

Review - Navies and Maritime Policies in the South Atlantic

Written by Andrea L. F. Resende de Souza

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Navies and Maritime Policies in the South Atlantic
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Correia, 2019

Although relevant and complex, the South Atlantic Maritime Policy is an often-overlooked theme in Contemporary Maritime Studies. In the hope of covering this topic, *Navies and Maritime Policies in the South Atlantic* provides an analysis of the current issues, constraints and barriers for the main maritime powers in the region. The South Atlantic region is composed of 21 countries from Africa and 3 countries from South America, and all of them have very different backgrounds and domestic issues to deal with, but in terms of their naval capabilities all of them are considered “small navies”. The typology used for classifying the South Atlantic Navies comes from the works of Eric Grove, a well-known author in the field of Maritime Studies. This classification was first introduced in *The Future of Sea Power*, published in 1990, and later in the chapter *The Ranking of Smaller Navies Revisited*.

For Grove (2014), the ranking is an attempt to categorize the different kinds of navy that exist today, providing a classification based in the navy’s capabilities and power projection, creating 9 categories or ranks to classify the most powerful and complete navies to the least powerful. The “small navies” classification starts in the 4th category of Grove’s ranking. Departing from Grove’s methodology, Duarte and Correa present a classification of all 17 “small navies” from the South Atlantic (p.189):

4. Regional Force Projection Navies: Brazil.
5. Adjacent Force Projection Navies: Argentina, South Africa.
6. Offshore Territorial Defence: Venezuela, Nigeria, Uruguay.
7. Inshore territorial defence navies: Namibia, Equatorial Guinea.
8. Police and constabulary navies: Cameroon, Ghana, Guyana, Gabon.
9. Token Navies: Angola, Togo, Benin, Suriname, Ivory Coast.

Even if all 17 navies of the South Atlantic are classified (p. 189), the book only describes and contextualizes the most powerful navies in South America (Argentina and Brazil) and Africa (Nigeria and South Africa). Thus, Chapters 2 to 7 focus on these four countries, each written by a different author. Though this brings value to the work by exploring the many faces of South Atlantic’s maritime policies, the focus on four countries also highlights a weakness of the book, given that the region is composed of seventeen navies. Perspectives of countries like Namibia and Uruguay, which have several projects with the Brazilian Navy, would have enhanced the analysis of multilateral efforts in the South Atlantic.

African Perspective: Nigeria and South Africa

The Second and Third chapters present the perspectives of two of the most important regional players, Nigeria, and South Africa, and demonstrates how they deal with threats to maritime security. For both countries, illegal fishing and piracy are considered major threats to Maritime Security, but in the Nigerian case, these threats are a direct hit to its

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economy, since the country “[...] is largely dependent on foreign trade which generates more than 90 percent of the GDP through exports of oil and gas. Like other littoral states in the zone, Nigeria relies heavily on the South Atlantic for both imports and exports.” (p. 25). In the South Africa case, what draws most attention is the fact that, even if these threats are latent to the country’s security and economy, the maritime policies and the Navy are largely ignored by the government and its institutions.

The regional efforts of cooperation in Africa are presented in both chapters 2 and 3, but not deeply explored. Further exploration could have included another chapter focusing on the dynamics of cooperation in Maritime Security between the countries of the Guinean Gulf, showing how differently they respond to the threats and if they seek cooperation with other powers in the South Atlantic or outside the region. Complementary to this would be the consideration of other African countries like the Namibian Navy, exploring the history, constraints and threats that face the country and the initiatives between Brazil and Namibia, where Brazil systematically offers training for the Namibian Navy. Nevertheless, even with only two African perspectives, it is still a valuable effort given the lack of material on African Navies in the field, especially from African authors.

South American Perspective: Argentina and Brazil

Chapters 4 and 5 contextualize Argentinian Maritime Security. First, Gonzales and Caplan (2019) focus on the conflicts and territorial claims involving Argentina, Chile and the UK during the 20th and 21st centuries. In Chapter 5, Martin Robson (2019) explores the deep and difficult relations between the UK and Argentina prior to, during and after the Malvinas/Falklands War of 1982. The two chapters highlight the openness to solve the Malvinas/Falkland question which for both countries, depends more on the bias of its governments. During the Mauricio Macri government in Argentina and the May/Johnson mandate in the UK, both countries tried solving the tension by promoting a closer economic and financial bond. This can also be seen as a case in which Argentina’s economic dependency with a foreign power may increase. Argentina has been through a severe economic crisis during the last decade and the Macri’s government, being extremely adept to neoliberalism, caused a deepening of this situation since the external debt of the country has increased exponentially since 2015.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the Brazilian Navy, the most powerful navy in the South Atlantic since the end of the 19th century. The perspective describes how Brazil achieved its status as a regional sea power and how it uses this status to gain and maintain influence in the region through cooperative efforts with other South Atlantic countries. Still, the Brazilian Navy has a crucial problem related to its budget, as investments decreased in the face of a Brazilian economic and political crisis. During 2014, 80% to 90% of the Navy budget was spent on personnel, instead of prioritizing the maintenance of vessels, or even purchasing or building new ones.

Although Brazil has one of the greatest oil reserves in the world, known as the “Pre Sal”, there is very little public and political discussion about the protection of its maritime resources. An event that happened after the book was published reinforces this point: the disastrous oil spill of 2019 from an unknown origin so far. This man-made disaster caused a lot of damage to the environment and for the economy of the Northwest region, where thousands of people depend upon tourism or fishing as a source of income. This disaster shows the incapacity of Brazil in patrolling and protecting its own maritime resources and how the lack of public discussion about maritime policies can bring tangible damages. Even recent initiatives from the Brazilian Navy to protect the “blue amazon”, a term that simplifies the importance and richness of Brazil’s coast in natural resources, failed to prevent this disaster and this shows how badly the Brazilian Navy needs more investment.

The last chapter: Seablindness

At the very end, beyond comparing the capacities of the small navies of the South Atlantic, it is defined that the main constraint for the growth of these small navies is “seablindness”: the lack of and the need for public and political discussions about emerging maritime threats. The point is that if countries were more aware and brought the threats to maritime security into public discussion, such as the illegal exploration of natural resources and all sorts of illegal trafficking, the navies could receive more support and investment from their own governments. Thus, it is clear that the main constraints of all the countries analyzed are located at the domestic level and related to seablindness. As a

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consequence of the lack of political discussions about emerging maritime threats, there is little investment in new technologies for the Navies and this delays its improvement.

A pertinent solution to the problem of seablindness proposed in the last chapter would be “[...] improving the material and immaterial naval means to address the known and unknown threats by investing in knowledge diffusion, quality, training, cooperation, leadership, and public discussion to allow citizens’ engagement with politicians in developing better answers for the South Atlantic in the future” (p. 195). This couldn’t be more palpable if we recall, for example, the already discussed disastrous oil spill of 2019 in the coast of Brazil. So as long as decision makers do not take a stance on the importance of maritime security for their countries, the South Atlantic is doomed to have more cases of piracy, man-made disasters, and less commercial trade with partners overseas, like China, India and Russia.

What is interesting about “seablindness” is that it is not a theme commonly explored in works on Maritime Policy/Security. One of the few works on the subject is the book *Seablindness: How Political Neglect Is Choking American Seapower and What to Do About It* by Seth Cropsey, which focuses on the United States as a major maritime power. If at least one chapter on seablindness for the small navies of the South Atlantic was presented, it would not only contribute to the “small navies” topic but also to the “seablindness”, remembering that both topics are largely unexplored.

Conclusion

In sum, the book talks much more about South Atlantic navies than any other book ever published on the subject. It is a fact that a ton of books were written about the Navies and Maritime Policies in Europe, the US and Asia. But even great books such as *Small Navies: Strategy and Policy for Small Navies in War and Peace* don’t present any work on the South Atlantic region. Although it would benefit from the consideration of other small navies, *Navies and Maritime Policies in the South Atlantic* is essential reading for those interested in Maritime Security as it provides a careful insight into the current issues and threats to Maritime Policies in the South Atlantic.

About the author:

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