



The Washington Post

VIEW ON WEB >

The Washington Post

Today's WorldView

Edited by Ruby Mellen

 Share Share Tips/Feedback

BY ISHAAN THAROOR

The Amazon fires put spotlight on two rival leaders



(Eraldo Peres/AP; David Mercado/Reuters)

Even as fires rage in both their countries, there's little neighborly love between the leaders of Brazil and Bolivia. International scrutiny has fallen on both countries following a summer where vast tracts of the world's most important forest went up in flames. In Brazil, there's been [a more than 80 percent spike in the number of fires from 2018](#), a development that garnered international headlines when the city of Sao Paulo got cloaked in sooty smoke last week.

Similar pollution reached Bolivia's largest city, Santa Cruz. An area roughly the size of Connecticut in Bolivia's densely forested Chiquitania region, on the border with Brazil and Paraguay, has burned to the ground this summer, endangering hundreds of animal species. [By one account](#), it may take Bolivia's forests two centuries to recover. But don't expect either Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro or his Bolivian counterpart, President Evo Morales, to come to the other's aid. When the former, a far-right firebrand, took office at the start of the year, the latter, a South American leftist stalwart, [tweeted his disgust](#) at "the reemergence of white supremacist (KKK) ideology" in the continent's politics.

The feelings were mutual. At Bolsonaro's inauguration, Morales, the only regional left-wing leader to attend, was [jeered by the new president's supporters](#) as a "communist" and a "f---ing Indian." In [an interview with the Brazilian newspaper O Globo](#), a lawmaker in Bolsonaro's political party scoffed at critics who worried about the risks facing Brazil's indigenous communities under the new president's watch. "If you like Indians, you should go to Bolivia," said Rodrigo Amorim, the recently elected

congressman, referring to Morales's indigenous ethnicity. "As well as being communist, it's governed by an Indian."

Since coming to power in 2005, Morales has been [unabashed about his origins](#) and his desire to uplift his country's most marginalized. He leveraged [a boom in natural gas and mineral exports](#) to redistribute the wealth and bring hundreds of thousands of Bolivians into the middle class through populist social plans that guaranteed him reelection in 2009 and 2014. Although Bolivia remains one of the continent's poorest countries, [its gross domestic product per capita has tripled](#) while Morales has been president.

But Morales's popularity [has been waning](#). He is seeking reelection in October for an unprecedented fourth term — a bid only possible after he controversially circumvented [the results of a 2016 referendum](#) that blocked him from scrapping constitutional term limits.

Meanwhile, Bolsonaro's antipathy toward both indigenous minorities and leftists has been a defining streak of his politics. During his successful 2018 election campaign, he [tarred his domestic opponents](#) as would-be leftist autocrats in the vein of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro — and, indeed, Morales. And, now in command, Bolsonaro has followed through on his campaign trail vows: a restructuring or wholesale dismantling of Brazil's existing environmental protections for indigenous areas in the Amazon, to the benefit of the country's powerful agribusiness industry. Not for nothing did [he earn the sobriquet](#) "Captain Chainsaw."



Donald Tusk ✓
@eucopresident



The EU stands by the EU-Mercosur agreement but a harmonious ratification is hard to imagine as long as the Brazilian government allows for the destruction of the green lungs of Planet Earth.

♡ 8,060 7:39 AM - Aug 24, 2019



💬 3,757 people are talking about this



Those moves provide the backdrop to the unfolding calamity in the Amazon rainforest, referred to widely as the "lungs" of the planet. Critics, [including prominent politicians in Europe and elsewhere](#), argue that Bolsonaro has emboldened cattle ranchers and loggers [to start setting fires to clear land](#). At the Group of Seven summit in France on Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron announced an immediate fund of \$20 million to help fight the fires in the Amazon. He and other European leaders have also threatened to stall a free-trade deal between the European Union and a bloc of South American nations over Bolsonaro's harmful policies.

This censure has not played well in Brazil. "From the start, Bolsonaro, like U.S. President Donald Trump, stacked his cabinet with science deniers who call climate change a Marxist hoax and made his open disdain for minority communities who depend on the Amazon a hallmark of his political messaging," [noted reporters for HuffPost Brazil](#). "Now, both leaders distract from fierce criticism and low polling at home by recasting criticism from media or other countries as unfair mudslinging from ideological opponents."

Bolsonaro has angrily lashed out at his critics and recently [warned his supporters](#) that "Brazil is the virgin that every foreign pervert wants to get their hands on." On Monday, his government [rejected the G-7 aid](#) on offer, saying in a statement that the funds should be used instead to reforest Europe and save the continent's famous cathedrals like Notre Dame in Paris.

“The Bolsonaro administration is trying to produce a rally-around-the-flag effect,” said Matias Spektor, an associate professor of international relations at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation in Sao Paulo, [to my colleagues](#). “They are trying to denounce Macron ... and the international press and the NGOs as a coalition that is set on suspending Brazilian sovereignty over the Amazon and it’s our duty to fight back.”

Though they are far from kindred spirits, Morales and Bolsonaro share a similar culpability in what has unfolded this summer. The Bolivian president’s administration initially played down the scale of the fire before realizing its horrific reach after an outcry. Morales suspended his reelection campaign to help coordinate his government’s response. After his earlier reticence, he did an about-face and [said he welcomes whatever aid](#) the rest of the world can muster for Bolivia’s firefighting efforts.



Evo Morales Ayma ✓

@evoespueblo



El Supertanker y nuestros helicópteros trabajan para sofocar el incendio. Agradezco el esfuerzo de tantos compatriotas, hombres y mujeres, que trabajan en esta dura tarea. Enfrentamos juntos esta batalla contra el fuego. [#UnidadEnLaAdversidad](#)



♡ 8,242 8:21 AM - Aug 24, 2019



💬 4,829 people are talking about this



But critics argue that the fires in Bolivia are also a product of policies that encouraged deforestation, including [a recent decree aimed at boosting beef production for export](#) that infuriated Bolivian civil society. Morales has a “top-down mentality about imposing development projects on the Amazon,” said Andrew Miller of conservation organization Amazon Watch [on the left-wing radio show Democracy Now](#). “So, at the same time that Evo Morales has had some progressive policies, he’s also had tensions with indigenous peoples.”

And suddenly, Morales has something in common with his ideological foe across the border. “The two countries most affected [by the fires] have governments at opposite ends of the political spectrum, but their position on deforesting the Amazon is the

same,” said Eugenio Coter, a prominent Bolivian bishop, [to Catholic News Service](#). “There is no political or economic plan for the Amazon that does not depend on the extraction of natural resources.”



TALKING POINTS

- **Trump, standing alongside Macron**, and then by himself, participated in a characteristically scattershot press conference. The president offered a range of false or dubious statements during a freewheeling news conference at the close of the often contentious G-7 summit in France, [my colleague Josh Dawsey reported](#).
- **Trump also reiterated his support for returning Russian President Vladimir Putin** to this club of Western powers. Trump’s advocacy on behalf of the Russian president was the most contentious issue, and he said he would invite him to the next G-7 summit when the United States hosts. The possible venue? [A failing Trump-owned resort outside of Miami](#).
- **The shadow war between Israel and Iran** keeps flaring in the open now. Another suspected Israeli strike hit targets in Lebanon, part of a wider series of airstrikes against Iran-linked positions in Iraq, Lebanon and Syria that has [raised fears that the tensions unleashed will escalate further](#).
- **Welcome to the jungle**. Indonesia has picked a site for its new capital city. With traffic-clogged Jakarta beset by pollution — and sinking fast — [officials plan to shift the country’s administrative nerve center to the island of Borneo](#).
- **The Atlantic’s Mike Giglio digs deep into the evolving Chinese espionage offensive into the United States**. Just in the past year, a number of former U.S. intelligence officials have pleaded guilty on espionage-related charges related to China.



President Trump in Biarritz, France, on Aug. 26. (Andrew Harnik/AP)

Waste of a weekend?

President Trump’s divergence on key international flash points, particularly trade, climate and Russian provocation, [upended the Group of Seven summit in France this weekend](#). On Monday, when participating leaders traveled home, their differences appeared to have sharpened and many agreements seemed more out of reach. As the G-7 meeting broke up, **many of the most pressing issues on the global agenda remained unresolved, in part because Trump was still deciding how to proceed**. For example, he said that he planned to continue pressing China with trade penalties if President Xi Jinping does not agree to major concessions. He continued his blunt attacks on the 2015 Iran nuclear deal even as French President Emmanuel Macron — one of the deal’s top defenders — stood by his side. And Trump mocked many Americans who have said that the White House should move quickly to address climate change.

The summit concluded with a short, one-page declaration that papered over many of the differences, a reflection of how far Trump has pulled the consortium from their goal of tackling global issues together.

It was supposed to be about much more.

A growing number of countries have launched costly trade wars. North Korea has restarted its missile-testing programs. Relations between South Korea and Japan have broken down. Multiple economies in Europe are stumbling toward recession. Britain is close to pulling away from the European Union without any deal. Leaders touched on some of these issues during discussions but nothing was resolved. Even the Amazon funding pledge, the main concrete takeaway, was denounced by the intended beneficiary, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro.

At its anticlimactic conclusion, **the summit showed how much Trump has been able to redraw the world order in less than three years.** He ran for president on a nationalist agenda, mocking international consortia as ineffective and counter to U.S. interests. For two years, other leaders tried with mixed success to convince him that these organizations were helpful.

But Trump has lurched wildly in the past week, proposing tax cuts and then pulling them off the table. Planning a trip to Denmark and then canceling it. Ordering companies to prepare to leave China and then backing away. **Aides have tried to explain away his comments by brushing aside some and doubling down on others, but world leaders still don't know how to decipher his statements and some have stopped trying.** — Toluse Olorunnipa, Michael Birnbaum, Damian Palette and Josh Dawsey



OPINIONS TO KNOW

Speaking of France, a piece in Bloomberg notes the country's remarkable economic strength at a dire time for the eurozone. Meanwhile, a column in the Moscow Times dissects the anatomy of China's alliance with Russia, one in The Post argues human apathy towards climate change lies in the way we empathize and at least someone's on board with President Trump's desire to buy Greenland — ladies and gentlemen, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) in the the New York Times.

The French are finally doing better than the Germans

France is no longer looking like one of Europe's walking wounded. Increasingly, that seems to be the fate of the export-dependent Germans.

Ferdinando Giugliano | Bloomberg

[Read more »](#)



Russia and China's cosplay alliance

How long will this awkward friendship last?

Mark Galeotti | The Moscow Times

[Read more »](#)



Caring about tomorrow

Why can't we stop climate change? We're not wired to empathize with our descendants.

Jamil Zaki | The Washington Post

[Read more »](#)



We should buy Greenland

Trump isn't the only one to recognize the country's strategic importance. Beijing does, too.

Tom Cotton | The New York Times

[Read more »](#)



An Oklahoma judge found Johnson & Johnson responsible for fueling the state's opioid crisis in the first case to find a drugmaker culpable for the fallout of years of liberal opioid dispensing that began in the late 1990s. Elsewhere, the New York Times looks at the growing art of scavenging American scrap metal, and GQ investigates the case of the American missionary who set out to make contact with a Sentinelese tribe on an Indian Ocean island to convert them to Christianity.

Johnson & Johnson ordered to pay \$572 million for its role in Oklahoma's opioid crisis

The Oklahoma judge's landmark ruling is the first to hold a drugmaker responsible for the nationwide epidemic of addiction and overdose deaths.

Lenny Bernstein | The Washington Post

[Read more »](#)



The big business of scavenging in postindustrial America

The U.S. produces more garbage than any other nation in the world per capita. Here's how scrappers are turning that waste into a \$32 billion business.



Jake Halpern | The New York Times

[Read more »](#)

The American missionary and the uncontacted tribe

When 26-year-old American missionary John Chau set out last year to convert the uncontacted Sentinelese tribe, he had ambitions for a great awakening. What awaited instead was tragedy.



Doug Bock Clark | GQ Magazine

[Read more »](#)