

An ocean apart? Angola, Brazil and the need for a strategic framework

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Touting preferential relationships based on close geographic proximity, economic interdependence or even shared historical background is often a popular approach to developing a country's foreign exposure and subsequent ties with the remaining international community. When it comes to Lusophone countries, cultural links usually take such a lead in propelling and promoting the respective relations between one another. In that sense, Brazil and Angola's supposedly brewing partnership is thus dully and officially sustained.

However, as time has come to demonstrate, such linkages are not without their weaknesses, as cultural affinities – from a common language to similar historic-colonial roots – are frequently sidelined or overcome by structural constraints of political-economic order. One of these, undoubtedly the most significant, included Angola's own long-lasting civil war which inevitably prevented any intended bilateral framework from ever reaching its full potential, at least until the very end of hostilities on the ground, symbolically heralded by the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002.

Still, this is not to say that Brazil remained detached from Angola since the latter achieved its independence back in 1975. On the contrary, Brazil was even the first country to recognize the Angolan state, right after the Alvor

Agreements. Political and economic cooperation was then immediately envisioned as a way to connect Brazil with Portugal's former African countries and specially with Angola, as its economic and regional potential was already presumed to be of considerable significance for Brazilian interests in the near future. Likewise, the Brazilian military regime's support for the growing wave of decolonization in the Third World also helped to enhance such a focus.

As expected, Angola's massive oil reserves quickly topped every item on the agenda, more so after Brazilian state-owned Petrobras reached an agreement in 1979 with its local counterpart, Sonangol, to begin operations in the country and carry out the so-called counter trade activities, i.e. Angolan oil for Brazilian products and services. Together with civil construction company Oderbrecht, these two investments would for years symbolize, if not total, Brazil's presence in Angola. Furthermore, a General Cooperation Agreement signed in 1980 would also provide the necessary political framework for greater bilateral consultations and possible increased cooperation.

Nevertheless, relations were never truly allowed to effectively evolve beyond the 'oil paradigm' or the supposedly privileged Lusophone ties and the 1990s ended up proving as much. Even more, despite Brazil's attempts to play a



part in international mediation efforts around Angola's internal strife – having contributed with a significant number of observers to the United Nations Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM) I-II and, more importantly, with the largest contingent of troops to UNAVEM III¹ –, peace on the ground remained illusive. Until 2002, that is. From that date on, a massive process of national reconstruction was initiated, intended to present a new Angola, open to the world and to new reinforced relationships. International suitors with enough capital to invest and sufficient goodwill were therefore enthusiastically welcomed by Angolan authorities.

Coincidentally, around that time Brazil also began a new chapter in its history under the leadership of Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva. Keen on expanding ties on a South-South basis, Lula soon professed an interest in the African continent, and Angola was no exception. Indeed, in his first visit to Africa in November of 2003, Lula made sure to include Luanda among his official stops. The new paradigm behind the two countries' relations could not have been made clearer: "a strong and prosperous Angola could be the starting engine for the entire region. Angola's development will also reflect in benefits for Brazil, and vice versa".² In other words, Brazil clearly showed the political will to take a step forward in this relationship, originally structured around cultural ties and timely sectoral cooperation, but now recognized as a careful strategic gambit that could potentially cement Brazil's position both in Angola and in the surrounding continent. Overall, it is safe to say that this new political emphasis was entirely in line with Brazil's new African focus, as it included a "re-examination of the previous 'culturalist' speeches in favor of a more structural and pragmatic approach regarding the cooperation with African elites".³ But more importantly, such pragmatism was soon matched by rising economic figures between the two countries. If in 2000, the trade balance amounted to an insignificant US\$137 million in bilateral exchanges, mostly due to Brazilian exports, by 2005 that number had already risen to US\$521 million. What's more, in 2008 it would reach a whopping all-time high of US\$4.2 billion, with Angolan products accounting for nearly US\$2.2 billion of the total sum, in great part due to the weight of Angolan oil in these figures. The perils of this 'singular dominance' would be later brought into evidence as the steep decline of trade in the following two years – mostly as a consequence of the international financial crisis – reflected itself in a decreasing balance of US\$1.4 billion

in 2010.⁴ But still, the remarkable evolution in economic relations is undeniable.

In truth, they were also greatly promoted and incited by both countries' authorities. For example, the growing approval of up to US\$2.5 billion in Brazilian credit lines to finance the export of goods and services to Angola under the Export Guaranty Fund until 2009 – later expanded with another billion in 2010 – was a clear signal of national resolve to invest in this relationship. And the political focus was also on par, with Lula paying a second visit to Angola in October 2007, followed by José Eduardo dos Santos who traveled to Brazil in June 2010.

However, it is important to understand that political cooperation also existed through other institutional venues other than direct bilateral relations, as it had already done during the previous 'hesitant' years.⁵ The Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) in particular, clearly stood out as a preferential forum for all Lusophone parties, Brazil and Angola included. And even when the new bilateral focus began to gain pace, the CPLP continued to provide a regular framework in which both countries could deepen their consultations and further increase cooperation in a number of areas open to the respective civil societies.

On the other hand, strategic considerations were equally never put aside. Despite its apparently permanent stillness, the 1986 Brazilian-backed South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone (ZPACAS) – made up of 24 states, including Angola – continued to figure high on Brazilian policymakers' discourse, who understood the demilitarization and subsequent security of the surrounding maritime area as an absolute defense imperative. It was therefore without surprise that Brazil quickly endorsed Angola's efforts to revitalize such a project, when the latter assumed its presidency in 2007. Furthermore, a Defense Cooperation Agreement also formally enshrined greater military cooperation in June 2010, which opened the door to new joint opportunities in this area.

Nevertheless, amid all this bilateral élan, the lack of an official mechanism that could take the relationship to the next level remained painfully clear. A suitable and constant accelerator was thus urgently in need. To that end, recognizing this void, both Lula da Silva and José Eduardo dos Santos met in 2010 to co-sign a declaration establishing a strategic partnership between Brazil and Angola.⁶ Hence, a new phase in bilateral relations was then announced.

1 Brazil contributed with 739 troops, 20 military observers and 14 civilian police to UNAVEM III from 1995 to 1997. For UNAVEM I (1989-1990) and II (1991-1995) the country provided an average of 8 observers for the entire duration of the missions.

2 Speech by President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva during the opening of the Brazil-Angola Ministerial Meeting (Luanda, 3 November 2003).

3 José Saraiva, "The new Africa and Brazil in the Lula era: the rebirth of Brazilian Atlantic Policy" (*Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, Vol. 53, Special Issue, 2010), p. 179.

4 Figures provided by the Brazilian Ministry of Development, Industry and Foreign Trade.

5 See Kamila Rizzi, "Relações Brasil-Angola no Pós-Guerra Fria (1990-2002)" (*Anos 90*, Vol. 15, No. 27, July 2008), pp. 287-324.

6 See "Joint Declaration over the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Republic of Angola" (Brasília, 23 June 2010).



But if the working structure was effectively laid down, for all purposes, its actual sustainability and development remains to be seen. Indeed, by now Brazilian-Angolan relations have clearly reached a point in which the need for a permanent framework, capable of resisting unforeseen international variables and enduring regular political shifts – specially in Brazil, since the Angolan elites will most likely remain adverse to any meaningful political change in the short/medium term – has become too evident to ignore or leave at the mercy of the usual and varying geopolitical circumstances. Furthermore, in all fairness, Brazil did not just discover Africa and inherently, Angola. Brazil's "African Policy"⁷ began more than 50 years ago although, as mentioned, reliance on cultural links when it came to the Lusophone world tended to prevail and supplant any official approach to such countries.

However, significant as these ties were and will most certainly continue to be, they have also been frequently shown to be insufficient to coherently and consistently push relationships forward in an effective manner. Without question, they remain an important element in any bilateral relationship and should therefore be nurtured and promoted as such. But ultimately, in a realist international context, they should be complementary to a generalized increased focus on prosperous economic relations and regular political consultations, and not the other way around. As such, Brazil would do well to listen more closely to local calls for greater contributions to the continent's sustainable development and economic growth, and not let its course of action be solely based on traditional Brazilian "Africanity" themes.

In that order, the proposed strategic partnership unquestionably faces many obstacles ahead. Among others, for example, is the need to overcome the oil burden – decreasing as it may be, due to Brazil's growingly energetic autonomy – in the bilateral trade balance while

diversifying it or even readjusting institutionally established procedures to Dilma Rousseff's new foreign policy, still in development. At the end of the day, Brazil and Angola's Strategic Partnership inherently incorporates massive potential for reinforced relations, either at a bilateral, regional or international level. But if the South Atlantic and all the challenges it comprises are to be finally bridged, much work remains to be done.

7 See Gladys Lechini, "O Brasil na África ou a África no Brasil? A construção da política africana pelo Itamaraty" (*Nueva Sociedad*, No. 32, Outubro de 2008), pp. 55-71.

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