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Viewpoint: Sovereignty and reversing Brazil's history of Amazon destruction

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Abstract

Brazilians have lived for many years under governments with discourse proclaiming the need to occupy and develop the Amazon to integrate this vast territory into the rest of the country. Increasing the region's population, economic activity and infrastructure have been promoted to expand agricultural production and to protect Brazil's Amazonian borders and natural resources from foreign nations; but the processes of occupation and development have taken pathways with severe impacts. Infrastructure to connect to markets now facilitates the destruction of the region's forests, and illegal activities were openly supported until recently by Jair Bolsonaro's (2019-2022) presidential administration. Although Brazil's sovereignty over its Amazonian territory is uncontested, today it is a space that is largely controlled by those who exploit the region's commodities, often, ironically, led by foreign interests.

Key-words: Amazon land use policy, Amazon sovereignty, Brazilian environmental policy, land degradation

Main Text:

Introduction

The specter of foreign invasion of the Amazon Basin has always been a source of concern for the different presidential administrations in Brazil, which have often raised alarms claiming imminent threat. The belief that the world is conspiring to take away Brazil's sovereignty in Amazonia, whether by invasion or by converting the region into an international area like Antarctica, has been widespread in the population and is a potent vote-getting tool for politicians from all parts of the political spectrum. In Brazilian Amazonia a survey found that 71% of respondents agreed with the statement "I am afraid Amazonia will be internationalized" and 75% agreed that "Foreigners are trying to take over Amazonia" (Barbosa, 1996). This belief is essentially universal among Brazilian diplomats, whose training includes the theory of "Amazonia and international covetousness" as put forward in the many editions of the book by the same title (Reis, 1982).

37 **Brazilian sovereignty discourse**

38 During the military period (1964-1985) people were brought to the region to settle and
39 assist in the development and integration of the rainforest to the rest of the country (Fearnside,
40 2008). The slogan was “*Ocupar para não entregar,*” meaning “Occupy [Amazonia] so as not
41 to hand it over [to foreigners]”. The forest was seen as an impediment to progress. The
42 Brazilian government greatly expanded infrastructure across the region in the 1970s and
43 1980s. Internal migrations and development activities that aimed to conquer the Amazon are
44 largely responsible for shaping today’s geography and society in the region.

45 For many years the belief by Brazilian diplomats that the world is conspiring against
46 the country’s sovereignty in Amazonia was the major barrier to Brazil’s admission of any
47 connection between Amazonian deforestation and climate change, and to accepting any
48 international payment linked to Amazonia’s climatic role (Council on Foreign Relations
49 Independent Task Force, 2001; Fearnside, 2001). This position would only change in 2007
50 after the deforestation rate had fallen to less than half its level three years earlier, and
51 diplomats became convinced that deforestation was under control and that the country could
52 receive funds without risking international pressure compromising sovereignty.

53 During the 2019-2022 term of President Jair Bolsonaro, protecting Amazonian
54 sovereignty dominated official discourse. At the outset of his administration Bolsonaro tried
55 to make good on his campaign promise to withdraw Brazil from the Paris Agreement,
56 claiming that the agreement was part of an international plot to take Amazonia away from
57 Brazil (Fearnside, 2019). He was later persuaded to maintain Brazil in the agreement, but only
58 “for the moment” (Fearnside, 2019); the backtracking was likely due to pressure from soy
59 producers who had convinced him not to abolish the Ministry of Environment because such a
60 move could trigger boycotts (Ferrante and Fearnside, 2019).

61 Another announcement at the beginning of the Bolsonaro administration was the
62 massive Barão do Rio Branco project, which included a bridge across the Amazon River and
63 a highway to Brazil’s border with Surinam. The slogan was, once again, “*Ocupar para não*
64 *entregar*” (Wenzel, 2020), and audio recordings later revealed the project was intended to
65 defend the country against invasion by Chinese (Dias, 2019). The astronomical cost of the
66 project, plus COVID-19 and other setbacks, prevented it from advancing. The irony of the
67 sovereignty discourse versus the behavior of political leaders in promoting the exploitation of
68 Amazonia by foreign companies is illustrated by the efforts of Bolsonaro and his close
69 supporters to promote two Canadian mining projects impacting Indigenous peoples: the Belo

70 Sun gold mine in the state of Pará and the Autazes potassium mine in the state of Amazonas
71 (de Freitas Paes, 2022).

72 The Amazon forest has been undergoing rapid deforestation and degradation, with the
73 pace accelerating during the 2019-2022 Bolsonaro administration (Figure 1). Although no
74 international forces have invaded Brazil, the country's Amazonian territory is now being lost
75 to destruction by Brazil itself. A provider of important ecosystem services, the southwestern
76 portion of the forest, which was once a sink of CO₂, is now a net source of emissions
77 (Nogueira et al., 2019; Gatti et al., 2021). The sequential setbacks in environmental
78 governance in the region are largely motivated by desire to facilitate the “only” invasion in
79 the last decades perpetrated by the Global North: the market demands that slowly take away
80 Amazonia's remaining resources (Rajão et al., 2020). The Bolsonaro administration pushed
81 Amazonia to an advanced state of degradation, and solid proposals are now needed to protect
82 Amazon's forests, rivers, and communities.



83
84 **Figure 1.** Deforestation in Rondônia in Brazil's Amazon region. Photo credit: José Sabino.
85

86 **Future scenarios**

87 Production of beef and soy that are consumed elsewhere is devastating the region,
88 where the forest is cut and burned, rivers are dammed and polluted, and the environment is
89 poisoned with pesticides and heavy metals, while protected areas, Indigenous peoples and

90 local communities are destroyed by mining. Despite vast natural wealth, selling off the Basin's
91 natural resources to fuel the prosperity of other nations leaves Brazilian Amazonia stagnated
92 and undeveloped. As environmental and institutional collapses become more likely, the lack
93 of governance paves the way towards the forest's tipping point (Walker, 2021). Isn't this
94 another type of sovereignty loss for the region? A perfect example is the advance of
95 multinational corporations that are creating further degradation (Angelim et al., 2021).

96 The sovereigns of today's Amazon are those who carry on the agenda of exploitation.
97 Illegal activities advance into protected areas and threaten Amazonian biocultural diversity.
98 The Brazilian presidential administration of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, who took office in
99 January 2023, faces challenges to establish control of the territory. Voters in the area known
100 as the "arc of deforestation," which is dominated by the agribusiness sector, strongly
101 supported Jair Bolsonaro's unsuccessful presidential bid in the 2022 election. The new
102 administration faces these anti-environmental political forces and the 'developmentalist'
103 legacy left by Bolsonaro.

104 During his campaign, Lula promised to protect the Amazon as a top priority. Soon
105 after his election he traveled to COP27 in Egypt, where he stated his intention to bring Brazil
106 back to the international conversations on climate change and to move forward with
107 mitigation plans. Lula's speech in COP27 reinforced his commitment to the environmental
108 agenda and to complying with the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forest and Land Use,
109 signed by Brazil and 136 other countries during COP26 in 2021 (COP26, 2021). The
110 agreement pledges to "halt and reverse forest loss" by 2030 (COP26, 2021). With less than
111 eight years to achieve zero deforestation rates, the new president will need to move quickly
112 with strong measures to conserve the Amazon rainforest as well as the other country's
113 biodiverse biomes (Fernandes et al., 2023a).

114 One of Lula's first acts was to create the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and to
115 appoint an Indigenous leader (Sônia Guajajara) to head it. Indigenous territories represent
116 critical barriers against land use change (e.g., Fa et al., 2020), and their protection was eroded
117 under the Bolsonaro administration (Figueira et al., 2019; Conceição et al., 2021). The
118 alliance with Indigenous people is part of the backbone of Lula's conservation agenda,
119 together with the fight against environmental crimes. Lula issued Decree 11,368/2023 to
120 resume the Amazon Fund, Decree 11,367/2023 to resume the Action Plan for the Prevention
121 and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon and Decree 11,417/2023 to reestablish the

122 National Council for the Environment (Conama), and he revoked Bolsonaro's Decree
123 10,966/2022 promoting goldmining by "wildcat" prospectors (Oxfam, 2023).

124 Unfortunately, environmentally damaging measures are also in course, such as Law
125 14,182/2021 that requires 50% of each power utilities' market to be supplied by small
126 hydropower plants (SHPs) by 2026. This implies construction of dams throughout the
127 country, including in the Amazon (Ferreira et al., 2022; Fernandes et al., 2023b). Lula's
128 longstanding support for hydroelectric dams is one of the areas of concern regarding the
129 environmental outlook for his administration (Fearnside, 2023a). Another is his announced
130 priority for land "regularization" (a euphemism for legalization of illegal land claims) - a key
131 issue for Brazilian Amazonia's 70 Mha of "undesignated public forests," or government land
132 without a specified function (Fearnside, 2023b). This land is an easy target for land grabbers
133 (Azevedo-Ramos et al., 2020).

134 The first step to avoid further loss of Amazon forest will be rebuilding Brazil's legal
135 apparatus that was partially destroyed by the Bolsonaro administration (Barbosa et al., 2021).
136 Halting further deforestation will also require assigning the undesignated public forests to use
137 as "conservation units" (protected areas for biodiversity) and as Indigenous territories, not
138 converting them to private property. Measures to halt deforestation must be Brazil's first
139 priority at present. Later, once Amazon deforestation is controlled, large scale ecological
140 restoration will be needed (Bustamante et al., 2019). International policies like the European
141 Union's deforestation Law will help to avoid deforestation for commodities in the Amazon,
142 but these policies only prohibit import of certain commodities (Fernandes et al., 2023a). They
143 also fail to address the major indirect effect on Amazonian deforestation caused by
144 conversion of pasture to soybeans in other parts of Brazil (Fearnside, 2017).

145 Beyond regaining the ability to exert environmental control, a new proposal is needed
146 for the Amazon to reconstruct resilience-building approaches and to develop sustainable
147 production models that involve local stakeholders and incorporate diverse forms of
148 knowledge. Creation and demarcation of Indigenous territories is important in this regard.
149 Controlling deforestation and fostering sustainable land uses with low-impact depend on
150 domestic policies and priorities. International policies are also important, including financial
151 and other assistance to Brazil's efforts to halt deforestation, criteria for commodity imports,
152 and control of investments by international companies. Over its history, Brazil did not lose
153 control of its Amazon territory to foreign armies, but rather to the sectors of society that seek

154 to exploit this region. In Brazil and elsewhere, government, academia and society must
155 collaborate to contain the threats to the remaining forest.

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