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Mapping the geopolitics of the South Atlantic

by

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The South Atlantic, lying between the coasts of South America and West Africa, is often overlooked in debates on strategic competition. However, it is rapidly becoming a strategic pivot, linking Europe and the Indo-Pacific via the Panama Canal and the Cape of Good Hope. In early 2024, Red Sea disruptions drove a nearly 60% rise in vessel tonnage transiting the Cape⁽¹⁾.

The basin includes major powers such as Argentina, Brazil, Nigeria and South Africa. It holds significant reserves of cobalt, lithium, copper and silver, key for the green transition and for defence. The Atlantic seabed and Antarctica may soon emerge as new frontiers of competition.

The South Atlantic is also a major transatlantic drug-trafficking route and an increasing threat to European security: the main cocaine corridor runs from the Andean countries to Europe, directly or via West and Central Africa⁽²⁾. Between 2019 and 2024, over 550 tonnes of cocaine bound for EU ports were seized in South America⁽³⁾.

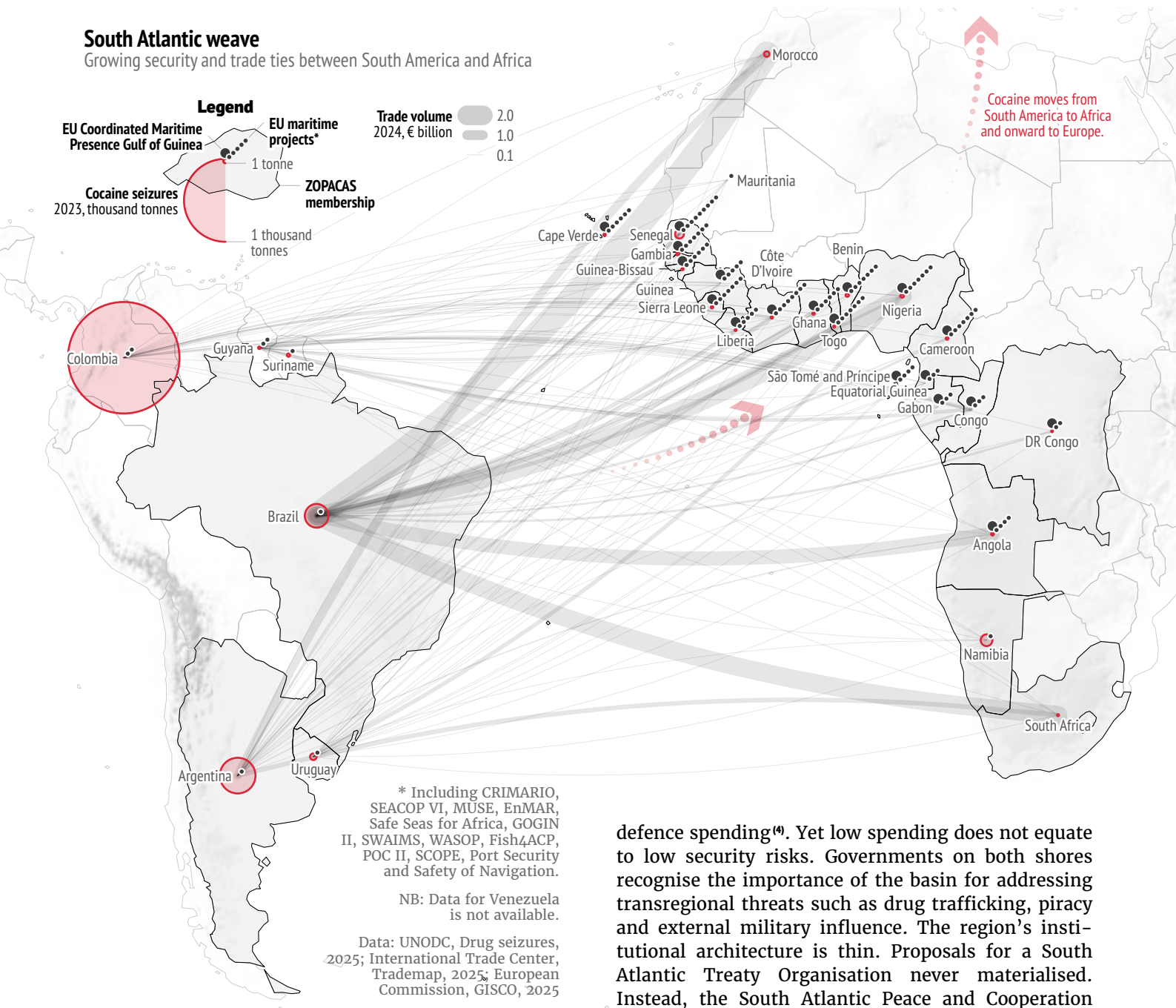
Countries along the Atlantic's southern shores are reshaping a geopolitical space that Europe should

Summary

- Long seen as peripheral, the South Atlantic is emerging as a strategically important arena where African and Latin American actors are deepening security and economic ties. This maritime space is vital for Europe's efforts to diversify its supply chains and trade routes, but it is also the main cocaine route to the continent, thus posing a growing security challenge.
- Expanding cross-regional cooperation – through regional forums, maritime security partnerships, and a surge in transatlantic trade and diplomacy – is reshaping South Atlantic dynamics. At the same time, growing involvement by China, the US and other powers is heightening competition over energy, minerals and governance.
- For the EU, engaging this 'other' transatlantic relationship means aligning with regional priorities on sovereignty and non-intervention, investing in sustainable connectivity, and strengthening joint responses to organised crime and external interference to safeguard European interests.

South Atlantic weave

Growing security and trade ties between South America and Africa



monitor closely. External actors, including China and the US, are expanding their presence through trade deals, security partnerships and diplomatic initiatives. Neglecting the region could weaken the EU's position amid intensifying geopolitical competition.

BRIDGING SHORES

Security, diplomacy and trade ties across the South Atlantic have deepened. Angola, Brazil, Nigeria and South Africa are central to this trend, while other countries are increasingly pursuing cooperation across both shores – and beyond – including through dialogue among regional organisations.

In 2024, Latin American and Sub-Saharan African states together accounted for just over 3% of global

defence spending⁽⁴⁾. Yet low spending does not equate to low security risks. Governments on both shores recognise the importance of the basin for addressing transregional threats such as drug trafficking, piracy and external military influence. The region's institutional architecture is thin. Proposals for a South Atlantic Treaty Organisation never materialised. Instead, the South Atlantic Peace and Cooperation Zone (ZOPACAS), serves as the main security framework. Established in 1986 by a UN resolution, its core mission is to promote peace, cooperation and nuclear non-proliferation in the South Atlantic – including keeping foreign, especially nuclear, powers out. This reflects longstanding priorities for countries such as Argentina, which continues to claim sovereignty over the Falkland/Malvinas islands. Since 2016, Brazil's national and naval strategic plans have focused on ZOPACAS as a tool to counter extra-regional interference and organised crime, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG).

Maritime security cooperation has continued to expand. Recent examples include the India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSAMAR) naval drills in October 2024, and the GoG Operation GUINEX V in April 2025. Brazil and several African countries also participated in the US-led Obangame Express and French-led African Nemo exercises in 2025. Brazil supports the Yaoundé Architecture for maritime security and participates as

an observer in the G7++ Friends of the GoG. It also cooperates closely with Benin, Nigeria, and Senegal through joint anti-piracy exercises and ship-boarding inspections. On 25 August 2025, during Nigerian President Tinubu's visit to Brazil, President Lula pledged to appoint a Federal Police attaché to Abuja, highlighting the deepening link between internal and external security cooperation.

As the weaponisation of trade and supply chains intensifies, countries on both sides of the South Atlantic have sought to diversify partnerships. Trade between Latin America and Africa's Atlantic coast grew significantly between 2018 and 2024: Argentina's trade by 13%, Brazil's by 53%, and Colombia's by 139%⁽⁹⁾. Inter-regional agreements remain limited. The 2016 MERCOSUR-SACU Preferential Trade Agreement is the only formal framework. However, bilateral memorandums of understanding (MoUs) have proliferated. South Africa has signed agreements with Brazil and Argentina covering education, sports, agriculture, customs, taxation and investment. In August 2025, Brazil and Nigeria concluded MoUs on trade, energy, aviation, science and finance. Petrobras has resumed operations in São Tomé and Príncipe and plans to return to Nigeria to pursue hydrocarbon development⁽¹⁰⁾.

A shared ambition to strengthen cooperation among partner countries and to reform multilateral systems is driving growing diplomatic engagement between Africa and Latin America. High-level exchanges between the African Union, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2025 highlight growing collaboration on culture, trade, visas and reparatory justice⁽¹¹⁾. Brazil and South Africa have been key to deepening Africa-South America ties. As hosts of the 2024 and 2025 G20 summits, they shared a global platform to showcase their cross-Atlantic partnership. Both countries have also experienced strained relations with the US in 2025 – with President Trump accusing Brazil of suppressing free speech and South Africa of committing 'genocide'. The confrontation with Washington has drawn the two countries closer and enhanced their leadership role in the Global South. President Lula has injected strong momentum into Brazil-Africa relations. Since returning to office, he has visited Angola (2023), Egypt (2024), and Nigeria (2025). African leaders have reciprocated: President Lourenço of Angola and President Tinubu of Nigeria visited Brazil in 2025, signing multiple cooperation agreements. Lula has also reopened embassies closed under Bolsonaro, attended the 2024 AU Summit, and hosted the 2024 Brazil-Africa Forum and the Second Brazil-Africa Dialogue on Food Security in 2025.

Beyond Brazil, other countries have expanded cross-Atlantic contacts. Colombia has launched

an Africa strategy for 2022–2026⁽⁸⁾. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), led by Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, has signed an MoU with the Southern African Development Community (SADC). South Africa, Namibia and Angola have committed to promoting a coordinated approach to managing the marine ecosystem through the Benguela Current Convention, while Morocco launched the Process of Atlantic African States in 2022.

However, not all countries in the hemisphere are orienting their policies towards the South Atlantic. Argentina has scaled back its engagement with African counterparts such as South Africa and withdrawn its application to join the BRICS. President Milei has shown greater openness to cooperation with the northern Atlantic, especially on defence issues: he authorised US military access to the port of Ushuaia in 2025, and in 2024 applied to become a NATO Global Partner.

CROWDING IN

The South Atlantic is increasingly attracting the attention of global powers. In November 2025, Togo and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement that grants the Kremlin access to the GoG.

China has been particularly active, engaging in diplomacy, infrastructure development, resource extraction and security cooperation. Beijing's trade with coastal countries in the South Atlantic amounted to €410 billion in 2024 – an increase of 74% for South America and 59% for Africa since 2019⁽¹²⁾. Beijing is seeking long-term access to critical minerals, particularly lithium, and is expanding energy infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese digital technology companies – such as Huawei, ZTE, Xiaomi, and Oppo – dominate regional digital markets. China has also consolidated its security footprint in the region. Between 2010 and 2020, countries in Africa collectively purchased around 19% of China's overall arms exports⁽¹³⁾. The number of South American students enrolled in Chinese military colleges since 2020 is more than five times the number studying in US academies⁽¹⁴⁾. Beijing's port investments in the region, such as Walvis Bay in Namibia, could also provide opportunities to establish a military presence⁽¹⁵⁾.

The US has begun to rethink its strategic posture in the South Atlantic, accounting for more €200 billion in trade in 2024 and USD 114 million in investment⁽¹⁶⁾. The Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation (PAC), launched in 2023, faces an uncertain future under President Trump's second term due to scepticism

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toward multilateralism and tensions with South Africa and Brazil. Instead, Washington's approach has tilted toward the use of tariffs, hard power in the Caribbean and threats of military action in Nigeria. At the same time it has strengthened ties with ideologically aligned governments, most notably Argentina, and secured multi-billion-dollar agreements with West and Central Africa signed at the US-Africa business summit in Angola⁽⁴⁾.

Beyond the US and China, a growing number of actors – including Canada, France, Portugal, Spain, Germany, Italy and Morocco – have incorporated a Southern Atlantic dimension into their strategies, signalling heightened interest in the region and a desire to compete for influence. In August 2025, the United Arab Emirates signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with Angola, with investments pledges of about USD 6.5 billion.

BROADENING HORIZONS

The EU is by far the largest investor in the South Atlantic, accounting for more than USD 245 million between 2023 and 2024 (more than double the US and 34 times more than China)⁽⁵⁾. It also plays a role in regional maritime security through projects like SEACOP VI, which supports efforts to combat illicit maritime activities in Africa and Latin America, thus acknowledging the interconnectedness of maritime theatres.

However, the shifting dynamics of the South Atlantic require a more strategic and proactive EU response. As Latin American and Atlantic African states deepen cooperation – and external powers expand their footprint – the EU cannot afford to ignore the geopolitical reconfiguration under way. That would mean losing influence in an increasingly relevant region, losing access to key resources for the defence and green transition, and missing out on key partnerships for the future of multilateralism, maritime security and governance of the commons. The EU should act as a long-term partner on both shores by investing in infrastructure, green and digital transitions and stronger economic ties, including via the EU-MERCOSUR agreement and deeper cooperation with African partners, to reduce supply-chain vulnerabilities. It should also extend security programmes, including capacity-building and maritime domain awareness, with partners on both shores to create new opportunities to tackle common threats to both the North and South Atlantic.

Engaging with this 'other' transatlantic relationship is therefore essential to protecting EU interests in an era of growing great power competition.

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