



# Biden, Brazil and the Amazon

BY MARK S. LANGEVIN AND RAONI RAJÃO, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 03/02/21 10:30 AM EST  
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On Feb 12., Senate Foreign Relations Chair Bob Menendez (D-N.J.) sent a [letter](#) to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, warning that his foreign minister's alignment with domestic terrorists in the U.S. was a "strategic error" that "could have ramifications for our diplomatic relationship moving forward."

The senator's ire calls into question whether the Brazilian president will cooperate with President Biden on climate change [policy](#) and curbing deforestation in the Amazon.

Last week, Special Climate Envoy [John Kerry](#) discussed the Amazon and deforestation with Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo and Environment Minister Ricardo Salles. Without a doubt, the fate of the Amazon is now a key bilateral issue and one of Biden's most prickly foreign policy challenges.

Brazilian deforestation has ramped up since 2012, accelerating since Bolsonaro took office in January 2019. According to the government's own [figures](#), deforestation in the Amazon jumped from 4,683 square miles in 2018 to 6,294 in 2019 and continued in 2020, reaching 6,890 square miles, nearly the size of New Jersey. The Amazon's deforestation has spewed a growing cascade of carbon emissions and degraded the world's largest carbon sink. Forest cover loss is rapidly changing the regional climate, pushing the Amazon biome towards a [tipping point](#) that could trigger a dieback of large tracts of rainforest, releasing 90 gigatons of greenhouse gases and leaving Amazonian communities in the lurch.

The Brazilian president has placed the Amazon's [economic development](#) ahead of its environmental preservation. Forces within Bolsonaro's [ruling coalition](#) accept or directly engage in the illicit activities leading to

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clearcutting and forest fires. Therefore, Biden's engagement with Bolsonaro must be calculated to solve Brazil's unique political equation.

In recent years, Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom (the so-called GNUK group) have made substantial investments to build capacity to prevent deforestation and finance results-based payment programs aimed at environmental protection and sustainable development. The most notable of these efforts is the [Amazon Fund](#), created by Brazil with \$1 billion, mostly from Norway. Salles [suspended](#) the activities of the fund in 2019, stranding much needed resources to protect the Amazon.

So, what difference could Biden make?

We offer three steps to build confidence during the coming months and, eventually, convince the Bolsonaro administration and its political allies that the Amazon's economic development can best be achieved through international cooperation to preserve its forest.

First, the [Amazon Protection Plan](#) offers a longer term blueprint to finance forest protection and sustainable economic activities (as framed by Article Five of the Paris Agreement) and reform trade and supply chain policies, including the expansion of the [Lacey Act](#) that prevents the import of illicit agricultural and extractive products from the Amazon. U.S. trade policy and the multilateral trade system provide carbon intensive goods with an [implicit subsidy](#). The Biden administration should work to eliminate overt and tacit support for deforestation "contaminated" imports and prevent both multilateral and U.S.-based financial institutions from supporting activities that trigger deforestation.

[France](#) and the UK have already [passed legislation](#) that prevents the import of products linked to illegal deforestation and the European Union is on the same path. [COFCO](#), China's largest government-owned food processor, manufacturer and trader has made similar pledges to squeeze out deforestation from its supply chains. Biden can deepen and accelerate such efforts by guiding reforms of preferential and multilateral trade agreements to reduce deforestation with an eye on timber, beef and leather, minerals and other commodities illegally produced in the Amazon.

Second, Biden can encourage local solutions to deforestation. The Brazilian government has [repeatedly stated](#) that it is looking for ways to fund the conservation of its forests and Biden's pledge to bundle \$20 billion in donations will be an important step to show good faith. Yet, the U.S. administration should exercise caution and determine whether the Bolsonaro administration meets its obligations under any forest conservation spending program. While Brazil has built up a "stock" of emission reductions, thanks to the success of its previous forest preservation policies, Biden should not reward Bolsonaro as long as he continues to undermine the very policies, including extensive monitoring and strict enforcement of his nation's environmental laws, that curbed deforestation in the past. Biden should immediately offer and explicitly tie payments to the achievement of short-term reductions in deforestation.

Third, Biden should partner with all Amazon countries to quickly fortify the 2019 "[Leticia Pact](#)" summit after last September's [follow-up meeting](#). His administration should immediately engage all of the Amazon basin governments at all levels, civil society and scientific organizations, the Inter-American Development Bank and established donors, including Germany and Norway.

A special expanded Leticia Pact meeting could be held in conjunction with Biden's Earth Day Summit in April and focus on building a "green" Amazon economy that flips the incentives from illicit extractive activities to sustainable, gainsharing projects that enrich the region's diverse

populations and reward them for protecting the region's forest and waterways. If Bolsonaro attends and demonstrates committed leadership, then Biden should reciprocate with a visit to Brazil in 2022 that focuses exclusively on environmental protection and sustainable development.

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Biden should not hold his breath for Bolsonaro. Rather, the U.S. government and its allies should sidestep, circumvent and, whenever possible, hurdle the obstacles to addressing global warming and deforestation. In the process, Biden should work across borders, at every level of government and with as many Brazilians as possible to stop deforestation and contribute to sustainable and equitable development in the Amazon.

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