

DEBATES

# Recognition More Than Friendship: The Bicentennial of US-Brazil Relations, 1824–2024

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## Abstract

Marking the bicentennial of US-Brazil relations, this article assesses the fraught inception of the bilateral relationship and where it stands today. The United States, fueled by the ideals of its revolution, viewed itself in the nineteenth century as a beacon of democratic principles beset by powerful European discontents. Brazil's position as an independent nation with deep ties to Portugal bred suspicion. The promulgation of Brazil's 1824 Constitution offered a modicum of common ground, creating space for a political rapprochement culminating in formal recognition. The relationship thereafter was proper but distant. Brazil today is not a rival of the United States, but some worry that it has not done enough to distance itself from Washington's antagonists. Indeed, while friendship and commonality have been common bywords of leaders in both nations, suspicion and ambivalence have been ever-present. If anything, the surprise is that both countries remain as close as they are today.

**Keywords:** Brazil; bicentennial; Dom Pedro I; Monroe Doctrine; Lula

## Resumo

Marcando o bicentenário das relações Brasil-EUA, este ensaio avalia o difícil início do relacionamento bilateral e onde ele se encontra atualmente. Os Estados Unidos, impulsionados pelos ideais de seu processo revolucionário, viam-se no século XIX como um bastião de princípios democráticos ameaçados por poderosos descontentes europeus. A posição do Brasil, uma nação independente com fortes laços com Portugal, gerou desconfiança em Washington. A promulgação da Constituição de 1824 ofereceu um ponto mínimo de convergência, criando espaço para uma aproximação política que culminou no reconhecimento formal. A partir daí, a relação foi correta, porém distante. Hoje, o Brasil não é rival dos Estados Unidos, mas alguns comentaristas se preocupam que não tenha feito o suficiente para se distanciar dos antagonistas dos Estados Unidos. De fato, enquanto amizade e afinidade foram palavras comuns entre os líderes de ambos os países, desconfiança e ambivalência estiveram sempre presentes. Se há algo surpreendente, é que ambos os países permaneçam tão próximos como são hoje.

**Palavras-chave:** Brasil; bicentenário; Dom Pedro I; Doutrina Monroe; Lula

In early 2023, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, recently inaugurated to an unprecedented third term as head of Latin America's largest nation, visited the White House. After discussing shared priorities like the environment and democracy with President Joe Biden, Lula invited his interlocutor to visit Brazil. A joint statement released after the meeting

declared that “the two leaders committed to broaden their dialogue and to pursue deeper cooperation in the lead-up to the celebration of the bicentennial of US-Brazil diplomatic relations in 2024.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the year after Lula’s visit to Washington, Brazil and the United States celebrated two hundred years of formal bilateral ties. Marking the occasion, Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira (2024, 9) wrote: “One of the first countries to recognize the independence of Brazil, on May 26, 1824, the United States established itself, throughout this period, as an undisputed partner of Brazil in the international community.” Both nations share a “complex” history, Vieira asserted, adding that it would always be in his country’s interest to maintain a “mature, balanced relationship, based on mutual respect and on an equal footing, in which we seek to understand the North American positions on global issues, also reserving the right to present our different points of view” (10). This was essentially Lula’s attitude. He got along well with Biden in public. They complimented each other’s backgrounds and introduced a few joint initiatives, particularly around labor, even if not a whole lot came of them. They disagreed vehemently on certain issues but refused to allow them to hinder their broader working relationship (Biller et al. 2023). This diplomatic tone, proper, if sometimes distant, was hardly unprecedented. As Matias Spektor has observed, “Brazil has been very cooperative with the United States, yet this is a relationship that never really took off—even when the two sides have a lot of interests in common and they share a similar view of what’s going on.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite evidently holding each other in high regard, Biden and Lula represent nations with interests that often overlap but frequently do not. The distance between the largest American democracies is fraught with high stakes. In the twenty-first century, would Brazil swivel decisively away from the United States toward China, Russia, and other US rivals, as some alarmists predicted? Could Brazil’s diplomatic and commercial dealings with countries hostile to Washington one day endanger US national security? What Brazil would do on the world stage mattered enormously for the United States in 2024, just as it always has. This is because Brazil’s sheer size and political independence frequently enable it to create its own gravity in international affairs. It trades widely with countries of every stripe, rarely engages in armed conflict, and possesses a large internal market and abundant natural resources that attract sustained foreign attention.

From its earliest days as an independent nation, the United States worried about its inability to control events in the Western Hemisphere (Grandin 2021, 1–8). “America was an aspiration, an errand, and an obligation,” Greg Grandin (2019, 11) has written, “born out of violent Christian schism and Europe’s interminable religious and imperial conflicts.” Safeguarding it meant forcefully exerting political control over as much territory as possible. As much as anything, this imperative fueled westward expansion across the continental United States. At the same time, the rest of the continent loomed ominously as a site of potential peril. The rise to superpower status that began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated in the twentieth unquestionably bestowed the United States with awesome capabilities, but it still cannot simply dictate the course that a large, diverse, self-sustaining democracy like Brazil should take—which is not to say it doesn’t try (see, e.g., Bandeira 2010a, 2010b).

This article uses the occasion of the bilateral bicentennial to consider US-Brazil ties in two moments, 1824 and 2024, and in so doing, it presents an up-to-date framing for where

<sup>1</sup> “Joint Statement Following the Meeting Between President Biden and President Lula,” White House, February 10, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/10/joint-statement-following-the-meeting-between-president-biden-and-president-lula/>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis, interview with Margaret Myers and Matias Spektor, “Why Brazil’s Relationship with the United States Isn’t Taking Off,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 24, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/08/why-brazils-relationship-with-the-united-states-isnt-taking-off?lang=en>.

the relationship stands today. First, I examine the earliest days of the relationship, the period between the declaration of Brazilian independence in 1822 and the establishment of formal ties with the United States in 1824. Then, I discuss more recent history, identifying reasons for lingering mistrust in 2024. Drawing on existing scholarship, contemporary periodicals, and government records, the central claim here is that despite a generally favorable disposition over time, the bilateral relationship has frequently been strained by the very factors that cause it to endure. Henry M. Brackenridge, who led a special mission to Brazil in 1817 at the behest of President James Monroe, expressed the conflicted view that US policymakers held of Brazil at the time. “As an American, I cannot but feel a kind of pride in looking forward to the lofty destinies of this new world,” he wrote in 1819. He concluded, however, that “when we consider the vast capacities and resources of Brazil, it is not visionary to say, that this empire is destined to be our rival” (McCann 2013, 23–24).<sup>3</sup> Proximity—in geographic, economic, and political terms—has made Brazil a critical partner for the US, and vice versa. It has also sometimes proved a liability.

In taking stock of the US–Brazil relationship over time, it becomes clear that even more than Washington’s “friendship”—a term leaders frequently invoke but that is insubstantial in the realm of international affairs—Brazil has sought recognition of its ultimate right to pursue its interests as determined by Brazilians even when doing so is inconvenient for the United States. Lula, for example, has at times been castigated for a supposedly anti-American inclination, a misreading belied by the fact that he has always pursued a robust working agenda with his US counterparts.<sup>4</sup> Rather, what has annoyed the Brazilian president is the implication that he might jeopardize his standing with Washington by engaging countries with which the United States, for its own reasons, is not on good terms.<sup>5</sup> But this dynamic is not just about Lula. The historically salient nub of the issue is the extent to which the United States accepts divergent geopolitical orientations in the Western Hemisphere. As Peter H. Smith (2013) and Gregory Weeks and Michael Allison (2023) have asserted in their own ways, historical assessments of US–Latin America relations should not simply assess whether and why Washington’s priorities for the region have or have not been met. Rather, they must consider complicated dialectical relationships—behaviors that, for different reasons, build or undermine trust—and the competing interests that compel individuals to action. The bicentennial of US–Brazil relations offers a fresh opportunity to do just that.

### **A dubious sovereignty and an unproven monarch—1824**

The promises and ravages of the age of revolution mostly bypassed Brazil. For many reasons, Portuguese America did not experience a great anticolonial insurrection of the kind that forged a unified nation of thirteen disparate North American colonies or the kind that carved most of Spanish America into multiple upstart republics (Taylor 2016).<sup>6</sup> In fact, the common story holds that Portugal’s American colony broke away painlessly on September 7, 1822, after months of transatlantic agita over where the crown prince, who,

<sup>3</sup> Roughly one hundred years after Brackenridge’s voyage to Brazil, historian William R. Shepherd observed that while no nation in the Americas had yet equaled or surpassed the United States “in all that makes for international prestige,” it remained “within the range of possibilities” that one someday could (Shepherd 1924, 51).

<sup>4</sup> For an example of such criticism, see O’Grady (2023). For recent discussions of purported anti-Americanism in Lula’s foreign policy, see Ellis (2023); Sanches (2023); and Winter (2023).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, his insistence that a state visit to China not be interpreted as a slight against the United States, as mentioned in “Lula diz que relação do Brasil com a China não é ‘capaz de criar arranhão’ com os Estados Unidos,” *G1*, April 14, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2023/04/14/na-china-lula-diz-que-brasil-nao-precisa-romper-com-nenhum-pais-para-melhorar-tem-que-fazer-acordo-com-todos-paises.ghtml>.

<sup>6</sup> On the revolutionary implications of Spanish American independence, see Kinsbruner (1994).

thanks to Napoleon, happened to have grown up on the wrong side of the Atlantic, should live.<sup>7</sup> Infuriated by demands that he return to Portugal right away or face punishment at the hands of the liberal Cortes in Lisbon, Dom Pedro famously declared independence on the banks of the Ipiranga River near São Paulo. “From today on, our relations with them are finished,” the first Brazilian monarch is said to have declared, adding, “I want nothing more from the Portuguese government, and I proclaim Brazil forevermore separated from Portugal” (de Oliveira 2019). Thus was the colonial bond severed.<sup>8</sup>

Within months, the new country had assured its nationhood “beyond all doubt,” as the historian Leslie Bethell (1989, 37) put it, “while at the same time avoiding civil war and territorial disintegration.” Alan K. Manchester (1951, 80) seventy years ago synthesized this traditional, serene narrative: “Independence, in the final analysis, was won not on the field of battle but by diplomacy.” Although not wrong per se, this story elides a few things. First, the Cortes in Lisbon refused to recognize Brazilian independence. As far as the Portuguese parliament was concerned, the new Brazilian monarchy was “a government *de facto*, and not *de jure*,” and all who followed it were to be considered criminals “unless when compelled by force.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, the traditional narrative overlooks the loss of many lives, particularly in the Northeast of Brazil. On the day of Brazil’s formal declaration of independence, for example, the *Alexandria Gazette & Advertiser* reported on a clash that had occurred months earlier in Salvador, Bahia, “between the inhabitants and European troops, the Brazilians insisting on a government of their own choice.” According to the paper, Prince Dom Pedro had summoned for the engagement “10,000 stand of arms, 100 officers, 3000 men, a frigate and three corvettes, from Rio.” Some three hundred Brazilians, “principally citizens,” were reportedly killed fighting the Portuguese.<sup>10</sup> In October, *The Winchester Gazette* reported on a letter from Bahia noting that “there is little doing but fighting or preparing for it.”<sup>11</sup> Newspapers in the United States reported anxiously on bellicose events in the Brazilian Northeast for months. Independence may have been a less violent affair for Brazil than other New World colonies, but it was not bloodless (Pimenta 2022).

As the dust settled, fortune shone upon independent Brazil. An observer writing in *The Eclectic Review* in 1824 raved about the prospects of the new nation:

Its revenue, which, in 1818, amounted to little more than fourteen millions of francs, had risen, in 1820, to sixty-one millions, and in 1823, to sixty-six millions, and it is rapidly augmenting. Possessed of from a thousand to twelve hundred leagues of coast, with the finest ports in the world, an immense interior navigation, excellent fisheries, and a geographical position peculiarly advantageous . . . a territory capable of one day affording sustenance to a population of a hundred millions, with abundance of the finest timber for ship-building,—with such immense natural advantages, nothing but a bad government can hinder this rising empire from becoming one of the greatest maritime states in the New World.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A lengthy two-part account of Brazilian independence published in a US newspaper in 1824 concluded that “if foreigners had not intermingled themselves with, and misled the Brazilian people, it would have been effected without one violent deed,” suggesting that this view is anything but recent. “Brazil,” *Alexandria Gazette & Advertiser*, August 31, 1824.

<sup>8</sup> The bicentennial of Brazilian independence in 2022 was marked by the publication of myriad books, special events, and other observances. For diverse academic perspectives on the occasion, see *Resgate: Revista Interdisciplinar de Cultura*, 30 (2022), and *Revista Historiar*, “As Independências do Brasil: Atores, conflitos e projetos,” 14 (2022).

<sup>9</sup> “Latest from Europe,” *New Hampshire Gazette*, November 19, 1822.

<sup>10</sup> “From Rio,” *Alexandria Gazette & Advertiser*, September 7, 1822.

<sup>11</sup> “Brazil,” *Winchester Gazette*, October 19, 1822.

<sup>12</sup> Review of *L’Indépendance de l’Empire du Brésil*, in *Eclectic Review* 22 (July–December 1824).

Given these auspicious features and the future prosperity they augured, the course that independent Brazil would chart for itself on the world stage was the subject of intense foreign speculation. The uncertain aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) loomed large.

As Brazil and the United States mark two centuries of bilateral ties in 2024, it is worth noting first that the anniversary is something of a misnomer. Condé Raguet, a Pennsylvania state legislator appointed consul to Brazil by President James Monroe in 1821, arrived in Rio de Janeiro on September 8, 1822. He was elevated to *chargé d'affaires* upon news of independence, ensuring that Washington never lacked formal representation before authorities in Rio de Janeiro. In the days after the break with Portugal, the government rounded up for deportation individuals known to oppose Brazilian independence, per *The New Hampshire Gazette*, while “every disposition was manifested by the people, to maintain a friendly intercourse with the United States.”<sup>13</sup> *The Alexandria Herald* likewise reported that “Brazil looks to the United States for friendship.”<sup>14</sup> Although two years would pass before Monroe accepted José Silvestre Rebello’s credentials as Brazil’s first ambassador in Washington, the bilateral relationship could hardly be said to have begun in 1824.

The second, more interesting dynamic to consider is the wariness with which the US handled Brazil in the wake of independence. Why did it take two years for Washington to recognize Rio? Brazil craved international recognition of its independence, but its chosen form of government was a primary sticking point (Krause and Soares 2022, 54–55). The lack of alignment on fundamental questions like trade and political culture fed a sense of caution in Washington vis-à-vis Brazil. With Napoleon’s defeat, antirepublican forces in Europe coalesced into the Holy Alliance, which threatened to reimpose Old World imperialism in the Americas. From Washington’s perspective, it was unclear where Dom Pedro I stood on this pressing matter of geopolitical concern. How Brazil would position itself in a shifting global order worried Monroe and his successor, John Quincy Adams. It is no small thing that the United States was among the first countries to officially recognize Brazil’s independence (Argentina established formal ties with its neighbor in 1823). Yet the delay in its recognition is telling, stemming from the fact that leaders in Washington and Rio held divergent ideas about what Brazil was, what it should be, and how it should act in the hemisphere and beyond.

In an era of westward expansion, it would be an overstatement to say the attentions of US policymakers were consumed by the fate of Brazil (Rosi 2017, 268). To the extent that the former Portuguese colony was considered, however, it was with cautious trepidation. The adoption of the monarchical form of government and the absolutist tendencies of Dom Pedro I generated resistance to the recognition of Brazilian independence by other American nations recently freed from the colonial yoke. In Europe, for its part, conservatives opposed recognizing the independence of any former colony. Viewed from either side of the Atlantic, Brazil was in a unique and unreliable position. Which direction it would take in its international affairs was ultimately as pressing a question for Washington in 1824 as it is in 2024.

Napoleon’s invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1807 triggered a series of independence movements in Spanish American colonies inspired by the American and French revolutions and emboldened by the weakened grip of the Spanish crown. It also forced the Portuguese royal family to flee to Brazil, establishing Rio de Janeiro as the seat of its empire. Following Napoleon’s final defeat in 1815, European powers, particularly Austria, Prussia, and Russia, formed the Holy Alliance in the hope of restoring the prerevolutionary political order in Europe and suppress any further revolutionary movements. Monroe in

<sup>13</sup> “From the Brazils,” *New Hampshire Gazette*, November 12, 1822.

<sup>14</sup> “Events at Rio de Janeiro,” *Alexandria Herald*, November 15, 1822.

1821 asserted publicly that Spain could not succeed in reconquering its former American colonies and thus should not try. It nevertheless seemed plausible in the years that followed that the Holy Alliance might intervene in Latin America to help the former Iberian powers reclaim their lost colonies. The United States, a guarded yet increasingly assertive nascent power, looked warily to its south. Was the Brazilian Empire a lifeline for Old World absolutism or a herald of New World self-determination?

Alphonse de Beauchamp, a French writer who in 1815 had published a history of Brazil, envisioned the former. His 1824 tract *L'Indépendance de l'Empire du Brésil, présentée aux monarques européens* distilled the antirepublican, counterrevolutionary case for Brazilian independence, a perspective that gravely concerned the United States. Lamenting the rise of republicanism in the Americas and presenting the birth of the Brazilian Empire as a conservative victory, Beauchamp (1824, xi) pins his hopes on the former Portuguese colony: "Let it be recollected, that the United States of America, in establishing their independence, inoculated us with the fever of democracy, unhappily imported into Europe. The contrary will be the case of Brazil, which has preserved the monarchical regime and the hereditary principle. What immense advantages for an ancient race! The example of Brazil will be of great weight beyond the Atlantic, and perhaps, among us. May the fruits of Brazil, grafted on the tree of the European monarchy, be appreciated and enjoyed in both hemispheres!" Insisting that "the reconciliation between father and son will make more of an impression on Brazil than all the political forces and all the armaments of Europe," Beauchamp (1824, 118) argued for the immediate recognition of Brazilian independence by the heads of Europe. José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva, a closer adviser to Dom Pedro I and the first prime minister of independent Brazil, also evoked familial bonds as he sought to "keep the entire large Portuguese family politically united under one head" (Krause and Soares 2022, 55). For the historians Thiago Krause and Rodrigo Goyena Soares (2022, 55), this underscored the dynastic aspirations—rather than purely national ones—of the Brazilian monarchy. "Brazil can and must be the monarchical safeguard of the new hemisphere and old Europe," Beauchamp (1824, xii) concluded. Like many other conservatives in this period, he dismissed the United States as a worthy example of self-rule (Sexton 2011, 147).

The fact that Brazil had not embraced republicanism was cause for concern in its early relationship with the United States. Some of Monroe's advisers were reticent about the Empire's intimate links to Europe, and others argued that US recognition of Brazil was an important demonstration that Washington could work with governments organized differently than its own (Manning 1918, 291). Fears regarding Brazil's monarchical orientation transcended the halls of government. An unsigned piece in the *American Watchman and Delaware Advertiser*, for example, noted critically that Dom Pedro I's statements indicated Brazil might follow the example of Mexico, where Agustín de Iturbide, a former royalist general turned patriot, became Emperor after a successful coalition brought about independence from Spain.<sup>15</sup> Iturbide's reign lasted less than a year, marking a brief and turbulent monarchical episode in Mexico's early history that highlighted the potential for instability and foreign intervention in the former Iberian colonies. This concern reflected a common misapprehension that events in Mexico mirrored events elsewhere in Latin America and vice versa.

Still, for those worried about the possibility of European interference in the Americas, Pedro had not done enough to separate himself from the royal tradition he was born into. Responding harshly to Pedro's August 6, 1822 manifesto—effectively Brazil's declaration of independence—the aforementioned item in *The American Watchman and Delaware Advertiser* noted: "The Prince Regent talks largely of his *legitimate* authority and speaks of the king being a prisoner at Lisbon, without that free will which any 'legitimate constitution ought

<sup>15</sup> *American Watchman and Delaware Advertiser*, November 8, 1822.



not to deny to a true monarch.’ This language is totally inconsistent with the rights of the people, and what we are inclined to think the Brazilians will not approve of, if, as has been so often stated, they are attached to liberal constitutional principles.”<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding “some just reasons of complaint on the part of the Brazilians,” *The Alexandria Gazette & Advertiser* was similarly disappointed by Pedro’s professed orientation in the manifesto: “Above all we are very sorry to remark therein several expressions, which appear to be borrowed from, if not indirectly dictated by the Holy Alliance” as well as terms “which we think entirely unbecoming of a people, who pretend to liberal constitutional principles.”<sup>17</sup> Referring to the emperor’s correspondence with his father, the king of Portugal, another newspaper asserted flatly that “we should take [Pedro’s] letter to be the work of some Representative of the Holy Alliance.”<sup>18</sup>

Driven by concerns over the designs of the Holy Alliance and, to a lesser extent, the British, Monroe declared in his annual message to Congress in December 1823 that the Western Hemisphere was henceforth closed to further European colonization.<sup>19</sup> Any attempt by European powers to intervene in the affairs of newly independent American states would be viewed as a threat to the United States. This was not a novel principle in Washington. Indeed, as William L. Scruggs (1894, 13), envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to both Colombia and Venezuela in the 1880s, argued, the ideas undergirding the Monroe Doctrine “were the logical sequence of the Declaration of Independence” and had been present in the country’s earliest foreign policy formulations. At a delicate geopolitical moment, however, Monroe’s message resonated clearly: the United States would not tolerate European interference in the Americas.

Despite concerns among some US observers that the Brazilian monarchy was too close to its European progenitor to be fully reliable, Dom Pedro I’s government was the first South American nation to publicly support the Monroe Doctrine (Teixeira 2014, 118).<sup>20</sup> Monroe’s “immortal and invaluable” address to Congress articulating a novel enduring principle of US foreign policy “was printed in handsome style in Portuguese at Pernambuco, in an Extraordinary Gazette,” reported *The New Hampshire Gazette* on May 11, 1824.<sup>21</sup>

In November 1823, Caesar Augustus Rodney, a former senator from Delaware appointed ambassador to Argentina, arrived in Rio de Janeiro en route to his new diplomatic post. A minor diplomatic incident followed when local authorities insisted on inspecting Rodney’s baggage. Rodney insisted this was inappropriate considering that he was on official diplomatic business and that Brazil was not the final destination of his belongings. Condé Raguet, the first US ambassador to Brazil, was able to smooth things over before presiding over a dinner for Rodney with other US citizens residing in the Brazilian capital. Several toasts were reported, a few in particular standing out as exemplars of how US officials saw themselves, their country, and the situation of the hemisphere:

*Our country*—The first to proclaim to the world, that the sons of America were born free.

<sup>16</sup> *American Watchman and Delaware Advertiser*, November 8, 1822.

<sup>17</sup> “From South America,” *Alexandria Gazette & Advertiser*, November 2, 1822.

<sup>18</sup> *Massachusetts Spy*, November 27, 1822.

<sup>19</sup> Despite Britain not being part of the Holy Alliance, the US feared it might tacitly support intervention or seek to maintain its own colonial interests in the Americas, potentially clashing with US ambitions and its desire to see an independent, republican Western Hemisphere (Lawson 1922, 77). On US-British competition in Latin America in the 1820s, see also Sexton (2011, 64).

<sup>20</sup> See also “Noticias estrangeiras,” *Imperio do Brasil—Diário do Governo*, January 2, 1824, 241–242.

<sup>21</sup> “Extract of a letter from an intelligent Brazilian, received by a late arrival at Marblehead, dated Pernambuco, 29th March,” *New Hampshire Gazette*, May 11, 1824.

*The President of the United States*—A Chief who owes his title to the only legitimate source of power—the People.

*The independent states of South America*—May a common feeling of liberty guide their public course, and unite them with their brethren of the North, in resisting foreign influence, foreign interference, and foreign invasion.<sup>22</sup>

The first and third of these are clear enough, underscoring the example of the United States for other newly independent nations and urging hemispheric unanimity against European recolonization. The second is likely a not-so-subtle dig at Dom Pedro I, whose authority did not derive from any expressed manifestation of popular will.

The emperor's purportedly absolutist tendencies were frequently referenced in articles about Brazil in the US press between 1822 and 1824. As Brazilians deliberated over the creation of a foundational charter, *The Massachusetts Spy and Worcester Advertiser* reported with alarm that Dom Pedro I, "in imitation of Napoleon," forcefully shuttered the assembly tasked with writing a Constitution. Surely, per this account, this lack of commitment to liberal principles and accountability presaged "the speedy return of the Brazilian *Empire* to a Portuguese *Viceroyalty*."<sup>23</sup> Civil war threatened to break out, particularly in the Brazil's Northeast, as several US papers reported. "The conclusion may be," as one put it, "that the imperial power of Pedro 1st, was tottering in the northern provinces of Brazil, and that Iturbide's destiny is coming fast upon him." The same dispatch concluded that "the New World hates and loathes European dominion of any sort; they have suffered long enough under its selfish and cruel policy, and will and must be governed after the Washington federal system."<sup>24</sup>

The emperor eventually gave Brazil a Constitution, which more than anything paved the way for formal US recognition. Issued on March 25, 1824, the charter established a separation of powers, dividing government into legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Unlike the United States, it established Catholicism as the nation's official religion and created a fourth branch of government known as the moderating power that gave the emperor the discretionary power to intervene in the other three branches. There was a voting system, but it was highly restrictive, limiting suffrage to a small segment of wealthy and educated male citizens, effectively excluding the vast majority of the population from political participation. While it was hardly a democratic document, the fact that Brazil had a constitution reassured US observers about its essentially American character and independent orientation.<sup>25</sup> American newspapers recognized the promulgation of the Brazilian constitution as a milestone. "Don [*sic*] Pedro has granted a constitution to the Brazilians," one paper noted, "and the government is to be considered hereafter as a *limited* and not *absolute* monarchy."<sup>26</sup>

Several other papers reported that the Brazilian chargé d'affaires in Washington was to swear an oath to the new charter before a public magistrate. He was then to ensure that all Brazilians residing in the United States did the same. Recording the impressions of an American naval captain recently in Rio, the paper noted that the sheer amount of activity and foreign ships in the Brazilian capital raised some concern—"the people fear the Emperor may intend to restore the country to Portugal"—but the tenor of the news report was no longer one of frank suspicion toward the Brazilian government. If anything, the captain recounted being asked more than once why the US did not have a naval base in Brazil considering extensive trade opportunities and that "the times were so precarious."

<sup>22</sup> "The Brazils," *The Wilmingtonian*, January 22, 1824.

<sup>23</sup> *Massachusetts Spy and Worcester Advertiser*, January 7, 1824.

<sup>24</sup> "Extract of a letter from an intelligent Brazilian."

<sup>25</sup> "Brazil," *Richmond Enquirer*, May 6, 1824.

<sup>26</sup> "Latest from Brazil," *American Watchman and Delaware Advertiser*, May 7, 1824.



He also noted that a US citizen residing in Rio had gifted the emperor, through Consul Raguet, a collection of North American seeds to be planted in the botanical garden, presumably as a gesture of goodwill.<sup>27</sup>

The creation of the 1824 Constitution helped to make the Brazilian political experience intelligible to Americans who otherwise paid very little attention to affairs so far away. It signaled alignment with the trajectory the US had set for itself and that it envisioned for others, namely, a political break from an archaic ancien régime followed by the establishment of new, more responsive institutions anchored by a legal charter that assured the basic rights of citizens (Krause and Soares 2022, 29). “The late revolution in Brazil terminated in the establishment of a constitutional monarchy at the head of which is the graceless son and heir of the present King of Portugal,” *The Fincastle Mirror* reported with more approval than scorn. “Notwithstanding a few bickerings between him and his Congress at the commencement of his reign,” it continued, “Don [sic] Pedro appears to be on very good terms with his subjects.”<sup>28</sup> In terms of how Brazil was covered in the US press at the time, the promulgation of the constitution marked a turning point. The same was true for deliberations in Monroe’s cabinet regarding whether to officially recognize Brazil. Ultimately, the constitution would encourage the Monroe administration to officially recognize the new Brazilian government (Cumiford 1977, 52).

José Silvestre Rebello, a Portuguese native who had been a successful businessman in Brazil and supporter of independence, became Brazil’s first official diplomat to the United States in January 1824. He arrived in Baltimore in late March, where he was warmly received, and reached Washington on April 3 (Whitaker 1940, 383). Rebello came with the specific aim of securing “the solemn and formal recognition of the independence, integrity, and dynasty of the Empire of Brazil under the present emperor and his successors, perpetually and without any reservation with regard to the title of Emperor” (Whitaker 1940, 384). In making the case for recognition, Rebello was instructed to point out that if Brazil did not receive support in the Americas, it would be forced to look to Europe. He was also to appeal to the Monroe Doctrine, arguing that Brazil’s independence was just, constitutional, and representative—like the United States—and should thus be free to follow its own independent path (Whitaker 1940, 384–385).

Reporting on Rebello’s arrival, one paper remarked that “it has been a matter of some surprise to us, that this vast and beautiful country, containing upwards of two millions of square miles, watered by innumerable, large, navigable rivers, and abounding in capacious and secure harbors, should have been almost entirely overlooked in the interest excited by the Spanish provinces of America.” Indeed, the unsigned piece asserted, Brazil’s relative stability should be considered together with its boundless potential: “We know not upon what terms Mr. Rebello has been received by our government, nor whether his mission will lead to our acknowledgement of the independence of his empire; but we believe that the real independence of Brazil stands upon much surer grounds than that of any of the Republics with which we have entered into correspondence.”<sup>29</sup> Rebello requested a meeting with Secretary of State John Quincy Adams on April 5 to present his credentials from the Brazilian government. Negotiations between them began shortly thereafter. On April 20, Rebello presented Adams with a document explaining why Brazil had declared independence.<sup>30</sup> Finally, on May 26, Monroe formally recognized Rebello, marking the culmination of a mutual sizing-up process that began with Brazil’s break from Portugal two

<sup>27</sup> “From Brazil,” *Constitutional Whig*, June 25, 1824; *Richmond Enquirer*, June 22, 1824.

<sup>28</sup> “Brazil,” *Fincastle Mirror*, May 14, 1824.

<sup>29</sup> “Brazil,” *Fincastle Mirror*, May 14, 1824.

<sup>30</sup> Ambassador Griscom to the Secretary of State in US Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, with the Annual Message of the President Transmitted to Congress December 3, 1906 (in two parts), Part I* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1909), doc. 114.

years earlier. “There is now but little doubt, that this rich and magnificent country is lost to Portugal, forever,” *The Constitutional Whig* observed on August 10, 1824.<sup>31</sup>

While US papers published accounts of Brazilians celebrating the establishment of formal ties with Washington, they also noted discontent from Lisbon, which had refused to formally acknowledge its colony’s sovereignty (Robertson 1918, 267–268).<sup>32</sup> Recognition failed to fully quell concerns about secret ongoing European meddling in the New World.<sup>33</sup> It did, however, establish the basis for a working relationship between the largest nations of North and South America. Rebello openly admired the experience of the United States and the statesmen it had produced, but his time in the United States confirmed his monarchical inclinations.

“To my horror,” he later recalled, “Americans seemed to idolize leaders like Napoleon and Simón Bolívar, both of whom aspired to lifelong power. All of this led me to judge ‘that they love monarchy when it is acquired and not inherited, that is, they are revolutionaries to the very core of their spirit’” (Widener 2022). He would complain that the US government seemed to favor the republican government of the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata in its disputes with Brazil (Manning 1918, 310). “It could be said, without being called a fanatic but rather a realist,” he later observed, “that elective governments are centers of crimes which are chilling to humanity” (Widener 2022). His experience in Washington gave “proof to the entire universe that that which is called modern republicanism is . . . clearly opposed to the most holy purpose of the creation of this universe” (Widener 2022). Recognition brought the US and Brazil closer together, but it did little in the short term to change the official opinions each nation held of the other’s mode of government.

### Seeking a new path in a changing world—2024

Even as the world has changed dramatically since he first took office twenty years ago, Lula remains committed to securing a prominent place for Brazil on the world stage. His return to office revived what might be called Brazil’s independent buy-in to global affairs, that is, an eagerness to engage other countries on the most pressing issues of the day from a position of strategic neutrality. To demonstrate that buy-in, Lula has traveled extensively, meeting with more heads of state in five months than Bolsonaro did in four years (Alves and Oliveira 2023). He was even criticized for spending so much time abroad (Paraguassu 2023). But these were not mere goodwill expeditions. Their purpose was to restore Brazil’s presence in major international fora and as a player in debates shaping the future of global governance. As Oliver Stuenkel (2023) has noted: “While multipolarity is often seen as less stable and more difficult to manage than bipolarity or unipolarity, Brasília’s view has traditionally been more optimistic: Former Brazilian Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota coined the terms ‘benign multipolarity’ and ‘cooperative multipolarity,’ which regard the emergence of multipolarity not as a threat, but as an opportunity.” To embrace multipolarity, as Lula strongly does, is to distrust that US hegemony serves Brazilian interests.

Both countries are not on the same page when it comes to some of the major geopolitical issues of the day. First, Brazil does not share the essentially bipartisan US view that China’s rise is inherently disruptive to global stability. Lula wants to collect the benefits of a warm working relationship with China without incurring blowback from the United States. His April 2023 visit to China was covered closely by international outlets, a kind of recognition that the Beijing-Brasilia connection is a central storyline in the near,

<sup>31</sup> “Brazil,” *Constitutional Whig*, August 10, 1824.

<sup>32</sup> “Brazils,” *Alexandria Gazette & Advertiser*, November 18, 1824.

<sup>33</sup> “Brazil,” *New Hampshire Gazette*, June 8, 1824.

medium, and long-term future of the Western Hemisphere (Arias 2023; Iglesias 2023).<sup>34</sup> As officials in Washington fretted openly about competing aggressively with Beijing in the years to come, Lula spoke in 2024 about securing a “long-term strategic partnership” with China in pursuit of major new infrastructure investments (Poast 2024; Palmer 2024).<sup>35</sup> Lula has repeatedly insisted that Brazil’s deep trade relationship with China should not cause friction with Washington. At least in public, the Biden administration seemed to agree.

Lula has also refused to materially support Ukraine in its efforts to defend itself against Russia’s invasion, calling instead for a small group of countries with no direct involvement in the conflict to mediate negotiations to end the war immediately. While he has condemned the Russian invasion, his position has been criticized widely for equating Russian and Ukrainian culpability in the ongoing conflagration (Kluth 2023). John Kirby, US National Security Council spokesman, even accused Lula of “parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda,” a harsh criticism made on the record (Wright 2023). But there is a rational basis for Lula’s position considering his nation’s interests, indicative of “broader misgivings across the global south about the inclusiveness of the supposedly liberal international order,” in the words of Stuenkel (2023). Whatever the cost for Ukrainians, Lula believes it is in the world’s interest for the conflict to come to a mediated solution (Jones 2023). This has not been Washington’s position.

Finally, the Lula administration does not see eye to eye with the US when it comes to the situation in Venezuela.<sup>36</sup> The aftermath of the July 28 election in that country has been marked by the same heavy-handed tactics that have helped keep strongman Nicolás Maduro in power for over a decade.<sup>37</sup> Despite several pollsters suggesting an opposition victory, Maduro unilaterally declared himself the winner and cracked down on dissent (Rogerio 2024). The Biden administration denounced the government in no uncertain terms and reapplied some of the sanctions it had lifted as an incentive for Maduro to carry out a free and fair election (Hansler and Conte 2024). Two days after Venezuelans went to the polls, the Biden administration “thanked President Lula for his leadership on Venezuela,” signaling agreement with Brazilian calls for Maduro to release the full vote tallies that would support his claim of victory.<sup>38</sup> In the days that followed, Lula and his closest foreign policy adviser, Celso Amorim, adopted a more critical line toward Maduro than many critics might have expected (Iglesias 2024). Still, there was no chance Brasília would break with Caracas, as Washington had done years before.

Here too it is important for policymakers in Washington to understand Lula’s reasoning. The Maduro regime has weathered years of US sanctions and hostility from almost all Western countries. With that in mind, it is difficult to imagine that Brazil breaking with Maduro would turn the tide against him for good. It would, however, keep Latin America’s largest nation from playing a constructive role in resolving the crisis peacefully, which appears to be the Brazilian government’s overarching goal. During Donald Trump’s first administration in the US, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro reportedly came close to signing off on a violent regime change in Venezuela (Oliveira 2019). The Lula administration, by

<sup>34</sup> “Brazil’s Lula Criticises US Dollar and IMF During China Visit,” *France24*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/americas/20230414-brazil-s-lula-criticises-us-dollar-and-imf-during-china-visit>.

<sup>35</sup> “Brazil’s Lula Nods to ‘Long-term Partnership’ with China,” *Reuters*, August 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/brazils-lula-nods-long-term-partnership-with-china-2024-08-14/>.

<sup>36</sup> “Lula Cosies Up to Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela’s Autocrat,” *The Economist*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2023/06/01/lula-cosies-up-to-nicolas-maduro-venezuelas-autocrat>.

<sup>37</sup> “Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/04/venezuela-brutal-crackdown-protesters-voters>.

<sup>38</sup> “Readout of President Joe Biden’s Call with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil,” *White House*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/30/readout-of-president-joe-bidens-call-with-president-luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva-of-brazil-2/>.

contrast, believes—as does, it would seem, the Biden administration—that such an outcome would be an unmitigated disaster for the entire region.

Lula's long-held objective is to position Brazil as a go-between for some sticky diplomatic problems, approaching them from angles that the US sometimes cannot. Maduro is currently as isolated as he is going to get on the world stage. What would Lula accomplish by joining the overwhelming chorus of condemnation against him? What end goal would that advance? It is unclear whether such an approach would do anything to shift the current stalemate. Instead, Lula insists on maintaining relations in the hope that Brazil can preserve credibility all around and eventually help broker an agreement. Whether this approach will yield tangible results or not remains to be seen, but it is a clear, concrete strategy. Recognizing the considered, interest-driven thinking of Brazil's foreign policy moves is the bare minimum required in establishing a more trusting relationship between Washington and Brasília on the bicentennial of bilateral ties.

Above all, even if it is clearly not to the liking of the US, Lula is committed to a multipolar world because he believes it serves the interests of Brazil and other countries that see few avenues for sociopolitical ascension under the current correlation of forces around the world. The stated aim of his administration is not to undermine the so-called liberal international order led by the United States but to expand its democratic appeal (Perrin 2023; Holanda and Coletta 2024; Costa 2024). Against the common refrain that a dilution of US power in international affairs would lead to worse human rights outcomes around the world, Lula argues that greater influence for a broader array of nations would actually strengthen global democratic commitments.

In a telling interview conducted during a visit to Portugal in April, he was asked about the UN Charter and whether there is any such thing as universal values that should guide the conduct of international affairs. He pointed out that members of the UN Security Council themselves do not always respect the value of the charter but are shielded by their veto power. Those responsible for the most destructive recent wars, he pointed out, are permanent members of the UN Security Council: “The US invaded Iraq without UN authorization, France and England invaded Libya without UN authorization, and now Russia invaded Ukraine.” That's precisely why it is imperative to expand democratic participation in global governance, he concluded, adding that “we have to guarantee that Africa is represented [on the UN Security Council], that Latin America is represented” as well as India and Germany (da Silva 2023). The United States should grapple seriously with this critique rather than reflexively questioning Brazil's geopolitical orientation if it is interested in a more productive partnership with Brazil in the medium to long term.

## Conclusion

As a political act, declaring independence entails engaging the past to claim the present and shape the future. It is therefore not surprising that the disparate circumstances by which Brazil and the United States achieved their independence have colored the relationship between the two countries from the start. In 1820, as a new Portuguese representative arrived in Brazil, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “I hope he sees, and will promote in his new situation, the advantages of a cordial fraternization among all the American nations, and the importance of their coalescing in an American system of policy, totally independent of and unconnected with that of Europe” (Gilman 1883, 188). Within a few years, one was in place. In Brazil, however, a monarchy took root, not a republic.

The differing paths to independence sowed seeds of distrust between the US and Brazil. The United States, with its revolutionary fervor and commitment to republican ideals, viewed Brazil's monarchy with suspicion. The US championed the Monroe Doctrine, which aimed to limit European influence in the Americas, a principle it believed would not be

entirely welcomed by the newly independent Brazil, which still harbored close ties to Portugal. To the surprise of some US observers, however, the Brazilian government welcomed the Monroe Doctrine, suggesting that Washington had misjudged the orientation of Rio de Janeiro. Such misjudgments have frequently characterized the bilateral relationship for two centuries. The US image of a self-made republic born of an enlightened revolution stands in contrast to Brazil's more gradual and negotiated independence. This difference in national narratives has, at times, hampered the cultural intelligibility of either side and hindered the development of a warm, collaborative partnership.

Although cooperation has emerged on certain issues, historical baggage continues to influence US-Brazil interactions. Doubts in Washington about Brazil's political, economic, and ideological orientation have reemerged periodically over two hundred years. Doubts in Brazil about the US willingness to treat Brazil as an equal despite occasional differences have never dissipated. Indeed, the period discussed in this article marked but the beginning of a complex and mercurial relationship between the US and Brazil, one essentially defined by the persistence of irreconcilable interests and self-conceptions. If anything, the surprise is that both countries are as close as they are today.

In dealing with Brazil, the US government would do well to recognize that the leaders of Latin America's largest nation chafe at the sense that they are held to a different set of rules on the world stage than the one US leaders set for themselves. Much of the criticism of Lula's independent foreign policy in the press and by some public officials would seem to suggest that there is no legitimate critique of US hegemony. From a Brazilian perspective, there appears to be precious little accountability for US foreign policy catastrophes, even as Brazil risks diplomatic backlash for refusing to contribute weapons to a war in which it is not directly implicated. The paradox is clear: Lula's thoughts on any foreign policy matter are heavily scrutinized to gauge Brazil's democratic commitments and determine whether it can or should be allowed to have a bigger say in global affairs while US hegemony is taken as a given despite the mottled history of the twentieth century. This double standard contributes to the trust deficit between the hemispheric giants and feeds a sense that more voices need to be heard in the construction of a new framework of international governance.

Brazil today is not a rival of the United States, but some worry that it has not done enough to distance itself from Washington's antagonists. The concern that Brazil, with its size and ample resources, could fall into fundamental misalignment with the United States has been recurrent in Washington at different moments over the past two centuries. As I have noted here, the seeds of such fears were planted at the dawn of Brazilian independence. In response to Brazil's ambitions and legitimate critiques of the existing global order, Washington would do well to demonstrate flexibility, self-awareness, encouragement, and even—yes—a degree of deference. Such is the recognition that Brazil has in fact always wanted from its friend to the north.

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