

MARITIME SECURITY IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

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This chapter examines the South Atlantic Ocean according to a minimalist definition of maritime security – the provision of law on the sea – which results from the confluence of maritime activities of state and non-state actors in complying with an established set of norms (Duarte & Moura, 2019). However, given the lack of an ultimate authority to coordinate the network of maritime activities, the law of the sea is enforced by the distribution of power among the states surrounding an ocean and the types of regimes established for stewarding the sea. Conversely, maritime security can be disturbed and corroded by more capable states' lack of will or means to ensure compliance with such norms as well as inter-state rivalry, which leave unopposed all kinds of maritime criminal organisations.

This analysis draws on a structural realist approach of international relations (Waltz, 1979), which explains the international order as a result of great power politics (Mearsheimer, 2019). Great powers create and govern several types of bounded/thick and international/thin institutions to help them manage their interactions with weaker states and other great powers; they abandon and replace security regimes when their interests are not served or to deal with new rivals. This structuralist approach, however, is both restricted and complemented by the recursive interaction between contextual factors (such as the environment, economic crises and pandemics) and state-level decision-making (Flint & Dezzani, 2018; Goertz, 1994; Tilly & Goodin, 2006).

Accordingly, the South Atlantic can be seen as an underdeveloped international political subsystem. An international subsystem is composed of “groups of units within an international system that can be distinguished from the whole system by the particular nature or intensity of their interactions/interdependence with each other” (Buzan & Little, 2000, pp. 68–69). The ocean stretching from the Caribbean to Antarctica and bordered by West Africa and South America was governed by European countries and the United States' navy from the New World's colonisation until the twentieth century. After the Second World War and African decolonisation, new security interactions and regimes emerged and defined the South Atlantic as a subsystem, but this process was shaped by the Cold War's bipolarity. On the one hand, security was configured by the capabilities and interests of the region's larger navies. For instance, Brazil and South Africa privileged anti-submarine warfare against the Soviet Navy over coastal patrolling (Eisenberg, 2012; Vidigal, 1985). On the other hand, the creation of a South Atlantic Treaty Organisation was initially proposed by South American and African pundits and

decision-makers (Hurrell, 1983; Mattos, 1980). This idea gained weight from the systemic dynamics in world politics that ended and replaced the Cold War, which opened up brief windows of opportunity for regional security initiatives. However, these were wasted owing to the absence of a sponsor – a regional power or coalition of countries – with sufficient capacity to consolidate a maritime security regime.

The first opportunity to build a South Atlantic maritime community occurred in the 1980s. In this heightened period of the Cold War, US President Ronald Reagan showed interest in the proposal for a South Atlantic Treaty Organisation as a bounded maritime security regime. However, the 1982 Falklands War resulted in cleavages that removed the conditions for it, and the United States focused its security imperatives in Eurasia. This void encouraged the formation of the first block of countries around the Zone of Peace and Cooperation of the South Atlantic (ZPCSA, also known by its Portuguese acronym, ZOPACAS). During this brief historical period, African countries enjoyed relative political stability, and Brazil sponsored the enterprise (Viegas, 2016). Unfortunately, the debt crisis during the so-called “lost decade” during the 1980s consumed the attention of South American governments, overshadowing other priorities. During the 1990s, civil wars ravaged Africa, while the United States “war on drugs” agenda dominated South America.

The second window of opportunity opened in the 2000s, when the United States waged war in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere against terrorist groups. This time, South American and African countries as well as their regional coalitions proved more resourceful and engaged in more substantial South-South cooperation (da Silva, 2017, p. 28). This also provided the momentum for the ZPCSA to have a second chance. However, the national economic and institutional crises following the 2008 recession and the global redistribution of power terminated the experiment of the South Atlantic maritime security regime. The systemic effects of international multipolarity in the South Atlantic increased bilateral rivalries, weakened regional security arrangements, and led to contests between the United States, Russia, China and the European Union (Wills, 2020, p. 38).

This chapter outlines with some pessimism the conditions for maritime security in the South Atlantic. The next section presents the available data indicating the escalation of drug trafficking, illegal fishing and piracy. This web of maritime criminality has been caused by (1) the increasing rivalry of great powers; (2) the recrudescence of regional security initiatives in South America and the shortcomings of those in West Africa; and (3) the lack of a reliable regional power to sponsor a South Atlantic maritime security regime. The chapter ends by addressing two potential hotspots at risk of descending further into crisis in the South Atlantic.

The State of Maritime Insecurity in the South Atlantic

The South Atlantic lacks a regime to steward maritime activities during the globalisation of its countries’ “blue economies”. In this section, it shall be demonstrated how a lack of government regulation and oversight had made the economic integration of South America and West Africa vulnerable. Reduced operational costs in the global value chain have motivated new forms of ocean-based organised crime and political–criminal nexuses.

This section presents data on illegal maritime activities in the South Atlantic, with a focus on cocaine trafficking, illegal fishing and piracy. The data analyses show that these activities are expanding and becoming endemic. South Atlantic transnational criminal organisations have not shown the regular cyclical pattern of the “balloon effect” (UNODC, 2020a, pp. 9–10, 25), which suggests they are entrenched in more stable organisational and societal bases.

Drug Trafficking

South American cartels hold a monopoly on cocaine production. Since 2010, when the United States, the European Union and Mexican anti-drug operations began targeting maritime shipment routes and final destinations, the South Atlantic has become the current transshipment area for trafficking cocaine from South America to Europe and Asia. The new routes proved to be cheaper and allowed for more successful evasion of anti-narcotics operations and agencies than previous waterways. The drug cartels discovered a more available workforce and complicity from local governments in Brazil, Argentina and West Africa (Duarte et al., 2019).

Recent reports estimate that South American production of cocaine reached 1,410 tonnes in 2016 and 1,976 in 2017 (UNODC, 2018, p. 28; UNODC, 2019, p. 8). However, while they accurately assessed cocaine cultivation in Colombia (which doubled from 2015 to 2017) but not the expansion of production in Peru and Bolivia (UNODC, 2020b, pp. 23–26), the real volume is probably much greater. In these two countries, cartels have succeeded in establishing coca bush cultivation closer to the borders of Argentina and Brazil to reduce shipment costs.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provides little information on the quantity of drugs trafficked by vessels and those intercepted. Therefore, to supplement this information, official reports from the few national law enforcement agencies in South Atlantic states that publish updated drug apprehension reports were accessed, such as the Brazilian Federal Police, the Argentine Ministry of Security and the Uruguayan Ministry of Interior. For this reason, it is possible to appraise the trafficking of cocaine from South America but only roughly estimate the tonnage shipped to West Africa, Europe and Asia. Although insufficient, our research shows an increase in cocaine enforcement in Argentina and Brazil of 100% and 300%, respectively, between 2015 and 2018. In the latter case, the preliminary report of 2020 revealed that 92.5 tonnes of cocaine were apprehended just in the first six months, out of which 60% was seized in the largest Brazilian port of Santos (Agencia Brasil, 2020) (Tables 27.1 and 27.2).

The data suggests cartels' bases of operations have moved closer to ports in Southern America and Venezuela. On the one hand, the predominance of seizures involving coca leaves over paste and salt in Argentina confirmed that this country evolved within the cocaine trafficking network from a consumer and pathway country to an area of refinement, supplying the hub of shipments straight to Europe from Argentina and Brazil. On the other hand, it can be seen that Venezuela has become the main route to Europe and Asia through West Africa (Sampó, 2019, pp. 193–195).

Illegal Fishing

Documenting illegal fishing is a daunting task, as information is scarce and not adequately provided by any national or international public agency. The global fishing interactive map of the Global Fishing Watch is the closest to a report.¹ However, while this shows the evolution of

Table 27.1 Most significant cocaine seizures in the South Atlantic, 2012–2016 (kg)

Country	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Argentina (leafs)	94,702	87,088	118,088	113,732	115,640
Brazil (salts)	19,875	41,710	33,858	27,223	41,472
Nigeria (salts)	132	290	226	260	302
Venezuela (salts)	27,458	20,462	25,929	65,389	34,919

Source: UNODC, Annual Drug Seizures: <https://dataunodc.un.org/drugs/seizures>. Accessed 17th April 2020.

Table 27.2 Cocaine seizures in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, 2015–2018 (tons)

	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Uruguay</i>
2015	6.9	27.5	0.20
2016	8.4	41.5	0.28
2017	15.7	48	0.17
2018	11.9	79.2	0.75
2019	–	93	1.75

Sources: Argentina. Estadísticas Criminales. Ministerio de Seguridad [Buenos Aires] 2019. Disponível em: <https://estadisticascriminales.minseg.gob.ar>; Brazilian Federal Police. Estatística de Drogas Apreendidas – Atualizados até maio/2019: <http://www.pf.gov.br/imprensa/estatistica/drogas>; URUGUAY. Evolución de incautación de drogas (2005–2019). Ministerio del Interior. Montevideo, 2019: https://www.minterior.gub.uy/images/2019/PDF/Cuadro_drogas_2005_-_2019.pdf. Accessed 17th April 2020.

worldwide fishing activities between 2012 and 2020, it only gives a rough impression of the phenomenon, without providing systematic statistics.

First, patterns of illegal fishing can be identified on the limits of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) between Suriname and French Guiana, Angola and Namibia, as well as Argentina and the Falklands/Malvinas Isles (Clarín, 2020; Hartman, 2017; Mbewa, 2019; Moritán, 2020). This indicates that the illegal fishing industry is sufficiently risk-sensitive to avoid areas with high coastguard activity levels.

Second, illegal fishing is entangled with piracy and other maritime crimes because transnational crime organisations reach out to the same coastal populations for labour and sanctuary (Jacobsen, 2017). In Nigeria, for instance, some studies have identified a causal relationship between illegal fishing's negative socioeconomic impacts and higher levels of hiring by piracy and trafficking organisations in fishing communities (Okafor-Yarwood, 2020, pp. 9, 16).

Armed Robbery and Piracy

The International Maritime Organization provides more informative and reliable reports on piracy and armed robbery at sea. However, most shipping companies consensually omit incidents to avoid bad publicity and the rise of insurance fees (Table 27.3).

The analysis of these data points to a rise in incidents of piracy and armed robbery in the South Atlantic, predominantly in the Gulf of Guinea (Jeong, 2018, p. 11). Similar to drug trafficking, piracy is related to a population's poverty and its susceptibility to co-optation by militias and criminal organisations that provide welfare in place of the local government (Biberman & Turnbull, 2018).

The Rivalry of the Great Powers in the South Atlantic

The United States played a leading role in sponsoring maritime security cooperation in the South Atlantic until the late 1990s during its “war on drugs” (Carrier et al., 2012; Mabry, 1988). Aside from its uncertain results, the campaign lost momentum after the United States directed most of its military resources and attention to the Persian Gulf during the Bush administration. This trend continued during Barack Obama's redeployment of naval and coastguard assets to the Indo Pacific and the more recent interest of the Trump administration in the Baltic Sea (Bruns, 2019, p. 8). The current US National Security Strategy (US, 2017) remains

Table 27.3 Piracy and armed robbery in West Africa and South America, 2010–2020

<i>Year</i>	<i>West Africa</i>	<i>South America</i>
2010	47	40
2011	61	29
2012	64	21
2013	54	17
2014	45	9
2015	27	4
2016	62	25
2017	48	23
2018	81	22
2019	70	15
2020	14	3

Source: IMO, Piracy and Armed Robbery Reports. <http://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Security/PiracyArmedRobbery/Reports/Pages/Default.aspx>. Accessed 17th April 2020.

heavily focussed on Russian and Chinese threats, rather than on enhancing maritime security cooperation and capacity-building.

Another factor we must take into account when examining the United States’ dismissal of a maritime security role is its Navy’s warfighting strategic culture (Libel, 2020). Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a “mismatch between the platforms designed for warfighting and [the] day-to-day tasks orientated towards diplomacy and statecraft” (McFate, 2020, p. 43), which are imperative for the stewardship of maritime security. This was demonstrated by the deactivation in 2014 of the Maritime Civil Affairs and Security Training Command (MCAST) (McFate, 2020, p. 55).

Consequently, most of the United States’ recent maritime security measures in the South Atlantic have been reactions against naval competitors. For instance, in 2018, Colombia became a NATO “Global Partner” to operate as a net maritime security provider and exporter in the region (Neira, 2020). This move, however, was more instrumental in exerting pressures on Venezuela’s government (due to its close association with Russia) rather than turning the Colombian Navy into a South American sea control force. Unsurprisingly, the United States set up a security assistance agreement with Argentina the same year. In addition to galvanising further support against Venezuela, the initiative aimed to respond to the China–Argentina military agreement of 2015 but made no mention of maritime security (Wilson, 2015). Finally, most US operations in the Gulf of Guinea aim to tackle illegal activities that finance terrorist groups, without providing a reasonable capacity building package in coastal patrolling. Therefore, the United States plays a minimal role in providing good order in the South Atlantic, which is recognised as a debilitating factor when faced with great power competition (Tallis, 2020).

An increasing number of Chinese and Russian military activities have taken place around the South Atlantic. Naval exercises involving Russia, China and South Africa between November and December 2019 stand out as illustrative examples (Mastro, 2020; Panda, 2019). Moreover, Russia and China have undertaken military ventures in South America and Africa. In South America, Russia traded hard currency and military assistance to Venezuela for access to bases and ports where it showcased two Blackjack nuclear-capable bombers and a naval task force for the first time in the Western Hemisphere. Some outlets recognised the critical role of Russian

private military companies played in the survival of Nicolás Maduro's regime's in Venezuela, and Russian defence authorities have since assessed Venezuelan infrastructure for more extensive deployments (Poggio Teixeira & Da Silva Nogueira de Melo, 2019, p. 91; The Guardian, 2019; Zverev & Tsvetkova, 2019). In Africa, Russia has resumed Soviet-era ties and regained its position as the region's largest arms supplier. Since 2015, Russia has put into effect defence agreements with Cameroon, Nigeria and Sierra Leone and secured access to Guinea's airbases. Agreements with Ghana, Gambia and Niger are under negotiation, and Russian private military companies operate in the Central African Republic and Mozambique. It therefore seems unlikely that Russia will change its projected course of power in the South Atlantic (Adibe, 2019; Hedenskog, 2018; Schmitt & Gibbons-Neff, 2020).

China holds a complete set of assets for influencing South Atlantic countries. Although its military ambitions in South America are yet limited to a space station in Argentina's Patagonia, China has substantial investments, infrastructure projects and defence cooperation agreements in Africa. Its *modus operandi* has been to set up companies that pour investments into local economies before entangling them in more strategic agendas (Hanauer & Morris, 2013; Nantulya, 2020). China has thus established defence and security cooperation ties with South Africa in 2000 and updated with Namibia and Angola agreements extant since their independence wars (Campos & Vines, 2008). Although Chinese presence in Africa predates the Belt and Road Initiative, this project paved the way for positioning Africa as the barometer for a global security governance system headed by China (Nantulya, 2019). With pace and patience, China became an Africa's main weapon supplier and the sponsor of the China-Africa Defence and Security Forum, which as of 2019 had gathered "nearly 100 senior representatives from the defence departments of 50 African countries and the African Union, including 15 defence ministers and chiefs of general staff, to discuss new approaches of China-Africa security co-operation in the new era" (Yi, 2019). The so-called "Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative" has even more extensive reach. It promises blue partnerships for the "exploration of marine resources, maritime industries, and maritime safety" as well as the control of illegal activities at sea (Medeiros & Benvenuto, 2020, p. 12). The initiative aims to establish 12 ports as Strategic Maritime Distribution Centres (SMDC), five of which would be located in the South Atlantic: Mar del Plata in Argentina, Salvador in Brazil, Libreville in Gabon, Tema in Ghana, and Dakar in Senegal (do Nascimento, 2020, pp. 30–35). Finally, China's (not so) informal leadership of BRICS can help it buffer its interests in the region (Silva, 2020, p. 100).

The great power rivalry in the South Atlantic also involves European countries acting as security proxy sponsors for the United States or looking to fill the void of power (Duarte, 2019). The European Union has advanced a maritime security plan with a less militarised approach for the Gulf of Guinea that has nevertheless been undermined somewhat by some of its members' more ambitious unilateral agendas.

The European Union sponsored the Cocaine Route Programme (CRP) and the Critical Maritime Routes in the Gulf of Guinea Programme (CRIMGO), which evolved into the Gulf of Guinea Action Plan for 2015–2020. Since 2016, most of the European Union's projects and programmes on the South Atlantic focused on training and capacity building, intelligence sharing and multi-national operational coordination (Cabral, 2017; Jespersen, 2017). Such initiatives include, for example, the Critical Maritime Routes Monitoring, Support and Evaluation Mechanism (CRIMSON), the Gulf of Guinea Inter-Regional Network (GoGIN) and the Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS).

However, there is a trade-off between those projects and support for maritime security policies to guarantee the safe passage of oil and gas, the related growing market around the Gulf of Guinea, and the temptation to expand or consolidate influence over African countries.

For instance, Portugal had many opportunities to express its intention to redirect NATO and national efforts towards the restoration of its historical maritime leadership within any sort of South Atlantic governance (Beirão & da Silva Ramos, 2019; Poggio Teixeira & Da Silva Nogueira de Melo, 2019, pp. 82, 92; Thomashausen & Graça, 2015, p. 74). The current French military operations in West Africa display striking continuities with historical patterns of intervention in the region (Diallo, 2019).

The Setback of the South Atlantic Maritime Security Regimes

The rivalry of great power politics has eroded the South American and West African regional security regimes without replacing them with a functional international one. The self-help logic of each great power project with South Atlantic countries has resulted in regional misperceptions and polarisation. Consequently, the South Atlantic countries that hold more capabilities – Brazil, South Africa and Nigeria – have been unable to put forth a collective maritime security agenda.

In South America, the once active and expanding Southern Common Market (Mercosur) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) have lost their force and relevance. Polarisation among South American countries split these organisations apart, which hold limited significance today. Not surprisingly, ZPCSA never had a chance to engage with these alliances and play a relevant role, even in South America (Duarte & Kenkel, 2019, pp. 8–9).

The ultimate dividing force is arguably Brazil's inconstant role in maritime security, which dates back to the three United Nations conferences on the Law of the Sea (da Silva, 2017, p. 25). Brazil never revised its Cold War geopolitical perspective towards the South Atlantic (Duarte & Kenkel, 2019). The Brazilian purpose of ZPCSA has been to block extra-regional great powers, rather than build a real maritime security regime, as explicitly stated in its most recent National Security Strategy (Brasil, 2016, p. 26). Moreover, most Brazilian security initiatives followed an historical trend of prioritising bilateral ties to guarantee predominance over its neighbours (Duarte, 2016; Espach, 2019, pp. 140–144; Malamud, 2011). Under the far-right populist government of Bolsonaro, Brazilian foreign policies became increasingly reactive and opposed liberal international norms and regional organisations, which signals that Brazil is likely to remain, for a long time to come, an unreliable regional player in terms of supporting any collective efforts towards South Atlantic maritime security governance.

The advancements in maritime security cooperation in Africa developed from subregional organisations and foreign donors' support. They are remarkable achievements; however, they face relevant challenges.

The starting point was the creation of the Gulf of Guinea Commission in 2001. It supported the conception of the Maritime Trade Information Sharing Centre and the Regional Maritime University at Accra, Ghana, in 2014. During the same period, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) implemented the most ambitious maritime agenda in the South Atlantic, based on previous comprehensive security plans and legally binding agreements. The SADC designed its Maritime Security Strategy in 2011 to address piracy and illegal fishing. This was followed by a far-reaching regional blue economy plan four years later (Duarte & Kenkel, 2019, pp. 9–12). The African Union's 2050 Integrated Maritime Strategy (AIM), adopted in January 2014, aimed to streamline all these initiatives. Two years later, the African Charter on Maritime Security and Safety and Development (also known as the Lomé Charter) was published under the auspices of the African Union.

The impressive track of the regionalisation of maritime security in Africa was nevertheless unable to overcome noteworthy limits. First, most of the agreements and projects were sound

only on paper and failed to address West African countries' structural deficits in conducting effective maritime security operations (Silva, 2019). For instance, only two boats, both lacking surveillance radar, are responsible for all 250 km of Ghana's coast. The capabilities of Senegal, Angola, Togo, the Ivory Coast and Mali are reduced to token navies, while Guinea Bissau has no coastguard at all (Correa, 2019, p. 189; Sampó, 2019, p. 190).

Second, even West African countries failed to translate most maritime security agreements into actual practice. For example, Nigeria "has no functional piece of legislation for managing, coordinating ocean governance under the UNCLOS" (Anozie et al., 2019, p. 193), which hampered the operational compliance with such agreements (Obi-Nwosu et al., 2014).

Third, a general problem in the region is sea blindness (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017). African countries face multiple domestic crises which often prevents them from prioritising maritime security concerns (Jacobsen, 2017; Okafor-Yarwood, 2020). Consequently, their national and collective maritime security programmes are constantly menaced by a lack of long-term political will and investment (Potgieter, 2018, p. 8). That is the case of South Africa, where the Navy's ongoing condition of marginalisation and obsolescence constrains the increasing demand for coastal patrolling operations to attend to SADC's commitments (Neethling, 2019). Furthermore, the business-oriented approach of its Operation Phakisa project, which is seeking to unlock the economic potential of South Africa's oceans, is likely to result in limited progress, without improving coastal populations' resilience against "blue crimes" (Bueger & Edmunds, 2020).

This pattern also plagues European donors in the Gulf of Guinea, as they favour capacity building in national security and the blue economy over developmental or human security aspects. Without whole-of-government solutions to address local populations' insecurity and poverty, inter-regional maritime security programmes will continue to have limited impact (Brits & Nel, 2018, p. 8).

Conclusion

The political context and most recent data on maritime crime in the South Atlantic produce a dark forecast. Unlike current agendas in the Mediterranean Sea and West Indian Ocean, ocean governance has low prospects for progress among South American and West African countries. The failure or suspension of national and regional state-building projects has reduced the number and effectiveness of public policies. Consequently, these regions have been plagued by frail coastal populations, powerful transnational criminal organisations, and wrecked political institutions (Cockayne, 2016). Two cases stand out as potential hotspots at risk of descending further into crisis.

In South America, Venezuela's current situation is severe because state failure is entangled within regional divides and great power rivalry. While criminal activities are unleashed from its coasts and across the South Atlantic, the involvement of the United States and Russia in Maduro's regime has polarised the region. Consequently, Venezuela cannot count on functional support for the restoration of its governmental capacity. In West Africa, the European Union's aid in fostering maritime security will shrink owing to the stark economic effects of COVID-19 and Brexit. The web of maritime criminality in the Gulf of Guinea will possibly increase and make West African countries even more dependent on China and Russia's security sponsorships, escalating great power rivalry to the detriment of that region's maritime regimes.

Note

- 1 See <https://globalfishingwatch.org/map-and-data>

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