

Mini Simulation

Stopping Deforestation in the Amazon

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Overview

Deforestation in the Amazon rainforest is a significant contributor to climate change. As the practice continues, the Amazon is nearing a tipping point that could endanger the entire rainforest. Countries around the world have an interest in stopping deforestation, but the Amazon remains largely under Brazil's control. Any efforts to curb deforestation could be seen as challenging Brazilian sovereignty. How should the United States respond to deforestation in the Amazon?

Students will understand that deforestation is occurring in the Amazon, which contributes significantly to climate change.

Students will understand that the United States can use economic statecraft in several ways to influence Brazil's Amazon policy. Each approach to statecraft comes with risks, as certain measures could be considered a violation of Brazil's sovereignty.

The Situation

The Amazon—the world's largest rainforest—is disappearing. As much as 17 percent is already gone. Destruction of the rainforest has gone on for decades. However, under Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, eased deforestation regulations have led to a 47 percent increase in the rainforest's destruction. Deforestation in the Amazon is a triple threat to the environment. The destruction of the ecosystem has wide global ramifications including sea level rise, crop failures, and extreme weather. First, it means fewer trees can capture carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere. Second, many felled trees are burned, releasing previously captured carbon dioxide. Finally, the forest is often replaced with a high-emission industry such as livestock farming. The Amazon is approaching a tipping point: once 20 to 25 percent of the rainforest is lost, scientists predict the region will turn drier, transitioning into scrubland or savannah. This ecological shift will further inhibit its carbon-capturing ability. Because of deforestation's global consequences, governments around the world, including the United States, have an interest in checking the practice.

However, such intervention carries risk and could appear to challenge an important international norm. Sovereignty is the idea that countries should have control over their own internal affairs—a principle that suggests Brazil can use its land as it wishes. Brazil has done just that. The country has enabled deforestation to its economic benefit as it enlarges the agricultural industry; this growing economic sector now accounts for over 20 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). However, the global consequences of Brazil's land-use decisions have been so ruinous that some policymakers are suggesting intervention. Diplomats are willing to undermine Brazil's sovereignty and set an uncomfortable precedent in order to curb the disastrous ramifications of the Amazon's destruction. As a result, countries like the United States could face sanctions of their own, for instance over coal mines or manufacturing practices.

The United States could use economic measures to intervene. Washington could either impose sanctions or use aid to shape Brazilian policy in the Amazon. It could sanction Amazon-relevant industries such as timber exports and beef raised on deforested land. Still, Bolsonaro has made clear that Brazil would likely fiercely resist such measures. Sanctions would also set the strongest precedent for undermining a country's sovereignty on behalf of the environment. This action would open the door to similar sanctions against the United States. The United States

could also provide Brazil with economic incentives to stop deforestation. This incentive structure would promote more sustainable farming practices in Brazil. Economic incentives have succeeded in the past; an 80 percent decrease in deforestation between 2004 and 2012 coincided with significant aid from the internationally funded Amazon Fund. Aid carries less risk of harming diplomatic and economic relations. This form of statecraft is also more respectful of Brazilian sovereignty than sanctions. However, Bolsonaro has still discouraged any attempt at outside influence. A final, low-risk option is for the United States to maintain its current policy of simply making statements condemning deforestation. This strategy is contingent upon the Brazilian people's desire to elect a new president. However, with the Amazon nearing a tipping point, the window for curbing deforestation could be closing.

Decision Point

Brazil's policies regarding the Amazon rainforest have increased [deforestation](#) at an alarming rate. The rapid destruction of the rainforest could permanently damage the region and contribute to climate change worldwide. At the same time, intervening to stop the deforestation is a dicey proposition because it undermines Brazil's [sovereignty](#). Such a move could set a damaging precedent and would certainly meet resistance from Brazil. However, the United States has an interest in combating climate change and has pronounced it foreign policy priority. Therefore, the president has called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to decide whether the United States should intervene in Brazil, and if so, which method would be best.

NSC members should consider any combination of the following policy options:

- *Force the Brazilian government to slow deforestation by sanctioning Brazilian companies tied to the practice.* Although this could reduce deforestation most effectively, sanctioning Brazil risks a hostile response from Bolsonaro that could damage U.S.-Brazil relations. This strategy also sets a troubling international precedent.
- *Offer Brazil economic incentives to combat deforestation in the Amazon.* By supplying foreign aid, the United States could support sustainable farming initiatives, practices that prevent forest fires, or the revitalization of the Brazilian forests. On the other hand, making a deal with Brazil belies the danger of not being able to control where and how the money is used. Furthermore, Brazil could react negatively even to economic aid, seeing it as undue foreign interference.
- *Publicly reprimand Brazil for deforestation.* The United States could continue publicly reprimanding Bolsonaro for his lack of action to protect the Amazon. This option does nothing to stop deforestation but does not risk damaging U.S.-Brazil economic relations and cooperation on diplomatic issues. This strategy could allow the United States to bide its time until Brazil elects a more cooperative government. However, continuous deforestation could cause the Amazon to reach a tipping point from which it would be difficult to recover.

Photo: Burning forest in the southern region of the state of Amazonas, Brazil on August 4, 2017.

Source: Bruno Kelly / Reuters

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