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The EU and Angola: Making Up for Lost Time?

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On April 19-21, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso paid a long awaited three-day visit to Angola, with one simple stated goal: catching up. Catching up to the time and opportunities lost in a relationship that has been neglected or poorly nurtured over the years, especially in comparison with other international suitors like China or Brazil, who have persistently wooed Angola in the hopes of figuring among its top foreign relations priorities.

With that context in mind, Barroso spared no efforts in assuring that his presence equated to a new starting point for bilateral relations. The visit was even more symbolic considering that it was the first ever by a European Commission President to Angola and that it follows a series of similarly illustrative travels by European high officials to Luanda, including French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008¹ and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2011.²

Granted, many of the dynamics between the two sides remained in the first decades of Angola's independence understandably tied to the course of the Angolan civil war and, during that time, no real investment in the improvement of relations was to be expected, aside from the customary humanitarian aid issues. After the end of hostilities on the ground in 2002, however, with Angola

eager to be welcomed back into the international fold, the European Union (EU) essentially failed to provide the means to accommodate and support Angolan aspirations in a structurally envisioned fashion.

The reasons for this sort of estrangement varied from distrust over the way the MPLA would lead Angola in the coming years to the EU's inherent focus on its own enlargement to the East. On the other hand, as other European bilateral partners swooped in – like Portugal, Germany, France and the Netherlands – the EU did not feel the need to come up with any particular overall strategy for Angola. As such, despite the maintenance of its responsibilities as a significant development donor, the EU soon found itself outpaced with Angola's expanding economic performance – a 20% GDP growth between 2005 and 2007 that easily puts the EU's own indicators to shame – and massive energy potential quickly attracting the interest and systematic focus of other world powers. As it turns out, "the memory of the EU's failure to seize the opportunity to engage in deeper cooperation with Angola in 2002 in the wake of the civil war is still very prominent in the minds of the Angolan leadership" and probably helps explain why Angolans have also been wary of reconnecting with Europe as a whole.³ Barroso's visit was thus supposed to close the existing gap between

1 "Sarkozy to mend fences with Angola" (*AFP*, 23 May 2008).

2 Alexandre Neto, "Angela Merkel quer vender navios de guerra a Angola" (*Voice of America*, 13 July 2011).

3 Damien Helly, "Europe and Angola: the case for deeper engagement" (*EU/ISS*, 22 September 2011).



the two parts and bring them towards a new framework of mutually beneficial cooperation. The instrument chosen to achieve such a goal was the so-called Joint Way Forward (JWF) mechanism that the EU has used in the past to promote its relations with countries that have not yet reached the 'strategic partnership' level but are considered important enough to receive considerable official attention.

In the case of Angola, negotiations towards the final approval of the JWF have been taking place for years now and many assumed that a final agreement would remain difficult to achieve. Indeed, the fact that Angola possesses increasing international leverage and that the JWF has an extremely broad scope that encompasses everything from regular high-level political dialogue to economic and cultural exchanges to cooperation on such matters as energy, sustainable development and security issues, inevitably complicated the odds of a swift successful outcome.

Nevertheless, despite Barroso's own admission that the process hasn't gone as smoothly as the EU had hoped,⁴ significant advancements have apparently been reached and Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos was even invited to visit Brussels to personally sign the final agreement, thus "elevating to a superior level the relations between the EU and Angola".⁵ In essence, this conclusion would provide not only a clear pathway for structured relations between the two sides for the next few years but it would also send an unmistakable sign to the remaining African countries of the EU's reenergized focus on Angola's rising star on the regional and

continental stages.⁶ Moreover, it would come as a complement to the visible pattern of growing trade ties – the EU is already Angola's third largest trade partner and its main source of imports – and to the ongoing disbursements under the 2008-2013 EU-Angola Country Strategy Paper (CSP), which is expected to reach a total financing of €214 million during that timeframe.

In April, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso paid a long awaited visit to Angola, with one simple stated goal: catching up. Catching up to the time and opportunities lost in a relationship that has been neglected or poorly nurtured over the years, especially in comparison with other international suitors like China or Brazil, who have persistently wooed Angola in the hopes of figuring among its top foreign relations priorities. With that context in mind, Barroso spared no efforts in assuring that his presence equated to a new starting point for bilateral relations.

Auspicious expectations aside, EU officials tread a fine line when it comes to the upcoming parliamentary elections in Angola, expected to be held in the second quarter of 2012. Unlike UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon when he recently travelled to Luanda,⁷ Barroso actually met with Angolan opposition leaders and civil society leaders, seeking to highlight the efforts made by all Angolans towards preserving national peace and stability while granting nearly €1.2 million for electoral support to local movements. That did not mean, however, that he backed down from the previous announcement that the EU would not send electoral observers this time, despite the insistent requests from opposition parties.⁸ The merits of such a decision are understandably debatable, especially since the conditions on the ground

are not the same as in 2008. Whether this will or will not affect the EU's perceived image as an actor engaged with the development of the democratization process in Angola, though, remains to be seen.

What is clear enough at this point is that EU is deeply committed to reconnecting with Angola and securing

4 Shrikesh Laxmidas, "EU, Angola near deal to strengthen ties: Barroso" (*Reuters*, 20 April 2012).

5 Ricardo David Lopes, "UE e Angola vão assinar novo acordo de cooperação" (*Sol*, 20 April 2012).

6 The EU currently only has one other JWF in place, signed with Nigeria in 2009. On a different level, the EU also established in 2007 a Strategic Partnership with South Africa.

7 "Angola: Ban Ki-moon lamenta não ter reunido com oposição, mas acredita em eleições justas" (*Lusa*, 27 February 2012).

8 "Angola: UNITA preocupada com ausência de observadores europeus para eleições" (*Lusa*, 20 April 2012).



and protecting its interests amidst a tidal wave of international focus on Angola. In Barroso's own words, it "would be a mistake, it would be shortsighted for Europe not to be more present in the development tasks ahead of Angola".⁹ Such a palpable political will was effectively translated into this latest visit and will thus likely fuel the expected signing of the JWF in the near future, providing the capstone for a series of significant steps taken by the EU to make up for lost time in its relationship with Angola.

⁹ Ricardo David Lopes, *idem*.

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