POLICY INSIGHTS 21

FOREIGN POLICY PROGRAMME

July 2015

Co-operation in the South Atlantic Zone: Amplifying the African Agenda

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Africa's foreign policy prioritises peaceful and sustainable growth in Africa by maximising its external engagements in increasingly strategic ways. Until now, Brazil has formed the pivot of South Africa's engagements in South America, with the effect that engagements in other significant Latin American countries have been left by the wayside. Shared commitments to South–South co-operation and global governance reform account for this skew in relations. This paper proposes avenues for South Africa to expand the scope of its engagement in more substantive ways that not only capitalise on the strategic importance of South America but also propel a greater African orientation of South Africa's foreign policy. The paper calls for South Africa to consider broadening its engagement with Latin America by reconceiving it as part of a South Atlantic Zone that includes the African and South American littoral states of the South Atlantic.

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INTRODUCTION

The South Atlantic Zone refers to a grouping of countries from Latin America and Africa that have a littoral border on the South Atlantic Ocean. This grouping holds significant strategic and economic potential for countries from both regions. Traditionally, South Africa's regional foreign policy has been classified as either Latin American or African. However, an approach that conceives of South Atlantic Zone countries as a single entity offers an opportunity to bridge this conceptual and geographic divide while providing a framework for greater multilateral co-operation.

One of the many opportunities that arise from this grouping is the potential to expand South Africa's foreign policy priorities on ocean economics through initiatives such as Operation Phakisa (discussed later in the paper). A similar initiative with the Indian Ocean Rim Association has already been prioritised by the South African government – seemingly because of its bid to lead this organisation from 2017 onwards.

The White Paper on South African Foreign Policy[1] identifies a number of similarities between Latin America and Africa. Countries on both sides of the South Atlantic are bound by shared developmental trajectories characterised by resource-based economies and exports of single commodities. They also share similar patterns of underdevelopment and poverty. These characteristics provide several opportunities for economic co-operation by sharing best practices in socio-economic development, mining, agro-processing, beneficiation of mineral products, science and technology, and infrastructure development.

Brazil is a major actor in the South Atlantic, and South Africa already enjoys a strong relationship with that country, shaped by the two countries' engagement in BRICS. However, South Africa and Brazil have a considerably longer history of interacting with each other. As founding members in 2003 of the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum, the two countries have a shared commitment to increasing South–South co-operation. They are also both strong regional powers and share similar challenges as middle powers, including an aspiration to have a greater voice in global affairs. This is recognised in the Foreign Policy White Paper, which states that 'South Africa's interactions with Brazil as an emerging power should be a platform for significant bilateral growth in economic and political cooperation, as well as for collaboration on specific global multilateral objectives'.[2]

The White Paper continues: 'Other countries in the region also provide economic and political opportunities to pursue complementarities within the context of South–South cooperation, multilateralism, and closer bilateral strategic relations.'[3]

Although the White Paper suggests that South Africa prefers to base its engagement with Latin America on bilateral co-operation agreements (South Africa has bi-national commissions with Argentina and Mexico, a Joint

Commission with Brazil, a Joint Consultative Mechanism with Cuba and a Joint Commission with the Bahamas),[4] its longer-term vision is to increase its engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean with more active and emerging middle powers to 'enable partnerships and strategic coalitions to advance mutual interests'.[5]

The Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZPCSA) is an entity that has the potential to advance collaboration between Africa and Latin America. Established in 1986 under the stewardship of Brazil, its primary focus was the preservation of peace in the region and keeping the area free of weapons of mass destruction. The ZPCSA formally consolidated the Treaty of Tlatelolco (signed in 1967), the Antarctic Treaty (1959) and the Treaty of Pelindaba (1961). These treaties cumulatively created a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and Antarctica.

The ZPCSA comprises 24 countries: South Africa, Angola, Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Namibia, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and Uruguay. The primary focus of the ZPCSA is security co-operation. However, there has been limited engagement by signatory states on this and progress has been slow. This is because the sporadic ministerial meetings that have been held have tended to focus on reinforcing institutional frameworks. Development is also partly hampered by the fact that South Africa was the only African country during this period with significant long-range naval capabilities.[6]

Geopolitical changes in the maritime security situation in the South Atlantic and new interest from key countries in the region have contributed to a renewed drive to revitalise the ZPCSA. Ongoing tensions between the UK and Argentina over the disputed status of the Falklands/Malvinas islands and the growing incidence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea have focused greater attention on peace and security initiatives in the region. The 2013 Montevideo ministerial meeting was only the seventh time that the grouping had met since its formation in 1986,[7] and it seems to have injected new energy into its broader agenda. The reasons for this are partly economic.

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New discoveries of light oil (which is higher in market value than tight or heavy oil) and gas deposits off the coast of Brazil in 2012[8] created the domestic impetus for the country to improve its maritime security and co-operation. Brazil's Blue Amazon policy is aimed at gaining popular support for the notion that it has a 'responsibility to enforce' peace and security in the South Atlantic to safeguard its newly discovered natural resources.[9] South Africa's interest in furthering this kind of co-operation in this zone is bolstered by the fact that an estimated 9 billion barrels of oil and 11 billion barrels of natural gas lie untapped within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).[10]

Therefore, the stimulus to increase South Africa's co-operation in this zone is two-pronged. On the one hand, it needs assistance to address the growing issue of piracy in the region. Although it has one of the strongest naval forces on the continent, South Africa's capacity to curb the threat unilaterally is limited.[11] South Africa's current maritime patrol capabilities consist of the *Sarah Baartman*, *Lilian Ngoyi*, *Ruth First* and *Victoria Mxenge* patrol vessels. It is difficult for the South African Navy to patrol South Africa's EEZ, which encompasses 1 530 000 km^2 and includes the Prince Edward and Marion islands. Extreme weather exacerbates the challenge.

Nevertheless, South Africa has been an active participant in joint military exercises under the rubric of the India-Brazil-South Africa Maritime (IBSAMAR) co-operation. This initiative is in its fourth iteration and began in 2008.[12] It has also been engaged in joint maritime security exercises with Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay (known as Atlasur) since 1993.[13] Atlasur has held nine maritime exercises since its inception.

The second prong of South Africa's strategy is its desire to tap into the ocean economy. The government's much-touted Operation Phakisa, which was launched on 15 July 2014, is an instrument that seeks to expand the country's footprint into the blue economy to bolster economic development. The opportunities that this programme provides range from marine transport, services and manufacturing to offshore oil and gas exploration, aquaculture, marine protection services and ocean governance.

During Operation Phakisa's open-day discussions in October 2014, President Jacob Zuma reiterated the importance of the blue economy for South Africa's economic development. South Africa's National Development Plan forecasts that the country stands to achieve 5% gross domestic product (GDP) growth by 2019 if it can take advantage of its relatively untapped maritime resources in conjunction with other sectors of the economy. Given that the country's GDP growth is currently just 1.5%,[14] Operation Phakisa may be ambitious, but it could contribute significantly to South Africa's economic development agenda.

South Africa is also engaging its African Atlantic seaboard neighbours at a regional level. In 2013 it signed the Benguela Current Convention with Namibia and Angola. The convention aims to promote the conservation, protection, rehabilitation and sustainable use of maritime resources in the region, and to provide social, economic and environmental benefits to the citizens of its member states. South Africa is also an active participant in the AU's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy. Adopted in January 2014, this provides a comprehensive framework outlining strategic areas of action to harness the wealth potential of Africa's oceans, seas and inland waterways.

As the most capable naval actor in the region, albeit with limitations, South Africa has played a significant role in ensuring maritime security. For example, since the beginning of 2015 it has deployed frigates, submarines and over

220 defence force members to combat increasing piracy activities targeting oil tankers in the Gulf of Guinea.[15]

In addition to security co-operation in the South Atlantic, there are also significant opportunities for greater economic collaboration within the ZPCSA (see Tables 1 and 2). The zone includes the three largest economies in sub-Saharan Africa – Nigeria, South Africa and Angola – and two of Latin America's strongest economies, Brazil and Argentina. South Africa's geo-strategic location, with Atlantic and Indian Ocean coasts, optimally positions it as a gateway between Latin America and Asia. And all the African littoral states on the South Atlantic act as important gateways to their landlocked neighbours.

All the African littoral states on the South Atlantic act as important gateways to their landlocked neighbours

Table 1: Major ZPCSA member economies, 2013

Country	Population (millions), 2013	GPD growth (2015 Q1, based on annual change from 2013)	GPD size (current $), 2013	Gross national income per capita ($), 2013
Angola	21.47	6.8%	124.2 billion	5,170
Nigeria	173.60	5.4%	521.8 billion	2,710
South Africa	53.16	1.9%	366.1 billion	7,410
Argentina	41.45	2.9%	609.9 billion	6,290
Brazil	200.40	2.5%	2.246 trillion	11,690

Source: World Bank Indicators, http://www.worldbank.org/en/country, accessed 19 May 2015

Nevertheless, trade figures between South Africa and Latin America have been disappointing despite the ratification of the preferential trade agreement between the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) and the Mercado Común del Sur (Common Market of the South, or Mercosur) grouping in December 2004. In 2013 trade between South Africa and the three Latin American South Atlantic countries (Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay) made up $3.34 billion, with a $0.85 billion surplus in favour of the Latin American countries. This represents a marginal 2.3% ($0.92 billion) of all South African imports and a larger share of 9.7% ($2.41 billion) of total South African exports. Goods traded included automobile parts, textiles, mining products, petrochemicals, agricultural products, precious and semi-precious stones, vehicles and machinery. Low trade figures could be attributed to similar finished goods and commodities being produced by South Africa, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, resulting in limited demand for cross-Atlantic trade. Nevertheless, the encouraging expansion of Brazil–Africa trade by 464% and South Africa–Latin America trade by 314% over the past decade – albeit off a very low base – also points to the potential for further growth if more attention is given to increasing trade and economic links.

The Community of Portuguese Language Countries is another dimension that could support cultural and economic engagement across the South Atlantic

Table 2: Bilateral Brazil–Africa trade and South Africa–Latin America trade, 2003 and 2013

Brazil–Africa trade	2003 ($ billions)	2013 ($ billions)
Total	**6.061**	**28.13**
Imports	3.277	17.412
Exports	2.784	10.715
South Africa–Latin America trade	**2003 ($ billions)**	**2013 ($ billions)**
Total	**1.627**	**5.110**
Imports	1.189	3.469
Exports	0.437	1.640

Source: UN Comtrade data, http://comtrade.un.org/db/dqQuickQuery.aspx, accessed 19 May 2015

There is also much room to improve trade between South Africa and other African states bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Total trade in 2013 between South Africa and this group of African states amounted to $15.52 billion, with a surplus of $1.35 billion (8.7%) in South Africa's favour. This represents 6.8% ($7.08 billion) of total South African imports and 8.9% ($8.44 billion) of total South African exports.[16] Given these low numbers, it is clear that more attention should be given to economic co-operation in this region.

And there are significant opportunities for collaboration at a cultural level. The African diaspora in the Americas, particularly in the Caribbean and Brazil, is a strong rallying point for Latin American and African cultural co-operation. South Africa, for example, maintains strong links with the Cuban government on issues of health and education.

The Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (Community of Portuguese Language Countries , or CPLP) is another dimension that could support cultural and economic engagement across the South Atlantic. This community was formed in 1996 to promote diplomatic relations among lusophone countries. Six of the nine member states overlap with those of the South Atlantic Zone. These are Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé and Príncipe. South Africa already enjoys productive relations with many of these countries (and other members of the CPLP such as Mozambique, Angola and Brazil). The community provides a significant base from which to explore the deepening of social, cultural and diplomatic ties in the South Atlantic Zone. A noteworthy example is the strong economic, political and cultural ties between Brazil and Angola.

CONCLUSION

South Africa has limited capacity to project its power across the South Atlantic. However, this zone is becoming increasingly important as the country explores avenues to further its own economic development. Initiatives such as Operation Phakisa, which intends to propel the country towards greater engagement in the blue economy, make it necessary for South Africa to place greater emphasis on the South Atlantic Zone.

Serendipitously, the framework for expanding engagement into this region already exists on multiple levels. The ZPSCA, in conjunction with several IBSAMAR and Atlasur operations, has provided a strong base for joint maritime engagements aimed at strengthening security co-operation in the region. The further promotion and deepening of trade between SACU and Mercosur, and the potential for the CPLP to expand channels for greater cultural and economic collaboration, need to be explored further. More broadly, increased engagement in the South Atlantic offers an opportunity for South Africa to extend the scope of its African Agenda to its engagement with Latin America.

ENDNOTES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This policy insights paper is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). SAIIA gratefully acknowledges this support.

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