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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2022-10-04

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Alencastro, M. & Seabra, P. (2021). Introduction: Turnaround and let-down: making sense of Brazil and Africa after the surge. In Mathias Alencastro, Pedro Seabra (Ed.), *Brazil-Africa Relations in the 21st Century: From surge to downturn and beyond*. (pp. 1-8). Cham: Springer.

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.1007/978-3-030-55720-1\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55720-1_1)

Publisher's copyright statement:

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## **Introduction**

### **Turnaround and let-down: making sense of Brazil and Africa after the surge**

**Mathias Alencastro<sup>1</sup> and Pedro Seabra<sup>2</sup>**

#### **Abstract**

By improving political connections under a common South-South aegis, promoting new trade opportunities, and expanding the disbursement of significant amounts of development cooperation, Brazil quickly secured a foothold of its own in Africa between 2003 and 2014. However, in the face of a political meltdown and of controversial judicial investigations back home, Brazil's inversions in Africa have since then essentially collapsed. This abrupt turnaround calls for a more critical exegesis of the years of expansion. What were the main successes and failures of Brazil's overall strategy towards Africa? And what does the dramatic change of events, with Brazil moving from a pivotal player to an almost invisible one in merely half a decade, tell us about the possibility of a new pick-up of interest for Africa? This introduction to the edited volume takes stock of the main trends in previous literature over the character and content of Brazil's foreign policy towards the continent and sets the ground for the following chapters.

In late July 2018, three months before the general elections that brought Jair Bolsonaro to power, Brazilian President Michel Temer attended the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in his first and only trip to Africa. At the time, Temer reiterated that relations with African states were a diplomatic priority for Brazil and that such focus would remain unchallenged. Yet, he left without attending the closing remarks from his South African counterpart, Cyril Ramaphosa. Temer's overall indifference to African affairs throughout his two years in office was only matched by that of his predecessor, Dilma Rousseff (2010-2016). In a signal of changing priorities, Rousseff famously cut short her trip to Ethiopia for the 2013 African Union

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<sup>1</sup> Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning (Cebap). Contact: m.dealencastro@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Center for International Studies (CEI-Iscte). Contact: pedro.seabra@istce-iul.pt

(AU) summit. Even though at that occasion she announced that Brazil would cancel US\$900,000 owed by eleven African countries, her abrupt departure from Addis Ababa exasperated her African interlocutors, who had grown accustomed to greater levels of attentiveness under her predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010).

In a bid to build strategic partnerships with African counterparts, Lula's government had indeed elevated the continent to one of the cornerstones of Brazilian diplomacy during his tenure. It is often argued that such development amounted to a "rebirth" of past trends, rather than a brand-new foreign policy orientation in itself (Saraiva 2010, 174), somehow downplaying the novelty of it all. Regardless, his presidency unmistakably brought Africa to the forefront of priorities amidst a fast-changing international order. More distinctly, common historical-cultural links between the Brazilian society and populations in Africa assumed a heightened role in official discourse, while fuelled by the evolution of the Workers Party (PT – *Partido dos Trabalhadores*) in the country's political scene. Considerable emphasis was thus attributed to a notion of indebtedness between Brazil and Africa, as the former attempted to depart from past 'culturalist' interpretations of Brazil's African roots and its own perception as a supposedly racial democracy role model. The focal point was therefore set in presenting Brazilian endeavours and investments as a way for the country to not only reconnect with its past but also to repay African populations for its contribution to Brazil's own achievements.

The results were visible on multiple levels. By improving political connections under a common South-South aegis, promoting further trade opportunities, and expanding the disbursement of significant amounts of development cooperation, Brazil quickly secured a foothold of its own in Africa. The simultaneous growth on all three areas corroborated the perception of a cross-governmental effort by Brazilian authorities in a sustained fashion, seeking to effectively expand ties across the Atlantic. Hence, from 2003 onwards, the PT governments presented a discourse that dully highlighted the intensity of the new commitments amidst a rapidly changing international order.

Such approach made use of multiple concrete entry-points. For one, it involved committing to an ambitious program centred on loans and credits, as well as on an exponential growth in South-South cooperation. On the ground, Brazilian officials moved quickly to not only increase diplomatic representation in several African capitals, but also to

sign a myriad of cooperation agreements amidst regular high-level visits. In the hinterlands, a tripartite cooperation program known as ProSAVANA promised to export Brazil's own 'green revolution' to northern Mozambique, whereas the Cotton-4 program pursued similar ambitions in West Africa. In world stages, a number of alliances with African votes led to a revamped profile of Brazil as a chief spokesperson of the South and contributed to the election of several Brazilian officials for high-level positions. Investment in multilateral venues soon turned considerably more strategic and proliferated in the direct proportion of how many African counterparts could be encompassed by each new or old forum in existence. Even military branches, long detached from wider foreign forays, began to see in Africa an opportunity to expand their role in geopolitical calculations across the ocean and thus justify their own modernization efforts.

But initiatives were not restricted to official channels alone; the private sector took equal part in this outreach to Africa. Salvador-based construction giant Odebrecht, who had already taken the lead in post-war reconstruction in eastern Angola, massively diversified its investments beyond infrastructure during the Lula years. Likewise, mining transnational Vale went head to head against Rio Tinto for the exploration of bauxite mines in Guinea and became one of the flag-bearers for Brazilian investments in the continent. For the most enthusiasts, Brazil's oil partnerships in the Gulf of Guinea would turn the South Atlantic into a 'new Saudi Arabia'. Some of these investments were generously underwritten by the National Development Bank (BNDES – *Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social*), which pursued a policy of strengthening 'national champions', i.e. companies considered to have the capacity and scale to enter new markets successfully.

Organized civil society also helped build bridges between Brazil and African societies. Thinktanks began producing Africa-centred research, and Brazilian NGOs partnered with counterparts around the African continent to carry out programs, explore policy ideas, and even to contest parts of the official cooperation agenda with African counterparts, as in the case of ProSAVANA. Brazilian-made cultural products, from *telenovelas* (soap operas) to cosmetics and music, experienced a surge in many African countries, especially – but not exclusively – Lusophone ones.

What a difference a decade can make. In the face of political meltdown and the proliferation of controversial judicial investigations, Brazilian state and private initiatives

essentially collapsed. Today, diplomatic missions are running idle, and the crumbling infrastructure in Maputo and Accra is little more than a memory from a promising past. An airport built by Odebrecht with BNDES financing in Nacala, Mozambique, that had been inaugurated in 2014 remains closed and empty after the Mozambican government defaulted on the loan, amidst accusations of corruption by Odebrecht and over-estimation of the prosperity that would emerge out of coal exports from the region. Back in Brazil, the Car Wash (*Lava Jato*) investigations exposed the extreme lengths to which national corporations went to in order to become structurally entwined with policymaking at home and abroad, as PT's tenure wore on (Dye & Alencastro 2020). This, in turn, laid the ground for the beginning of a strikingly different political cycle, heralded by the election of Jair Bolsonaro on October 2018.

One of the most visible policy consequences was the official reorientation of geographic priorities away from the South and increasingly so once more towards the North, particularly the US. Overtures towards Africa were brought to a near stand-still, and not even calls for economic exchanges to “live up to our relationships firmly anchored in history and a shared cultural heritage” (Araújo 2019), succeeded in counteracting the profound disengagement that ensued. Despite Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo's trip to Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Cape Verde and Senegal in 2019 as well as the announcement of a future presidential visit to Africa – possibly to Angola or Cape Verde – contradictory outcomes piled on. An unprecedented symbiosis with evangelical churches and similar movements, themselves a pillar of support for the Bolsonaro government, quickly took the lead in what remained of existing backchannels with Africa (Fellet 2019). And in keeping up with one of its early electoral promises, on May 2020, the government officially decreed the closing down of embassies in Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Monrovia (Liberia), thus signalling to the rest of the continent that the expansive cycle of diplomatic representation was indeed over and done. Overtime, the association between African states and corruption scandals became dominant among opinion makers. For the general public, the involvement of Angola in Mozambique in Lava Jato investigations marked the end of an era of grand designs in foreign policy.

But for all its failures and let-downs, Brazil's drive to Africa still left a durable mark, whose implications are yet to be understood. Not all projects have gone under and some cooperation agreements and initiatives have even managed to retain momentum, with a few instruments being proposed anew. Regardless, the overall narrative of a “bust” after the

“boom” in Brazil-Africa relations stands out as difficult to avoid (Abdenur 2018). Despite the many reasons for Brazil's commitment to Africa – from the historical legacy of the slave trade, to the geographical border of the South Atlantic, and the earlier diplomatic efforts that date back to the 1970s – those elements alone cannot account for the steepest drop in transatlantic ties since the early 2000s.

What were the main successes and failures of Brazil's overall strategy towards Africa? And what does the dramatic change of events, with Brazil moving from a pivotal player to an almost invisible one in merely half a decade, tell us about this particular token of South-South cooperation? To answer these questions, we need to address the other side of the story, and adopt a more critical perspective on Brazil's previously lauded ties to Africa. The tribulations of Brazilian projects in Africa and the drawbacks of the government's *realpolitik*, easily ignored in times of affluence, reveal much about how foreign policy is devised in Brasilia, including the deep influence of private companies, the limits of state bureaucracy and inter-ministerial coordination, as well as the government's tense relationship with civil society.

The spectacle of political investigations and imprisonments over Brazil's alleged corrupt dealings in Africa as part of the Car Wash anti-corruption drive should not refrain scholars from examining the changes in perception of Brazil's presence and influence in Africa. As criticism of Brazil's role in Africa grows among political circles in Brazil – some of it deserved, and some of it an attempt to reinforce African stereotypes as the ‘dark continent’ – an empirically based and updated analysis of Brazil's involvement in Africa is urgently needed. Moreover, even though relations between Brazil and Africa have weakened in general, Brazilians and Africans in all walks of life, from artists to entrepreneurs and some committed diplomats and researchers, continue to make some of those ties grow in both depth and complexity. Developing and providing an informed understanding of the Brazilian engagement with Africa will pave the way for a more measured response to the current decline as Brazil endures a complex political transition of its own back home.

### ***Book outline***

The rise and fall of Brazil-Africa relations has provoked much discussion in policy-making as well as in scholarly research, primarily in Africa, Europe, and Brazil. These debates have

focused on broad interrelated topics, namely Brazil-Africa as presidential diplomacy, Brazil-Africa as big business, and Brazil-Africa as a South-South partnership.

The first thread holds that Brazil's involvement in Africa was unique because it depended on the rise of Lula's government on the global stage and on the figure of the president himself (e.g. Saraiva 2010; Saraiva 2012; Stolte 2015). Presidential diplomacy thus became a quintessential tool to promote new ties across the continent inasmuch as the ability to draw connections between the rise of Brazil as a global power and the new era of peace and development in countries like Angola and Mozambique helped pave the way for new opportunities during this specific period. The point being that the individual mattered and made a difference, thus explaining the stark contrast with previous administrations as well as with previous short-lived bursts of Brazilian engagement with Africa.

The second thread holds that Brazil's engagement in Africa was essentially driven by business interests. It emphasizes the role of commodities, and little concern for environment and human rights (e.g. White 2010; White 2013; Garcia & Kato 2015). In this context, Brazil was unabashedly aggregated with fellow BRICS members who pursued similar expansive strategies towards Africa, heavily supported by extractive industries but also often subjected to criticisms over the methods adopted and over how it further contributed to maintain African countries locked-in previous dependent roles amidst global supply chains.

The third thread holds that Brazil's involvement in Africa was part of a long-term diplomatic commitment to the continent, one that is driven by its aim of balancing Western influence by forging cooperation and partnerships with African governments in the name of South-South solidarity (e.g. Barbosa et al. 2009; Seabra & Sanches 2019; Seibert & Visentini 2019). Coalitions formed with the purpose of reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), congregating votes at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) or in advancing innovative trade frameworks that were brought forward as a way to not only ensure Africa's support for Brazilian initiatives but also to guarantee that their interests would be accounted for, thus breaking the restrictions of most post-World War II institutions.

We acknowledge the three overall trends in previous research lines but we also seek to go beyond them and provide a more critical exegesis of these years. This book will therefore investigate the rise and fall of the relationship between Brazil and Africa in order to assess the character and content of Brazil's foreign policy towards the continent. We heed

the call for more structured work in English over Brazil's multifaceted external relations (Burges 2013, 4-7), successful or declining as they might be, while seeking to complement recent efforts that already provide general snapshots of such period (e.g. Lessa et al 2020; Casarões 2020). In order to demonstrate how the three dimensions – presidential, big business, and South-South cooperation – shaped Brazil's approach to the continent, the book will shed light on the role of resources as a driver, the importance of personal leadership, and the influence of the Brazilian diplomatic history and traditions in shaping Brazil's priorities in Africa. Moreover, the book will provide attention to the mechanisms of implementation, from Brazilian private corporations, to the diplomatic and aid agencies, military branches, as well as the prospects of Brazilian activism overseas.

### **Chapter outline**

In Chapter 2, Thiago Krause and Leonardo Marques look at how present bilateral relations are shaped by their long and painful shared history, and most particularly the transatlantic slave trade, which lasted for three centuries and led to the coerced migration of 5.5 million enslaved Africans to Brazil. Relations collapsed with the suppression of the slave trade and the expansion of European colonialism in the African continent. They resumed a century later, as Brazilian officials turned to Africa in an attempt to gain relevance in the world stage. However, and crucially, their perception of Africa remained profoundly shaped by the historical events that preceded them.

Pedro Seabra then lays out in Chapter 3 the dynamics of Brazil in Africa in relation to Portugal, with the purpose of reframing the former's agenda towards African Lusophone countries. The aftermath of the 2012 military coup in Guinea-Bissau and the admission of Equatorial-Guinea to the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP – *Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa*) allow to question the fragility and susceptibility of Brazil's net gains in Africa in light of changing political-economic cycles. The 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.

In Chapter 4, Adriana Schor looks at the key characteristics of economic trade. She shows the exponential increase in bilateral trade, a point consistently raised by official from

both sides of the Atlantic, did not fundamentally changed patters of trade. Trade remained highly dependent on commodities and concentrated in very few countries. In other words, there is no Africa specificity when it comes to trade.

Mathias Alencastro then explores the case of Angola in more detail in Chapter 5. He argues that while Lula believed in the benefits of strengthening the ties of Brazil to Africa, and he went out of his way to protect the interest of Odebrecht in Angola, he did not fully control the agenda. Indeed, by the time he came to power, the Brazilian company had already developed a mutually beneficial relationship with the Angolan government. In fact, Odebrecht enlisted the president to help with its attempt to remain competitive in Angola. In the meantime, the Angolan government saw in the Brazilian politician, a global celebrity in the late 2000s, a skillful advocate of the democratic credentials of the regime. In the end, Lula conferred a new dimension to an already existing alliance.

In Chapter 6, Barnaby Dye reinforces this assessment by arguing that Brazilian companies did not appear to fully appreciate the nature of the African state and its deals environment. Focusing on the case study of Tanzania, it details the investment of two construction companies, Odebrecht and Queiroz Galvão, engaged in dam and airport projects. He shows that while the Brazilian state had a clearly enabling role, the private sector, and the Tanzanian government, effectively called the shots.

Chapter 7 and 8 consider the politics of development cooperation. In the former, Danilo Marcondes examines Brazil's initiative to donate a pharmaceutical factory to Mozambique. The factory, is one in many projects that Brazil is developing in the health sector as part of its South-South development cooperation portfolio. Nonetheless, it has been singled-out due to its highly symbolic nature, its direct association with technology transfer, broad political impact, and innovative character.

For her part, Laura Waisbich explores the centrality of civil society activism around Brazilian foreign policy towards Africa. She argues this social engagement responded to increasing opportunities for Brazilian civil society actors to engage at home and abroad, thus enabling different groups to pursue different forms of engagement with the official Africa policy. As a consequence, state-society relations and interfaces forged under PT's rule allowed for blurred and hybrid forms participation.

Finally, in Chapter 9, Pedro Seabra and Danilo Marcondes address a still underexplored issue with regards to Africa – the military. Marked by quick gains and an equally quick recognition over a short period of time, defence cooperation with African countries has not been exempted from a visible disengagement on the ground. They explore the main travails in this domain, which have compromised much of the gains previously obtained throughout the continent, with a specific focus on the inroads carried out at the defence industry level. They also present some opportunities for a new pick-up of Brazilian interest in the middle and long run.

In the Conclusion, Robert Rotberg reviews the future of Brazil and Africa relations. He argues that Brazil's main challenge in the post-Lula years is to project itself confidently into Africa. The project devised in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, characterized by the lack of institutionalization, does not provide the basis for a long-term, sustainable partnership. However, Brazil and Africa are bound to meet again. It is in Africa where Brazil sees itself best in the role of a global middle power. For African leaders, Brazil will always be seen as a historically and culturally deeply connected interlocutor.

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