

Top of the COPs: ‘Rockstar’ Lula puts Brazil back on climate stage at COP27

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President-elect only participates in side events at summit, but generates international buzz as he signals Brazil’s ambition to return as a global environmental leader

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Brazil’s president-elect Lula poses with indigenous leaders Célia Xakriabá (left), Sônia Guajajara and Joenia Wapichana at an event at the COP27 summit in Egypt (Image: Christophe Gateau / Alamy)

Following his victory in Brazil’s recent presidential election, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has headed for Egypt and brought an intriguing twist to the country’s presence at the COP27 climate summit. Few presidents-elect will have received so warm a welcome at a multilateral event, as if they were already in office, and overshadowed their country’s official delegation so emphatically.

Arriving at the conference on Tuesday at the personal invitation of Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Lula headed into a packed schedule of side events and unofficial meetings, with Brazil still represented in negotiations by a delegation from the outgoing Jair Bolsonaro government.

In his first two days at the summit, Lula, whose return for a third term in power has been seen as a boost to the global environmental agenda, met with Xie Zhenhua and John Kerry, the climate envoys for China and the US respectively. The latter told BBC Brazil that he hoped the president-elect would “turn around” Brazil’s climate policy.

In most corners of the conference centre, Lula, who will take office in January, was met with cheers and “rockstar” welcomes, and delivered speeches to packed rooms, with the clear message that “Brazil is back”.

“Brazil is coming out of the cocoon to which it has been subjected over the past four years,” the president-elect told attendees. “Brazil was not born to be an isolated country.”

He also reiterated his offer to host a future COP in the Amazon, with 2025 the next date likely available, though as yet unconfirmed.



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Countries generally only have one pavilion set up at COP climate summits. But the fierce divides that have emerged in Brazil amid the Bolsonaro administration’s controversial handling of the environment have led to three separate pavilions being set up at COP27: one representing Bolsonaro’s federal government, one from governors of Amazonian states who have acted as opposition to the government, and another run by civil society.

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The vision for Brazil presented by Lula at the summit was markedly different from the one on show at the official national government pavilion. Presentations by the Ministry of the Environment, headed by Joaquim Leite, focused on data about renewable energy: the minister’s strategy was to contrast the Brazilian energy matrix, mostly based on hydropower, with Europe’s dependence on oil and coal – which has become more evident since Russia began its war in Ukraine. Lula, meanwhile, highlighted the deterioration of protections for the Amazon and for indigenous peoples, the reduction in environmental inspections and the consequent increase in deforestation of the biome.

“In the first three years of the current government,” the president-elect said, “deforestation in the Amazon increased by 73%. In 2021 alone, 13 thousand square kilometres were deforested. This devastation will be a thing of the past. Environmental crimes, which grew in a frightening way during this government that is coming to an end, will now be fought relentlessly.” He emphasised that climate issues will be at the centre of his new government.

Diplomatic split at COP27

Raoni Rajão, a professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and researcher at the Wilson Center, told Diálogo Chino that there was a “diplomatic split” for Brazil during the conference, since ministers and state representatives only sit down to talk with their

counterparts who are already in office.

“There is a great desire to start talking to the Lula government, since there is unanimity that all possibilities of advancing with the Bolsonaro government were frustrated,” said Rajão, who attended COP27 and commented that the official delegation’s participation was “low profile”.

Rajão added that the arrival of Lula has served more to rebuild lost bilateral relations than to generate a real impact on the formal negotiations of the conference.

Despite the optimism on the international stage, it is still not clear how Lula will manage climate issues domestically. One difficulty he will face is reconciling the interests of the country’s agribusiness and its powerful lobby in congress with those of the climate agenda.

During Lula’s previous administration (2003–2010), his former environment minister Marina Silva split with the president and his Workers’ Party due to disagreements over environmental policy. There had been expectations that Lula would announce his future minister during COP27, but this did not happen.

Financing for the Amazon

COP27 has brought new impetus to negotiations over international financing to Brazil, with the near US\$600 million Amazon Fund, paralysed under Bolsonaro’s administration, set to be restarted, and the volume of transfers potentially increased. At an event held with governors of Brazilian Amazon states, representatives of the German and Norwegian governments, which back the fund, spoke of their intention to release resources early next year before the end of the year.

Marina Silva, the former environment minister who is, following the recent elections, an elected member of parliament and a member of Lula’s transition team, confirmed to Diálogo Chino that international actors are interested in investing in Brazil’s climate agenda.

“There is a great mobilisation to cooperate with Brazil, and we are feeling it here with the bilateral relations with all countries, with the multilateral funding agencies, with philanthropy,” Silva said. Lula also used his platform at the summit to call for financial aid from rich countries.



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“They are all concerned with helping Brazil to make this crossing, especially in the first year [of the new administration], in which the budget will have been made by the Bolsonaro government,” Silva explained. The country is expected to close 2022 with a debt level of almost 80% of its GDP – 20 points higher than in 2018.

Is Brazil back?

In her time at the summit, Marina Silva also told media of the importance of Brazil’s commitment to the climate agenda and to restarting trade negotiations. In particular, the proposed agreement between the European Union and Mercosur, the economic bloc formed by Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, will be back on the agenda, having been announced in 2019. “The negotiations will be resumed,” Silva assured. “They were suspended because there was no confidence that the Bolsonaro government would comply with the clauses protecting the Amazon and native peoples.” The four countries face difficulties with deforestation of their biomes, driven by agribusiness.

During COP27, Lula’s transition team received a document with suggestions for environmental foreign policy produced by the Plataforma Cipó, a climate NGO, presented by its executive director, Adriana Abdenur. Signatories of the proposals include Izabella Teixeira, another former environment minister and adviser to the COP27 presidency, and Pedro Abramovay, director for Latin America of the Open Society Foundation.



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Abdenur told *Diálogo Chino* that Brazil needs to go beyond emergency climate measures and think about short-, medium- and long-term strategies. “International cooperation has to be a way to strengthen sustainable development and fair transition policies,” she said. “And Lula will reposition Brazil as a proactive actor in regional and global discussions.”

Brazil has the capacity not only to strengthen and rebuild its mechanisms, but also to create new channels of dialogue and new initiatives

In the document, the group argues that Latin America and the Caribbean should use climate issues as a new basis for regional integration. “This is very important not only because of the challenges posed by climate change, but also because of the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, in which there has been a restructuring of the global economy and new risks to value chains have emerged, such as food and energy sovereignty,” Abdenur said.

Asked about the difference she noticed in Brazil's presence at COP27 compared to previous events, Abdenur felt there had been more optimism, even with challenges ahead.

“It will not be a very easy endeavour, there was a great emptying and dismantling of the federal institutions in charge of environmental protection,” she said. “But Brazil has, both within the state and outside, in civil society and the private sector, the capacity not only to strengthen and rebuild its mechanisms, but also to create new channels of dialogue and new initiatives.”