

# The Role of South Atlantic in China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

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## **Added-value**

**Projection of power**; trade by sea; struggle against piracy

**21st Century Maritime Silk Road.**

Literature **highlights PLAN in both Pacific and Indian Oceans.**

China in the **Arctic: the object of increasing attention, despite only in last years.**

Scant research on China in **North Atlantic**. Mostly **NATO concerns** about the ***Polar Silk Road or Russia in the High North***

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## **South Atlantic**

The Atlantic: **heterogeneous and fragmented**

**Lippmann: Atlantic Community**

**North Atlantic:** historically the near abroad of **NATO and the US.**

South Atlantic: outside NATO's jurisdiction. This has meant that throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, the South Atlantic has been one of the **least strategically relevant oceans.**

However, its '**strategic revival**' cannot be dissociated from the various Chinese interests in this region.

## Strategic Revival of the South Atlantic

1st Biodiversity, mineral and energy resources.

2nd The importance of the South Atlantic in global trade: 20% of maritime routes to/from the US

3rd Complex regional security challenges posed by various threats: piracy, drug trafficking, illegal fishing

For instance, the **Gulf of Guinea**

### **Cape Verde**

Latin American coasts, Chinese fishing activities::

The US is concerned about China's growing presence in the region.

China's initiatives in the South Atlantic as part of its **Going Out policy** and, after 2013, as part of the BRI.

BRI: the piece of a grand strategy aimed at promoting China's status as the centre and leader of the global economy.

12th and 13th five-year plans: **hybrid land-sea strategy** for the country's security.

- Attempt to build a Blue Water Navy.

- Geographical expansion of China's maritime activities beyond the Pacific to increasingly distant waters (such as those of the Atlantic Ocean).

Loans in exchange for natural resources - Beijing Consensus.

China: Africa's most important trading partner, with trade growing 40-fold in the last 20 years.

Raw materials and unfinished products: most of China's imports from Africa

Finished products represent the most important Chinese exports to Africa. China: main arms supplier to sub-Saharan Africa

September 2017: China declares that Latin America is the natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

Extended the BRI to Latin America by including Panama in the list of countries covered by the Initiative

Strengthening ties with more Latin American states

Mitigating US hegemony in this region. US: at the forefront of trade, China is catching up fast.

US naval priorities are not focused on the South Atlantic, but on the North Atlantic, as well as the Middle East and Asia-Pacific.

Gulf of Guinea: States with an extremely young population, they represent a vast consumer and investment market for China.

China's main maritime security concerns: the Indian Ocean and the East and South China Seas (Malacca Dilemma)

But in recent years, the South Atlantic has attracted the attention of the Chinese authorities.

Chinese diaspora: violence, a pressing need to protect Chinese citizens, investments and infrastructures.

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea; Boko Haram,

+

New conceptualisation of China's role as a responsible international power.

China's economic losses in Libya and Sudan,



The need to expand its involvement in peace support activities in Africa in order to secure national economic and strategic interests.

Since the late 2000s, Chinese White Papers on defence have reflected a gradual moderation towards non-interference, to protect Chinese investments and diaspora abroad.

Defence White Papers for 2013 and 2019, China's Military Strategy for 2015.



The need for the PLAN to develop capabilities in military operations other than war. This includes, for example, action against piracy, evacuation and peacekeeping.

To protect the Chinese diaspora and investments in the South Atlantic, the PLAN would have to become a resident naval actor in the region, rather than relying exclusively on the logistics of friendly ports such as Cape Town

Djibouti (1st naval base in 2017): too far from the South Atlantic. 2 weeks from Djibouti to Lagos for the evacuation of Chinese citizens

**Possible candidates:**

**Equatorial Guinea**

and/or

Walvis Bay would allow the PLAN to patrol the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and Cape Horn in South America. The main North Atlantic routes linking the Americas, Africa and Europe would be close by.

South Atlantic: relieving US pressure in the East and South China Seas.

So far, "inland strategy": countering the threat posed by the US and its allies in regional waters.

However, South Atlantic: "external strategy" complementary, more active and offensive, which has been supported by Chinese maritime strategists.

The South Atlantic diverts the attention of extra-regional powers away from China's maritime periphery,

A permanent fleet of 2-3 aircraft carriers for the region, in an attempt to deter US forces.

## Conclusion

Since 2014, PLAN has been more active in the South Atlantic. Diaspora, Chinese investment and the search for natural resources.

This cannot be dissociated from the governance vacuum, as well as the lack of interest from the US and NATO. A modest naval presence in the South Atlantic - compared to its assertive position in the East and South China Seas, and even in the Indian Ocean.

However, the PLAN's continued modernisation + willingness to operate in increasingly distant seas indicate a gradual shift in South Atlantic geostrategy.

Complementary and more active offensive naval strategy, vs defensive strategy in the face of US containment in the Indo-Pacific.