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## The New Atlanticism or a Wider Atlantic?

Is the traditional dominance of the Atlantic region by the US and Western Europe starting to erode? Johanna Mendelson Forman believes so. What's emerging in its place is a 'wider Atlantic' that accounts for the growing influence of Latin America, the Caribbean and other areas.

By Johanna Mendelson Forman for ISN

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The notion that the Atlantic Ocean connects North America to Europe is ingrained in the geographic DNA of most Americans by the time they finish grade school. Certainly for a generation of baby boomers who saw their security tied to a coalition of states in Western Europe that symbolized the post-war liberal international order, these are connections that unite. Today, many Americans do not think twice about crossing the pond to what appears to be a place where we find continuity of culture and historical roots. Europe is where the rule of law, open markets, and respect for human rights is a shared heritage.

However, what if you are citizen of a 'rising democracy' in the Global South? If you are a Brazilian, for example, the Atlantic has other connotations – such as the country's status as a rising global power. And what about other emerging powers? South Africa undoubtedly holds a different view of its growing importance on the global stage. So, just as the rise of US sea power in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century turned the Atlantic into an "American lake," the 21<sup>st</sup> century has potentially laid the foundations for a new geopolitical space – a 'wider Atlantic' that better reflects the multipolarity of the contemporary international system.

### Rethinking the Atlantic

North America and Western Europe are certainly aware that their combined influence over the Atlantic is changing. In 2010, for example, the then-President of the European Commission Jose Durao Barroso noted that "global events today force us to go beyond traditional Atlanticism". Such comments have provided the foundations for a "New Atlanticism" that seeks to maintain the Euro-Atlantic's influence through increased cooperation with the 'South', especially when it comes to trade and economic development. Accordingly, the New Atlanticism is also a reflection of how northern countries see their future role as guarantors of the liberal international order.

However, the South Atlantic appears to have greeted this reconceptualization of trans-Atlantic relations with a degree of skepticism. To some, the New Atlanticism is nothing more than a reaction to the growing independence of the region and an attempt by the Euro-Atlantic zone to bolster its influence over regional affairs. These criticisms also reflect the South Atlantic's growing confidence to

withhold its involvement in contentious foreign policy and security issues that are not on their doorstep, most notably the Ukraine crisis. Indeed, as the German Marshall Fund's Ian Lesser reminds us, states like Brazil and South Africa have long had foreign policy traditions that emphasize a philosophical distance from the United States and Europe.

As a result, the concept of a "wider Atlantic" starts by emphasizing the increasingly significant contributions that Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa make to the politics and security of the Atlantic (and indeed beyond). From there, the growing economic interests of external actors like China, India and Japan are also acknowledged. In doing so, the idea of a "wider Atlantic" further underlines the South's determination to distance itself from the interests of the United States and European Union, and to shape economic, foreign and security policy agendas on its own terms.

### **The South Atlantic as a Security Actor...**

If this happens on a regular basis, then we should expect initiatives like the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone (ZOPACAS) to become increasingly important on the world stage. Formed in 1986, ZOPACAS has helped to connect South America and West Africa via a network of institutions and mutual interests. While originally created as a mechanism to prevent regional nuclear proliferation, its mission today is much broader. Indeed, as Brazilian scholar Adriana Abdeneur notes, ZOPACAS is now contributing to the reframing of south Atlantic security, particularly when it comes to transnational challenges like trafficking and weak governance.

While the potential of this organization is still in its early stages, it's nevertheless thought that ZOPACAS will eventually provide the lion's share of solutions for the countless geostrategic challenges that await the South Atlantic...and maybe beyond. The main regional beneficiary of this development would be Brazil, a country that was instrumental in the formation of ZOPACAS and the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the South Atlantic. Brazil's growing power and influence is plain to see. It's now a bona fide sea power with sufficient naval assets to protect its sea lanes, trading routes and energy reserves in the Amazon and its territorial waters. To say that Brazil will play an important part in the wider Atlantic security debate in the years ahead is an understatement, to say the least.

### **...And an Energy Zone**

Brazil is also likely to make its presence increasingly felt in the global energy marketplace. The recent discovery of new and extensive sources of fossil fuels in the South Atlantic has prompted some observers to label the region the new arc of energy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this respect, the Atlantic's combined retreat from the traditional suppliers of the Middle East is also plain to see. Not only are the United States and Canada increasingly relying domestic shale resources, they're also looking to oil produced by Mexico and Venezuela to plug the gaps in supply and demand.

The South Atlantic is also poised to grow as a reliable source of renewable energy. Lower costs for wind and solar power will help make the Caribbean less dependent on fossil fuel, while also changing its political dependency on cheap Venezuelan oil that arose at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cuba's return to the international fold might also help the country's sugar industry to convert some of its product into ethanol. The end goal of this would be the export of this low carbon product to the United States to blend with fossil fuels. And let's not forget that West Africa's oil reserves could also make an increasingly important contribution to the South Atlantic's prosperity and energy security - if managed fairly and equitably.

### **Down...but Not Out**

Yet, while the future looks good for the South Atlantic, it would be naïve to think that the United

States, Western Europe and, indeed, the concept of New Atlanticism will slide even further into geopolitical obscurity. Take, for example, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Much like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that united Canada, the United States, and Mexico 20 years ago, this new agreement might also consolidate a robust transatlantic trading area that would be difficult to ignore and, indeed, to resist. Indeed, the TTIP might one day succeed where the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) failed – that is, linking the far-flung corners of the Atlantic.

That said, the resource-hungry markets of Asia are likely to pose challenges that could lessen the importance of the TTIP to the South Atlantic. Latin America and the Caribbean remain one of the world's most valuable sources of raw materials. These include soy, wheat and other edible grains – which are being shipped to Asia via the South Atlantic to meet rising demands for a more varied diet in the East. As a result, China has now overtaken the United States as the leading importer of Brazilian soy and other commodities. It's also entirely possible that the South Atlantic and its Asian partners could become major guarantors of food security in the years to come.

### **Looking Ahead**

There can be no denying that policymakers who have been weaned on a North Atlantic approach to foreign and security policy that has paid scant attention to the emerging actors of the south are now confronting a new set of arrangements that are challenging and dynamic. From the revitalization of ZOPACAS to the growing contributions made to United Nations peace operations (witness Brazil's leading role in MINUSTAH), the South Atlantic is increasingly becoming a mature and significant actor on the world stage. In addition, the region's growing contribution to global energy and food supplies effectively means that the traditional east-west dominance of the Atlantic is at an end. The north-south connections are as (if not more) important as the ties between the United States and Europe.

However, there's still one area where the North Atlantic maintains the upper hand. The instability plaguing the Sahel and West Africa looks set to fuel even more violent extremism in several South Atlantic states. Even with Brazil's growing military might, that's still a phenomenon that an organization like ZOPACAS cannot fight without the support of NATO. Moreover, the North's major trading partnerships with the region also suggest that the message behind New Atlanticism remains credible and persuasive – even if the unipolar moment has now passed. Consequently, the overall efficacy of the concept of the Wider Atlantic will only be determined by the South Atlantic's ability to move even further away from the political and security arrangements that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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