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Chapter · January 2023

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The South Atlantic in China's Global Policy: Why It Matters?

Laura C. Ferreira-Pereira and Paulo Afonso B. Duarte

This is the draft version of Chapter 42 of the book *The Palgrave Handbook of Globalization with Chinese Characteristics* published by Palgrave Macmillan. A later version of this Chapter can be accessed here <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-19-6700-9>

Abstract

There is extensive literature regarding the importance of sea-lane communications to China, explaining the continuous modernization and mobilization of People's Liberation Army Navy in both in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Yet, little attention has been paid to Chinese interests and presence in the Atlantic as part of this country's developing global policy. Considering the potential of the Atlantic Ocean when it comes to globalization of world trade, the logistics of shipping lanes and the quest for natural resources, this chapter will shed light upon the security and geostrategic relevance of the South Atlantic for Chinese foreign policy. It will assess China's increasing, albeit still modest, presence in a region within which Brazil has played a dominant role. It also looks at the area of the Gulf of Guinea which has become prominent for Chinese investments. The main argument points to the fact that China's stance in the South Atlantic has witnessed a critical transition. There was a shift from a traditional exclusive economic-oriented outlook to a more security-oriented and geostrategic posture. This cannot be dissociated from China's proactive global foreign policy agenda and has important implications particularly for a major South Atlantic power like Brazil.

Keywords: South Atlantic; China; Brazil; Gulf of Guinea; People's Liberation Army Navy; 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

1. Introduction

The projection of power at sea, the control of supply lines and fight against piracy have captured growing attention by key-international actors given that the great majority of world trade circulates by sea (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2019; Lane & Pretes, 2020). China is an illustrative case, as evinced by the developing assertive posture it has been adopting in the framework of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which is an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road has translated into investments in port infrastructure along the Indian Ocean, while covering several countries in Southeast Asia and the African coast (Chatzky & McBride, 2020).

The literature offers insightful analyses concerning the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy presence and assertive stance in the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Butt, Khari & Bhatti, 2020; He & Li, 2020; Liu, 2020; Mohan & Abraham, 2020). The Chinese engagement in the Arctic has stimulated some scholarly works, but only in recent years (Bennett et al, 2020; Zeng et al, 2020). Yet, literature dedicated to China's interests, presence and influence in the vast Atlantic Ocean remains thin on the ground. There are few analyses dealing specifically with Chinese presence in North Atlantic; and most of these have mainly discussed China's Atlantic maritime strategy in the making (Goldstein, 2017; Martinson, 2019; South China Morning Post, 2021a). Other scholarly works have bypassed China's discreet interests in the South in the Atlantic, whilst showing preference for addressing NATO's concerns regarding Russia's increasing maritime assertiveness in the North Atlantic (Horrell, Nordenman & Slocombe, 2016; Olsen, 2018; Păunescu, 2020; Tardy, 2021), Hence, the lack of literature on Chinese interests and presence in the

South Atlantic (except for Abdenur & Neto, 2013a,b; Vreÿ, 2017; Goldstein, 2017, 2021; and Martinson, 2019) remains a gap which the present study will help to narrow down.

This chapter will focus on the South Atlantic to appraise the emergent geostrategic relevance of this region for China; in other words, why it matters, as the title conveys. It argues that, despite its geographical distance from Beijing, the South Atlantic has emerged as a timely strategic extension of China's maritime assertiveness in its surrounding waters. As such, as some have already anticipated, this region might serve as a relief mechanism in view of the pressure exercised by the US on China's navy in the Indo-Pacific (Martinson, 2019, p.31). Along these lines, the South Atlantic might be used as a laboratory for PLA Navy's attempts to build up China's coastal defence capacities (Ibidem). This is so, not only since activities in this area might enable the PLA Navy to test its developing blue-water means and assets, but also because they might provide China with resources to develop an offensive and more active strategy that complements the PLA Navy's defensive posture vis-à-vis the US in the East and South China Seas. Eventually, all this points to the interdependence in Chinese naval calculus and international power projection between the South Atlantic, on the one hand, and the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, on the other. This is an aspect which the available Anglophone literature, focused on Chinese foreign policy, has not hitherto fully explored.

While focusing on China's presence in the South Atlantic, this study will give particular attention to Brazil for being the most prominent coastal and naval power in the region. Both actors have been close allies in multilateral initiatives and structures designed to promote the Global South, notably the BRICS and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China). At the same time, although Brazil has not formally joined the BRI, it has established and consolidated a strategic partnership with China. As of 2019, under Donald Trump's Administration, the 'US first' policy underpinning Jair Bolsonaro's presidential diplomacy has not been without consequences for Sino-Brazilian relations, in general (Amorim & Ferreira-Pereira, 2021).

This chapter's analysis spans largely from 2014, when the PLA Navy made its first exercises into South Atlantic waters, until the outbreak of the Coronavirus crisis in March 2020, after which the major focus of Chinese authorities shifted largely to the management of the pandemics, at domestic and foreign policy levels. The analysis of the topic will rely on primary sources, among which stand out China's official documents (e.g. China's 2013 and 2019 Defence White Papers, the 12th and 13th Five-Year Plans, and China's 2015 Military Strategy) and economic databases (e.g. Statista, World Economic Forum, and Trading Economics). Scientific articles and book chapters will be used as main secondary sources.

The present study will start by outlining the key issues at stake in South Atlantic before examining the major contours of Chinese activities in the area. It then attempts to demonstrate China's shifting stance from a bystander towards an emerging South Atlantic naval power, in view of the perceived security and strategic relevance of the region for Beijing. Finally, this chapter gives attention to Brazil's reactions vis-à-vis Chinese engagement in the region. Underlying this chapter's conclusion is the idea that although China's naval presence in the South Atlantic is still modest, there is evidence pointing to its somewhat inevitable expansion due to the mounting importance of the South Atlantic for Chinese authorities.

2. The South Atlantic: A Changing Strategic Landscape

The Atlantic is a heterogeneous and fragmented space. Historically, the North Atlantic has been part of the area of influence of NATO and the United States (US). Although the Atlantic Community, as Lippmann envisioned it, transcended the North Atlantic in terms of space and concept, the creation of NATO and its interests and priorities have entailed the neglect of the Atlantic's Middle and Southern flanks (Lesser, 2010; Aubourg, Bossuat & Scott-Smith, 2013; Lesser & Aynaoui, 2014). The South Atlantic, encompassing the oceanic expanse and the full basin area (both the sea and the coastal lands) located south of the Tropic of Cancer, has remained outside NATO's area of jurisdiction and strategic interest (Adogamhe, 2019). On the other hand, diverging views on the role and scope of NATO flourished across the South Atlantic (Abdenur and Neto 2014a, p.8). Overall, throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century, the South Atlantic, has been one of the least strategically relevant oceans. Yet, for some observers, the South Atlantic has witnessed a "strategic rebirth" (Guedes, 2012, p.26); and this change cannot be dissociated from diverse Chinese interests in this region.

Three major reasons account for that strategic renaissance (Lesser, 2010; Duarte & Barros, 2019a). Firstly, there is the biodiversity, mineral and energy resources that can be found in the South Atlantic, which match the demand and search for complementary sources on the part of China and other players. In this regard, it should be stressed that, in recent years, there has been a series of discoveries of vast oil and gas reserves on South American and African platforms (Cortinhas, 2019; Duarte & Barros, 2019a,b). Secondly, there is the South Atlantic's relevance within global trade given that "twenty percent of all maritime routes to and from the United States transit through the South Atlantic" (Soares & Leopoldino, 2019, p.127) that should be borne in mind to understand the rising strategic importance of this geographical area. Finally, there are complex security regional challenges, posed by several threats plaguing the African shores, like piracy, drug trafficking and illicit fishing that need to be addressed for the sake of international security and stability (Seabra, 2014, p.332; Soares & Leopoldino, 2019, p.127). For instance, the Gulf of Guinea – home to vast oil and gas reserves – is on the crossroads of maritime piracy. Also, due to its geostrategic location, Cape Verde has been used as a hub for the transshipment of drugs coming from South America, with Europe as final destination (Siqueira, 2021). As for the Latin America shores, the Chinese fishing activities have been perceived as having "geopolitical dimensions", with US officials being "wary of China's increasing presence" in the region (Business Insider, 2021, para. 22). Such US wariness and suspicion have led Washington to deploy "US Coast Guard (USCG), [more precisely] its new ship, USCGC Stone, to the South Atlantic to build regional maritime security partnerships and counter illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in the region" (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2021, para.4). Incidentally, the case of Argentina is an illustrative one. In the past years, numerous Chinese boats have been caught up due to suspicions of illegal fishing in Argentinean waters (South China Morning Post 2021b, para.1). The situation became particularly tense in March 2016, when this country's navy sank a Chinese-flagged boat that was reportedly fishing illegally in its national waters (Aljazeera, 2016, para. 1).

Besides the strategic revival of the South Atlantic, it is important to underline the power vacuum prevailing in this region, given the lack of both maritime governance structures in most littoral states and a multilateral system of governance (Richardson et al, 2012, p.160). Barros warns that such lack of governance may well foster "mutual suspicions and dilemma security behaviours", which in turn "undermine regional initiatives" such as those involving sharing information between countries facing

maritime insecurity (2019, p.195). At the same time, in order to prevent external powers from taking advantage of such governance vacuum (Cortinhas, 2019) some have noted that Brazil has tried to mobilise other states in the region, in an effort to make the Middle and South Atlantic “an area of predominantly South-South cooperation, in which Western powers ought to play a secondary role” (Abdenur, Mattheis & Seabra, 2016, p.1113). Hence the weight attributed by Brazil to the Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS), created in 1986, by the United Nations upon its initiative as the guarantor of a “shared South Atlantic identity” (Ibid., p.1114).¹ This background is necessary to contextualize the projects China has developed in the South Atlantic as part of its *Going Out Policy*.

3. The Chinese Going Out Policy in the South Atlantic: An Assessment

China’s initiatives and activities in the South Atlantic can be seen as part of its *Going Out Policy* (Parello-Plesner, 2016) which originally began in 1999 and, after 2013, was enshrined in the BRI. The *Going Out Policy* has been inspired by a threefold objective: diversification of energy sources² and investments abroad, and internationalization of Chinese companies. The BRI, which encompasses the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the sea-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, is the world’s largest multilateral infrastructure-building project (Mathews, 2019). At the same time, as Mendez and Alden posit, it is “the material basis of Chinese new world order”, the piece of a grand strategy aimed at “promoting China’s status as the centre and the leader of the global economy” (2021, p. 844). With the restoration of the millennial concentric distribution of power which served China in the so-called *Pax Sinica* in view (Duarte & Leandro, 2020), Beijing has sought to consolidate its power capabilities, both on land and sea, as well as to gain uninterrupted access to places and resources. Incidentally, the 12th (2011-2015) and the 13th (2016-2020) Five-Year Plans help to understand China’s concern in adopting a hybrid land-sea strategy for the country’s security, in the framework of which stand out China’s goal of building a Blue Water Navy, that is, a navy able to operate anywhere in the ocean(s). To achieve this goal, the geographical expansion of China’s maritime activities beyond the Pacific Ocean to increasingly distant waters (such as those of the Atlantic Ocean) is of crucial relevance (Martinson, 2016, 2019; The 2019 Defence White Paper).

Despite Chinese official documents have not established any geographical or conceptual delimitation of the South Atlantic so far (Parello-Plesner, 2016), a common twofold denominator characterizes the Chinese stance towards the Latin American and African shores of South Atlantic. This is the search for energy, natural resources and new markets, and the politico-diplomatic endeavour to isolate Taiwan (Duarte, 2016; Grieger, 2019). In the process, China has provided loans to African and Latin American states in exchange for access to natural resources, something which is often referred to as the

¹ Currently ZOPACAS includes 24 member states: Angola, Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Namibia, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Togo and Uruguay.

² In a context in which it is imperative that China finds new sources to ensure its energy security (largely explained by the end of the One Child Policy, as well as the Chinese Middle-class expansion), the Gulf of Guinea has great advantages for Chinese oil imports, when compared to other regions of the world, such as the Middle East. In fact, with the exception of Nigeria which is a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the other countries of this Gulf do not pose major restrictions to the exploration and export of oil directly by China (Onuoha, 2009).

‘Angolan Model’ and still remains for such states as an alternative to Western string-attached loans (Fijałkowski, 2011; Grieger, 2019).

China is Africa’s most important trading partner, “with trade growing 40-fold in the past 20 years” (Nantulya, 2021, para.2). In 2019, Angola, South Africa and the Republic of Congo were the largest exporters for China, while Nigeria was the largest buyer of Chinese goods, followed by South Africa and Egypt (China Africa Research Initiative, 2019). Raw commodities and unfinished goods account for most of China’s imports from Africa, whilst finished goods represent the most important Chinese exports to Africa. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, according to Nantulya, China has become the “top supplier of weapons to sub-Saharan Africa”, while diversifying its sales “from small arms and light weapons to tanks, armoured personnel carriers, maritime patrol craft, aircraft, missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and artillery”. It also became increasingly concentrated on “building institutional capability in Africa’s security sector” (2019, pp.3 and 4). Equally important, in the African continent, the Gulf of Guinea has acquired a certain prominence in terms of Chinese investments (Zhang, 2019; Yachyshen, 2020). While some of the latter have already led to infrastructure building, others, such as the deep-water port in São Tome and Principe, that China expects to become a regional transshipment centre, are still waiting for materialisation (Yachyshen, 2020).

In September 2017, Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that “Latin America [was] the natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and the Belt and Road Initiative has become a new opportunity for current China-Latin America cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2017, para.1). Three months later, China managed to extend the BRI to Latin America, through the inclusion of Panama in the list of countries embraced by its Initiative. Besides this, between 2018 and 2019, BRI cooperation memoranda have been signed with several member states of ZOPACAS³. The extension of BRI to Latin America evinced Chinese willingness to strengthen ties with more Latin American states and consequently further eroded the US hegemony in this region (Bayardo, 2019, para.2). Here, although the US has been at the forefront in the sphere of trade, China has been rapidly catching up (World Economic Forum, 2021) given the US disinterest in the South Atlantic which, albeit prior to 2016⁴, remained very visible during the Trump Administration inspired in the ‘America First’ motto. Among the most important goods that China has imported from Latin America are raw commodities, particularly soybeans, copper, petroleum, and iron (Global Development Policy Center, 2020), with the main partners being Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay (Statista, 2021). In turn, China exports have mainly comprised manufactured and finished goods to Latin America (Trading Economics, 2021).

The Chinese *modus operandi* has raised considerable criticism on both shores of the Atlantic. Among the most common ones, features the lack of transparency underlying “contracts predominantly allocated to Chinese firms without public tender” (Grieger, 2019, p.3). Another frequent criticism lies in the debt-trap attached to Chinese funding and the resulting fear from host countries vis-à-vis China’s economic and political influence (do Nascimento, 2020). There is also the recurrent observation that contracts signed require that the Chinese workforce be usually larger than the one of the host state, in addition to the criticism that Chinese goods are cheaper and of lower-quality, thereby

³ In 2018, the cases in point are Angola, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Uruguay. BRI cooperation memoranda with Benin, Equatorial Guinea and Liberia were established in 2019. Beyond this chapter’s timeframe, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe and the Democratic Republic of Congo signed similar arrangements in 2021.

⁴ This deficit of interest explains, for example, the lack of progress following the 2008 US declaration on the willingness to revive the US Fourth Fleet (The North American Congress on Latin America, 2008).

undermining local economies. The debate on China's stance as win-win versus neo-colonialist power has also been recurrent (Brautigam & Zhang, 2013; Carrai, 2020), with states like Cape Verde, Guinea and Mali perceiving Chinese presence in a very positive way (Statista, 2020).

Regardless of mixed feelings and criticism explored in the following section, there is evidence that China has been emerging as a naval power in South Atlantic, as a result of its departure from a role of mere bystander in this geographical area.

4. China as an Emerging South Atlantic Naval Power: Where Now, What's Next?

Although China's main security concerns regarding sea-lanes of communication have been more salient in the Indian Ocean and the East and South China Seas, in recent years the South Atlantic has attracted Chinese authorities' attention. There is a considerable Chinese diaspora living and working on both shores of the Atlantic, who is often the object of kidnapping, murder and other forms of violence. This has contributed to raise awareness among Beijing's authorities about 'diplomatic protection', that is to say the pressing need to protect national citizens, as well as investments and infrastructure in third countries, namely located along the African and Latin America shores (Parello-Plesner, 2016; The 2019 Defence White Paper). As a result of this, China has established an anti-terrorism law in 2005, which enables the PLA to undertake counterterrorist missions overseas "with the approval from the State Council and agreements from concerned countries" (The National People's Congress of the PRC, 2015, para.3).

The Gulf of Guinea is particularly important, as the coastal states of this region, inhabited by an extremely young population, represent a vast consumer and investment market for China. In fact, across this region, about 60% of the people are under 25 years of age, thereby providing important human resources for the growth of new industries, like fishing and logging. In addition, these industries play a vital role in helping China to ensure its food security (Yachyshen, 2020). In 2015, the African Union and China signed a cooperation agreement to build transport infrastructure which would connect 54 African countries, including those in the Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria has played a significant role in this initiative, as evinced in the fact that China has been financing several projects in the country, such as a deep-water port and the construction of the so-called Lekki Free Zone (Babatunde, 2020).

Diverse factors have contributed to bring security issues in South Atlantic to the forefront of Chinese agenda. Among these stand out the threat perception(s) linked to piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and Boko Haram activities, on the one hand, and China's new role conception as a responsible international power (Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira, 2021) on the other. To this, it should be added the considerable economic losses experienced by China in Libya and Sudan, which made the country aware of the necessity to expand its involvement in Africa's peace-support activities in order to secure national economic and strategic interests (Yu, 2018, p.493). Consequently, since the end of the 2000s, various Chinese White Papers on defence have reflected a gradual moderation regarding the traditionally dogmatic principle of non-interference, in order to ensure the protection of both Chinese investments and diaspora abroad. The 2013 and 2019 Defence White Papers, as well as China's 2015 Military Strategy, are cases in point. These strategic documents have underlined the need for the PLA to develop capabilities in Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW). This encompasses, for instance, counter-piracy action, evacuation and peacekeeping.

In 2014, PLA Navy's units undertook their first-ever joint drills with Tanzanian forces, and in the first half of 2018, the PLA Navy's anti-piracy escorted task forces and

conducted joint military exercises with Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana and Nigeria (Grieger, 2019, p.8). In November of the following year, China has engaged in a first joint naval drill with two BRICS partners, Russia and South Africa (code-named MOSI), off the city of Cape Town (The Diplomat, 2019, para.1). That being said, in order to ensure the basic conditions to protect Chinese diaspora and investments in the South Atlantic shores, the PLA Navy would need to become a resident naval actor in the region, instead of relying exclusively on the logistics of friendly ports, such as Cape Town, to conduct its operations. Djibouti, where China opened its first naval base in 2017, is too distant from the South Atlantic. The PLA Navy would take over 13 days to sail from Djibouti until Lagos, in Nigeria, should any need for evacuation of Chinese citizens in African shores arise (Martinson, 2019). Incidentally, the former's unprecedented rescue mission conducted in Libya, in 2011, through the deployment of the frigate 'Xuzhou' (Collins and Erickson (2011, para.1), has further raised Beijing authorities' awareness to the need to be vigilant in unstable regions along the Atlantic shores, in order to act fast, when the lives of Chinese citizens are in danger. This explains China's intention reported by US intelligence by establishing its first permanent military presence in the Gulf of Guinea, more concretely, in Equatorial Guinea (The Wall Street Journal, 2021, para.1).

There is a fundamental political obstacle preventing the PLA Navy from establishing a naval base in the Gulf of Guinea: the regional states' reluctance and hostility "to open up their jurisdictional waters to policing by outside powers" (Martinson, 2019, p.30). But according to some observers, Namibia's strategic access to the South Atlantic, together with its logistics facility and proximity to other hubs of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, makes this country an attractive candidate to host the first Chinese naval base in the South Atlantic (Nantulya, 2019). As Robert O'Brien highlighted, Walvis Bay would allow the PLA Navy "to patrol the critical Cape of Good Hope around Africa and Cape Horn around South America. The approaches to the key North Atlantic sea-lanes linking the Americas, Africa and Europe would be nearby" (In The Diplomat, 2015, para. 1). Eventually, during an official event in February 2018, the Chinese Ambassador to Namibia, Zhang Yiming, recognized the plausibility of this scenario when noting that Namibia's port of Walvis Bay "will become the most brilliant pearl on the Atlantic Coast of southwest Africa" (The State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2018, para.1). This statement is particularly telling for two main reasons. On the one hand, it is a clear acknowledgement that Namibia, with whom China shares a "special military relationship dating back to Chinese support for Namibia's independence war against South Africa" (Nantulya, 2019, p.4), has the potential to play a crucial role in Chinese Atlantic MOOTW. On the other hand, it holds an implicit reference to China's String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean, in which Djibouti (the first Chinese naval base abroad) has played a critical role (Barton, 2021).

Time will tell about Chinese endeavours towards establishing a naval base in Walvis Bay, complementing Djibouti's assistance to the PLA Navy, which would result in the extension of China's String of Pearls to the South Atlantic. As for now, there is evidence that, in recent years, Walvis Bay has hosted numerous PLA Navy port visits and naval drills and that its infrastructure could support nearly all types of PLA Navy surface combatants (Peltier, Nurkin & O'Connor, 2020). Also, Namibian press (e.g. Hartman, 2014) has spread out rumours that China has attempted to build naval facilities in Walvis Bay, based on a similar approach previously adopted in Djibouti, entailing the initial construction of a deep-water port before opening the naval base. The pieces seem to fit well in the puzzle to the extent that, according to Nantulya "once complete, this port will connect Southern Africa to China Harbor Engineering Company ports and infrastructure in São Tome and Principe, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Guinea, and

planned facilities in Gambia and Senegal” (2019, p.4). As aptly noted by the same observer, all these maritime corridors have important security dimensions as critical nodes of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Ibidem).

China’s concerns with the protection of its diaspora, investments and infrastructure in third countries have been gradually accompanied by a developing long-term strategic calculus in which the South Atlantic became part of Beijing’s equation to relieve US pressure in the East and South China Seas. So far, China has implemented what is called an ‘interior strategy’⁵, aimed at countering any possible threat posed by the US and its allies in the former’s regional waters. At the same time, the South Atlantic has begun to provide China with a complementary ‘exterior strategy’ of a more active and offensive nature, which has been endorsed by Chinese maritime planners. Such strategy consists of using the South Atlantic to “diffuse the attention of extra-regional powers away from China’s maritime periphery”, by mobilizing a “permanent fleet of 2-3 aircraft carrier strike groups” to the region, in an attempt to “deter and pin down US forces” (Martinson, 2019, p.28). In other words, by becoming gradually more assertive in the South Atlantic, China would reduce the US encirclement in Asia, indirectly leading Washington to demobilise some of its naval means used in the Pacific, to better contain the newly perceived Chinese threat in the Atlantic. Incidentally, a top U.S general for Africa has warned that a mounting threat from China may come, not only from the Pacific region, but also from the waters of the Atlantic as well. U.S. In an interview given to the Associated Press, Gen. Stephen Townsend, observed that Beijing has already approached countries stretching from Mauritania to south of Namibia in order to establish a large navy port capable of hosting submarines or aircraft carriers on Africa’s western coast. If this prospect is materialised, China would be able to base warships in its expanding Navy in the Atlantic, as well as Pacific oceans (Associated Press, 2021).

Chinese visits and maritime drills in South Atlantic ports, as dating back to 2014 or so, are relatively recent when compared to the country’s more active stance in other oceans. Yet, since that time, one has witnessed an evolution from ad hoc initiatives to more independent and long-term operations in this region. While such operations have allowed the PLA Navy to get more familiarised with South Atlantic underwater geography and operating conditions, they have also demonstrated a departure from the traditional bystander approach to an emerging proactive South Atlantic naval power. For example, China has already expressed its interest in “constructing the Antarctic Logistics Pole in Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego” to support Chinese expeditions to the South Pole (Dialogo, 2019, para.10). This logistical maritime hub has the potential to provide the PLA Navy with a foothold in the Strait of Magellan, which lies at the geostrategic convergence between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, *en route* to Antarctica⁶. Also, it might benefit from the previous openness shown by Argentinean authorities towards Neuquen, a space station in Patagonia⁷, which further evinces China’s military presence on the western shore of the Atlantic Ocean and its interest in protecting maritime lanes communication and reserves of natural resources in the South Atlantic (Boletim Geocorrente, 2020). Along these lines, Argentina might play an important role in China’s Atlantic operations due to the Antarctica factor (Dialogo, 2019, para.10).

⁵ This ‘interior strategy’ is both passive and defensive to the extent that it enables China to react to US pressure on its Eastern flank.

⁶ For more details about China’s Antarctic engagement and strategy, see Chapter (*number to be confirmed*) entitled ‘Why is China Going Polar? Understanding Engagement and Implications for the Arctic and Antarctica’, in this Volume.

⁷ This space station (concluded in 2016) is managed by China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General, which reports to the Strategic Support Force of the PLA.

However, considering that Brazil is the most prominent coastal and naval power in South Atlantic, it is important to shed light upon its posture vis-à-vis the developing presence of China in the region against the backdrop of the existing Brazil-China strategic partnership.

5. Brazil's vis-à-vis Chinese Emergence in South Atlantic

As of the early years of 2000s, Brazil and China have played a significant role in international trade, economy and finance, domains within which they have attempted to redefine global governance. In their condition of emerging powers, they have promoted South-South cooperation at several international fora, notably the BRICS, G20, BASIC and the also the United Nations, stressing the role of multilateralism and multipolarity (Amorim & Ferreira-Pereira, 2021). According to Trinkunas, they have stood together by criticizing “the degree to which the United States ignored the rules of the rules-based liberal order it purportedly championed” (2020, p.5). Non-intervention, solidarity and mutual respect have featured as the principal characteristics of their common stance in world affairs, most particularly within the Global South.

Their diplomatic ties, dating back to 1974, were elevated to a strategic partnership in 1993 and, as of 2004, to a so-called ‘all weather strategic partnership’.⁸ Overall, the latter is of major significance if one bears in mind that China is the largest country of the developing world, while Brazil is the largest developing state in the Western hemisphere. Not unnaturally, Brazil was the first Latin American country that established, in 2012, a comprehensive strategic partnership with China. Under the Presidency of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), as it had been the case during Lula da Silva mandates, Brazil cultivated robust ties with China which featured as a foreign policy priority. On the other hand, in the domestic sphere, the ‘Chinese factor’ has become increasingly noticed as it is the case with the domain of infrastructure building. For instance, the Chinese company CCCC has been operating Brazil’s second-largest container port in Paranaguá, and China is planning to build an enormous port in São Luis (the capital of the state of Maranhão) (Espach 2021, para.3). Moreover, much of the potential existing in this bilateral relationship is still to be unleashed. According to Marcondes & Barbosa (2018), there is remarkable potential for Sino-Brazilian defence cooperation in areas ranging from defence industry and space technology, information technology, telecommunications and remote sensing, among others.

Apparently, the growing presence of China in the African continent and its activities in South Atlantic waters performed by PLA Navy, as of 2014, did not affect the Sino-Brazilian relations. This is so although the Brazilian national defence documents have stressed the “strategic importance of South Atlantic”, while placing this region among the priority areas for National Defence, where national Brazilian authorities should promote the security of the maritime lines of communication (*Política Nacional de Defesa e Estratégia Nacional de Defesa*, 2012, pp.22, 23 and 31). The 2012 White Book of National Defence (*Livro Branco de Defesa Nacional*) has affirmed that Brazil’s “strong bound to the sea moves it to exert a natural influence on the South Atlantic” (pp. 16 and 17) in which the country has a “special interest in peace and security” (Ibid., p. 35). Also, this key strategic document has stated clearly that: “Conflicts and rivalries strange to the South Atlantic should not be here projected by states situated in other

⁸ According to Li and Ye, “the term All-weather suggests that the cooperation between [...] two countries would continue regardless of how the external environment changes” (2019, p.67). An ‘all-weather strategic partnership’ is seen by China as a superior form of cooperation between states, even above the official strategic partnership (Li & Ye, 2019).

regions” (Ibid. p.26). The 2020 Brazil Navy Strategic Plan (*Plano Estratégico da Marinha*) and the 2020 White Book of National Defence reiterate this view, whilst ascribing particular importance to the need to ensure free lanes of communication in the South Atlantic. In this regard, Brazilian authorities perceive the Gulf of Guinea as playing a major role.

Besides recognizing that Brazilian “strategic environment [...] includes the South Atlantic and the countries bordering Africa, as well as Antarctica” (p.21), the 2012 National Defence Policy and National Defence Strategy adds that “Brazil gives priority to the countries of South America and Africa, especially West Africa and the Portuguese-speaking countries, and seeks to deepen its ties with them” (p.25). Incidentally, during Lula’s Presidency, Brazil has prioritised the export of defence equipment to the Atlantic Africa, as exemplified by the sale of ships, *Super Tucano* aircraft and the development of advanced technology projects like the *A-Darter* Air-to-Air Missile (da Silva 2020, p. 108). At the same time, Brazil has engaged itself in the training of military personnel from various African countries, notably Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Namibia, Nigeria and São Tome and Príncipe (Ibid., p.102). Another example of Brazilian endeavours to ensure its leading role in the South Atlantic, thereby countering external powers’ attempts to penetrate in the region, is the creation of a Navy mission centre in São Tome and Príncipe (in 2014) charged with the identification of the major needs of navies in the area (Mattos, Matos & Kenkel, 2017, p.272). At the same time, the country has been competing with China in terms of military training and equipment sales to many states of the African Atlantic coast, including Lusophone Africa (Abdenur & Neto, 2014b; Grieger, 2019). Regarding the latter, Brazil has been aware of China’s attempts to expand its influence in the South Atlantic Portuguese speaking countries, whose geostrategic location is key within the BRI dynamics of enlargement in/across the South Atlantic. More concretely, Brazil has been attentive not only to Chinese critical investments on land, such as Dar es Salaam-Lobito railway system connecting Tanzania to Angola (in the making), but also on the establishment of “deep-sea ports and maritime installations in West African coast”, which may help China to expand its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to South Atlantic (dos Santos & Lobo, 2020, p.25).

According to some observers, arguably enough, “the sale of Chinese war material to African countries does not interfere with Brazil’s strategic goals of preventing militarization of the South Atlantic by exogenous countries to the region” (da Silva, 2020, p.122). China and Brazil’s economic and military engagement in the Atlantic coast of Africa exhibits a major difference: while Chinese strategic interests in Africa are well-defined, continuous and projected for the long-run, Brazilian approach seems to be subject to cyclical changes, besides lacking a coherent and long-term oriented planning (da Silva, 2020). This could potentially damage Brazilian relationships with relevant countries, such as Namibia, which has already showed interest in diversifying military partners and suppliers. In this regard, China appears to be an interesting alternative. For instance, in 2012 “Namibian forces chose a Chinese company as an alternative naval hardware supplier” (Seabra, 2016, p.99). Later, on 27th October, 2017, the Namibian President, Hage Geingob, “thanked China for its assistance to the southwestern African country in protecting its territory and maritime resources” (Xinhua, 2017, para.5). Such assistance was substantiated in the donation by PLA of two state-of-the-art submarine chasers, *Brukkaros* and *Daures*, to Namibian army (Ibidem). Episodes like these might carry with them the seeds to undermine Brazilian interests, as Namibian support for any Brazilian-inspired South Atlantic conceptualization “remains open to question” (Ibidem). This, in turn, seems to pose a geostrategic challenge to Brazil’s prominence in the region

in the medium/long-term, should Namibia be keen to offer the PLA Navy residency in South Atlantic waters, as we have discussed in the previous section.

6. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the strategic revival of the South Atlantic, this chapter has attempted to shed light on the importance of this region for China's global policy. It has underlined that, since 2014, the PLA Navy has been more active in the South Atlantic. This was associated to Beijing's authorities need to protect both its diaspora and investments in the South Atlantic shores, in a context of globalisation of world trade and increasing quest for natural resources. And it was not dissociated from the governance vacuum, as well as the longstanding US and NATO disinterest in the region, in contrast to what has been these actors' historical stance in the North Atlantic.

Moreover, this chapter has showed that, although China's naval presence in the South Atlantic remains considerably modest - when compared to its assertive stance in the East and South China Seas, and even in the Indian Ocean -, the continuous modernisation of the PLA Navy, together with its willingness to operate in increasingly distant seas, have indicated a gradual shift in this state of affairs. Indeed, the PLA Navy's diversified activities in the South Atlantic have substantiated China's endeavours to evolve from its longstanding near-coast defence towards exploring possibilities in more distant waters of the South Atlantic. Overall, this region offers a twofold advantage. On the one hand, African and Latin American shores provide China with complementary energy, food and mineral sources. On the other hand, it might be relevant in helping the country to relieve its Eastern flank from US pressure (Martinson, 2019). In fact, engagement in South Atlantic might enable Chinese authorities to foster a complementary offensive and more active naval strategy, thereby transcending the exclusive traditional attachment to a defensive strategy vis-à-vis US containment, both in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

This study featuring the still modest but significant China's engagement in South Atlantic gave particular attention to the Brazilian view of its prominence as a coastal and naval power in this region, which is of great national importance in strategic, security and defence terms. Since the early 2000s, the country has developed an 'all weather strategic partnership' with China. Yet, it has chosen to remain outside the realm of BRI. In view of the developing posture of China in South Atlantic, evidence regarding Brazilian (negative) response or reactive strategy is thin, fostering doubts about how Brazilian authorities have been 'the facto' accommodating Chinese presence and influence in South Atlantic. Nonetheless, this is a matter expected to acquire even greater significance, as the South Atlantic develops into a critical gateway for an interconnected world marked by globalization trends with Chinese characteristics (see the Introduction of this Volume), designed to protect sea-lanes of communication, as well as China's diaspora, interests and investments worldwide.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge that this study was conducted at the Research Center in Political Science (UIDB/CPO/00758/ 2020), University of Minho/University of Évora, and that it was supported by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology and the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science, through national funds. The authors would like to thank Danilo Marcondes, Daniella Melo and João Mourato Pinto for their valuable comments on earlier drafts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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