departure for a country that has for decades had a fairly stable relationship with the United States, but has crafted its diplomacy to keep Washington at arm's length. Can admiration for and emulation of Donald Trump actually sustain a policy of alignment?

Perils of Cheap Talk

Bolsonaro has made a number of policy pledges that, if and when implemented, would denote alignment with the United States. First of all, he is promising to push back against Chinese encroachment in Latin America. This comes at a time when officials in Washington begin to come to terms with the growing competition in their own backyard. Second, the next ruler of Brazil says he will follow Trump's lead in moving the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Whilst on the campaign trail, Bolsonaro also toyed with the idea of withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council and from the Paris accords on climate change. Upon being elected, he has hinted at the possibility of severing diplomatic ties with Cuba. The president elect has also promised a tougher stance on migration, organized crime, and drug trafficking – all of which would in practice entail greater coordination with the United States. Bolsonaro wants to strengthen cooperation in military-to-military relations with the US, and his allies in Congress are already planning to introduce a tougher antiterror law that would be welcomed in Washington. Taken

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as a whole, Bolsonaro's foreign-policy promises signal that he will be a proud member of the informal grouping of right-wing presidents in Latin America who are cozying up to Trump, including Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Iván Duque in Colombia and Sebastián Piñera in Chile.

And yet, so many of these promises could well turn out to be little more than hot air. Leaders make promises during the campaign season as a way of creating an image of themselves for their own electorate and third parties abroad, but they can easily reverse those pledges once they take office.[1] Leaders of all stripes also face powerful incentives to lie. In the context of the Bolsonaro case, there is a risk that the verbal commitment to bandwagoning on display on the campaign trail will be abruptly abandoned or quietly put aside for a less militant stance. The odds of bandwagoning will be inversely proportional to the material and political costs that the new president of Brazil would have to incur in order to make alignment happen. In order to understand under what conditions Bolsonaro stands a chance of actually delivering on the alignment with the US he promises, we need to have a sense of the costs and benefits of such policy choice, and a sense of whether and how the Trump administration would respond to an opening coming from Brazil.

Bandwagoning for Survival

In a new paper we offer a theory of bandwagoning that is anchored both in domestic politics and in international strategic interaction. Whereas past theories of bandwagoning focus either on external threats [2] or state capacity [3] to explain alignment in world politics, we connect the quest for domestic political survival with world politics. We treat bandwagoning as an equilibrium situation in which the leader in a dominant state provides side payments to help the incumbent in a secondary state retain office in return for compliance. This happens when the leader in the dominant state has a geopolitical stake in keeping her fellow incumbent in power *and* when the ruler in the secondary state feels the need to use material and political assistance from abroad to fight – and hopefully win – her battles at home.

What are the implications for Trump and Bolsonaro? If bandwagoning is to become a viable proposition, first, Trump would have to see Bolsonaro as instrumental to defend and advance US geostrategic interests in Latin America. Second, Bolsonaro would have to face a domestic situation in which the loyalty of his winning coalition is questionable to the point of making it worthwhile to comply with US demands in exchange for side payments.

Such scenario is not implausible. From the standpoint of the Trump White House, Bolsonaro can be a valuable asset if (a) the situation in Venezuela further deteriorates and calls in the US Congress for a tougher stance against *chavismo* become more pressing and/or if (b) officials in Washington feel Chinese expansion in Latin America cannot be reversed without the help of Brazil, the largest regional power. In such a scenario, Trump may come to the conclusion that assisting Bolsonaro in his domestic struggles would be profitable from the perspective of US concerns vis-à-vis Venezuela and China. In return for foreign-policy alignment and compliance, Trump would give Bolsonaro a package of goods to strengthen his hand at home.

According to our theory, the situation in which Bolsonaro would be most inclined to agree to a trade of goods for compliance is straightforward: if and when Bolsonaro feels he is losing the minimum number of supporters he needs to keep office. The more intense the threat of abandonment by his winning coalition, the more he will be prompted to jump on Trump's bandwagon. The type of side payments coming from the United States that could be translated into winning-coalition loyalty might include military equipment transfers, facilitated sales to assist in the modernization of Brazil's armed forces, and well-funded training programs in the fields of antinarcotics and antiterrorism – the military and the "law and order" institutions are a key pillar undergirding Bolsonaro's authority and power. Side payments might also include US unilateral decisions to lower import taxes on Brazilian commodity exports, agrobusiness elites being core to Bolsonaro's base in Congress.

And yet, our theory predicts that even when powerful incentives are in place, hammering out the terms of bandwagoning is far from easy. This is because our theory also shows that leaders who try have to confront three types of strategic-interaction problems: signaling, commitment, and bargaining.[4] Signaling is the mechanism through which one actor communicates her motivations to another who is unaware of them (with the effectiveness of signals dependent on how credible they are).[5] In turn, commitment problems occur when actors fail to make

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credible promises or credible threats.[6] Actors can overcome this problem by offering commitment devices, like formal diplomatic agreements or changing domestic law to make foreign alignment easier.[7] Such devices allow leaders to show one another that expressed commitments to alignment are not merely cheap talk. Finally, bargaining is the process through which two leaders distribute the costs and benefits that their alignment can generate. Rulers in international relations may agree on the general utility of alignment but be unable to reach a final agreement on the specific terms of their cooperation. The outcome of bargaining depends on whether one or the two sides have any outside options, such as a viable alternative to a negotiated agreement. Those who have outside options are in a better position to bargain than those operating under less favorable conditions.[8]

In order to get a policy of bandwagoning off the ground, then, Trump and Bolsonaro would have to overcome the problems of signaling, commitment, and bargaining that are so recurrent in strategic interactions. “Political will” alone would not suffice to shape a positive outcome. Also – and crucially –, because neither resolve nor capabilities alone settle the problems of strategic interaction, Trump would not necessarily prevail in defining the precise contours of the negotiation with Bolsonaro. Bandwagoning is not a policy that can be imposed, nor is it one that any given state can achieve on its own. As with tango, it takes two to bandwagon.

Odds of alignment

What is the likelihood of alignment between Trump and Bolsonaro?

Let us start with the United States. US officials have for a while cast China in Latin America as a menace to American interests. Last February, Rex Tillerson said that Latin America “does not need new imperial powers” and that China was “using economic statecraft to pull the region into its orbit.” In October, Mike Pompeo told reporters in the region that “when China comes calling it’s not always to the good of your citizens”. Although China has conducted its Latin American affairs with a great deal of self-restraint, it has been far from impotent. An editorial of the China Daily, the government’s English-language newspaper, warns Bolsonaro – whom it calls the “Tropical Trump” – not to disrupt relations with China. The language could not be clearer: “The economic cost [of disruption] can be backbreaking for the Brazilian economy, which has just emerged from its worst recession in history”. Bolsonaro is unlikely to breach relations with China, but he has sent a clear signal to Beijing that he is committed to renegotiating the terms of the China-Brazil relationship. For anyone wondering how much Bolsonaro is willing to risk, it suffices to point out that during the presidential race he paid a visit to Taiwan alongside three of his sons (who are elected politicians themselves).

As far as Venezuela goes, reports suggest that President Trump has in the past pressed advisors for options for military intervention in Venezuela. He even went public about it. The president is not alone. Florida senator Marco Rubio tweeted last August that the Venezuela crisis should be seen as “a national security threat to the U.S. that must be addressed. The Maduro regime is an organized crime syndicate that traffics drugs onto our streets, is driving a dangerous migratory crisis, and has invited Putin to open military bases”. Since Bolsonaro’s election, the Trump administration has said the new Brazilian president represents a “positive sign” in the fight against what National Security Advisor John Bolton called the “troika of tyranny” (Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua). What US-Brazil cooperation on the Venezuela file would entail in practice remains unclear. Yet there is no doubt that Bolsonaro is someone White House officials see as like-minded today, and a potential ally for tomorrow. Brazil does not have the inclination or capabilities to hurt *chavismo* through military intervention. But there are a range of measures that Brasília can take to apply pressure short of coercive diplomacy. The most obvious would be to condition Brazil’s own relations with China to Beijing suspending the lifeline they currently grant the Venezuelan regime.

From the standpoint of Brazil, too, bandwagoning might be an attractive proposition in the near future. Whereas Bolsonaro is now basking in his electoral victory, as time goes on and he introduces unpopular reform policies, the comfort he now feels will begin to fade. Indeed, many predict that early in 2019 he will feel the ground shaking below his feet as his winning coalition begins to pay the cost of the president’s declining popularity. It is worth noticing that Brazil’s brand of multiparty presidentialism is particularly prone to political backstabbing.[9] Although winning coalitions are an unfaithful bunch across the board, in Brazil they have powerful incentives to abandon an incumbent who does not deliver the goods. Consider the fact that half of all elected presidents since the country established

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universal suffrage three decades ago were impeached after congressmen abandoned them for a more appealing challenger. Given Brazil's current struggles with economic decay, unemployment, citizen insecurity, and endemic corruption, it is not inconceivable that Bolsonaro will soon find himself in a position of needing all the help he can get – including that which may come from the United States.

In sum, if it ever happens, bandwagoning will not be the result of mutual sympathy or identification between Bolsonaro and Trump. Rather, if it occurs at all, alignment will result from the successful trading of compliance for side payments to help Bolsonaro face his domestic battles. With growing US concerns over Venezuela in turmoil and China expanding its reach in Latin America, the conditions might soon become ripe for it to happen.

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