

## **Brazil, between the ZOPACAS and NATO**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores Brazilian diplomatic and defence interests in the South Atlantic, the country's membership of the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS) and the March 2019 bilateral meeting in Washington, D.C. between Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro and US President Donald Trump and the latter's suggestion that Brazil become a major non-NATO or NATO ally.

### **Key words**

Brazil, South Atlantic, ZOPACAS, NATO, United States, Non-NATO ally, NATO ally, Global partner

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### **Introduction**

The President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, was welcomed in Washington, D.C. by President Donald Trump for their first bilateral meeting on 19th March 2019. Since taking office in January 2019, Bolsonaro has expressed his alignment to his American counterpart. During the

press conference at the White House during Bolsonaro's visit meeting, alongside their condemnations of Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, talk of future Brazilian-American trade deals and Trump's comments on the state of the American economy, Trump raised the possibility of Brazil becoming a major non-NATO ally or potentially even a future NATO ally. Although Trump remarked during the press conference that he would have to first discuss this with "a lot of people", this was an invitation to become a NATO ally. Coming from Trump this is significant and recalling that 'communication agency will be influenced by the organizational power based on the hierarchical importance of the position itself and the class and gender of the agent' (Hallahan et al, 2007, p.15), in this instance the US President. Currently, Colombia is NATO's sole Latin American partner, with close relations dating back to 2013. If Brazil were, however, to become either a non-NATO ally or even a NATO ally, issues could arise.

Brazil is a founding member of the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic, commonly referred to as the ZOPACAS. This declaration was established on 27th October 1986 by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) via A/Res/41/11. There are currently three South American and twenty-one African member states.<sup>1</sup> Seven ministerial meetings have taken place since the inception of the ZOPACAS with prominent members Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, South Africa, Nigeria and Angola having played host. The main focus of the ZOPACAS is the maintenance of the South Atlantic as a zone dedicated to 'the non-introduction of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction and the non-extension into the region of rivalries and conflicts that are foreign to it' (UNGA, 1986, A/Res/41/11). This pledge stands in contrast to NATO which, as a political and military alliance between its twenty-nine member states, upholds the principle of collective defence. NATO members the United States, France and the United Kingdom are nuclear weapon states with other members Germany, Italy, Belgium, Turkey and the Netherlands currently participating in a US nuclear weapons sharing agreement. Brazil, as a member of the ZOPACAS, could consequently find itself in opposition to commitments set out in A/Res/41/11 if it were to become a NATO ally or even a non-NATO ally.

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<sup>1</sup> Angola, Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Namibia, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Togo and Uruguay.

Trump's proposal to invite Brazil into a closer working relationship with NATO in any form could be viewed as an example of strategic communications given that 'purposeful influence is the fundamental goal of communications by organizations' (Hallahan et al, 2007, p.10). His position as the President of the United States, the US being a founding member of NATO, is a significant one. Since his Presidential campaign back in 2016, Trump has continued to express unfavourable views regarding NATO and repeatedly made critical comments concerning some fellow NATO member states. These remarks have demonstrated his reservations about the current terms and conditions of NATO membership. His views, for example, that other members are not paying their fair dues to the organisation could be interpreted as a desire to potentially change aspects of the way in which NATO is run. It can thus be argued that Trump's proposition to Brazil, a country which is neither a European state nor in the North Atlantic region, is a further challenge to current NATO member states. Trump's offer could then be interpreted as a strategic decision and a demonstration that, at least in his view, NATO might begin expanding beyond the equator and into the South Atlantic region.

### **Brazil's South Atlantic strategy**

Brazil is the largest and one of the most developed countries in the South Atlantic region. With a coastline of over 7000 km, the South Atlantic Ocean is a principal area of interest for Brazil and has long featured in its diplomatic and defence aspirations. It is therefore of great benefit to Brazil to maintain good if not strong relations with its neighbouring countries, both in South America but also in Africa. Although the 'ZOPACAS lacks a number of characteristics typically associated with international organizations, such as a budget, headquarters, a secretary-general and institutional symbols' (Abdenur et al, 2016, p.2), it does have features akin to a diplomatic and defence alliance and is a unique example of a multilateral agreement dedicated to peace and cooperation. The establishment of the ZOPACAS was largely at Brazil's initiative and the country has since played a leading role amongst its fellow member states. This commitment to the ZOPACAS has been observed in many forms, such as hosting two out of the seven ministerial meetings and convening multiple training exercises. The Brazilian ministry of foreign affairs, commonly referred to as Itamaraty, reinforces the ZOPACAS's importance when it states that 'A ZOPACAS é o principal foro para o tratamento de temas relativos à segurança do Atlântico Sul'<sup>2</sup> (Itamaraty, 2019). This illustrates not only

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<sup>2</sup> 'The ZOPACAS is the principal forum to deal with matters related to security in the South Atlantic'

the centrality of the ZOPACAS to Brazil's foreign policy agenda in the South Atlantic but also shows that this remains the case under the Bolsonaro administration.

Brazil's commitment to the role of the ZOPACAS in its defence agenda is evident in its most recent White Book of Defence. It articulates that Brazil "dedica especial atenção à construção de um ambiente cooperativo no Atlântico Sul, sob a égide da Zona de Paz e Cooperação do Atlântico Sul" (LBDN, 2020, p.17). This is consistent with Brazil's interests in the South Atlantic have become predominantly orientated towards advancing its defence, commercial, socio-economic and diplomatic agenda. Also, the Brazilian National Policy of Defence and National Strategy of Defence states: "O fortalecimento da Zona de Paz e Cooperação do Atlântico Sul – Zopacas contribuirá para a consolidação do Brasil como ator regional relevante, aumentando sua influência no entorno estratégico e minimizando a possibilidade de interferência militar de potências extra regionais no Atlântico Sul" (PND/END 2020, 33). These include facing the security challenges that such a diverse geographic area presents as well as Brazil furthering its goal to play a larger role in world politics. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War and the abating of tensions between what were the two Cold War superpowers, Brazil has increased its participation on the world stage, particularly in the realm of peacekeeping operations (PKOs), with Brazilian Force Commanders playing significant leading roles. These PKOs have most notably operated in Brazil's wider geographic region, with MINUSTAH<sup>3</sup> in the Caribbean nation of Haiti and with MONUSCO<sup>4</sup>, in Brazil's fellow ZOPACAS member state, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). These actions have not only shown Brazil's dedication to PKOs but the country's involvement in the stabilising of another ZOPACAS member state can be interpreted as a furthering of its commitment to achieving its own diplomatic goals.

By raising its international profile and demonstrating leadership skills in PKOs, Brazil has increased its level of strategic influence on the world stage. The country has successfully positioned itself as a major player amongst second tier countries. Second tier is used here as a descriptor of Brazil's not belonging to the traditional rank of elite countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France yet still forging an influential role in the Global South.

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<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti began in 2004 and ended in 2017. Brazil played an integral role in this PKO, with Brazilian Force Commanders leading the mission and the country's provision of the largest number of troops.

<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo is an ongoing PKO, which began in 2010. There have so far been three Brazilian Force Commanders.

In addition to building its reputation as a leading figure in PKOs, Brazil has continued to develop economically and belongs to the block of major emerging economies, BRICS, as well as IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa). Brazil is also one of only three countries in the South Atlantic region, along with Argentina and South Africa, to be members of the G20. This has helped project Brazil's image as a developing country and a major player in the South Atlantic region. Brazil's position amongst other powers in the Global South, such as China and India, has also been elevated in the past decade via factors such as its greater PKO involvement. Although these significant relations with Global South countries have evolved in the previous decade, it is possible that under the current government in Brazil there may be a different avenue to be explored. During his first year of Presidency, Bolsonaro only conducted state or working visits to Brazil's neighbouring South American countries (Chile in March and Argentina in June) after his first visit to a European state, Switzerland, to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos in late January, to the United States in March (and before Argentina he has been to Israel in March and United States again, in May). This could be interpreted as a potential change in direction by Bolsonaro as in previous administrations the first state or even working visit was usually to a Latin American country. This stemmed from the emphasis placed on the importance of Latin American cooperation in Brazilian foreign policy. The Brazilian Constitution even has a section which enshrines the country's commitment to the closer integration of Latin America. Bolsonaro's diplomatic and defence agenda, however, has shown signs of aligning itself more closely with the United States and the advancement of his own personal alignment with Trump himself. It is therefore reasonable to postulate that Trump's proposition to Bolsonaro could lead to a prioritisation of closer relations being developed with not only one of NATO's principal players but even with the organisation itself.

While a change in Brazil's diplomatic and defence agenda by Bolsonaro could be viewed as an asset in terms of an advancement of Brazil's South Atlantic strategy, it is likely to be a hindrance as the country seeks to expand its influence in its own geographic region. Brazil has developed its reputation as a regional leader, particularly in economic, military and diplomatic sectors. It is also being viewed as an influential country in the Global South. With one of the largest Armed Forces in the Americas, Brazil has sought to build closer links with neighbouring South American countries as well as those in the South Atlantic region. These are reinforced by combined training exercises with the Navies, Air Forces and Armies from nations such as Argentina, Uruguay and South Africa. Given that Brazil's National Defence Policy declares its commitment to ZOPACAS as a way of preventing conflicts and rivalries foreign to the South

Atlantic be projected onto the region, Trump's invitation to Brazil to become either a non-NATO or NATO ally could provoke a significant change in Brazilian diplomatic and defence agendas and could be interpreted as an expansion of US influence in the South Atlantic region. This view is supported by comments alleged to have been made by Trump during a lunch with Bolsonaro where 'Trump disse que achava a classificação como aliado prioritário extra-OTAN muito pouco para o Brasil e que queria fazer do país um membro pleno da organização'<sup>5</sup> (Folha de S.Paulo, 2019). Any move to try and make Brazil a NATO member would, however, contradict what the National Defence Policy and National Defence Strategy states. It is important to highlight also that Article 4 of the Brazilian Constitution (1988) states that the international relations of the country centres on principles such as national independence, non-intervention, defence of peace and the peaceful solution of conflicts. This would certainly exclude the possibility of Brazil becoming a NATO member as it would be unable to partake in collective defence or other forms of military intervention, as such actions would be ruled as unconstitutional.

### **Brazil and the ZOPACAS**

The establishment of the ZOPACAS occurred in 1986 during a time of friction between the United States and the Soviet Union. The reach of this multifaceted battleground extended over all major continents and the member states of the ZOPACAS were not immune to American and Soviet influences. Some member countries during the Cold War, such as Brazil, followed a more US-centric approach, embracing capitalism and anti-Communism. However, Brazil also pursued an independent foreign policy, building and strengthening relations with its neighbours, as well as Socialist countries such as Angola. The ZOPACAS was established with one hundred and twenty-four (124) members of the UNGA voting in favour. It is significant to note that several NATO and influential United Nations member countries such as France and the Netherlands and growing Asian power Japan abstained from voting for A/Res/41/11. The United States, nevertheless, instead went a step further and voted against the establishment of the ZOPACAS. With peace, cooperation, the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and security at the core of its agenda, the ZOPACAS is arguably a unique example of peaceful multilateralism in an era of political and military unrest. It is also pertinent to note that 'during the second half of the twentieth century only two inter-state wars can be reported: the 1982 war

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<sup>5</sup> 'Trump said that he thought that classification as a major non-NATO ally was not enough for Brazil and that he wanted to make the country a full member of the organisation'

between Argentina and the UK over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands; and the 1995 border war between Peru and Ecuador' (Herz, 2010, p.602). The idea of being 'conscious of the determination of the peoples of the States of the South Atlantic region to preserve their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and develop their relations under conditions of peace and liberty' (UNGA, A/RES/41/11, 1986) is paramount. This commitment to peace is unlike many of the other multilateral agreements, such as NATO, which upon the collapse of the Soviet Union has expanded in membership with the addition of former Warsaw Pact states.

Before the eventual establishment of the ZOPACAS in 1986, the possibility of a South Atlantic Treaty Organization (SATO) was examined by British academic Dr Andrew Hurrell. He explored the idea of a SATO which would be 'a tightly-knit multilateral system of South Atlantic defence along NATO lines' (Hurrell, 1983, p.179). However, where NATO is a political and military alliance formed shortly after World War II upon facing a progressively more dominant Soviet Union, the ZOPACAS is a declaration committed to the maintenance of peace and cooperation in the strategically important South Atlantic. NATO counts three permanent members of the UNSC, the United States, France and the United Kingdom as member, countries which possess sizeable arsenals of nuclear weapons. The ZOPACAS, by contrast, is composed of member states that chose not to possess nuclear weapons and come from a range of political and ideological backgrounds. Hurrell emphasises that at the time, 'the divergence of views amongst supposed members of a South Atlantic pact has been so great that its formation was always highly improbable (...) the idea of a South Atlantic pact has simply refused to die' (Hurrell, 1983, p.179). Brazil is consequently a part of an agreement which, in spite of the diverse approaches and different political and ideological outlooks of its member states, although consistent at the time with the competing mantras of the Cold War superpowers, is dedicated to the safeguarding of a peaceful multilateral relationship between the countries bordering the South Atlantic Ocean.

## **Brazil and NATO**

Whilst NATO focuses on matters such as collective defence and North Atlantic security, placing high importance on political and military cooperation, the ZOPACAS is concerned with peace and collaboration. Brazil is a leading member of the ZOPACAS, hosting both the 1988 and the 1994 ministerial meetings, in Rio de Janeiro (1988) and Brasilia (1994). As the

ZOPACAS 'has as its main objective avoiding the proliferation of nuclear weapons and reducing – or completely eliminating – the military presence of alien forces in the region' (Guerreiro Moreira, 2016, p.360) the possibility of Brazil becoming a NATO ally is very unlikely. That is, unless the current Bolsonaro administration moves Brazil away from its commitments to the ZOPACAS and chooses to revert to a more US-centric approach. This would be a significant change from Brazil's current diplomatic and defence agenda which has continued to strengthen Brazil's relations with fellow countries in its geographic region and in the Global South. Trump's proposition to Bolsonaro, communicated during their press conference and his comments referring to the hope of advancement of mutual security and cooperation between their countries could, even if the possibility of Brazil becoming a NATO ally is unlikely, influence Brazil's future diplomatic and defence strategy. It is also possible to consider the appeal of fostering closer relations with a NATO principal player such as the US as being linked to the consideration that 'the balance of power is mainly a function of the tangible military assets that states possess, such as armoured divisions and nuclear weapons' (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.72). As a NATO or a non-NATO ally, Brazil would be entitled to greater concessions in terms of defence purchases, military technology as well as the ability to attend NATO military conferences or potentially participate in NATO training exercises.

Colombia, as the only current NATO Latin American partner, has benefited from NATO cooperation and addressed many of its own security challenges. Via collaboration on training exercises, transparency, construction, security and building integrity, Colombia has succeeded in developing its own diplomatic and defence agenda. Together with NATO, a greater programme of shared objectives on military education and strategies to combat organised crime and terrorism have also been established. These have arguably assisted Colombia in the advancement of its own strategic agenda via its position as a NATO global partner. The country is beginning to project a stronger image of new development following the long period of conflict between the Colombian state and FARC. The international news organisation, Reuters reported that Colombia would, in the words of the then former President, Juan Manuel Santos, 'join as a "global partner" which means it will not necessarily have to take part in military action, and will be fully accredited in Brussels', (Reuters, 2018) with British newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, confirming this report. If Brazil were to become a NATO global partner in the same way as Colombia, there could be significant advantages. An Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme (IPCP) would need to be agreed between NATO and Brazil which would, however, need to take into consideration Brazil's constitutional commitments as well



as its commitments to the ZOPACAS. This would likely be the only way Brazilian-NATO cooperation could work.

As a country which borders Venezuela, Colombia, like Brazil, has been affected by the current crisis in that country and is arguably on the verge of becoming more involved. During their meeting, Bolsonaro and Trump both deplored the situation in Venezuela with Trump calling President Maduro “nothing more than a Cuban puppet”. This critique is consistent with his view of the threat of Socialism as an ideology and as a system of governance. Trump’s remark that “the twilight hour of Socialism has arrived in our hemisphere” could also be a veiled reference to the recent peace agreement signed in Colombia between the state and the FARC. The existing opposition by the left-leaning political parties in the Colombian Congress as well as the likely resistance by the Brazilian Congress, respectively regarding the possibility of Colombian or Brazilian involvement in Venezuela, demonstrates that there is a reluctance in some quarters in response to the risk of entering into a potential conflict in South America. For Colombia, any military action in a bordering country could also be perceived as too soon after its own internal peace accord with the FARC. A second Latin American partner to the US or NATO could therefore be seen as advantageous for the US. It remains to be seen whether Venezuela will succeed in resolving its own issues without external intervention and possible military and diplomatic scenarios are a consideration.

Public opinion in Brazil would also need to be evaluated. Brazil’s reputation as a principal figure in PKOs is a source of pride for the Brazilian people and the country itself has known peace since its participation in World War II. The involvement of Brazilian troops in any international military conflict could therefore be met with indignation by the Brazilian public. Although Trump’s comments, regarding his hope that the Venezuelan military will rescind its support for President Maduro, indicate a view that no involvement may be necessary, his offer to Brazil to become a major non-NATO or even NATO ally could show that possible developments in Venezuela, which could include Brazil, were being considered.

As Bolsonaro’s relationship with Trump strengthened, his administration might also have concluded that potential US pressure and the prospect of NATO support in dealing with Brazil’s problematic neighbour could be beneficial. Nevertheless, whilst Brazil is a member of the ZOPACAS, it is aligned to multilateral cooperation commitments which do not condone involvement in conflicts or permit foreign military bases on its national territories. This commitment to the ZOPACAS would therefore make the possibility of foreign military

involvement in Venezuela a contentious issue. The UNGA declaration A/Res/41/11 delineates ‘the need to preserve the region from measures of militarization, the arms race, [and] the presence of foreign military bases’ (UNGA, 1986, A/RES/41/11). This emphasises the ZOPACAS’s dedication to peace and cooperation in the South Atlantic and stresses the need to remove foreign powers from the geographic region. As the ZOPACAS was established in 1986, only four years after the Falklands/Malvinas War, this can be interpreted as a critique of the British presence in the Falkland/Malvinas Islands. If Brazil were to become a NATO ally and potentially allow American troops to be stationed in Brazil and militarily involve themselves in Venezuela, this would contravene A/Res/41/11. Until now, for Brazil at least, this provision in the ZOPACAS declaration has allowed it to develop closer diplomatic and defence relations with its neighbours on either side of the South Atlantic Ocean and pursue its own agenda, without potential interference from foreign powers. Membership of the ZOPACAS has also permitted Brazil to exercise more regional authority and exert its own influence on fellow ZOPACAS members. Trump’s further comments during the White House press conference regarding a conversation with Bolsonaro about permitting US companies to make space launches from Brazil, could be expected to raise concerns about foreign interference. The stationing of US personnel in Brazil, of which some would most likely be from the US security services and the military, could also be seen to contradict Brazil’s commitments to the ZOPACAS. Although geopolitical circumstances in 1986 were different to those of today, the commitments made by the member states of the ZOPACAS, the most central being the maintenance of peace and security in the region, are still obstacles. There is also the matter of the Brazilian Constitution (1988). As Article 4 states Brazil’s commitment to the defence of peace, the peaceful solution of conflicts and non-intervention, there is no clear path to Brazilian military involvement in Venezuela. Any actions taken in that regard would be judged as unconstitutional.

Although President Bolsonaro’s administration may view the possibility of Brazil becoming a NATO or even non-NATO ally as a means to further its military development, this would contravene the commitment that the ZOPACAS ‘contribute significantly to the strengthening of international peace and security and to promoting the principles and purposes of the United Nations’ (UNGA, 1986, A/Res/41/11). If the country were to align itself more closely with the United States or NATO, Brazil could risk losing its reputation as a country dedicated to peace as well as risk engaging in a conflict in its own continent. This would affect Brazil’s image both internationally but also in Brazil itself. Brazil’s public image as a peaceful and non-

interventionist country has been an integral part of both its internal and foreign narrative. It is at the heart of Brazil's principles of diplomacy and, after all, the commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts is enshrined in its Constitution (1998).

The criticisms made by Trump and Bolsonaro, during their Washington press conference, regarding the current political situation in Venezuela demonstrate their opposition to Maduro's regime. Trump has previously suggested the possibility of military involvement in Venezuela and his comment to Bolsonaro that the two Presidents were "going to have a fantastic working relationship" may have alluded to an intention by Trump to rely more on Brazil to enforce greater pressure on Venezuela in the US's stead. This is consistent with Trump's praise of Brazil's support of the "Venezuelan people" and their shared recognition of Juan Guaidó as interim President. Bolsonaro also reiterated their administrations' joint interest in securing democracy in Venezuela. While Trump's invitation to Brazil is significant, the strategic agendas of both Brazil and the United States are not focused on the same goal. Any official moves towards designating Brazil as an ally of any form would need to be agreed upon by the other NATO members as well as the approval of the Brazilian legislative institutions. Following the 2020 election in the United States and a new elected President, the likelihood of Brazil becoming a NATO ally in the immediate future is slim.

## **Conclusion**

President Trump's invitation in March 2019 to designate Brazil as a potential major non-NATO or even NATO ally is a noteworthy proposition in the current geopolitical climate. As the President of a global power, Trump's words were the subject of international attention and any offer made to Brazil has a great deal of significance for that country and its neighbours. Brazil's commitments to its own Constitution (1998), its current diplomatic and defence agenda and ZOPACAS membership are at odds with a NATO role. Colombia also provides a benchmark for current Latin American relations with NATO and its role as a NATO global partner has arguably allowed it to develop its own agenda. A proposition was made to a Brazilian President who is an evident admirer of Trump and of the United States and his administration could decide to make significant changes in Brazil's South Atlantic and regional agenda as well as potentially create a new US-aligned diplomatic and defence strategy. A second Latin American NATO global partner or potential ally could also have been advantageous not only to Trump's

strategy to secure more influence in South America but to demonstrate to other NATO member states that he wanted changes made to the terms and conditions of NATO membership.

Whilst the idea of moving south of the equator and incorporating Brazil as a major non-NATO or NATO ally does seem unlikely, Brazil's inclusion as a global partner, in perhaps a similar framework to that of Colombia, could be an option. Brazil's membership of the ZOPACAS and its commitments to A/Res/41/11 are fundamental in these evaluations as they are viewed as an integral part of the country's current diplomatic and defence agenda. The new administration in USA may open a new chapter in this discussion. It is likely that President-elect Biden's administration will not favour Brazil's approach to NATO in the same way as President Trump's administration did.

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