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BRAZIL IN AFRICA

BRIDGING THE ATLANTIC?

Oliver Stuenkel

Brazil's presence in Africa is growing – nothing symbolises this reality better than the 37 Brazilian embassies that now exist across the continent, providing Brazil with a stronger diplomatic representation in Africa than traditional powers such as Great Britain. Yet what is Brazil's Africa strategy, and what are its interests? Are we witnessing an intense yet unsustainable rapprochement, as seen before, or is this just the beginning of a long-lasting and ever closer cooperation?

THE HISTORY OF BRAZIL-AFRICA RELATIONS

After Brazil and the African continent were separated from each other millions of years ago, it was the slave trade from the 16th century until the 19th century that marked Brazil-Africa relations. More African slaves were brought to Brazil than to any other country, including the United States, creating irreversible and profound cultural ties between the two. Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to abolish slavery in 1888. In the first half of the 20th century, however, Brazil-Africa relations were marked by a mutual lack of interest as both Africa and Brazil looked north towards Europe and the United States, respectively.

After World War II, Brazilian elites sought to minimise the role blacks played in Brazil's national identity, and topics related to Africa were removed from the curriculum in Brazil's schools. As the struggle for decolonisation intensified, Brazil (under President Juscelino Kubitschek) refrained from actively supporting independence movements, principally because it sought the help of industrialised nations to develop economically, and also because it was reluctant to

offend its old ally Portugal, a colonial power in Africa. Yet, after many African nations gained independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Brazil's President Jânio Quadros took the first steps towards establishing stronger ties with them. Quadros sent Raymundo de Souza Dantas, a black Brazilian journalist, to head the embassy in Accra. Dantas was the first black Ambassador in Brazil's history, yet he called his two-year stint in Ghana "traumatic and painful" and soon returned to Brazil, complaining that the government had not provided him with the necessary infrastructure to do his job properly. Ghana and Senegal soon opened embassies in Brazil, the first ones in Latin America. President Quadros also invited the Senegalese head of state Leopold Senghor to Brazil, who was paradoxically received in 1964 not by Quadros but by General Castelo Branco, who had deposed Quadros' successor Goulart in a military coup six months earlier. General Castelo Branco saw Africa mostly in the context of the threat of communism, but otherwise cared little about the continent.

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In the early 1970s, Brazil-Africa relations again received a boost, Brazilian investments in countries such as Angola surged, and the number of Brazilian embassies across Africa reached 16. In 1972, Brazil's Foreign Minister Gibson Barboza visited nine countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 1975, Brazil recognised the independence of Angola, thus ending the traditional alignment with Portugal – a hugely symbolic moment for Brazil-Africa relations. The oil shocks caused Brazil to turn to Nigeria and Angola as potential oil suppliers. Despite the advances, it took until 1983 for President Figueiredo to become the first Brazilian head of state to visit Sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet once again the activism proved unsustainable, and Brazil-Africa relations went into hibernation in the 1990s. President Fernando Collor put a clear focus on strengthening ties with the United States. President Cardoso's Foreign Minister Lampreia did not regard Africa as a priority in the post-Cold War scenario. While trade with Africa had made up ten per cent in the 1980s, it came down to two per cent of Brazil's overall trade in the 1990s.

It was President Lula who early on in his first term identified Africa as a priority in Brazil's effort to diversify its partnerships. Lula made 12 trips to Africa, visiting 21 countries. In the opposite direction, Brazil received 47 visits of African kings, presidents, and prime ministers from 27 nations. Brazil's Foreign Minister Celso Amorim made 67 official visits to African countries during his time with the Lula government. At first fiercely criticised by the opposition as an overly ideology-driven strategy, the wisdom of strengthening ties with Africa has now largely been accepted by the political mainstream in Brazil.



Brasil's former President Lula da Silva: During his term in office he aspired to "bridge the Atlantic". | Source: Alexander Bonilla / flickr (CC BY).

Notably, Lula's aspiration to "bridge the Atlantic" had both idealist and realist elements. Lula pointed to Brazil's "historic debt" to Africa, the existing cultural ties and sought to strengthen South-South relations in general to balance what he saw as overly powerful established powers. After all, Brazil has the world's largest black population outside of Nigeria. At the same time, Lula recognised that Africa's markets offered great potential for Brazilian companies. Unlike China and India, which are seeking to secure resources for their booming economies, Brazil is already a resource-rich country and a major oil exporter. From an economic point of view, Brazil sees Africa as an

opportunity to diversify its export markets in such sectors as agricultural machinery, biofuels, food and seeds, and providing help for its companies to internationalise their production. Supporters of Lula's move point out that Brazil is turning into a advocate for African interests in the international system, yet this remains controversial as Brazil's interests often diverge from those of small developing countries. Still, it was thanks to African votes that Brazil's José Graziano da Silva was elected FAO's Director-General in January 2012. African votes are also seen to be crucial should the UN General Assembly vote on UN Security Council Reform, which may provide Brazil with permanent membership, a long-term goal for policy makers in Brasília.

Lula administration's decision to reengage in Africa has had notable effects: There are now more African embassies in Brasília (34) than in any other capital in the Western Hemisphere except Washington, D.C. Trade has increased to 20 billion U.S. dollars, climbing back to six per cent of overall trade, and this share is expected to grow further. There is little doubt today that no emerging power can afford not to invest in Africa, one of the world economy's last frontiers.

BRAZIL AS AN EMERGING DONOR

Intertwined with Brazil's growing economic presence on the African continent is its newfound role as an aid donor. Yet similar to other emerging donors such as India and China, Brazil seeks to transcend the traditional interaction between donors and recipients and envisions an exchange between "equal" actors, with mutual benefits and responsibilities. Since 2005, Brazilian development projects have been an essential part of the country's Africa strategy. After a brief period of both receiving and sending aid, Northern donors are now ceasing to provide aid to Brazil, suggesting it is no longer seen as a developing country.

Will Brazil (along with India and China) seek to merely change some of the rules – say, dilute conditionalities – of the international aid regime? Or will it seek to undo the most basic organising principles of today's development aid regime? Will emerging donors come around to eventually adopting the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) position, or may we see emerging

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powers using their newfound status to pursue alternative visions of world order? When trying to understand whether emerging donors such as Brazil pose a serious challenge to the existing aid regime – a regime they often describe as unfair, outdated and dominated by former colonial powers – the evidence seems inconclusive so far.

Brazil is eager to assume more responsibility in institutions such as the World Bank, but it rejects key pillars of the aid regime such as the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. At the same time, it has signed the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, unlike other “emerging donors”. More research is necessary to gain a better understanding of what Brazil’s strategy will be as it emerges as an important player in the global aid regime.

The same uncertainty remains vis-à-vis humanitarian aid. In 2011, the UN’s World Food Program (WFP) distributed more than one million tons of food produced by Brazilian farmers, making Brazil one of the ten largest donors. An even larger quantity of Brazil’s humanitarian aid was provided bilaterally, helping Brazil project influence in a growing number of regions across the world, many of them in Africa, and promote its successfully applied domestic social policies that have contributed to reducing poverty at home.

Africa is now the primary focus of Brazil’s overall aid programme. The Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC) has technical cooperation projects in 30 countries on the continent, even though most of these initiatives are very small. In 2010 a little over 50 per cent of ABC’s budget was allocated to projects in Africa and the amount of money spent there has risen by 105 per cent since 2005. Most of the resources are going to the Portuguese-speaking countries, and in a few cases are executed in close collaboration with the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries, or CPLP. Brazil has helped establish a fund within the CPLP for the promotion of the Portuguese language in Africa and East Timor as is now offering more scholarships to train Portuguese language teachers than Portugal itself, a member of the OECD’s Development Co-operation Directorate (DAC). Brazil is also providing funds (500 million U.S. dollars) to help São Tomé and Príncipe, a former Portuguese colony, to feed children at schools.

The notion that Brazil is a reservoir of vast experience dealing with development challenges at home also strikes a responding chord among African countries. Contrary to traditional donors, Brazil still faces significant poverty and inequality at home, and can thus present itself much more as a partner than wealthier European countries for which poverty is a distant memory.

Brazil's experience in dealing with poverty and development issues is also reflected in the way it allocates aid. According to ABC's recent data, most of the money is going to agricultural projects (21.86 per cent), followed by health (16.28 per cent) and education (12.12 per cent). These are all areas in which public policy in the country has evolved dramatically over the past two decades. Food security and agriculture are also major themes. In addition, Brazil provides cheap and generic anti-retroviral drugs to Mozambique for those infected with HIV. Brazil has longtime expertise in tropical medicine as well, and under President Dilma Rousseff, Brazil has financed several specialised health centers across Africa. In the area of education, the Brazilian government has increased the number of scholarships for African students to study at Brazilian universities, and it has begun to build vocational training centers in several countries.

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In some instances, Brazil also acted as a democracy promoter in Africa. For example, as part of Brazil's ongoing involvement in Guinea-Bissau, member of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), Brazil had provided some electoral assistance to Guinea-Bissau from 2004 to 2005, and it continued to support efforts to stabilise the country by operating through the UN peace mission there. During a CPLP meeting in 2011, Brazil signed a memorandum of understanding to implement the Project in Support of the Electoral Cycles of the Portuguese-speaking African Countries and Timor-Leste. In addition, in the lead-up to the anticipated elections in Guinea-Bissau in April, 2012, Brazil made further financial contributions to the UNDP basket fund in support to the National Electoral Commission for assistance in the execution of the election.

Yet given the recent nature of Brazil's strategy of cooperation, little is known about Brazil's motives, priorities and internal decision making processes. It is not clear whether Brazil's recent efforts in places such as Somalia, for example, are ad hoc measures that are unlikely to find repetition, or whether they are the beginning of a broader strategy, turning development and humanitarian aid into one of Brazil's more important foreign policy tools.

CHALLENGES

Despite the promising developments, Brazil also faces some significant challenges when dealing with Africa. For example, the fact that race remains a potent marker of socioeconomic status in Brazil may also undermine attempts to forge stronger ties with African nations. Visiting delegations from Nigeria or South Africa are frequently baffled to see that very few blacks form part of Brazil's elites, contrasting Brazil's image as a color-blind society.

While Brazil's strategy of focusing first on Portuguese-speaking Africa (Angola and Mozambique, among others) is often portrayed as a shrewd idea, it may also be Brazil's greatest weakness as it seemingly reduces companies and the Brazilian government's need to adapt to non-Portuguese speaking countries – and hire staff that speaks English, French and Arabic. While Africa's Portuguese-speaking nations are strategically important, Brazil must seek to build a stronger presence in other African markets, such as Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya.

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Furthermore, there are worries among Brazilian analysts that Lula's drive into Africa will once again turn out to be unsustainable. A strong presence in Africa is to be welcomed, but many believe that Brazil does not have enough diplomats to represent the country in all those areas where Brazilian companies have long entered. Several of Brazil's diplomatic missions in Africa are so small that one wonders how they can function properly. Smart strategies developed at the Foreign Ministry in Brasília at home can fail to have the desired impact because there are not enough Foreign Service officers to implement the new policy. Complex bilateral negotiations can be negatively affected

if Brazil's negotiators have not been briefed properly due to a lack of diplomatic staff and on-the-ground knowledge of the domestic constraints the other side is facing. Finally, maintaining an understaffed embassy can send a negative signal to the host country, in some cases causing more damage than opening no embassy at all. As Brazil seeks to project more influence in Africa, its low number of diplomats thus poses severe limitations to its capacity to operationalise new policies.

In addition, the way Africans see Brazil will inevitably change as Brazil's economic presence in Africa grows. Brazilian economic and commercial interests in Africa – both public and private – loom much larger than ever before. Petrobras, Brazil's state-run oil company, invested 1.9 billion U.S. dollars in coal, oil, and natural gas in Nigeria during 2005 alone. It now operates in 28 African countries. In 2007, Brazilian mining corporation Vale invested a little over 700 million U.S. dollars in coal, oil and natural gas in Mozambique. Eletrobras is planning the construction of a six billion U.S. dollars hydroelectric power plant in Mozambique, which will most likely be financed by BNDES, the Brazilian development bank which provides more funds than the World Bank. Aside from BNDES, other Brazilian banks such as Banco do Brasil, Latin America's largest bank by assets and Brazil's biggest state-run bank, announced expansion plans last August to benefit from growing demand for loans and other products in Africa.

While its presence is still much smaller than that of India or China, Brazil must be careful to avoid some of the mistakes made by China, which runs the risk of facing a regional backlash. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Brazilians are well-liked across Africa. Now the challenge is to assure that even despite ever greater investments, such as Vale's recently signed one billion U.S. dollar deal to build a railway in Malawi to transport coal from Mozambique, Brazil will continue to be seen as a partner, and not a new coloniser who merely seeks to exploit Africa's resources. Since Brazil's investments in Africa are considerably smaller than China's, this risk seems manageable. Although Brazil's trade with Africa increased between 2000 and 2010 from four billion to 20

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billion U.S. dollars, its presence remains much smaller than China's (whose trade with Africa in 2011 exceeded 110 billion U.S. dollars).

Still, by offering technical expertise, Brazilian investors and policy makers seek to make clear that the African economy also benefits from the relationship. Agriculture, in particular, is an area where Brazilian expertise has made a significant difference in Africa. Given that soil and climate conditions are quite similar, the Brazilian agricultural research institute EMPRAPA has provided technical assistance in several African countries across the continent. Brazil is providing more than two million U.S. dollars to fund the development of rice crops production in Senegal, including providing genetically modified crops and the development of an experimental farm in Dakar. In the same way, Brazil's innovative social policies (such as Bolsa Familia) have been replicated in several African countries. Brazil is not only attractive to Africa in that it is the only BRIC country with a considerable African population, but also because it is the only emerging power that is able to reduce socio-economic inequality at home, thus enhancing social stability. Over the last 30 years, Brazil has also reversed its status as a food importer to become an important agribusiness producer of soybeans, amongst other products. Considering the challenge of food security that looms large in several African countries, Brazil's agricultural transformation is seen as a model by many African analysts.

In addition, Brazilian companies are keen to avoid the mistakes Chinese investors made by bringing their own workers to Africa. Quite to the contrary, Brazil seeks to employ as many Africans as possible in their projects – and Odebrecht, a Brazilian construction firm, is Angola's largest private employer. In Vale's mining operations in Mozambique, the vast majority of workers are locals, thus boosting the domestic economy.

In order to achieve these goals, civil society could take a more prominent role in Brazil's Africa strategy. It is also one of the key areas where Brazil can distinguish itself from China, and present itself as an open vibrant democracy with culture and arts that reflect Brazil's diversity. It is here that IBSA, a trilateral outfit comprising India, Brazil and

South Africa, can be useful. Perhaps IBSA's greatest value is in bringing India, Brazil and South Africa closer together on a societal level – allowing think tanks, civil society, academia, public sector specialists and foreign policymakers to engage and develop joint strategies to common problems. Seen from this perspective, IBSA has already been a success as it shifted its members' attention towards their fellow emerging powers. Given South Africa's great importance on the African continent, IBSA can thus indirectly strengthen Brazil-Africa relations as well.



Cape of Good Hope: Brazil expects to see a revival of the maritime route through the South Atlantic and is adjusting its strategy accordingly. | Source: icelight / flickr (CC BY).

Finally, Brazil is acquiring the military capacity, including several nuclear submarines, to increasingly control the South Atlantic that divides Brazil from Africa, yet it remains unclear how exactly Brazil seeks to employ this new-found strength. Security specialists both in the United States and in Southern Africa speculate as to whether Brazil will design a South-Atlantic Security Space akin to NATO and what the geopolitical implications of such a move would be. No matter what Brazil will decide, Brazil-Africa relations will be deeply affected.

In this context, one must also consider the growing strategic importance of the South Atlantic. As ever larger ships can no longer pass the Suez Canal, Brazil expects to see a revival of the Cape of Good Hope route. At the same time, piracy has turned into a problem, particularly as drug trafficking along the African coast is set to increase.

Guinea-Bissau runs the risk of becoming a narco-state, and other failed states similar to Somalia may arise.

In early 2012, Brazil's Minister of Defense traveled to Cape Verde to express Brazil's interest in strengthening military cooperation with the island state, located 300 kilometers off the coast of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, which is increasingly seen as a source of instability and a haven for pirates and drug-traffickers. Brazil also indicated it would donate two aircraft to the military of Cape Verde to increase its surveillance capacity.

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Brazil is thus beginning to regard the South Atlantic as its sphere of influence. As it lacks the naval capacity to control the area on its own, Brazil may resuscitate structures such as the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone (ZPCAS)¹ and strengthen IBSA to jointly provide security in the area. As the strategic importance of the South Atlantic is bound to increase, so will Brazil's willingness to strengthen its presence there, possibly in cooperation with other leading actors of the "Global South".

CONCLUSION

As this brief overview shows, Brazil's entry into Africa is one of the most fascinating developments of the past decade. The challenge for the Brazilian government will now be to show that its narrative about the mutually beneficial partnership with African countries makes sense not only to African analysts, but also to the African populace. Africa has a long history of foreign intruders who – despite affirmations of benign intent – ended up harming the continent's prospects of development. In many aspects, Brazil has a great opportunity to show that its approach is more sustainable.

At the same time, Brazil has the chance to introduce new models in the development arena, which remains dominated by OECD countries. Given that only a decade ago Brazil was a recipient of aid and had not yet begun

1 | In 1986, Brazil initiated the creation of the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone (ZPCAS), which sought to promote economic cooperation in the region and maintain peace and security – with a particular focus on the prevention of nuclear proliferation.

to provide aid to other countries in a systematic fashion, its progress has been remarkable, changing the way Brazil is perceived abroad and the way the country sees itself. Brazil's aid strategy thus underscores, more than anything, Brazil's ambition to play a more important role in international affairs and project global influence, but particularly in Africa.

Brazil is trailing both China and India in Africa, but if it carefully studies the role both countries play in Africa, it can avoid their mistakes and engage in Africa more effectively. Otherwise, the red carpet rolled out to welcome Brazil to the continent will quickly be rolled up and taken away.