

A Southern rising: partnership and power in Brazil's Africa agenda

By Ivan Briscoe and Timo Peeters

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's proclamation before a summit of African Union leaders in May of a new era of cooperation across the Atlantic might have provoked a wry cackle in one mining town in Mozambique. For Rousseff, the deepening ties between Brazil and Africa over the last decade mark a "form of cooperation that is not oppressive," one that is "free of colonial hells." For some of the residents of the town of Moatize, on the other hand, the giant open-cast coal mine owned and operated by the Brazilian multinational Vale is a source of relentless misery. "There are raids and repression," said one local leader. "We feel that natural resources are a curse, not a blessing."ⁱ

The contrast between Rousseff's speech in Addis Ababa and the indignation of Moatize does not reflect hypocrisy on the part of the Brazilian president; nor does it suggest that a decade of outreach to Africa from Brazil's diplomatic and political establishment has been hollow. In fact, President Rousseff's own reactions to a series of corruption cases in her cabinet (seven ministers stepped down in the first two years of her government), as well as to the wave of mass street protests in Brazil in June this year, revealed a politician with deeply progressive and pluralist instincts.

But there is also no doubt that the unrest in the Moatize mine, whose owner Vale won the Public Eye award in 2012 for its alleged corporate misdeeds,ⁱⁱ expresses the paradoxes and difficulties that an emerging superpower and economic giant such as Brazil – with hopes of gaining a seat on the world's high table – can experience in seeking to build a foreign policy rooted in cooperation and solidarity across the developing world. And all the more so where the target is a continent coveted by the country's main rivals and allies.

Lula's new world

Upon taking power at the start of 2003, President Luiz Inácio da Silva, or Lula for short, became his country's first elected left-wing leader. A former trade union militant who had led the Workers' Party (PT) to defeat in three previous presidential polls, Lula soon disappointed followers looking for a radical turn in economic policy: for the first years of his government, the fiscal anchor was the very orthodox achievement of a primary budget surplus of 4.25 per cent of GDP.ⁱⁱⁱ Progress towards reducing Brazil's inequality rate, which in the 1990s had been the highest in the hemisphere, began sluggishly (although it later speeded up).^{iv}

But Lula's determination to shift Brazil's diplomatic bearings away from the United States, and the industrialized North in general, towards a vanguard role within and on behalf of the

poorer developing world, resonated almost immediately. Lula famously informed President George W. Bush in the White House upon their first meeting in December 2002 that his “fight is against hunger, not Iraq.”^v Late in 2003, Brazilian intransigence and activism at a summit in the Mexican resort of Cancún helped scupper the Doha Round of free trade talks; even earlier in Lula’s first year as president, a Brazil-Africa Forum had marked a new orientation in foreign policy.

Although this turn to Africa has been somewhat neglected by observers, who have focused instead on Brazil’s widely noted efforts to frame an independently spirited foreign policy – for instance, by seeking to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran in 2010, or by forcing the pace of Latin American regional integration through Mercosur and UNASUR – it remains a substantial pillar of the country’s new geopolitical orientation. The number of Brazilian embassies in Africa more than doubled under Lula, reaching 37.^{vi} The former president paid 12 visits to the continent, covering a total of 29 countries, and often went accompanied by large business delegations. The country has created a new machinery for inter-regional summitry, and supported numerous programmes of co-operation in health, technology and culture. Brazil’s pioneer cash transfer programmes to combat malnutrition and extreme poverty (*Hambre Cero* and *Bolsa Familia*) have been studied and emulated in various shapes across sub-Saharan Africa, including in Kenya, Ghana and South Sudan^{vii}; plans are underway to carry out the same sort of knowledge transfer for Brazil’s major electricity access programme, *Luz para Todos*.^{viii}

One hallmark of this array of programmes has been its decentralized and fragmented nature. Brazilian cooperation, which is mainly driven by requests from recipient countries, is scattered over a group of more than 120 institutions, including a number of ministries.^{ix} Whereas foreign aid from Western donors, including the Netherlands, has tended in recent decades towards realizing a set of normative values in exchange for substantial financial aid – in governance, security, human rights and gender – Brazil has shunned any such requirements. Its model has instead been “horizontal partnership,” as opposed to what one Brazilian diplomatic scholar terms the West’s “international assistentialism, disguised in the most varied forms of old-fashioned technical cooperation.”^x

However, the rapid expansion across Africa of Brazilian cooperation projects, now with backing from multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and funding from other bilateral donors such as Britain,^{xi} has not yet been followed by any major reform to the country’s aid institutions. Although the total aid budget from Brazil to Africa is still relatively modest – standing at 116 million euros in 2010^{xii} – severe overstretch has become common. It has been reported that Brazil does not have enough diplomats to support its business missions and staff its embassies properly. Furthermore, there is still no law to regulate the use and oversight of development finance.^{xiii}

Identity and business

Concentrating on the practicalities of donor impact and the size of financial flows, however, does not do full justice to the significance of Brazil's pivot to Africa. Wound up with the initiative is a sense that the centre-left Brazilian government is also honouring its large black population^{xiv} after centuries of slavery, which were followed by decades of economic and social marginalisation: having imported an estimated four to five million slaves from Africa, Brazil only managed to abolish the practice in 1888.^{xv} For a ruling party devoted to social justice, targeted action on behalf of the black Brazilian population – not only economically, but in terms of broader symbolic redress – is a natural component of public policy. As a result, some of the world's most demanding racial quotas in higher education were signed into law by President Rousseff in 2012.^{xvi}

Enhancing the ties to Africa can be regarded as an extension of this national redefinition, in much the same way as Venezuela under its late president, Hugo Chávez, also embarked on a diplomatic rush to the continent – at one stage termed the “motherland” by the left-wing ruler.^{xvii} Alongside Brazil, Venezuela is the Latin American country that has most emphasized its connections to Africa, signing some 200 cooperation agreements with countries across the continent and, most recently, issuing an commemorative book devoted to strengthened relations between the two.^{xviii}

At the same time, strong relations to Africa are not purely an invention of the radical new rulers of Brazil and Venezuela. Although their sense of shared identity was certainly weaker, previous Brazilian governments, many of them led by military rulers, also looked to Africa after its era of decolonization as a region in which Brazil's independent and growing diplomatic weight could be exerted. For certain commentators, Lula's emphasis on Africa is more rightly seen as a renewal of this old tradition, which was somewhat lost during Brazil's economic crisis in the 1980s and its ensuing economic stabilisation during the 1990s. Perhaps the apogee of this first outreach to Africa can be found in the early 1970s when Brazil forged cooperation with a number of socialist African regimes and peeled away from its old loyalties to the retiring colonial power of Portugal, all with the aim of strengthening national development, industrial modernization and diplomatic independence.^{xix}

The strategic pay-offs to a stronger relationship with Africa are also clearly visible in Brazil's new approach. Brazilian diplomatic rhetoric frames the relationship in terms of a cooperative vehicle to represent and defend the world's developing nations. As a result, its consequences can be detected not just in particular tie-ups, summits or development projects, but in the whole array of intergovernmental bodies that represent to varying extents the “South”, be it IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa), BRICS and the G-20; or bodies that should do, as shown by the campaign for more IMF voting rights or greater influence in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

But foreign policy tradition in Brazil also determines that the country always pursues its own interests in the guise of partnerships. Long aware that it has land borders with 10 South American countries, many of which traverse areas of very limited state presence deep in the Amazon region, the diplomatic establishment headquartered in the Itamaraty Palace traditionally operates through dialogue and consensus. The leadership role that Brazil has

assumed on-and-off in recent years in Latin America, exemplified by its protagonism after the Honduran coup of 2009 or its part in defusing the Bolivian crisis of 2008, has never failed to ground itself on broad regional support. But this does not mean that Brazil does not eye for itself a role in Latin America as *primus inter pares*, most obviously in the shape of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, or a major role in multilateral bodies and in regional conflict resolution, or as the acknowledged hegemon and oil explorer in the South Atlantic region. And in this respect, its African allies will certainly form an important bedrock of diplomatic support.

The emerging contradictions

By presenting itself as a “natural partner” for Africa, emphasizing the ethnic, cultural or tropical agricultural ties with the other side of the Atlantic, Brazil has managed to operate more or less inconspicuously in Africa until quite recently.^{xx} However, the unrest in the Moatize mine is illustrative of an emerging economic superpower’s difficulties in finding the right balance between national political or diplomatic interests and corporate engagement. It is thus likely to mark a new era in Brazil-Africa relations, where Brazil’s actions, far from being disinterested and praiseworthy, will increasingly be viewed with a critical eye.

Precisely this process, whereby the growing economic and political sway of Brazil has outstripped its capacity to maintain a reputation as an equal and peaceful partner, has been observed already in Latin America. Brazilian designs for a cohesive South American infrastructure grid have enflamed indigenous activists in Bolivia; Brazilians’ ownership of large tracts of land in western Paraguay has sparked violence with local landless peasants. However, the clearest sign of the difficulties in maintaining the delicate equilibrium of Brazilian diplomacy came late in August, when Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota was forced to resign after apparently supporting the flight into exile of a fierce critic of Bolivian President Evo Morales.

It is likely that similar concerns and conflicts will soon be raised about the environmental impact and sustainability of some of Brazil’s large business projects across Africa. So far, Brazil and its flag-carrying multinationals, such as Vale, Odebrecht, Petrobras and Andrade Gutierrez, have avoided most (if not all) of the mistakes committed by China. Brazil and its companies pride themselves on greater capacity for cultural understanding, hire mainly local staff and endeavour to transfer skills and technology to local communities. Instead of seeking to extract the continent’s natural resources, Brazil’s relative abundance of oil and minerals means it targets sectors such as agriculture, construction and a growing consumer market – all in principle welcomed by Africans.^{xxi} Interestingly, Brazil’s Africa policy encounters its fiercest critics within the home country. Rousseff’s recent announcement that Brazil would pardon almost 900 million US dollars in debt of 12 African countries – including four that are ruled by authoritarian governments – was considered by many to be an insult towards a Brazilian public that only emerged from decades of military rule in the 1980s.^{xxii}

Furthermore, it is not only the licit industry that seems to be profiting from Brazil's intensified engagement with Africa. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) *World Drug Report 2013* reports that Africa is being used as a major transit point for drugs to Europe, and is also developing a market for narcotic use: Africa's share of global cocaine consumption reportedly rose from 7 per cent in 2005 to 15 per cent in 2011.^{xxiii} Much of this cocaine finds its way to the continent via Brazil, which has a highly strategic position on the cocaine route – it possesses borders with all three major source countries and a long coastline fronting the Atlantic Ocean –, a large population and high levels of cocaine use.^{xxiv}

This rise in illicit trafficking is perhaps not surprising given that Brazil's trade with sub-Saharan Africa as a whole increased six-fold between 2000 and 2012. But at the same time, Africa still only represents a small part (5.7 percent) of Brazil's foreign trade in 2012^{xxv}, meaning that its commercial significance to Brazil's economy pales against that of Latin America, the United States and, above all, China, which is Brazil's most important trading partner. Brazil, meanwhile, is still only third amongst the BRIC countries in terms of its trade with Africa, lagging behind China and India.

Seen from this perspective, the love in the air between Brazil and Africa hardly corresponds to either a stable or monogamous relationship. Brazil's trade with Africa remains concentrated in a handful of countries: Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa and Angola. As Brazil's power and ambition grow and spread, however, complications with other interested powers are sure to ensue. Tensions with China are already growing as both nations are at cross-purposes not only in each other's backyard, but also in Africa. Brazilian manufacturers are increasingly crowded out by cheap Chinese products, while Brazil has taken measures to protect its home market.^{xxvi} Moreover, Brazil's economy has suffered much more intensely than China and India from the recent global economic crisis, growing by a meagre 0.9 per cent in 2012.

Brazil's erratic rise as a diplomatic power is also evident in the field of international security. The Brazilian-backed policy of "Responsibility while Protecting" – an effort to modify the UN's more interventionist "Responsibility to Protect", a set of principles aimed at protecting citizens from mass atrocities – would appear to obstruct any direct international engagement in hybrid armed conflicts such as that of Syria.^{xxvii} Indeed, by seeking to remain on good terms with superpowers and key regional actors, Brazil risks avoiding firm and consistent positions on matters of international security, democracy or human rights. This might well explain Brazil's hesitant stance towards the Arab Spring in general and the Syrian crisis in particular, where the bloodshed has been dismissed as a matter of "internal affairs".^{xxviii}

Aside from its many domestic concerns, involving stalled growth, crime or flawed governance, Brazil manifestly covets a greater global role. The approaching football World Cup and Olympic Games are destined to be vehicles for this aspiration. Brazil's rapprochement with Africa, meanwhile, serves a more complex set of objectives. While the relationship was hatched as a broadly redistributive strategy in both the domestic and diplomatic arenas – providing a platform for the developing world, as well as redress for Brazil's black population – the strategy now conforms in many ways to a pattern of Brazilian economic expansion and national aggrandizement, with the grand goal of gaining a permanent

seat on the UN Security Council looming in the distance. Brazil and Africa still reap the gains of greater co-operation, but Brazil's rhetoric of partnership may well start to pale against its logic of aspiration.

ⁱ "FIR semeia pânico entre população de Moatize." Notícias Moz Maníacos 29/05/2013.

ⁱⁱ See Public Eye's Hall of Shame: <http://www.publiceye.ch/en/hall-of-shame/>

ⁱⁱⁱ This move, which in many ways appeared to betray the redistributive objectives of the PT, was taken against a backdrop of rising Brazilian debt levels and market scepticism over the incoming government's intentions. In particular, Lula's elections was accompanied by falling Central Bank reserves, devaluation, rising inflation and rising spreads on Brazilian treasury bonds (or "risk premium"). See Arestis, Philip, Fernando de Paula, Luiz and Ferrari-Filho, Fernando. 2007. "Assessing the economic policies of President Lula in Brazil: Has fear defeated hope?" Centre for Brazilian Studies working paper, University of Oxford, especially p. 5.

^{iv} Altman, Daniel. 2012. "A Real War on Inequality." *Foreign Policy* December 17.

^v El País. 2003. "Lula acepta la propuesta de Aznar de crear una alianza estratégica entre Brasil y España." July 17.

^{vi} Konijn, Peter, & Lenfant, François. 2013. Brazil-Africa: Booming business across the Atlantic. African Studies Centre info sheet, 18, Leiden.

^{vii} Stolte, Christina. 2012. Brazil in Africa: Just another BRICS country seeking resources? Chatham House Briefing Paper. P. 13.

^{viii} Ibid. P. 15.

^{ix} Marcondes de Souza Neto, Danilo. 2011. Brazil & Africa: Challenges and opportunities. *Indian Journal of African Affairs*, 51(3-4), August 2011 — January 2012. P. 80

^x Saraiva, José Flávio Sombra. 2010. "A Nova África e o Brasil na era Lula: o renascimento da política atlântica brasileira." In *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 53, p. 180.

^{xi} World Bank and Brazilian Institute of Applied Economics. 2011. *Bridging the Atlantic: Brazil and Sub-Saharan African, South-South Partnering for Growth*. Washington DC: World Bank; United Nations Development Programme. 2013. Human Development Report 2013. The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World. New York: UN. PP 56-61.

^{xii} See report from Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA): http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19209

^{xiii} Stuenkel, Oliver. 2013. *Brazil in Africa: Bridging the Atlantic*. KAS International Report; Alves, Ana Cristina. 2013. *Brazil-Africa Technical Co-operation: Structure, Achievements and Challenges*. SAIIA Policy Briefing.

^{xiv} 44 per cent of the Brazilian population claim African heritage. Meade, Teresa. 2010. *A Brief History of Brazil*. New York: Infobase, p. xvi.

^{xv} For more on Brazilian slavery and its eventual abolition, see Bethell, Leslie. 1970. *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

^{xvi} Romero, Simon. 2012. "Brazil Enacts Affirmative Action Law for Universities." *New York Times*, August 30.

^{xvii} Robertson, Ewan. 2013. Venezuela: An Ethical Foreign Policy? Carnegie Council, July 10.

^{xviii} See Bolívar, José Reinaldo. 2013. *Venezuela y África. Las Nuevas Relaciones*. Caracas: Ministry of Popular Power for Foreign Relations.

^{xix} Saraiva, op. cit.

^{xx} Markus Weimer, research fellow in the Africa Program at Chatham House, in: Kermeliotis, Teo. 2012. "Brazil competes with China, India to invest in Africa". CNN, June 7.

^{xxi} Stolte, Christina, op. cit., p. 17.

^{xxii} Arias, Juan. 2013. Brasil continúa con el perdón de la deuda a los gobiernos dictatoriales de África. *El País*, August 5.

^{xxiii} UNODC. 2013. *World Drug Report 2013*. United Nations, May.

^{xxiv} UNODC. 2013. *World Drug Report 2013*. United Nations, May.

^{xxv} Alves, Ana Cristina. 2013. *Brazil in Africa: Achievements and challenges*. In: Emerging powers in Africa. LSE IDEAS. P. 39.

^{xxvi} Bremmer, Ian. 2013. *The underappreciated tensions between China and Brazil*. Reuters.

^{xxvii} Avezov, Xenia. 2013. "Responsibility while protecting': are we asking the wrong questions?" Stockholm International Peace Research Institute: http://www.sipri.org/media/newsletter/essay/Avezov_Jan13

^{xxviii} Gosh, Palash. 2012. Brazil Slowly Moves Towards Condemning Syria Violence. *International Business Times*. February 7.