



## **US poised to strengthen ties with Brazil's 'Trump of the Tropics'**

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Brazil's newly elected president, Jair Bolsonaro, is positioning himself to be a strong ally of President Trump, a move that could bolster U.S. influence in South America as the region's largest economy tries to shed its socialist past.

Bolsonaro, a right-wing populist and former military officer, has praised Trump and echoed his rhetoric against "fake news," China and criminals. Trump returned the favor on Saturday, congratulating Bolsonaro for his electoral victory, saying the United States and Brazil will "work closely together on Trade, Military and everything else!"

The potential for strengthened ties between the U.S. and Brazil — the two largest countries, by population, in the Western Hemisphere — is very real, according to Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a Latin America expert at the Cato Institute in Washington.

"I think relations with the U.S. under the Trump administration are very likely to improve significantly," said Hidalgo.

Brazil has been moving away from the leftist bloc led by Venezuela and Cuba ever since 2016, when the centrist President Michel Temer took over after the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff, whose Workers' Party had been in power for 15 years.

The ideological shift comes at a good time for the Trump administration's Latin America policy team.

This month, the Senate cleared Kimberly Breier as assistant secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and the White House appointed Mauricio Claver-Carone in September to head Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council.

With a full policy team in place, the administration is poised to further isolate Venezuela by leveraging an increasingly friendly Brazil, a long-standing alliance with Colombia, a personal

friendship between Trump and Argentine President Mauricio Macri, and improving relations with Ecuador.

“We share key regional security and economic interests with Brazil and look forward to working closely with President-elect Bolsonaro to strengthen the relationship between our nations,” a senior administration official said.

Bolsonaro, known as an economic nationalist, is displaying some openness to improved commercial relations with the United States.

His choice for defense minister, former Gen. Augusto Heleno, told Reuters on Monday that the incoming administration has a positive view of a proposed merger between Boeing and Brazilian aircraft manufacturer Embraer.

The merger would require approval by the Brazilian government.

Bolsonaro's choice of advisers is also stoking hopes that the new government could reverse some of Brazil's more restrictive trade policies.

"The private sector is very optimistic that finally we could get a free trade agreement between the two countries," said Gabrielle Trebat, regional director for Brazil and the Southern Cone at consulting firm McLarty Associates.

Still, trade with the United States is unlikely to be a top policy agenda for Bolsonaro, as the two countries are competitors in various markets, such as soybeans and corn.

"It remains to be seen what would be the areas where we could find common ground with the United States on trade," said Hidalgo. "These economies are not complementary when it comes to trade."

"For Bolsonaro, the fiscal situation is what really needs to get addressed," said Trebat, adding that corruption, internal security and crime are also at the top of the agenda.

Because of his harsh rhetoric on crime, Bolsonaro has often been compared to Trump, but Hidalgo said he avoids that parallel.

"The more sophisticated comparison would be with [Philippine President] Rodrigo Duterte," said Hidalgo.

Thousands have been killed in Duterte's anti-narcotics crackdown, and Trump's good relationship with Duterte and other strongmen has become a consistent line of attack for Democrats.

When Bolsonaro does turn his attention to foreign affairs, he and Trump are likely to find common ground on international hotspots like Israel and Venezuela.

"Bolsonaro is very pro-Israel," said Hidalgo. "I wouldn't be surprised if one of his first moves was to move the embassy to Jerusalem."

Trebat said Bolsonaro's regional foreign policy will distance the country from Venezuela and Cuba.

"We can expect a much tougher line from Bolsonaro on addressing the migration crisis [in Venezuela]," she said.

Trump's priorities in Latin America, for the time being, will likely remain focused on migration from Central America, a region with few historical ties to Brazil.

Still, the Bolsonaro presidency is expected to be a net positive for Trump, especially compared to previous Brazilian governments that kept their distance from the United States.

"As long as Brazil remains firmly committed to Israel, as long as Brazil takes a stand against China, if Brazil withdraws from the Paris accord, that will all be music to the Trump administration's ears," said Hidalgo.