

Venezuela's Maduro meets Lula in Brazil as relations improve

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Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro (left) and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva hold talks in Brasilia, Brazil, May 29 [Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters]

Brasilia, May 29 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has held talks with his Venezuelan counterpart, as Nicolas Maduro made his first visit to Brazil in years in a sign of warming ties between the two South American nations.

Maduro was welcomed by an honour guard at the Brazilian presidential palace in the capital Brasilia on Monday, when Lula greeted him with a hug and a backslap.

The two left-wing leaders signed various agreements in a push to strengthen ties after a period of hostility during the tenure of Lula's right-wing predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, who banned Maduro from entering Brazil in 2019.

The Brazilian foreign ministry said in a statement that Lula and Maduro -- who are set to attend a meeting of South American leaders on Tuesday -- planned to discuss further normalising relations and reopening their respective embassies. "We are living in an historic moment," Lula said on Twitter, welcoming the Venezuelan leader to Brazil. Maduro tweeted on Sunday that he was "grateful for the warm welcome".

After his talks with Lula, the Venezuelan leader said he would propose that South America as a region asks the United States to lift its sanctions against the country. Maduro also said his nation wants to be part of the BRICS group of leading emerging nations, with Lula saying he would personally favour a bid from Venezuela to join it.

Lula is the latest left-wing leader in the region to restore relations with the Maduro government, which faced a period of international isolation amid accusations it had cracked down on political opposition and civil liberties in Venezuela.

Relations between Colombia and Venezuela recently improved as left-wing Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who took office in August 2022, departed from the more confrontational path of his conservative predecessor Ivan Duque.

The two countries have re-established diplomatic ties and taken a series of steps to expand relations, such as easing travel restrictions on their shared border. Petro and Maduro held a bilateral meeting in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas in November.

And earlier this month, Colombia and Venezuela also announced that they would increase the military presence on the border, where criminal and armed groups have operated.

Under Bolsonaro, Brazil prohibited Maduro and many members of his government from entering the country, and it recognised opposition leader Juan Guaido as the "legitimate" president of Venezuela. In contrast, Lula, who previously led Brazil from 2003 to 2010, had cultivated close ties with Maduro's predecessor and mentor, Hugo Chavez.

"No matter if both governments agree with each other, Venezuela is a neighbour and can't be ignored or have diplomatic ties broken, as we have practical issues that need to be solved," said Carolina Silva Pedroso, an international relations professor at Sao Paulo's Federal University.

Meanwhile, analysts have said Lula is hoping that this week's regional summit will be an opportunity for greater integration – and a test of leaders' willingness to cooperate through a revived Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

First established 15 years ago in Brazil's capital during Lula's second presidential term, the regional bloc sought to integrate the 12 South American nations culturally, socially, politically and economically.

The last meeting with all UNASUR's members took place in 2014. After 2017, disagreements over the bloc's leadership and the participation of Maduro led seven countries to withdraw, including Brazil in 2019 under Bolsonaro.

"UNASUR's greatest problem is that it was built in a moment when there were leftist leaders, and it shattered when right-wing leaders came along," said Oliver Stuenkel, an international relations professor at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university and think-tank in Sao Paulo.

“It is easy to talk about its comeback now, but they need to think of ways to make this second attempt last.”

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