

Opinion **US foreign policy**

## Trump — emperor of Brazil

The US president's sympathy for disgraced strongman Bolsonaro is part of an alarming pattern

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Donald Trump in 2020 with then Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who is currently awaiting trial for his alleged backing of a violent attempt to overthrow Brazil's 2022 presidential election © Bloomberg

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Sagging in the polls? Hurtling towards electoral oblivion? Canada's Mark Carney, Australia's Anthony Albanese and now Brazil's Luis Inácio Lula da Silva have a fix for you. Get Donald Trump to launch a trade war on your country. Few things rally voters around the flag quicker than a superpower assault on your bottom line. Though the Vatican is no trading entity, America's first pontiff, Robert Francis Prevost, might also credit Trump with his election. Trump and the late Pope Francis, Pope Leo XIV's predecessor, were not mutual admirers.

In Trump's playbook, however, Brazil is in a category of its own. Citing the prosecution of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's last president, Trump earlier this month vowed 50 per cent tariffs on the western hemisphere's second largest democracy unless it cancelled the strongman's trial. A few days later, Marco Rubio, US secretary of state, slapped a US visa ban on Brazil's supreme court justice, Alexandre de Moraes, who is presiding over Bolsonaro's hearing.

Rubio's move qualifies as one of those "pinch me" moments. The former Republican senator built his brand around evangelism for [US](#) democratic values and the rule of law. Now he is punishing a sister democracy's legal system for enforcing the law. Bolsonaro, it should be recalled, awaits trial for his alleged backing of a violent attempt to overthrow Brazil's 2022 presidential election, which Lula won. Bolsonaro's failed putsch took place a year and two days after Trump's similar alleged democratic reversal after his defeat to Joe Biden.

The Trump-Bolsonaro parallel is uncanny. The difference is that Bolsonaro is being held to account. In case anyone misses the point, Rubio last week instructed US diplomats to "avoid opining on the fairness or integrity of an electoral process, its legitimacy, or the democratic values of the country in question". To be fair to Rubio, America's preachiness has often boomeranged. The world pays attention to what America does, not what it says. But if there is a liberal democratic beacon nowadays in Rubio's hemisphere, it comes from Brasília and Ottawa. For the time being, Washington has counted itself out.

What are America's trading partners — democracies and non-democracies alike — to make of this? My colleague, Alan Beattie, aptly observes that when it comes to Trump on trade "nobody knows anything". Trump indeed prides himself on his unpredictability. But two patterns are nevertheless visible. The first is that even on Trump's mercantilist terms, his actions make no sense. America has a trade surplus with [Brazil](#). Lula's country should thus have been exempt from Trump's "liberation day" tariffs.

Should Trump have a non-economic motive in mind, such as helping a fellow strongman, his logic still self-cancels. Among the chief victims of a 50 per cent US tariff on Brazil would be the country's cattle ranchers and coffee exporters. Both these sectors are Bolsonaro strongholds. Trump is thus boosting Lula's standing, not Bolsonaro's. It is no surprise that Lula's fortunes have been restored. Nor is it a surprise that Lula complains that Trump was elected to be US president "not . . . emperor of the world".

The second pattern to Trump's trade policy is imperial incontinence. In his mind, tariffs are a beautiful thing. They give him leverage over the rest of the world's access to America's vast consumer market. To wit, Turkey's strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has to contend with a mere 10 per cent Trump tariff. This is in spite of the fact that the US has a trade deficit with Turkey, unlike with Brazil. That Erdoğan has recently [jailed several opposition mayors](#), including Istanbul's Ekrem İmamoğlu, his likely presidential opponent, is no sin in Trump's eyes. Erdogan's shift to autocracy may even have caused the US president to look more favourably on Turkey.

As is often the case with Trump, his impulse contains a fraction of underlying merit. US democracy promotion has a patchy record. Shifting Washington to neutral would be a respectable move, which could even prove more effective in spreading the democratic example. But Trump is in the business of autocracy promotion. Fellow democracies are understandably alarmed.

The loudest complaints, however, should be coming from Trump's protectionist advisers. Should they find their voice, they might point out that Trump is fouling up his own agenda. By their lights, tariffs are about building up US domestic capacity. Trump, by contrast, is using that tool for whatever takes his fancy. And boy does he fancy strongmen.

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*This article has been amended to correct the date of Brazil's presidential election*

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