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From opportunity-seeking to gap-filling: reframing Brazil in Lusophone Africa

Pedro Seabra¹

Abstract

This chapter inquires whether Brazil's headways in Africa over recent years were organic in nature and in content or if, in fact, were achieved at the expenses of other previously established actors. By reframing Brazil's agenda towards African Lusophone countries in juxtaposition to the perceived external downturn of Portugal, the propitious context and consequences of a new player on the continent can be best brought into evidence. The push-and-pull forces enacted by both Brazil and Portugal towards Lusophone Africa are explored through the aftermath of the 2012 military coup in Guinea-Bissau and the adhesion of Equatorial-Guinea to the CPLP in 2014. The chapter offers a reinterpretation of Brazil's net gains in Africa and argues for its fragility and susceptibility to changing political-economic cycles.

Introduction

In January 2019, a Portuguese military contingent was dispatched to the Central African Republic (CAR) under the auspices of the EU Training Mission (EUTM-CAR). In itself, the decision did not prove particularly novel given how Portugal had already been contributing to international pacification efforts in-country since 2015. What proved more noteworthy, however, was the inclusion for the first time of three Brazilian army officials embedded in its midst. After dragging an extensive process of private and public consultations for nearly 3 years over whether to send a contingent of its own, Brazil ended up dashing UN expectations and opting instead for a much more subdued presence on the ground (Victor & Alencastro 2018). In other words, one of the cornerstones of Brazil's contemporary engagement with Africa surreptitiously turned into a diminished footprint of what the country was able to

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provide. This outcome further solidified a reverse of fortunes after a decade and half in which most observers would have had likely bet on an inverted dynamic.

More strikingly, it came on the heels of an opportunity provided by a partner which Brazil had, witting or unwittingly, sought to circumvent in recent years. As Brazil significantly increased its profile in African Lusophone countries, it benefitted from an added erosion of Portuguese clout on the ground. Hence, and given the stark policy changes that have recently taken place in Brasília, this chapter inquires whether previously lauded headways towards Africa in the high-politics domain were indeed organic in nature and in content or if, in fact, were largely achieved at the expenses of other established actors. The geographic selection is set on where Brazil's priority has been more intense, whenever any wider African agenda was rolled out in contemporary history. This regional choice comes with one important caveat, i.e. inroads in the CAR will never be on the same plain field as Brazil's track-record with, for example, Angola or Mozambique. Inferences that apply to the broader continent are therefore more difficult to extrapolate. That said, such clear-cut geographic preference still allows to explore the set of conditions that instilled Brazil's expanded profile in the first place.

The core claim lies on the necessity to go against pre-established narratives of inevitability, that Brazil succeeded, succeeds or will succeed in Africa *just because*. A more critical approach is in need if the current debate is to move forward. I argue that Brazil has only been able to venture into Africa and will only do so once more whenever the right set of externally-driven conditions are in place. That includes not only taking advantage of unexpected opportunities but also in filling-in gaps made possible by other players competing for the same space of influence. In both cases, expansive cycles with corresponding material resources are paramount. Yet, if credible commitments are not dully provided across the Atlantic, any occasional upswing of the sort will invariably prove short-lived.

Based on interviews, diplomatic cables², and a review of previous literature, I recast Brazil's agenda towards African Lusophone countries in juxtaposition to Portugal's own perceived external downturn. I begin by elaborating on Brazil's recent change of fortunes and

² The chapter benefits from diplomatic communication obtained under the Law for Information Access and exchanged between the Secretary General of Foreign Affairs (SERE – *Secretaria de Estado das Relações Exteriores*) within the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and different Brazilian diplomatic representations in Africa.

the need to adjust the lens of analysis adopted until this date. The recurrent push-and-pull forces enacted by both Brazil and Portugal over time towards Africa are then explored. Afterwards, I unpack the aftermath of Guinea-Bissau's 2012 military coup and the adhesion of Equatorial-Guinea to the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP – *Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa*) as two underexplored cases that can provide key insights over Brazil's overall ambitions. The chapter concludes by offering a reinterpretation of Brazil's net gains in Africa and arguing for its susceptibility to changing political-economic cycles. Through this approach, the conditions required for a renewed burst of engagement with the continent are best brought into evidence.

How to perceive Brazil in Africa

The year of 2003 marked a consensus amongst most Brazilian analysts and scholars: under Lula da Siva, Brazil began to unapologetically profess a more assertive foreign policy towards Africa, aimed at conciliating different geopolitical and economic-oriented vectors, all the while attempting to become a credible partner across the Atlantic. The bulk of research lines were quick to consider Brazil's initiatives as neatly falling within the categories of "political discourse/prestige diplomacy, "economic interest/soft imperialism, and "socio-economic development/southern solidarity (Visentini 2010, 80-82; see also White 2010, 228; Saraiva 2010). However, a slower dynamic had also already taken hold when Dilma Rousseff became president (2011-2016). Unlike her predecessor, the general lack of interest for foreign affairs led to a perception of an overall decline in the country's status abroad (Cervo & Lessa 2014). This posture was further aggravated by a deteriorating economic context that prompted a detachment from previous multilateral initiatives and the decrease of resources available to the country's foreign policy apparatus. By the time Michel Temer (2016-2018) took office after a convoluted impeachment process, Africa was once again at the low end of the external agenda, in a complete volte-face over the course of 15 years.

A thorough recap of this period covering three distinct governments is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, two reasons underline the need to revisit past work that espoused fairly well-established and uncontested narratives on Brazil and Africa. First, the bulk of previous output on Brazilian-African interactions essentially worked as an echo chamber of an official discourse that was too confident on its own success and sustainability

(e.g. Stolte 2015; cf. Abdenur 2018; Seibert & Visentini 2019; Dye & Alencastro 2020). The number of Brazilian embassies opened during this period, for instance, was constantly brought up as undisputed proof of this impetus, regardless of their actual size or lack of adequate staffing to perform the tasks they were assigned to in the first place³. Second, this discourse was also particularly adept at underscoring a logic of mutual necessity and interaction, building upon the “idea that Brazil has not only suffered, but also overcome many of the problems that plague Africa”, thus justifying Brazil projecting itself as a player in its own right (Santos et al. 2019, 10). Overall, the crux was straightforward: politically, geographically and economically complementary vectors of engagement supported a set of self-reinforcing relations, all the while associated to a discourse that ‘Brazil possessed a sensibility’ like no other at that particular moment in history. That much was made clear when during his first visit to Africa in November 2003, Lula set the tone for what would become the ensuing approach: “For many years Brazil had its back turned to Africa. And we think it is time to catch up. I have the hope and belief that in these coming years, we will do more than what was done in the last 15 or 20 years” (Silva 2003). To be sure, these efforts did not deviate significantly from other approaches in the past. Yet, they were still cast as innovative enough to speak of a new chapter in Brazilian-African relations.

How to then account for Brazil’s change of fortunes as of 2020? This discussion can be better informed if Brazil’s external claims are contextualized as part of similar efforts by other emerging or unsatisfied powers within the framework of the broader international order. Above all, these powers crave room. Room to manoeuvre, room to establish themselves, room to be vocal about the issues they feel more strongly about, room to showcase their ability to perform, engage and create initiatives of their own. Vying for redistribution of power and international recognition as legitimate players synthesizes the bulk of what they aim at, when asserting their status abroad (Nel 2011; Gray & Murphy 2014). However, that kind of room is also pre-emptively restricted by a set of rules and institutions that work against any perceived outlier that seeks to break away. These countries have been able to successfully pierce through such rules and institutions on occasion and even make some visible progress

³ That included the opening of such posts as São Tomé and Príncipe (2003), Benin, Sudan, Equatorial-Guinea, Guinea-Conakry (2006), Burkina Faso (2007), Mali, Congo-Brazzaville (2008), Botswana (2009), Mauritania (2010), Liberia (2011), Sierra Leone (2012) and Malawi (2013). Embassies in the DRC (2004), Cameroon, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Togo (2005) were reopened as well. Brazil’s embassy in Nigeria was also transferred from Lagos to Abuja in 2004.

in recent years. But the underpinning geopolitical dictums remain unfazed, meaning the odds are more readily stacked against them than the other way around.

Complicating the outlook further, they are forced to resort to the same kind of behaviour as any other willing international actor, in the sense that they are required to project enough influence and display enough results so as to substantiate their claims. If they fail to do so, they will most likely incite the reverse effect of being labelled as ineffectual, inconsequential or just plainly irrelevant. Low odds of accomplishment and high expectations over outcomes make for a perilous combination whenever hefty external ambitions come into play. Yet, influence also comes in finite quantities, meaning there is only so much space for so many actors to try and enlist a given country to either follow or abide by X or Y initiative. Options have to be made, priorities have to be sorted out, and preferences over one or the other partner have to be displayed at some point.

Such state of affairs can be more usefully perceived if observed along a relational spectrum. One diametral pole can take up the form of opportunity-taking behaviour, in which such powers accept what the world offers, while benefiting from situations that fall largely outside of their control or unfold depending on unforeseen variables. That makes them extremely context-dependent but also potentially savvier in terms of how they choose to break with past constructs or innovate in their external dealings. Meanwhile, the other pole can assume a more gap-filling course of action, in which rising powers benefit from the momentary downturn of previously established competitors on the ground, making way for other alternative solutions and initiatives to eventually take roots. In this case, room for assertive displays of leadership are directly linked to the (mis)fortunes of other players and thrive on their downturns.

Brazil's overall agency to intervene can be claimed to be found along this broad spectrum, tilting one direction or the other or even crossing both, according to the breadth of its own national capabilities. If those capabilities falter or happen to be diminished in some form, then it becomes irrelevant whether unexpected circumstances or breathing room from other players suffices, as Brazil will not be able to benefit from 'make-it or break-it' situations. The emphasis on material conditions also allows to refocus attentions on the sustainability of any external impulse of the kind. But before laying forward two examples that can help clarify this rationale, the next section zeroes in on a possible intervenient actor who might have

either contributed to such timely opportunities or provided Brazil with such gaps to emerge in the first place with regards to Africa.

How to perceive Brazil vs. Portugal in Africa

A set of structural differences invariably stands out, whenever Brazil and Portugal are pitted under the same analytical framework. The clear disproportion in size, resources, and overall clout in the international system, all contribute to fuel skewed conclusions that preferentially tilt one actor over the other. That said, over the years, Portugal remained a constant for many Brazilian policymakers due to previous historical-cultural connections alone. This symbolical hold was largely owed to the persisting influence of deeply-Lusophile Brazilian elites in tandem with a sizeable Portuguese community in-country, who often succeeded in nudging the official line towards Lisbon whenever so required. Historically, Brazilian inroads in Africa also directly benefit from the disaggregation of Portugal's colonial presence. But as Brazil's military rulers consolidated their grip on power after the 1964 coup, they also began to entertain less previous automatic alignments, including any plans of a common Luso-Brazilian community that could box aspirations of reaching out to Africa in an autonomous fashion (Selcher 1976). The defining moment came with Portugal's democratization in 1974, which produced a ripple-effect in the form of the ensuing decolonization of the Portuguese colonies in Africa. Sensing an opportunity to dispel previous unsavoury associations with the Salazar regime and make headways with the newly-independent countries, Brazil moved quickly to position itself as an alternative partner⁴.

Yet, this approach also heralded an incoming logic of competition with Portugal for the same space in those same countries. More so as the latter sought to reimagine its African credentials and navigate the social-economic consequences of a hasted decolonization, the overt hostility of new Marxist-led governments in the former colonies, and infrequent attempts at mediating local warring sides. One route adopted to circumvent these issues was to try and reinvent Portugal's post-colonial role as an exclusive bridge-builder between Africa

⁴ The swift recognition of Guinea-Bissau's independence on 18 July 1974 or of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA – *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) government in Angola on 6 November 1975 clearly attested to the new Brazilian orientations towards Africa. See, for example, Dávila (2010).

and the West, which, in itself, presupposed not giving leeway to any other novel actors on the ground (Reis & Oliveira 2018). Hence, even if prosaic formulas adopted by Portuguese diplomats deeming Brazil a ‘competitor but [still] an ally’ in Africa continued to populate official discourse, a zero-sum perception over each country’s insertions and opportunities in Lusophone countries remained (Gama 1985, 286-287; Carvalho 2016).

Meanwhile, Portugal’s own relations with African Lusophone countries remained as complex as prolific in announcements, official visits and rhetoric, through a successive combination of advances and retreats, subject to cyclical adverse economic cycles. This perception was only further accentuated after the 2011 financial crisis, which led to an international bailout program that entailed major cuts in Portuguese government expenditure and directly led to a scale-down of resources allocated to African partners: between 2010 and 2014, Portuguese development aid dropped from 0.29% of the Gross National Income (GNI) to 0.19%, amounting to a variation from €490 million to €324 million (Carvalho 2018, 152). Additionally, more embassies were closed in Africa during the 2000s (8) than in the two decades following decolonization (4), leading to a more spartan diplomatic footprint on the ground (Seabra 2019, 78-80). Above all, Portuguese policy towards Africa remained very much tied to a lingering historical baggage difficult to overcome. When dealing with cases of transnational corruption, for example, Portugal often sought to avoid any “tantrum that damages Portuguese interests, from the most materially tangible, such as our investments, to the most metaphysically sacred - the cohesion of the Portuguese-speaking world” (Soares de Oliveira 2005, 68).

The multilateral side of this alleged cohesion experienced more success due to the sheer existence of the CPLP. Although based on initial informal meetings between African Lusophone countries in the 1980s, the negotiation process towards its creation still proved thorny enough (Monteiro 1996). However, its political usefulness soon became clear in terms of fostering common positions in the face of crisis situations (e.g. Guinea-Bissau; Timor-Leste), exchange of support for candidacies for international high-profile positions, or in its formal recognition as a relevant actor by other multilateral organizations⁵. For its part,

⁵ The UN General Assembly granted the CPLP full observer status in 1999 through resolution A/RES/54/10, while the European Union (EU) signed a memorandum with the CPLP’s Executive Secretariat in 2007 aimed at fighting poverty, fostering democracy and human rights, cultural diversity and economic and social development.

Portugal sought to become the main driving force, both logistically - with the availability of the CPLP's headquarters in Lisbon - and financially. However, that also implied avoiding any perception of ownership in order to accommodate the rise of Angola and Brazil at the regional and international levels, respectively (Santos 2003; Hewitt, Burges & Gomes 2017; Carvalho 2018). The evolution of the contributions to the budget of the CPLP's Executive Secretariat illustrated these developments: if by 2005 Portugal stood out as the main financier, as of 2013 this role began to be assumed with more prominence by Brazil, with Angola also matching the Portuguese quota in ensuing years – despite the irregularity of both Brazilians and Angolans with regards to the actual payments (Seabra 2019, 84; Herpolsheimer 2019).

However, sharing a common multilateral framework did not prevent tokens of mutual dismissal, whenever Portugal and Brazil's broader interests down South were in question. The most public episode during this period occurred when a new discussion over the geopolitical limits of the Atlantic was triggered during the 2010 revision of North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Strategic Concept. At the time, Portugal went out of its way to include a reference to the South Atlantic, in an attempt to further burnish its bridge-building credentials with Africa before the remaining transatlantic community. Brazil, however, perceived it differently and interpreted such efforts as only contributing to the perpetuation of solutions crafted in the North and imposed upon the South without the South's own involvement or input. Former Brazilian Defence Minister Nelson Jobim was particularly vocal over this clash of views, owing to Brazil's own rise in the international stage at the time as well as to suspicions over the US agenda for the surrounding region⁶. Likewise, Former-Minister of External Relations Celso Amorim squarely expressed the contradictions in dealing with Portugal over such issues: "I would say that Portugal has a certain poetic licence to be in the South Atlantic, thanks to CPLP. But evidently, the fact Portugal belongs to NATO remains a limitation to the type of cooperation that you can have" between the two countries⁷. To be sure, Portuguese officials also frequently looked down on Brazil as an actor all too eager to be taken serious in Africa, but not necessarily prepared for the nitty and gritty of events on the ground. The reasoning being made in Lisbon pointed to a "frontal clash with the very

⁶ Telegram 715.6 from BRASEMB LISBON to SERE, date: 16/09/2010.

⁷ Interview with Celso Amorim, former-Brazil's External Relations (2003-2010) and Defence (2011-2015) Minister, Brasília, 15 May 2013.

sovereign positions related to the projection of power in Brazil, or what Brazil imagines as being its ability to project power in the Atlantic”⁸.

Overall, when considering the intersection of agendas and interests, a modicum of unofficial competition between the two countries in Africa was to be expected. That does not mean it supplanted the gist of bilateral relations. A general emphasis on “special fraternity bonds”, “historical and cultural affinities” and “tradition of friendship, collaboration and deep cultural roots” (Fonseca 2010; cf. Seabra & Abdenur 2018, 265-266), concentrated around a single common multilateral setting, still allowed to defuse more unsavoury dynamics. However, it did not necessarily pre-empt their occurrence either. The following sections focus on how the positions of both countries invariably collided with regards to Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial-Guinea, thus paving the way for a more assertive Brazilian presence in Lusophone Africa.

Dealing with the aftermath of the 2012 coup in Guinea-Bissau

As a common Lusophone denominator, Guinea-Bissau warranted regular attention from its international peers over the years due to multiple crises and political instability (MacQueen 2003; Embaló 2012). Between 1998 and 2010, the country had a total of four presidents, four acting presidents, and 11 prime ministers, in a clear testament to the need for continuous external support. However, on 12 April 2012, after the first round of voting for presidential elections, a new coup d'état took place that led to the arrest of interim President Raimundo Pereira and Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Júnior (then-frontrunner in said elections), both from the ruling African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC – *Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*). This turn of events came on the heels of consecutive international Security Sector Reform (SSR) efforts that failed to rein in parts of the armed forces. The situation was made even more complex due to the presence in-country of the Angolan Military Mission in Guinea-Bissau (MISSANG – *Missão Militar de Angola*), itself considered a compromise solution following similar episodes of political-military instability the year prior. MISSANG, however, had come to be perceived as overly

⁸ Interview with high-ranking Portuguese governmental official, Lisbon, 14 September 2013.

threatening to the lucrative interests of local elites and as backing the efforts led by Prime-Minister Gomes Júnior to eradicate unwanted elements in the military.

After a few days of uncertainty, on April 18, both the mutinous military officials and some opposition parties agreed to form a national transition government – without the participation of PAIGC – thus entirely bypassing the abovementioned electoral process. The threat of sanctions on the coup’s perpetrators by the overall international community, including the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), soon became the main tool to try and break the impasse. However, rifts quickly emerged between two key multilateral platforms, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the CPLP. The former, supported by Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, advocated for a year-long transitional process; the latter, supported by Portugal and Angola, defended an immediate resumption of the electoral process. Even though UN officials repeatedly called for a unified strategy between both organizations, such an outcome proved elusive⁹. Amidst these developments, Brazil began by fully supporting a common Lusophone stance and demanding a return to legal order. However, as the crisis endured on, Brazilian authorities began to entertain the notion of working with the transitional authorities and thus break away from the initial CPLP consensus. Given the centrality that Portugal attributed to such a multilateral framework for its own reimagined ties with Africa, divergences invariably came to light.

The starting point for both countries in Guinea-Bissau was uneven to begin with. The disparity in the support attributed to local authorities, for instance, attested to such a duality. For the 2012 presidential elections, Portugal had made a direct pledge of US\$400,000, while Brazil channelled €150,000 through the CPLP¹⁰. Still, Brazil often held Portugal to task over what occurred on the ground: “Portugal, historically, is an unavoidable actor for historical reasons that we all know. Portugal has, I think, a differentiated responsibility. After all, [Guinea-Bissau] belonged to Portugal for almost five hundred years and much of what

⁹ See, for example, United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in that country” (S/2012/554); and United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on the restoration of constitutional order in Guinea-Bissau” (S/2012/704).

¹⁰ Telegram 98 from BRASEMB BISSAU to SERE, date: 03-02-2012.

happens or does not happen in the country is the responsibility of Portugal”¹¹. Regardless, Brazil perceived a brewing opportunity to insert itself in local dynamics and make headways as a self-titled neutral broker between different political-military factions. The lack of an unsavoury historical baggage like Portugal together with common language and cultural ties, was then understood as enough of a differential factor to instil confidence over Brazil’s own chances of success – particularly when compared with others who had previously tried and failed or seemed to be in retreat.

As the post-coup situation dragged on and international discussions moved to the fold of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (UNPCB), the opportunities for a more increased profile expanded exponentially. The fact that Brazil already presided over its specific configuration on Guinea-Bissau, and that it was set to preside to the overall UNPCB between 2014 and 2015 – particularly after the assignment of former-External Relations Minister, Antônio Patriota as Permanent Representative to the UN in 2013 –, directly led to a more assertive position. But such a choice of seeking out further reputational dividends also implied new clashes over to partner with:

“We had a [CPLP] member state [Angola] directly involved in another member state [Guinea-Bissau]. The presence of Angolan troops was instrumentalized for the coup (...). The CPLP was tied to Angola’s position, given how it held the organization’s pro tempore presidency at the time. On the other hand, Portugal allied itself to Angola and assumed a very radical position towards the coup. (...) We agreed on the principle of zero tolerance, but the way things were carried out ended up characterizing itself as a conflict between CPLP and ECOWAS – which in reality was an instrumentalization of the conflict between Angola and Nigeria, due to internal African issues. (...) We thought it was much easier to solve this in the framework of the UN than within the CPLP, precisely because the CPLP had a country holding the presidency who was directly invested or that very specific interests at the same time. (...) The CPLP ended up not playing a bigger role because it was caught up in this impasse”¹².

¹¹ Oral history interview with former Brazilian Ambassador to Guinea-Bissau, Jorge Geraldo Kadri. Rio de Janeiro, CPDOC/Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV), 2014, 22.

¹² Interview with Brazilian senior diplomat #1, Brasília, 12 June 2013.

Two sets of reasons can account for Brazil's evolving stance during this episode. The first deals with Brazil's own expectations that it would eventually "come to assume an even more relevant role in leading the SSR process"¹³. Following an initial bilateral agreement signed in 2009, plans had already been drafted for a Brazilian mission on the ground, that would ideally succeed where other international efforts had failed: i.e. to rein in the military and advance an actual reform process. The mission was to be structured around the following goals: to establish a productive dialogue with the Bissau-Guinean Armed Forces; (ii) to analyse the local military reality, in order to better define existing needs; (iii) to collect information, including costs, with a view to making a decision on the installation of an Officers Training Centre; and (iv) to identify synergies with other partners, in order to make Brazil's contribution to SSR more effective¹⁴. The dynamics of the 2012 coup, however, effectively brought such designs to a standstill. By not pushing away the new *de facto* rulers in Bissau, Brazil still hoped to recoup its losses and relaunch its proposed project down the line while at the same time ensuring a prime interlocutor role in-between the country, the region and the world at large.

Secondly, Brazil's move towards decoupling its position from other Lusophone peers can also be contextualized by the efforts put into a previous Brazil-ECOWAS summit that took place in 2010 in Cape Verde, and which had been crafted as a way for the former to reach out to West Africa in a more direct fashion. Amidst broader governmental priorities across the Atlantic, establishing working channels with proven multilateral institutions in the region proved a pragmatic approach. That required not only nurturing those same channels but also ensuring they would not be disrupted by other alternatives, deemed less institutionalized or possibly more constraining for Brazilian interests. Above all, "we did not want to enter into confrontation with ECOWAS. Brazil sought to establish mechanisms of dialogue with members of ECOWAS - who also showed very little flexibility. That's why Brazil, unilaterally, we tried to reach a middle ground" with regard to Guinea-Bissau¹⁵. In this case, the benefits of opportunity-taking were brought into evidence, as Brazil sought to make the best of what the regional context was providing at that specific moment in time. Sensing a favourable set

¹³ Telegram 207 from BRASEMB BISSAU to SERE, date: 21-03-2011, p. 2.

¹⁴ Telegram 315 from BRASEMB BISSAU to SERE, date: 16-05-2011, pp. 2, 6.

¹⁵ Interview with Brazilian senior diplomat #1, Brasília, 12 June 2013.

of circumstances, Brazil managed to stake a tentative claim as a stabilization promoter all the while seeking to advance its own sub-regional priorities. Yet, despite initial displays of material conditions to back up its aims, as the following years would show, the sustainability of such an approach was left very much up in the air.

The adhesion of Equatorial-Guinea to the CPLP

Long considered a standard-bearer for other repressive regimes in Africa, Equatorial-Guinea has skilfully pursued a strategy international engagement as a way to circumvent occasional criticisms over its internal record; that included submitting applications to as many international fora as possible. The main goal was one and the same: to obtain legitimacy and official backing to the regime of Teodoro Obiang, in power since 1979. In this context, the CPLP emerged as a useful alternative. After winning over observer-status in 2006, the country began to gradually inch closer towards full-fledge membership, following an agreement on a roadmap for its adhesion during the 2010 CPLP summit in Luanda. Such a roadmap essentially consisted of a normative litmus test and included specific indicators in terms of “adopting and using Portuguese in Equatorial-Guinea”, “incorporation and implementation of the organization’s set of norms”, “rehabilitation of historical and cultural memory”, “institutional communication”, and the “promotion and integration of civil society in the CPLP’s activities” (Sá 2016, 156). In practice, this was translated into the need to observe a generalized respect for human rights and democratic principles, the abolishment of the death penalty and the teaching of the Portuguese language on a national scale. Simultaneously, the choice to abide by this roadmap was also perceived as pushing a final decision down the road, until more concrete commitments could be extracted from local authorities at later stages.

During this protracted formal process, Portugal found itself isolated in its bid to prevent the entry of a new member with less than recommendable credentials as far as human rights and good governance were concerned. On the other side, Brazil and Angola pushed for a quick adhesion. Their underlined rationale was to build upon Malabo’s oil reserves – the third largest African producer, after Nigeria and Angola – and eventually turn the CPLP into an energetic and economic bloc, instead of just a forum reserved to the worldwide promotion of a common language:

“The process is currently slow. The expectation from Equatorial-Guinea was that it would not be that slow and, in a way, neither did we. (...) When they formally applied in 2010, it was our expectation at the time they would be accepted. And then that did not happen because Portugal threw a tantrum. Which was legitimate, I am not questioning Portugal’s motives, I think it was mostly an issue of accountability before its civil society. (...) [But] There is a political issue in there that it is important. Our vision is more political than technical, whether or not they speak Portuguese, even though that is relevant. I think Equatorial-Guinea is a country that is searching for a space in Africa at this moment. They were rejected by the Francophonie, they were never well treated, and they are now searching for space within the Lusophone world. We recognize that it is not a perfect country, far from it. But it is a country that is slowly opening itself and we think it is better to promote transformation by inclusion than by isolation. (...) I think it strengthens the CPLP as a space of dialogue and political concertation. Our [Brazil’s] vision nowadays, we see more the CPLP as a political body rather than an instrument to defend the language. Of course, the issue of language is strategic and important, but more because of its political dimension. The cultural subdomain is the basis, the soil under which the CPLP sustains itself. But the language issue is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one to sustain” the CPLP in the long term¹⁶.

The deadlock came to a head in 2014 during the CPLP summit in Dili. By that time, the requirements in the roadmap had hardly been met. Equatorial-Guinean officials claimed that a temporary moratorium on the death penalty and the signing of cooperation agreements for the training of Portuguese-speaking teachers amounted to enough evidence of its overall compliance. Brazil perceived it as enough of a glass half-full:

“In the case of Equatorial-Guinea, it evolved from associated observer to member state because of a possibility that does not exist in many countries: through an executive decree, establishing Portuguese as an official language. Of course, that is something somewhat arbitrary from the Equatorial-Guinean government but it shows a willingness to include

¹⁶ Interview with Brazilian senior diplomat #1, Brasília, 12 June 2013.

Portuguese, to promote Portuguese”¹⁷. [Moreover, the] “issue of Equatorial-Guinea, instead of diminishing, strengthens the capacity of the CPLP, not only because of the interest in the Portuguese language but because the CPLP was able to extract this commitment on the death penalty moratorium – which other groupings and institutions that traditionally work in the human rights domain, were never able to achieve”¹⁸.

The subsequent result was a concerted push by Brazil and Angola towards formalizing Equatorial-Guinea’s immediate adhesion in Dili. The lines of tension between the remaining members were brought up to a point that a possible dismemberment of the CPLP all together was even put on the table if membership was not to be granted at that particular moment in time (Monteiro 2014; Ribeiro 2014). Two sets of arguments can account for this push. The first, already alluded to, consisted of the economic and commercial opportunities identified in term of bringing Malabo into the Lusophone fold. Closer ties with Brasília in preceding years had already foreshadow considerable political and private interest, including in the energy domain. The rationale was pointedly encapsulated by Celso Amorim when visiting Malabo: “Business is business. (...) We have to imagine that this is an important area, rich in oil, with great possibilities of construction” (Uchoa 2010). Supporting local aims for full-blown membership of the CPLP was thus perceived as laying forward the ground for further opportunities by such Brazilian conglomerates, such as Queiroz Galvão or A.R.G., already present in the country or vying to expand to a new market in the continent (Zanini 2017, 195-221).

Secondly, the dispute between two poles of countries within the same organization was also grounded in broader claims for leadership at the top. Unlike with Guinea-Bissau, where CPLP was mostly perceived as an obstacle against more productive relations with ECOWAS, in this case, Brazil recognized a clear opening to ensure this Lusophone platform could become more in tune with its own broader African agenda. The fact that different variable geometries of influence were required (like leaning on Angola to achieve a common goal) did not prove too much cause for concern. Even more so when such a concerted effort

¹⁷ Interview with Brazilian senior diplomat # 2, Brasília, 8 December 2017.

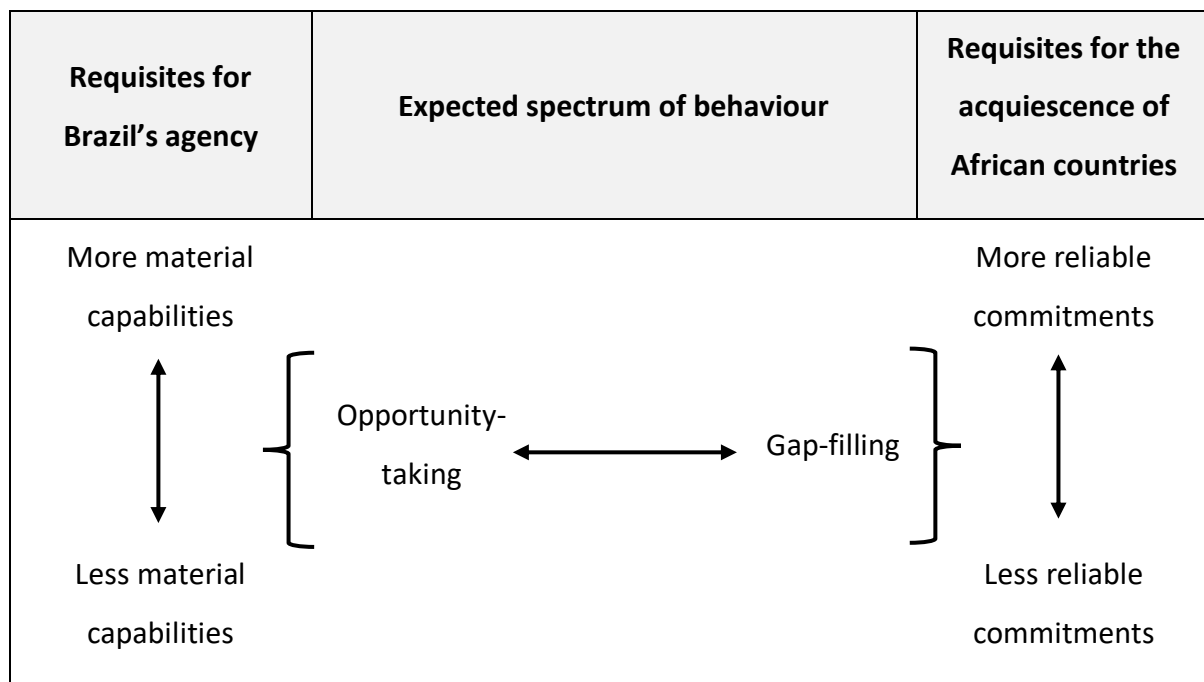
¹⁸ Interview with Brazilian senior diplomat #3, Brasília, 8 December 2017.

also aimed to turn the CPLP less aligned with those preventing structural changes to its core. In other words, Brazil took advantage of Portugal's external downturn and corresponding isolation to fill in a gap and achieve a stated goal of increasing the number of member states, thus increasing its clout within this particular multilateral setting. Concrete offers to send Brazilian teachers and support local Portuguese schooling efforts marked the immediate period afterwards. But much like with what happened in the engagement with Guinea-Bissau, Brazilian follow-up to adequately support the next stages of this significant policy move quickly dried out.

Reframing Brazil in Lusophone Africa

With the benefit of hindsight and new access to sources and official information, any foreign policy development can be easily reconstructed under a different light. But even if the reinterpretation of the events that took place during those two processes is to be abided by, there is still one part of the equation missing, namely the views from African countries themselves. Treating them as mere bystanders amidst these bursts of engagement by outside powers would lead us to incur in the same mistakes of the past, through which Brazil's leadership drive was presumed to be uncontestedly welcomed or accepted on equal measure across the entire continent. Instead of adopting such reductive uniformity, the discussion would be better served by perceiving such countries as gatekeepers of the relational spectrum between opportunity-taking and gap-filling, thus having the final say over the success of any external inroads of the sort. Their acquiescence to stay on board with such forays or dictate their eventual recession would be held by one trait: reliability, meaning the need to exhibit enough seriousness over the sustainability and longevity of the compromise that grounded the original effort by countries like Brazil in reaching out to Africa in the first place. If such measure of confidence evaporates, then previous gains quickly turn meaningless or, at the very least, end up diminished in the broader context of evaluating who to partner with in years ahead. The graphic representation of the different components of this relational spectrum can be best illustrated by Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 - Spectrum of relational engagement between Brazil and Africa



Source: elaborated by the author.

But if reliability is indeed paramount, it is also possible to make the case that Brazil taking advantage from opportunities that it was unexpectedly presented with or filling in the void that a competitor for similar space used to withhold, meant very little for its longstanding credentials in the continent. Backstage support for ECOWAS during the crisis in Guinea-Bissau, for instance, proved hardly consistent in years to come as the inexistence of further high-level meetings between the two sides came to evidence. Even Brazilian diplomats recognized that their all-out support did not produce tangible dividends in terms of what they had originally envisioned their role to be on the ground: “It was very difficult to continue compacting with successive blows: 2009, 2010, 2012. So, it was necessary, perhaps, to send a stronger message. ‘This way we are not going to come to a good term’. So, I think that the position adopted by Brazil, correctly, naturally affected our project. It affected perhaps a little the relative position that Brazil had as a great facilitator, as a provider of cooperation. But it left a clear message that Brazil wanted Guinea-Bissau on a very clear, defined democratic path”¹⁹. The bulk of bilateral cooperation efforts remained unexecuted and the possibility of Brazil becoming a central SSR player on the ground was also indefinitely postponed. Overall,

¹⁹ Oral history interview with former Brazilian Ambassador to Guinea-Bissau, Jorge Geraldo Kadri, 34.

“things did not work that well. We never questioned the final conclusions, yet we always ended up signing them”²⁰.

Likewise, all-in support for Equatorial-Guinea’s adhesion ended up equalling to nothing short than a new set of blocked dynamics as the institutional paralysis within the CPLP afterwards soon demonstrated (Gomes 2017). Ultimately, “I think we all embarked together on that decision of including Equatorial-Guinea and have now to all contribute so that Equatorial-Guinea can fulfil all those commitments. (...) Hence, I think it is still too early to lose hope that EG will not meet all its commitments. I think we never expected, no member state expected that such an evolution would be achieved from night to day, it is something that will take some time”²¹. In both cases, an inability to adequately follow through essentially doomed any kind of enduring rewards that might have been originally perceived as in reach for a country like Brazil. Instead of substantiating its African credentials, both cases ended up denting Brazil’s further aspirations of a reputational spill-over to other nearby partners and sub-regions.

Meanwhile, the usefulness of this relational mechanism is not solely exhausted in revisiting past foreign policy decisions or events. It also allows to pinpoint possible entry-points through which Brazil can potentially reclaim some initiative of its own, if the current political and economic outlook were to improve once more. When confronted with a growing Chinese presence in Africa, for instance, possible pathways of choice become clearer. Depending on whether China incites unexpected backlash at a local level or is forced to deprioritize certain partners due to international predicaments, Brazil might find itself again in a position to either take advantage of the fluctuating situation or make good use of suddenly existing room for influence. In any of those cases, however, it will still be required to display sizeable material capabilities to back any new initiative up as well as to showcase more enduring commitments towards its respective African partners, if it is to find more success than previous endeavours.

²⁰ Interview with Brazilian senior diplomat #1, Brasília, 12 June 2013.

²¹ Interview with Brazilian senior diplomat #2, Brasília, 8 December 2017.

Conclusion

By revisiting the track-record of Brazilian-African contemporary relations and casting them under the evolving competing dynamics between Brazil and Portugal, the net gains of the former's ambitions can be best reinterpreted. Overall, there is nothing fundamentally wrong in benefiting from outside opportunities and occupying the space left void by other countries. In itself, it can become a useful strategy to pierce through the limitations and constraints of a restrictive international system. But if the debate over Brazil and Africa is kept on going from surge to downturn and beyond, then the emphasis should be more clearly set on how reactions trigger appropriate actions. Not that Brazil should be exclusively perceived as a passive actor but rather as one contingent to what invariably happens in its surroundings.

Instead of expecting Brazil to be a natural partner to Africa simply owing to a rhetoric of the past grounded in inevitability, Brazil should be seen under a more context-driven light, bound by the push-and-pull dynamics from other actors. It might not do much for national expectations and it might even be perceived as an excessively opportunistic narrative, but it will certainly comprise a far more realistic approach. Either the grounds of what was supposedly achieved in this area in the last few years start to be questioned or a sense of deep disenchantment that regularly accompanies any boost in Brazilian-African relation will invariably return once more.

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