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Brazilian Military Culture

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Executive Summary

This paper revisits the conclusions of a 2018 study on Brazilian military culture and evaluates how subsequent political developments have affected the Armed Forces and the implications for U.S.–Brazil defense relations. The central conclusion is that Brazilian military culture itself has remained largely unchanged, but the institutional and political context in which it operates has been repeatedly challenged. These challenges have not resulted from external threats to Brazil’s sovereignty or from the country’s worsening organized crime environment. Instead, they have emerged from recurring tensions within Brazil’s democratic institutions and the evolving relationship between the Armed Forces and civilian authority.

Since the publication of the 2018 study, Brazilian military culture has been tested at least three times, with each episode affecting the Armed Forces’ ethos, internal cohesion, and public legitimacy. Interestingly, the institutions that emerged from these crises demonstrated greater maturity in their relationship with democratic and political institutions while simultaneously reinforcing their professional military focus. Despite several situations that, in earlier periods, might have been perceived as provocations, the military culture largely resisted pressures toward political confrontation and kept the Armed Forces away from direct challenges to democratic institutions. In some instances, military authorities even supported initiatives aimed at preserving democratic processes and institutional stability. The conduct of successive ministers of defense and senior military leaders proved fundamental in managing tensions and addressing challenges faced by the Armed Forces during this period.

The first major challenge emerged from the political crisis surrounding former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Lula had previously been imprisoned on corruption charges linked to the Operation Lava Jato investigations, which uncovered extensive corruption schemes involving political actors, state institutions, and major corporations. Despite an abundance of evidence that many sectors of Brazilian society interpreted as confirming corruption linked to the Lula administration—evidence that had been upheld at different judicial levels—the Brazilian Supreme Court ultimately annulled the proceedings on procedural and jurisdictional grounds, arguing that due process had not been properly followed in the original cases. The Court’s decisions resulted in Lula’s release from prison and restored his political rights, authorizing him to run in the subsequent presidential election. His political rehabilitation and eventual electoral victory over President Jair Bolsonaro reopened deep political divisions within Brazilian society and placed the Armed Forces within an increasingly polarized political environment.

The second challenge followed Bolsonaro’s electoral defeat. Brazil entered a period of institutional confrontation culminating in investigations and legal proceedings concerning an alleged attempt to overturn the election results. Former President Bolsonaro, retired General Walter Braga Netto, and other military-linked figures were prosecuted and condemned for their presumed involvement in engineering a failed coup d’état aimed at maintaining Bolsonaro in power. Despite internal discomfort within segments of the officer corps regarding the severity of the penalties imposed, the Armed Forces accepted the authority of the Supreme Court and refrained from institutional confrontation, reinforcing the principle of constitutional subordination to civilian authority.

Nevertheless, as is often the case in Brazilian politics, nothing remains simple or straightforward for long. In the last week of April 2026, Congress passed a *dosimetria* law intended to review and potentially reduce the prison sentences established by the Supreme Federal Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal – STF) for individuals convicted in connection with the January 8 riots, including former President Jair Bolsonaro and retired General Walter Braga Netto. So far, however, Justice Alexandre de Moraes – the principal judge (rapporteur) conducting the process – has refused to revise his decisions, suggesting that the controversy is far from over and that additional institutional and political confrontations are likely ahead.

Another chapter of this case will unfold within the Military Court system (Superior Tribunal Militar – STM), where military personnel previously convicted by the Supreme Federal Court (STF) may face separate proceedings that could result in the loss of military rank, benefits, and pensions—an outcome with deeply traumatic institutional and personal implications that will be closely followed by both active-duty and retired military personnel. These proceedings may continue for another year before final decisions are reached, and their timing will almost certainly add further political tension to the 2026 presidential electoral cycle.

At the same time, the approach of the November 2026 presidential elections is expected to intensify political tensions further. With Senator Flávio Bolsonaro—son of former President Jair Bolsonaro—emerging as one of the principal challengers to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the judicial and political repercussions of the January 8 events will likely continue to generate significant turbulence in Brazilian politics over the coming months.

The third challenge has emerged more recently with allegations of corruption or influence trafficking involving the Supreme Court justice who served as rapporteur in the coup attempt proceedings. The investigation remains ongoing but launched serious questions about the credibility of the judge in question. Once again, the Armed Forces have avoided public confrontation and have maintained institutional restraint while observing developments in the

civilian judicial sphere, but uneasiness is evident among military leaders.

Taken together, these three episodes illustrate a key point: Brazilian military culture has not been fundamentally reshaped by external threats but by internal democratic tensions. In each instance, the Armed Forces accepted judicial authority and preserved constitutional subordination. At the same time, the cumulative impact of these crises has weakened the military's public image and strained internal cohesion. Political polarization has eroded the perception of the Armed Forces as a neutral national institution, while internal divisions between strict legalist officers and those associated with previous political leadership have affected institutional unity.

The result is a set of military institutions that remain constitutionally obedient, but also more cautious, less politically confident, and internally more fragmented than in previous decades. One illustration of these tensions occurred in April 2026, when the Brazilian Army general serving as the Army's liaison to Congress confronted a congressman—himself a supporter of former President Bolsonaro—for publicly describing the Army Commander as *frouxo* (“weak”). The criticism referred to the Commander's perceived willingness to tolerate repeated public offenses without institutional response and his refusal to appear before Congress despite repeated invitations. The congressman reacted strongly, generating political turmoil by demanding the officer's removal from his congressional liaison position. On the following day, the civilian Minister of Defense visited Congress and formally apologized to the congressman, helping to reduce tensions and cool the political atmosphere.

Simultaneously, the Armed Forces perceive a growing gap between Brazil's strategic environment and the resources available to address it. Although Brazil does not face an immediate external military threat, the global security environment is becoming increasingly unstable. Yet defense budgets remain limited and insufficient to sustain modernization programs or maintain credible long-term deterrent capabilities. This reinforces the perception within the military establishment that Brazil's ability to respond to potential external challenges is not commensurate with emerging geopolitical uncertainties.

These domestic developments have coincided with several U.S. policy choices that unintentionally contributed to a cooling of bilateral military relations. U.S. regional engagement increasingly focused on Venezuela, illegal immigration, China's expanding presence in the hemisphere, and global tariff disputes. At the same time, selective political alignment with certain regional actors, tariff-centered economic policies, and disruptions in U.S. interagency coordination created uncertainty among Latin American partners accustomed to stable institutional relationships.

Additionally, U.S. messaging emphasizing the long-term risks of dependence on China proved less persuasive in Brazil's strategic context. In the absence of an immediate external threat, deterrence narratives alone were insufficient to shape Brazilian defense choices. Historically, defense cooperation between the two countries has advanced primarily through concrete opportunities for technological collaboration, professional exchange, and mutual institutional benefit.

Understanding Brazil's defense posture also requires attention to the missions and strategic outlook of the individual services.

Brazilian Army (Exército Brasileiro): Focused on territorial defense, border security, strategic presence, and internal support operations. Major initiatives include the Calha Norte program, aimed at strengthening sovereignty, infrastructure, and state presence along Brazil's northern border region, particularly in the Amazon. The Army has also supported the revitalization of Brazil's defense-industrial base through armored vehicle development projects such as the Guarani and Centauro II, designed to enhance mobility, force protection, and operational flexibility across Brazil's vast territory.

In recent years, the Army has also emerged as one of the principal institutional actors behind Brazil's cyber defense and digital sovereignty strategy. Through the establishment of the Brazilian Cyber Defense Command (ComDCiber), the Army has played a central role in developing cyber doctrine, protecting strategic infrastructure, supporting election

security initiatives, and integrating cyber capabilities into joint operations. The Army has further contributed to Brazil's broader cyber policy by promoting cooperation among military institutions, universities, research centers, and the private sector. A particularly important development has been the creation of a military-oriented cyber education ecosystem—frequently referred to as a Brazilian “Cyber University” initiative—designed to train military and civilian cyber specialists, stimulate innovation, and strengthen national technological autonomy in areas such as cyber resilience, artificial intelligence, and information security.

Brazilian Navy (Marinha do Brasil): Oriented toward maritime defense and the protection of offshore resources (the “Blue Amazon”). The Navy's strategy centers on the Amazônia Azul concept and the ProSub program, which includes the development of a nuclear-powered submarine.

Brazilian Air Force (FAB): Increasingly guided by the strategic concept Dimensão 22, which integrates air and space capabilities and emphasizes aerospace innovation, satellite systems, and dual-use technological development. The FAB has acquired Gripen fighters and is rethinking its strategy through capacity-building methodologies. FAB also works closely with Embraer, a private enterprise aligned closely with its operational needs

Dimensão 22 creates a particularly promising area for renewed U.S.–Brazil cooperation, especially in aerospace technologies, satellite systems, space situational awareness, and defense innovation.

Implications for the U.S. policy and bilateral agenda

Despite recent political tensions, military-to-military cooperation remains one of the most resilient pillars of the bilateral relationship. Brazilian officers continue to value professional engagement with the United States in areas such as training, interoperability, aerospace cooperation, maritime security, cyber defense, and professional military education. This cooperation acquires even greater strategic relevance within the framework of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy, which explicitly prioritizes the Western Hemisphere as a central arena for security, economic resilience, technological competition, and geopolitical stability.

In this context, Brazil emerges as a particularly important partner due to its continental scale, regional influence, industrial and technological capabilities, and strategic position in the South

Atlantic, cyber, and space domains.

Strengthening military-to-military relations with Brazil therefore represents not only a bilateral defense interest, but also a broader strategic opportunity to reinforce hemispheric stability, democratic institutional resilience, and long-term regional cooperation.

Strengthening bilateral defense relations will require several adjustments in U.S. policy:

- reaffirm long-term institutional engagement with Brazil's Armed Forces independent of political cycles;
- align cooperation with the specific missions and strategic priorities of each Brazilian service, particularly aerospace initiatives under Dimensão 22, and Artemis initiative (Brazil is certainly an important candidate to host a Space Center of Excellence);
- complement strategic messaging about China with credible technological and defense-industrial partnerships;
- restore predictability and interagency coherence in U.S. engagement with Latin American partners;
- recognize Brazil's tradition of strategic autonomy and frame cooperation in terms of mutual benefit rather than exclusivity.

Ultimately, the United States does not need to deter Brazil from engaging other partners. Instead, it must demonstrate consistently that cooperation with the United States offers unique technological, institutional, and strategic advantages. Positive defense relationships are built gradually through trust and continuity, but they can deteriorate quickly when institutional engagement gives way to episodic or transactional approaches.

Brazil's Armed Forces remain a professional and potentially valuable strategic partner. However, they are currently navigating domestic political turbulence, institutional scrutiny, and resource constraints while striving to preserve their constitutional role within Brazil's democratic system.

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