

# Brazil in the South Atlantic: growing protagonism and unintended consequences

By **Adriana Erthal Abdenur** and  
**Danilo Marcondes de Souza Neto**

## ■ Executive summary

For most of the twentieth century, the strategic importance of the North Atlantic outstripped that of the southern part of the ocean. However, the past decade has brought significant shifts in Atlantic dynamics, with regional and external actors developing new interests in the region. Brazil, in particular, has been working to reinforce its control and influence in the South Atlantic. To this end, over the last five years the Brazilian government has launched or intensified efforts meant to securitise the South Atlantic. This strategy combines unilateral initiatives – naval build-up, domestic military publicity efforts and international legal moves – with a vastly expanded international defence cooperation programme that covers nearly the entire South Atlantic perimeter. This policy brief analyses key components of Brazil's strategy, situating them within the South Atlantic's changing ecology of actors and suggesting some of the potential tensions that may arise from Brazil's growing protagonism in the South Atlantic.

## Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, the strategic importance of the North Atlantic outstripped that of the southern part of the ocean. However, the past decade has brought significant shifts in Atlantic dynamics, with regional and external actors developing new interests in the region. Brazil, in particular, has been working to reinforce its control and influence in the South Atlantic. To this end, over the last five years the Brazilian government has launched or intensified efforts meant to securitise the South Atlantic. This strategy combines unilateral initiatives – naval build-up, domestic military propaganda and international legal moves – with a vastly expanded international defence cooperation programme that covers nearly the entire South Atlantic perimeter. All of these efforts may be understood not only within Brazil's changing security thinking, but also in light of its foreign policy, which seeks to project Brazil as a rising power within and beyond South America, including through a bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Underpinning this changing strategy is a new preoccupation with maritime natural resources, particularly following

recent discoveries of large oil and gas deposits within the pre-salt layers of Brazil's continental shelf. In the long term, these resources may transform Brazil into one of the world's leading oil exporters. As Brazil works to reinforce its sovereignty claims over these resources through the international legal regime, the unilateral aspect of its strategy – and its nationalist rhetoric – may generate unintended consequences. Brazil's emerging protagonism within this key transregional space may also help trigger new dynamics of competition with other key actors in the South Atlantic, both northern players and other emerging powers. This policy brief analyses key components of Brazil's strategy, situating them within the South Atlantic's changing ecology of actors and suggesting some of the potential tensions that may arise.

## Brazil's strategy for the South Atlantic

With 7,491 km of Atlantic coastline – more than any other country along the South Atlantic – Brazil has long considered the ocean to be a key strategic concern. Over the past five years, however, there has been a clear increase in the amount of attention and resources the government

dedicates to the South Atlantic. This shift is reflected in the two key documents issued over the past few years: the 2008 National Defense Strategy and the 2012 White Paper on Defense. The former accords a new level of strategic priority to the South Atlantic, linking the richness of natural resources within Brazil's maritime territory to the possibility of armed conflict in the South Atlantic. The latter lays out the steps for securitising the South Atlantic through a mix of unilateral moves with international cooperation, not only with other South American countries, but also with states along the western coast of Africa. The White Paper notes not only the presence of natural resources such as oil, gas and fisheries within Brazil's maritime territory, but also the centrality of the ocean to the country's commercial interests and to global trade in general. These documents argue the need to safeguard Brazilian sovereignty in the South Atlantic, identifying maritime resources as being vital to national interests and coveted foreign states as potential enemies.

Broadly put, the strategy that follows from this discourse can be broken down into three key components. First, Brazil has launched a military build-up, intended to upgrade its ageing military equipment and enhance its dissuasion capacity in the South Atlantic. In an effort to attain autonomy in military technology, there is also an ongoing effort to boost the country's industrial–military complex. These priorities are reflected, for instance, in the defence equipment acquisition and development programmes launched in the past few years. In addition to expanding the navy's fleet through vessel purchases from the UK, Brazil is developing, in cooperation with France, a fleet of conventional and nuclear-propulsion submarines. Apart from the ability to enhance patrolling capacity of the pre-salt oil, the decision to invest heavily in the development of this fleet (whose nuclear propulsion component is being developed by Brazil) is a strategic choice by the Brazilian government to elevate Brazil's status as part of a small group of countries that possess this technology. There is also an effort to diminish the strategic vulnerability posed by the heavy geographic concentration of naval forces in Rio de Janeiro through the establishment of a second fleet that may be based on the coast of Pará, a gateway state to the Amazon. In addition, Brazil is investing in a new satellite and radar system, dubbed the "Blue Amazon Management System" (SisGAAz), also intended to enhance patrolling of the pre-salt areas.

Domestically, these efforts are buttressed by the "Blue Amazon" campaign, which aims to boost support among the Brazilian population for the new maritime strategy (and corresponding military spending) through school textbooks, travelling exhibits and other publicity materials focusing on the South Atlantic and Antarctica. At the same time, Brazil has either launched or strengthened a variety of legal initiatives meant to ascertain its sovereignty over an expanded portion of the South Atlantic. Brazil has proposed an extension of its continental shelf by way of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas

(UNCLOS), which would expand Brazil's maritime space from around 3.66 million to about 4.5 million square kilometres. To boost its claims, Brazil is also expanding maritime research programmes to survey its continental shelf (a basis for the continental shelf expansion proposal) and allowing it to keep teams of researchers in residency in the South Atlantic islands. In relying on these legal and institutional channels, Brazil has the benefit of having clearly defined borders with its South Atlantic neighbours.

Finally, Brazil has been rapidly expanding its defence cooperation with countries along the South Atlantic perimeter. Working closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and the Brazilian Navy often adopt the Brazilian rhetoric of South–South cooperation, which stresses ties to other Lusophone states. However, within the South Atlantic, Brazil's defence cooperation programmes are not restricted to Portuguese-speaking areas. In Namibia, for instance, Brazil has been instrumental in building up the country's navy. In addition to strengthening cooperation with strategic partners such as Angola, Nigeria and South Africa (with which Brazil is developing a short-range air-to-air missile: the A-Darter), Brazil also works to cement ties with smaller countries, including Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Equatorial Guinea. These ties often include officer training, equipment provision, and collaboration in mapping out those countries' continental shelves in the South Atlantic.

Although different branches of the Armed Forces are involved in these programmes, Brazil clearly prioritises naval cooperation, with the Brazilian Navy playing an active role in projects that cover officer training, joint exercises, equipment provision and arms exports. In addition, Brazil has been helping countries along the coast to survey their own continental shelves, particularly where oil reserves may be present. This emphasis on identifying and patrolling marine resources suggests that Brazil is working to create a common South Atlantic identity by stressing the links between oceanic resources and national sovereignty. This is also evident in Brazil's attempted leadership in reviving or consolidating multilateral platforms such as the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone (ZOPACAS), the India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) and the Africa–South America Summit (ASA).

## A changing ecology of actors

Brazil's growing maritime interests emerge within a rapidly changing ecology of actors in the South Atlantic. Among European countries, the UK has the broadest presence in the region due to its overseas territories, including the Malvinas/Falklands. Although Brazil supports Argentina's claim to the archipelago, this position has not kept Brazil from intensifying its defence cooperation with the UK. Brazil has also deepened military cooperation with France and with the U.S., particularly for equipment purchases

and development. At the same time, Brazil remains suspicious of a stepped up NATO presence in the South Atlantic, especially the prospect of the U.S. Fourth Fleet returning to the region. During President Lula's administration, Minister of Defense Nelson Jobim repeatedly referred to the prospect of a strong NATO presence in the South Atlantic as "inappropriate". Under the current administration, the discourse has been broadened from NATO to "actors from outside the region", which allows for the inclusion of other emerging powers among potential new threats.

These other players include China, India and Russia. In addition to the dramatic increase in China's trade with countries in the region (characterised by a growing imbalance in China's favour), China cooperates with most Latin American and African states. This drive includes political, economic and military ties with strategic partners such as Brazil, Argentina, Nigeria, Angola and South Africa. However, China has also deepened relations with smaller countries, including those with which Brazil has defence cooperation ties such as Namibia. Although India's presence is far smaller, Indian companies are increasingly active in the region's extractive sector. Moreover, in 2006, India's Chief of the Naval Staff included the South Atlantic in India's strategic calculations. Through IBSA, India has also been cooperating with South Africa and Brazil through joint naval exercises held off the South African coast. Russia has dozens of billions of dollars of investments in the Caribbean, especially Venezuela, and it is interested in prospecting seabed minerals in the South Atlantic and in Antarctica – where China's strong interest has also increased dramatically with the establishment of two new naval bases and an intensive research programme. These shifting strategic and economic concerns contribute to the growing importance that Brazil attaches to the South Atlantic, including its links to Antarctica.

### Unintended consequences?

Although its strategy in the South Atlantic is premised on the construction of a common and peace-orientated South Atlantic identity, Brazil's emerging protagonism in the South Atlantic may, whether inadvertently or not, reinforce

other states' claims in the region. This unintended consequence may be particularly problematic in places where maritime boundaries are not quite as clear, such as the overlap in claims between Argentina and the UK, but it could also generate, more broadly, an environment of maritime territorialism. In the long term, this contagion may undermine rather than boost the construction of a peaceful transregional identity.

Brazil's current rhetoric, marked by a growing territorialism, already causes discomfort among NATO actors and, increasingly, other emerging powers active in the region. If that discomfort turns into alienation, it could be detrimental to partnerships that remain important to Brazil within and beyond the realm of defence. For all its anti-NATO bravado, Brazil still depends significantly on the U.S., France and the UK, among others, for crucial military technology, and those countries remain important for trade, investment and cooperation partnerships.

As for other emerging powers, Brazil has been investing more than ever in its ties with strategic regional powers, including the BRICS countries (Russia, India, China and South Africa). Although all of these states prioritise their immediate regions within their foreign policy and defence strategies, they all have growing interests in the South Atlantic. Brazil will thus have to balance the desire for enhanced control over its portion of the South Atlantic with the political, economic and security needs to maintain constructive relationships with key players both within and outside the South Atlantic.

### Sources

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## ■ THE AUTHORS

**Adriana Erthal Abdenur** (PhD Princeton University, BA Harvard University) is a professor of International Relations at the Pontifical Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) and the General Coordinator of the BRICS Policy Center.  
abdenur@puc-rio.br

**Danilo Marcondes de Souza Neto** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Cambridge, UK. He was formerly a lecturer at PUC-Rio and an educational adviser at the Fulbright Commission's office in Rio de Janeiro.  
dm595@cam.ac.uk

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