

The South Atlantic Ocean: geopolitics, resources and global influence

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The South Atlantic is fast becoming a focal point of interest and competition, accentuated by its abundant oil reserves and fishing territories. This region - bridging South America and West Africa - not only boasts vast economic potential but also holds significant geopolitical importance, monitored by multinationals and global powers alike.



Stakeholders in these contested waters include regional masters Brazil and Angola, both eager to capitalise on these resources for obvious economic rewards. Meanwhile, global giants China and the United States (US) are also embroiled, driven by a desperate need to secure supply chains and influence over vital resources. These interactions are forming a complicated scene, where economic gains are intertwined with the onset of geopolitical frictions.

The resource riches of the South Atlantic

The South Atlantic is now seen through a lens focused purely on its vast oil and maritime resources. Such assets are not only of huge interest to countries like Brazil and Angola but are also pivotal for top table players China and the US, who both aim to secure some control over these natural assets.

Oil exploration and extraction

This vast region's both known and conjectured oil reserves act as a substantial lure for energy firms and countries alike, looking to diversify energy sources and stake a claim to long-term independent supply. Exploration efforts have been conducted in earnest, with new fields being surveyed and existing ones developed to increase productivity.

As technology has improved, so has the potential for uncovering additional reserves, which has ensured a continued stream of investment in the region. Intelligence suggests that these efforts are sure to increase as oil demand remains undeterred, despite green initiatives pushing for renewable energy.

Fishing rights and maritime resources

The fishing sector in the South Atlantic is also big business, significantly contributing to the economies of all coastal nations. It is responsible for the employment of thousands and feeds millions. That being said, this prosperity is haunted by the looming spectre of escalating tensions regarding fishing rights.

One such conflict has emerged between local fishing fleets and Chinese trawlers, with West African nations furiously accusing the latter of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices. This has been driven by an unprecedented growing demand for seafood in China, forcing Chinese fishermen to expand their activities globally with a significant presence on African coasts. This aggressive action is threatening the stability of marine ecosystems. Furthermore, large Chinese fishing nets have been indiscriminately capturing marine species, including non-target species and juveniles, contributing to the decline of fish stocks. The French Navy has been assisting Africa in policing these waters and on 17 May 2023, a patrol boat in co-operation with the French warship Commandant Birot, intercepted the Chinese vessel Chang Hui 2, which admitted to fishing in a prohibited zone.

The repercussions of illegal fishing are staggering; West Africa, the sub-region most affected, alone loses up to US\$9.4 billion annually. This area accounts for 40% of the world's IUU activities. According to a study by the Financial Transparency Coalition (FTC), one-third of the vessels involved in IUU fishing in Africa are Chinese-owned. The FTC also states that eight of the world's top 10 companies involved in IUU fishing are from China, two of which (Pingtan Marine Enterprise and China National Overseas Fisheries Corp) are world leaders. The remaining two IUU abusers are from Colombia and Spain. Almost 50% of the world's IUU vessels are operating in Africa, which is costing the whole continent up to US\$11.5 billion a year.

These disputes do not just focus on direct economic losses, but also on the sovereignty and sustainable management of ocean resources. Given China's recent activities in the South China Sea, forcing Philippine commercial trawlers away from fishing within their own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), this behaviour seems somewhat contradictory.

Geopolitical dynamics and tensions - current geopolitical stances

As of today, the geopolitical climate of the South Atlantic is influenced by its historical allegiances and present-day strategic wants. Brazil and Angola, taking advantage of their prominent positions on this chessboard, are keen to assert respective maritime rights while retaining a modicum of decorum among regional alliances. On a macro scale, the involvement of China and the US marks an external influence that cannot be ignored, with both world leaders eager to exert influence via soft power initiatives and, in some cases, more direct maritime engagements.

The involvement of international maritime treaties has reached an important juncture. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has been serving as a fundamental framework for finding resolutions to such disputes. However, enforcement of judgments has proved challenging and very much dependent on the geopolitical might of the nations involved. The UNCLOS Hague decision in favour of the Philippines regarding China's claim over the entire South China Sea comes to mind. In this case, China simply refused to accept the ruling, and who is capable of arguing with them?

Global impact and business strategy

Global supply chains

The South Atlantic plays a fundamental role in global shipping lanes, connecting economies and enabling the transit of goods, including oil and seafood. Any conflict in this region could disrupt this supply chain, leading to delays and increased shipping costs. The repercussions could affect everything from manufacturing to market prices. For example, outright conflicts over maritime zones could force vessels to reroute - as seen in the attacks from the Houthis rebels in the Yemen which prevented access to the Red Sea/Suez Canal, redirecting vessels around the Cape of Good Hope - increasing operational costs and causing delays.

Conclusion

It is important to reiterate the multifaceted strategic influences in the South Atlantic, and the environmental concerns surrounding the pervasive IUU fishing abuses led by Chinese entities. This gross exploitation stresses not only marine biodiversity but also demonstrates a blatant disregard for African nation sovereignty, and suggests the possibility of a much broader influence that China has over African nations as a result of excessive loans and infrastructure projects.

Appreciating the roles and potential for non-near-future conflicts between global giants like China and the US in this part of the world is vital. As Brazil and Angola continue advancing their economic pursuits through oil exploration and fishing - without crossing paths for the time being - world leaders China and US cast a watchful eye on their own energy requirements. Should Brazil and Angola's activities reach a point of encroachment, which superpower would run to either's aid if required?

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