

ECOWAS and the Brazilian foothold in Africa

PEDRO SEABRA

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security

As his second term gradually comes to an end, President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva seems keen on leaving a noticeable legacy in Brazil's foreign policy. Amidst an overreaching agenda – from increased participation in international stages to the fight against world hunger, to name just a few – it has been the consistent improvement of ties with the African continent and Brazil's newfound role in South-South international relations that has won him the widespread praise and respect of developing nations.

Since taking office back in 2003, Lula has quickly made it clear that his country would see Africa with a different set of eyes as well as with redoubled focus. No longer was the "forgotten continent" merely understood as a hopeless case of international assistance, lacking good governance, riddled with corruption and human rights abuse: from that moment on, Brazil acknowledged a vast, potentially profitable market, with unparalleled, untapped, natural resources and desperately in need of a specialized work force and expertise, crucial to local economic growth and sustainable development.

However, this newfound interest in Africa did not quite match the diplomatic presence on the ground or the political focus it demanded – specially, when facing competition from other promising international suitors like China, who is also increasingly setting its eyes on the continent. To overcome such shortcomings, Brazil promptly opened 34 new local embassies and Africa dully climbed to the top of

Lula's foreign visits – during his two terms, he managed to visit 25 of a total of 53 African countries, six of which during his last tour this past July. Unsurprisingly, by associating such political will with the country's strong cultural links to Africa, export numbers to the African continent eventually tripled during Lula's tenure, from US\$2.68 billion in 2003 to nearly US\$8.7 billion in 2009.

Still, despite this recognizable boost, Brazil's trade with Africa is still dominated by a handful of countries such as Nigeria, Angola and South Africa, and by a reduced number of large companies, such as miner Vale do Rio Doce and oil firm Petrobras. Additionally, the constraints and risks of investing or developing a fruitful business relationship in a potentially unstable/undeveloped scenario remain a crude reality for any interested part.

In this context – and keeping in mind Brazil's appreciation for regional integration projects, ineffective or impracticable as they may be – it is important to take notice of the latest Brazil-ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Summit held in Cape Verde on July 2nd, with the attendance of Lula himself as well as over ten other African leaders and their respective delegations.

In fact, this meeting in particular, and the relationship with ECOWAS in general, might indicate the beginning of a slight deviation in Brazil's African approach. Indeed, the vastness – and consequent intangibility – of results originating from the Africa-South America Summits – which



began in Abuja in 2006 with a Brazilian blessing – may have succeeded in convincing Brazil of the benefits of a smaller scale dialogue, where sub-level organizations are preferred over larger-than-life summits, and promises of tangible economic breakthroughs are easier to obtain. In other words, the public wish for an overly ambitious and comprehensive partnership with such a diverse and contradictory continent as a whole might prove to be too slow-paced – and ultimately, too inefficient – for the kind of advanced political and economic relationship that Brazil expects to achieve with Africa in the coming years. Preferred contacts with a number of middle-sized actors, who bring about smaller but more realistic expectations, can thus be understood as a possible alternative for Brazilian diplomacy in this specific geographic area.

ECOWAS has apparently taken the lead as a desirable and credible regional partner, with proven structural stability – Niger and Guinea-Conakry are currently suspended, due to their internal ‘irregularities’ – and with an integration process probably only comparable to the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Furthermore, beyond including both an economically relevant player, i.e. Nigeria, and a good-governance and internationally acclaimed regional example, i.e. Cape Verde, ECOWAS’s range of action manages to cover most of the increasingly strategic and oil-rich Gulf of Guinea area, thus acquiring sustained international focus on its development – a focus that Brazil is naturally and discreetly aware of.

Accordingly, Brazil’s wish to form a partnership with such a regional actor – a mutually reciprocated goal – is far from unbiased. The tremendous potential in agricul-

tural production and energy cooperation alone, as well as the economic opportunities for Brazilian companies, are enough to drive this relationship forward in the next couple of years. The newly proposed African-Brazilian Centre of Excellence in Biofuels or the Brazil-ECOWAS Financial Mechanism – designed to provide incentives to investment and trade in the region – are clear evidence of the desired direction both parts wish to follow.

Still – and looking further than Celso Amorim’s often professed mantra “business is business” for a moment – the fact that Lula has insisted in complementing his country’s approach with an unequivocal aid component – exemplified by the creation of a University in the Brazilian state of Ceará, for the training of ten thousand African and Brazilian students – has also undoubtedly served Brazil’s image well. Unsurprisingly, Lula is now seen throughout the entire continent, in the words of his Cape Verdean counterpart Pedro Pires, as “a great defender of Africa’s interests”.

His recent calls for a “moral commitment” in maintaining strong ties with the continent and the recognition that “there is no way to pay back our historical debts to Africa”, only reinforce the privileged status he holds among most of the African leadership.

But at the end of the day, Brazil will inevitably need more than words and goodwill if it is ever going to reach the full potential of this working relationship. Resorting to a regional institutional approach might prove to be the most appealing solution of them all. In such case, ECOWAS is undoubtedly the current frontrunner to win Brazil’s favor.

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão

ASSISTANT EDITOR | Laura Tereno

DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua Vitorino Nemésio, 5 - 1750-306 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

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