



“We Are Committed to Restoring Confidence in the Country and Its Institutions”

A Conversation with His Excellency Hamilton Mourão
Vice President of the Federative Republic of Brazil





A Conversation with His Excellency **Hamilton Mourão, Vice President of Brazil**

Paulo Sotero: Good afternoon to you all. Welcome to the Wilson Center. We are honored to have the Vice President of Brazil, Hamilton Mourão, with us today for his first public event in Washington, D.C. as vice president. Since joining the government, Vice President Mourão has emerged as a moderating voice in Brasília, and someone who supports civil dialogue, freedom of expression, and the rights of the press inscribed in the Brazilian Constitution. As you all know, providing a forum for nonpartisan and open debate on pressing global issues is our core mission here at the Wilson Center, and there are many pressing issues for us to discuss today, from the role of the military in a democracy to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela and Brazil's domestic and political challenges. We look forward to hearing the Vice President's thoughts on these and other topics.

We are also pleased to discover that the Vice President has an early connection with Woodrow Wilson. In the early sixties, when his father, an Army officer, served in a military inter-American commission in Washington, Vice President Mourão attended the Woodrow Wilson High School, right here in northwest D.C., for the first semester of his freshman year. After returning to

Brazil and completing his secondary education, Vice President Mourão enrolled in the military academy of Agulhas Negras. He served in the Brazilian Army as an officer for forty-five years, including as military attaché in Venezuela and a UN peacekeeping mission in Angola, and rose to the rank of four-star general before retiring in 2018.

He is one of the eight former senior military officers currently serving in the government. As I welcome Ambassadors Sérgio Amaral [and] Fernando Simas, Ambassador Luigi Einaudi, I wanted to express, Mr. Vice President, that it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Wilson Center. Please, the floor is yours.

Vice President Mourão: Dear Paulo Sotero, Director of the Brazil Institute of the Wilson Center, I would like to greet the audience attending this event. Ambassador Sérgio Amaral, Ambassador of Brazil to the United States, ladies and gentlemen. The official visit of President Jair Bolsonaro to Washington three weeks ago raised expectations for the strengthening of relations between Brazil and the United States. In the past couple of days, participating in events in Boston and in Washington, I heard many encouraging

** The Vice President's remarks have been lightly edited for clarity. A video of the speech and Q&A that followed is available at: www.wilsoncenter.org/program/brazil-institute.*

comments from politicians, businesspeople, professors and students. I have been able to see important players turning their eyes and ears towards Brazil with confidence that our country is getting back on the right track.

On that note, I want to thank Paulo Sotero for organizing this event. I believe that the Brazil Institute, as the only think tank in D.C. exclusively dedicated to Brazil, has an important role in advancing understanding about the agenda of reforms presented by our administration, and how that agenda will enable our country to reap more benefits from closer cooperation with the United States and other strategic partners.

Within two days, on April 11, we will complete 100 days in office. The date will offer an opportunity to take stock of what has been achieved so far, while also allowing us to set a course for the future work. We know that there is still a long way ahead, and our duty will only be accomplished on January 1, 2023, when President Bolsonaro and I will hand over power to the next elected government. By then, I am confident that we will have taken decisive steps to enable Brazil to fulfill its manifest destiny as the largest and most vibrant and prosperous democracy in the Southern Hemisphere.

From the outset of our administration, we acknowledged that the Brazilian economy is not in tune with current times, and that our public institutions are still very far from the needs and wishes of our people. The global context has been deeply transformed by the economic and political reforms adopted in the late seventies and early eighties. The triumph of neoliberal ideas, coupled with a scientific and technological revolution, brought to life what has been called globalization. The impacts of those reforms were magnified by unprecedented development of information and communication technologies, resulting in an international environment of greater instability and competition.

Today all nations, even the most developed ones, are kept in a permanent state of alert. The speed of change makes the new look older in the blink of an eye. Conflicts appear everywhere,

and transnational threats such as terrorism, cyber war, drug trafficking, epidemics, illegal immigrations, organized crime, environmental and climate catastrophes, are all around us. The information society cannot be confined within our national borders. Social networks became part of everybody's life, but those channels and technologies are also used for wrongdoing. So-called globalization brought efficiency, information and comfort; but unfortunately it also allowed hate, intolerance, and violence to spread more easily through our societies, right under the nose of existing institutions.

Such flows are faster than our capacity to provide political response, and governments seem to be facing critical challenges everywhere. Even international trade governance is now under threat as a commercial war is taking place, and many countries are starting to protect their internal markets.

Latin America, in turn, is still searching for itself, trying to break out of its peripheral logic. Our region wants a better place on the great geopolitical chessboard of globalization and global value chains. We are still great exporters of primary goods, with very low added value. To make it worse, many countries in the region are still under the influence of colonial dogmas, and of people who believe that the Cold War has not ended, and defend ideas that went wrong everywhere else. Venezuela is an emblematic example of the destruction that the so-called socialists can do. Late President Chávez conducted a process of conquest of power using the democratic instrument of elections and a new constitution that gave him full control over the state. His death showed that he did not have a substitute, and Mr. Maduro is simply completing the disruption of the country.

What of Brazil? This colossus, with continental dimensions, [is] incredibly rich, but it seems it wants to be the eternal "country of the future." Due to governments that believed that the state should do everything, we walked into a terrible political, economic, and social crisis. We have been cut down by the incompetence of the political leaders, by the inefficiency of the public

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administration, and by the cancer of a compulsive corruption. Leftist governments turned their backs on market freedom, and opened their arms to embrace crony capitalism. That process was interrupted with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, and most decisively with the election of Jair Bolsonaro as the president of Brazil.

Bolsonaro was elected in a wave of indignation, and a vigorous movement to rescue our country, our pride, our values. First and foremost, we are committed to restore the confidence in the country and its institutions, so we can resume the path to our social and economic development. From the outset, our government has taken steps toward a reform of the state. We reduced the number of ministries, appointing a cabinet without political influence, far from the practice that sold the government to the political parties. We have also cut more than 20,000 positions in different levels of the federal government, the so-called

“commissioned positions,” which are open for non-career appointments and therefore were part of the give-and-take game of old politics.

To attack the main problems linked to the economy and public security, Mr. Paulo Guedes and Mr. Sérgio Moro were chosen. Both ministers, within their fields of competencies, have already presented legislative proposals that are critical for the future of our nation. As part of our priorities for the first 100 days, the pension reform, the anticrime/anticorruption bills were submitted for the consideration of Congress. Several projects were also presented from other sectors of the administration, but we have clarity that the priority now is the pension reform, followed by the anticrime and anticorruption package.

On the economic side, the two main structural problems for the Brazilian economy are low economic growth and the deterioration of public accounts. Each of these problems is deeply rooted from years of economic mismanagement, and our response will need to combine different measures in order to have lasting impacts. For the productivity agenda, we should highlight the tax system reform, the opening of the economy to trade, privatization, and the reform of our educational system. We need to remove the state burden from the back of those who produce. The fiscal consolidation, in turn, will be achieved by a combination of the social security system reform, freezing public sector wages, the reduction of fiscal subsidies, and other measures as the liberation of the mandatory expenditures and nonrecurring revenues.

On February 20, President Bolsonaro personally handed over the pension system reform bill to the presidents of the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate, in a political gesture that illustrated the priority given to that reform. We are now working to have the pension reform bill approved in Congress, but obtaining the necessary votes is not an easy task. Party fragmentation poses a challenge for any political system, and in Brazil we have more than thirty political parties represented in the parliament. We are not elected to revert into [the] old politics of corruption, bribery, and co-optation that have caused so much damage to our political institutions. That is why the government has decided to intensify its efforts to persuade congressmen and public opinion that the current social security system is doomed,

and a substantial reform is badly needed. The proposal is to save around \$260 billion over the next decade. The draft submitted to Congress is balanced and progressive. It will cut privilege, reduce inequalities, and preserve the future of our children and grandchildren.

Important outcomes were already achieved by the infrastructure concession program, under the leadership of the Minister for Infrastructure, Tarcísio Freitas. The program includes roads, port terminals, railways, power transmission lines, sanitation infrastructure, among others. Minister Tarcísio announced, after a series of successful auctions, that the government met the goal of delivering twenty-three concessions before 100 days, an outcome that contributes to promote investment in strategic projects, as well as to improve the business environment in Brazil. We also need to get rid of the excess of regulatory requirements and the red tape that keeps our country tied, preventing entrepreneurs from flourishing and developing. A radical simplification of the process to open a new business is necessary and the regulatory agencies must be kept free of political influence.

On public security, we have been working on four different axes. [We are] tightening the legislation so that criminals really spend their time in prison. We have to end the progressive [punishment] system which only benefits criminals. We have to deal with the problem of crimes perpetrated by minors as well. The prison system has to be changed because prison cannot be a place for a vacation and for where the criminal lords command their groups. Our police force needs modern technological devices and support from intelligence, while we also have to ensure greater control of our borders. Finally, public security policy can only be successful if we create jobs, improve education, and offer basic social services for the groups that live in poor and vulnerable situations.

The package of bills prepared by Minister Sérgio Moro and presented to Congress provides for greater efficiency in the fighting against

corruption, organized crime, and violent offense. Those bills are also a priority for our administration and even more for the Brazilian people who suffer most directly from the scourge of violence, crime, and corruption.

Finally, Mr. Bolsonaro has a firm stance toward the Constitution and our institutions. Everybody can be sure that Brazil will enter into a new period in history: one marked by efficiency, responsibility, and no corruption. The president is a statesman, who is not looking at the next elections but at the next generations.

Now, more than ever, Brazil is committed to the same democratic principles and values that have inspired and guided the United States. It is not by chance that Presidents Bolsonaro and Trump had such a fruitful meeting three weeks ago. In the conversation I had with Vice President Mike Pence yesterday, I was also convinced that our shared values will pave the way for greater cooperation and integration between the United States and Brazil, resulting in mutual benefits for our countries.

We are promoting reforms that will have real and lasting positive impacts on growth, productivity, public security and many other fields such as health, education, and environment. Brazil is aware of the challenge of our times. We will continue to do our part in global efforts against climate change, as our government is also working to ensure a better future for the next generation.

I will return to Brasília tomorrow and I have more confidence that when our mission ends on January 1, 2023, Bolsonaro and I will have advanced in our most important concern, which is to ensure greater freedom to the Brazilian people, as phrased by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his speech of the State of the Union in the year of 1940: "freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear."

Thank you very much.

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Q&A Session

Paulo Sotero: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President. We have some friends here that would like to ask you more specific questions, and for that, I would like to invite Ambassador Luigi Einaudi, former assistant secretary general of the Organization of American States, to start.

Ambassador Einaudi: Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President. Welcome to the Wilson Center, and I hope this is the first of many further dialogues. As a career military officer, who only recently came into the political sphere, I would be interested in your views of the political role of the military, which under the Brazilian Constitution retains an obligation to guarantee public, constitutional institutions, and I am curious of what your views are on that and whether those who remain in active duty agree with you.

Vice President Mourão: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador. This question is something that concerns everybody, once two people who came from the military were elected in Brazil.

Of course, Mr. Bolsonaro spent fifteen years in the army and thirty years as a politician. He knows how to do politics. I retired last year and was called by Mr. Bolsonaro at the last moment to join his ticket, and here I am. One thing has to be very clear: our Constitution in its Article 142 [defines] the task of our armed forces. Of course, it is to defend our country, to [guarantee the] democratic powers, [and] to cooperate in the guarantee of law and order. And so, our armed forces are only doing this. They are not in the government.

Of course, we have some people who came from the armed forces in the government. I think it is normal, as Mr. Bolsonaro came from this group, [that] when he had to choose people with competency, capacity, and who know the activity they are supposed to run, he chose one of those guys. So, I want to assure you, Mr. Ambassador,

the armed forces will [stay] as they are and as they have been for the last thirty-four years, since the end of the military regime in 1985. And we received the task from the Brazilian people to run the government for the next four years and to do our best to change the course of Brazil has taken, to restore our economy, to restore the [public] security of our people, and to put the country back on track so we can reach sustainable development. Thank you.

Sotero: I will now invite Joel Velasco, vice president for Latin America at United Health.

Velasco: Good to meet you, Mr. Vice President. I am not going to ask about health care policies, I am actually going to ask about the vice presidency. I had the pleasure of working at the vice presidency here in Washington when Vice President Al Gore was serving under President Bill Clinton. One thing that I learned in this experience is that successful vice presidents are successful not only in [terms of] what they do afterwards—in the case of Al Gore he was not successful—but their success really has to do with two things: one [is] their relationship with the president. But the other one is picking a few [issues] to focus on. I am curious if you could tell us two or three things you will be focusing on, assuming you will follow that lead.

Mourão: Thank you very much. Well, it is not easy to be a vice president. Of course, you are second in command. You can look at me and say, “You’ve been a general for twelve years. You commanded everybody.” Well, now I don’t command. I am the one [who is] commanded. So the first thing is this: you have to have intellectual discipline to understand the needs of the president. So I look at myself as a complementary man for the president. Things that he doesn’t want to say he can tell me, “Go there and you speak.” Sometimes, I say to people in the press that I feel

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like the shield and the sword of the president. I can defend when he needs to be defended and I can attack before he needs to attack. That's another point that I see.

And, I tasked myself and I [strategized] (25:22) with the president to bring our way of thinking to the different people in our society. We speak with people from investment, we speak with syndicates [unions], we speak with local leaders, so that we can convince everybody to have confidence in us and believe in what we want to do for Brazil. So, I say that we are doing more publicity work for the government. That is the way I am feeling right now. Our Constitution is very vague about the tasks of the vice president. It just says that the vice president exists to substitute temporarily the president and to receive "special missions." Whenever the president wants to give me a special mission, I'll be ready.

Sotero: Monica de Bolle, Professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and also a fellow at the Peterson [Institute for International Economics] here in Washington.

Mourão: Monica has a fame that precedes her.

De Bolle: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Vice President and a pleasure to get to ask you a question. So, I will deviate from the subjects that have been raised thus far and just raise a question about the region, and what's in Venezuela, and impact on the region, having you as a very renowned expert of the situation on the ground. My question basically is: we know that the Venezuelan crisis is having many spillovers across the region, in Colombia most notably, but also in other parts of the region. So, I would be very interested in hearing about your views on the role that Brazil can play in helping to resolve not just the Venezuelan crisis but also the spillover effect as a global leader in the region. Thank you.

Mourão: Thank you, Monica, for your question. Everybody is following what is happening in Venezuela. It is the chronicle of an announced death. The way things were being done in that country, we didn't have any doubt that it would reach the point that we are seeing right now. So it [falls on] all of us in Latin America to help Venezuela.

And how can we help Venezuela now? We have to do all that is in our hands to press the Maduro government to call new elections, to get out. They don't have the capacity to solve what is happening there. The country is shattered economically, the population is suffering because they don't have access to food, they don't have access to medicine. The problem now of electric power has reached a point of no return because there are no people who [are capable of doing] maintenance. The maintenance was of course not being done, so they don't have electricity now. Yesterday, I had a chat with one fellow from Venezuela and he told me his mother-in-law still lives there. She is eighty-two years old and she lives in the twelfth floor of a block [building]. Her grandson has to [walk] all the way up with water, with food, so that she can live a normal life. So it's difficult, the situation.

What can we do? It is what we are doing through the Group of Lima. We have to apply pressure. The political pressure is being applied since the moment that we did not recognize anymore Maduro as the real government in Venezuela, and we recognized Guaidó. And economic pressure: Brazil and Colombia can do some part of the economic pressure, but the great pressure comes from the United States. Yesterday, I spoke about this with Mr. Pence. Because you see, the great [source of] revenue in Venezuela is the oil industry, and where does the oil from Venezuela go? Mainly to the United States. It's a heavy oil. The refineries that you have here on the southern coast, in Texas, they are specialized to refine the Venezuelan oil. So, as long as we keep this pressure, we tighten the regime, I think this can be a moment where Maduro will understand that he has to leave.

And then there is the day after. That is a big task, a big responsibility for us and for the Venezuelan armed forces. Because we know there are the Cubans, there are the militias, there are the coletivos. So, the Venezuelan armed forces have to deal with these guys. Also, the international community will have to provide the funds so we can raise Venezuela again.

Sotero: I now call on Benjamin Junge, he is a Professor at the State University of New York and Fellow at the Wilson Center Brazil Institute. An anthropologist.

Junge: Mr. Vice President, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Brazilians are deeply concerned over rising violence against LGBT people, about the stripping of LGBT protections in government policy and the denigrating statements made by President Bolsonaro and other members of the administration. You yourself have recently emerged as a voice of moderation, as when gay Congressman Jean Wyllys of Rio abruptly resigned and fled to Europe out of fear for his life. You told the press in response that anyone who would threaten a parliamentarian, this would be a crime against democracy. Mr. Vice President, how do you address the concerns of LGBT Brazilians? Especially, there are concerns about their rights, the right to freedom from discrimination that is guaranteed to all Brazilians in the Constitution. How can you reassure those Brazilian citizens? Thank you.

Mourão: Thank you for your question. Well, President Bolsonaro firmly and truly believes that he was elected for everybody who is in Brazil. So, there is no problem, there is no case about minorities, our government has no policy to—okay, we are going to persecute minorities? That is not the way we behave.

Everybody who is Brazilian must [be able to] stay in Brazil, like I said, free from fear. They do not have to fear anything there. And, in the specific case of Mr. Wyllys, I particularly think that he should have stayed in Brazil and believed in our law and our police, so that we could protect him. That is the task of the state. I just think that he should have stayed. It is very sad when things like this happen. So, what I can assure you: there is no policy of the government to persecute [anyone]. Brazil is for everybody. And of course, the minister who is in charge of the LGBT people, Minister Damares, she has opened channels with them. Currently, I haven't seen problems like this. Of course, violence that happens has to be dealt [with] by the police and by the law, because, I think all of you agree with me that a mass democracy like ours, with 200 million people, only can be together, only can be in peace if the law is above everybody. So, we have to be by the law.

Sotero: From one anthropologist to the other, Steve Schwartzman, from the Environmental Defense Fund and an expert on Brazil for more than forty years.

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Schwartzman: Thank you Paulo and thank you Mr. Vice President. You mentioned just now that Brazil will continue to do its part to combat climate change. I very much wish that I could hear a representative of the United States government make a similar declaration and it is obviously very timely. Even as we speak, in Rio de Janeiro, terrible flooding, at least six people have died. And this is only one in an increasing series of events that you characterized as environmental and climatic disasters around the world. Yet, Environmental Minister [Ricardo de Aquino] Salles characterized climate change as an academic question. Do you share this view?

Mourão: Well, what I think—I have no doubt that the climate is changing. I lived in Rio de Janeiro for many years in my life. I remember some fifty years ago, when I was a young boy in Rio, we never used the air conditioning, okay? We slept in the summer without any problem. Today, it is impossible to sleep in the summer in Rio de Janeiro without air conditioning. So, this is a simple proof that there has been a change in climate. What I can think is: has this change come to stay, or is it one of the [periodic oscillations] that happens in the life of Earth. It is the only thing that I can argue about this. But, there is no question about the change. It is changing. And, like you said, in Rio any rain is a big problem because of the topography of the city, the disorganization of the occupation of the city. So, we have to deal with this. And, of course, at first there was all that talk about the Paris Agreement. We are going to stay in the Paris Agreement, we have to fulfill the Paris Agreement. And I think that

we in Brazil can pass a good word to everybody once we do our homework on sustainability and environmental question. Also, I look forward because there is going to be a market of carbon credits in the nearby future. Well, we will have a lot of carbon credits to sell. That is my answer.

Sotero: I would like to piggyback on this question. There is something that has intrigued many people here. We know that the Amazon is an asset for Brazil; it is not a liability. And the question is: how best to use, to mobilize the Amazon in benefit of our economy, of our society, and of our presence internationally. Do you have thoughts on that?

Mourão: Well, we have a plan for the Amazon area. What happened is that most of the Amazon area is not fully integrated to Brazil. For instance, you only reach Manaus by plane or by boat. There is one road that comes from the state of Rondônia that has a big problem, [which] as of today, has not been solved. We need to integrate the Amazon area to the rest of the country.

You have to look also that the Amazon area is an empty area. For instance, [the] Amazon is not only in Brazil. Peru, north of Bolivia, Colombia, part of Ecuador, the Guyanas, part of Venezuela—they all are in the Amazon area. There is one point in part of this area that belongs to Brazil, to the Guyanas and to Venezuela, that I call the island. And if you imagine, if you come through the mouth of the Amazon River, you reach Manaus, you go up the Black River [Rio Negro] and you go north and you reach the border between Venezuela



and Colombia. There is a channel—Casiquiare channel—and you go to the Orinoco River and you go back again to the Ocean. This is an empty space. There are very few people on the Brazilian side, very few people in the Guyanas and very few people in Venezuela. We have to deal with all this area and [it] belongs to all these countries.

We have to keep the forest and we have to find ways to explore the biodiversity that exists in the forest. Where the Arc of Fire (that the agriculture bordered) reached, for the most part, we detained it. And we have to rebuild part of the forest that was degraded by this exploitation. It reached the southeast part of the state of Pará and the south of the state of Amazonas and parts of Rondônia and Acre. We have to deal with this in a good way. And we have to be examples for the rest of the world. Technology will be very important so that we can explore what we have in the Amazon area, and at the same time keep it like it is, because

she [Amazonia] is the lungs of the world and we have to keep it this way.

Sotero: And the final question goes to Elcio Santana, from Georgetown University.

Santana: Mr. Vice President, just a follow-up on your answer right now. You mentioned the Amazon and how to deal with this. Brazil is actually crucial to solve two of the most pressing problems that everybody is projecting for the next thirty or fifty years. One is food security and Brazil is well placed—apparently, it is one of the five countries that can respond to that challenge. The second issue is the issue of water scarcity, and this is already behind some conflicts between countries, between regions and so on, and tends to be a growing and very difficult problem. So, given that Brazil has 15 percent of global reserves of fresh water, what scenarios are you considering in terms of how to deal with this challenge?

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Mourão: Well, it is a very challenging one. In my last period in the army, I told my junior officers that probably in the future we will kill and die for water; maybe future wars will happen because of the lack of water. We have seen people in North Africa launching themselves in the Mediterranean Sea to reach the south coast of Europe because they are fleeing from bad climate and a total absence of water. Well, it is not easy to deal with this question of water [but] we have to think very strongly about [it] and so far we are just planning what to deal with this, but we are very concerned, very, very concerned.

The first part of your question was...?

Santana: It was about food security.


Mourão: Yes. Agriculture is [one of] the greatest riches in Brazil. More than forty years ago, one of the uncles of my deceased wife, he told me that our future would be [to be] the barn of the world, okay? I think that is our main task: we can provide food to everybody. We have good technology, we

have water, we have sun, we have the land, okay? We have to keep the land. For instance, some two months ago I went to Mato Grosso to see the harvest of the soybeans and so they were cutting the soybeans, and on the rest of the harvest, they were already [planting the second crop of] corn. So, it is a technology that is ours, we discovered that and we can provide also this technology for instance for people in Africa, they are starving sometimes while the land in Central Africa is very similar to the one of our central Brazil, so that is a thing [where] we can be leaders in the world. Thank you for your question.

Sotero: Well, with that, the Vice President has other commitments, I will ask you to recognize his visit with a round of applause. Thank you very much.




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