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Sub-Saharan African Geopolitics in Guinea-Bissau

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The international donor conference for Guinea-Bissau, held in Brussels on March 25, 2015, was a success. Seeking to raise €427 million, Guinea-Bissau saw the round table promise more than €1 billion. One year after the return to constitutional order, and with a democratically elected president and government, the country has been granted an opportunity for a fresh start.

However, funding is not by itself the solution to Guinea-Bissau's problems. Development is contingent on political stability, which in turn depends on tackling the meddling of the military in national politics. Lacking an overarching and efficient Security Sector Reform (SSR), Guinea-Bissau will remain vulnerable to internal instability.

With this purpose in mind, a number of African actors have shown willingness to support Guinea-Bissau, notably Angola, ECOWAS—via Nigeria and Senegal—and South Africa. It is, however, worth asking why are three of the sub-Saharan Africa major powers interested in helping one of the world's poorest countries and with little political relevance?

In fact, Guinea-Bissau is not as insignificant as it appears to be. The small West African country has considerable amounts of largely untapped natural resources,¹ presents good investment opportunities and enjoys a strategic location with implications for regional and international stability and security.

Regarding ECOWAS, support for SSR can be partly explained by the need to mitigate the repercussions of maritime insecurity and drug-trafficking for regional and international stability, security and trade. Plus, it does not serve the organization's international status to have an additional focus of instability in West Africa. On the other hand, reasons behind Angolan and South-African involvement are less obvious.

Certainly the nation's natural resources, investment in infrastructures and productive sectors, as well as the strategic location, are motivating factors. However, it is the interconnection between these factors and geostrategic interests that best explains their involvement.

These dynamics played an important part in influencing the 2012 coup. In particular, ECOWAS member-states regarded the deployment of an Angolan military mission (MISSANG)—intended to contribute for the SSR—as foreign meddling in their sphere of interests.

The involvement of major African powers in Guinea-Bissau has led to the emergence of an unusual geostrategic and geopolitical confrontation in sub-Saharan Africa that is worth analyzing.

Geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics in Guinea-Bissau

Nigeria faces economic, political and security challenges that not only affect the domestic economy, but also the ability to project power and influence. In addition, these challenges limit Abuja's capacity to fund and participate in peacekeeping and stabilization missions, having already led to the withdrawal of military contingents from ongoing missions—such as in Mali

¹ Such as oil, bauxite, phosphates, gold and uranium. "The World Factbook" (Central Intelligence Agency).



and Darfur.² Notably, ECOWAS and Nigeria have been facing financial difficulties in maintaining ECOMIB.³

Both Luanda and Pretoria regard Nigeria's unfavorable context as a window of opportunity in all fronts. Angola and South Africa have, in this way, a greater ability to project military and political influence across the continent. Additionally, political instability and the resulting higher risk associated with investment in Nigeria may lead foreign investors to shift attentions to the Angolan and South African markets.

From another perspective, West African countries present a plethora of opportunities for Angolan and South-African companies. Concerning Angola, the resumption of cooperation may revive projects and investment that were disrupted in 2012, such as the deep-water port in Buba, the railway connecting the port of Buba to Bamako, and bauxite mining in Madina do Boé and in the east of Guinea-Conakry. These projects go in line with Luanda's objective of diversifying the economy beyond oil.

Not intending to downplay South Africa's economic capacity, it is worth noting that Angola's economic projection poses a comparable greater threat to Nigeria's interests. In other words, the state-owned nature of Angola's big businesses enables Luanda to expand economic and political influence simultaneously, as these companies operate as vehicles of foreign policy. The rate of Angola's economic presence in foreign economies dictates, to a large extent, the level of political influence over governments. With this in mind, Nigeria will certainly not welcome the possibility of an ECOWAS membership having its political guidelines influenced by a rival African power.

Moreover, Angola's involvement in Guinea-Bissau goes in line with Luanda's strategy to export security to other African countries,⁴ including contributions for SSR. That strategy, grounded on the use of the Armed Forces as a foreign policy instrument, serves the need to mobilize an army that is among the largest, better prepared and equipped in Africa.

After years of attention dedicated to the United States, Europe and China, Luanda intends to reshape its reputation and turn to Africa. Therefore, Luanda aims to transform Bissau into a base for projecting power and influence beyond the regions in which it is more actively involved, thus expanding its presence across the Gulf of Guinea and establishing a foothold in West Africa.

In sum, an active presence in Guinea-Bissau enables Luanda to attain greater projection within ECOWAS's sphere of influence, bringing with it implications for Nigeria and also Senegal.

Senegal was certainly the most interested party in the end of Angola's involvement in Bissau. Enjoying a close relationship since both countries' independence—namely in managing the

Casamance crisis—the Bissauan shift to Luanda in the late 2000's was a major blow to Dakar's foreign policy, in particular by depriving it of a major regional ally and also of the rare chance to exert decisive influence in the region.⁵

In line with Abuja, Dakar would not welcome a Bissauan government anchored in Luanda, since that would mean, among other things, that Bissau's policy guidelines on Casamance would be vulnerable to Angola's interests. Furthermore, the economic damages resulting from the materialization of Angolan projects and investment—with particular emphasis to the port of Buba and the Bissau/Bamako railway—would entail the rapid decline of Senegal as one of the major commercial hubs in West Africa.

With this said, the 2012 coup presented an opportunity for Dakar to regain influence over Guinea-Bissau and reassert itself as a regional power. In fact, the first official visit by Guinea-Bissau's interim president, in June 2012, was Dakar. Moreover, ECOMIB's deployment allowed Senegal to have once again soldiers on Bissauan soil.⁶ More recently, the presence of the Senegalese President in the donor conference, next to his Bissauan counterpart, symbolized the consolidation of that rapprochement.

South Africa's interest in Guinea-Bissau is equally relevant. The August 2011 official visit by South Africa's Vice-President, Kgalema Motlanthe, to Guinea-Bissau was marked not only by the signature of a cooperation agreement—including SSR and mineral extraction—but most importantly by the delegation's composition,⁷ highlighting the importance with which Pretoria regards Guinea-Bissau.

An integral part of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy has been the promotion of peace, good governance and post-conflict reconstruction. Nonetheless, the main drivers behind its involvement in Guinea-Bissau are most likely to be the strategic necessity to follow a main rival—in this case Angola—in its ventures into 'faraway' regions.

Angola and South Africa have cooperated on a number of issues, with a focus on the military domain.⁸ However, military cooperation is not only aimed at coordinating actions and exchanging information, but also allows for greater levels of monitoring and predictability of each other's activities. Both governments willingness to cooperate in the field of SRR in Guinea-Bissau portrays this dichotomy between cooperation and competition.

2 See Andrew McGregor "Nigerian army abandons peacekeeping missions in Mali and Darfur to combat Boko Haram" (*The Jamestown Foundation*, 24 July 2013).

3 See "Adoption of Resolution Renewing the UN's Peacebuilding Mission in Guinea-Bissau" (*What's In Blue*, 17 February 2015).

4 Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry, Equatorial Guinea and Somalia.

5 See Vincent Foucher, "Wade's Senegal and its Relations with Guinea-Bissau: Brother, Patron or Regional Hegemon?" (*South African Institute of International Affairs*, January 2013).

6 The last time that happened was in 2002, during Operation Gabou.

7 The Minister of State Security, Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Deputy Minister of Defence and Military Veterans and Deputy Minister of Health. "Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe departs for the Republic of Guinea Bissau on an official visit" (*The Presidency Republic of South Africa*, 29 August 2011).

8 "Angola e África do Sul assinam cooperação no domínio da defesa" (*Angop*, 17 August 2011) and "RSA and Angola deepens the strategic partnerships" (*Department of Defence Republic of South Africa*, 2013).



Different context, different outcomes?

Interests by the great sub-Saharan powers in Guinea-Bissau are the same as those that led to the 2012 crisis. It is therefore of utmost importance for them to reach a constructive understanding. In addition, Bissauan authorities should act towards deepening ties with them.

The period following the reestablishment of constitutional order may have spurred fears among ECOWAS members-states that the new Bissauan authorities would again realign with Angola. Those fears emerged from the fact that President-elect José Mário Vaz served as Finance minister in the government toppled in 2012, and also that the elected Prime-Minister, Domingos Simões Pereira, is the current leader of PAIGC—the ruling party during the coup—and former secretary-general of the CPLP. Probably catching many by surprise, those fears were allayed, with the new authorities focusing on strengthening ties with regional partners.

The first official destination by the newly-elected President was Dakar, followed in the same month by Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. Angola was the last destination. Similarly, before being sworn in as Prime-Minister, Simões Pereira went on a tour across West Africa. In March 2015, already as Prime-Minister, he visited Dakar. Moreover, a planned subsequent visit to Luanda was cancelled.⁹

Angola, however, was not entirely side-lined. In February 2015, Guinea-Bissau's minister of Foreign Affairs travelled to Luanda to discuss a resumption in cooperation.¹⁰ Although the priority apparently is to strengthen ties with regional countries, nevertheless the new authorities in Bissau recognize the importance of an active role by Angola for the country's normalization.

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Is fomenting positive ties with the main parties at stake a sufficient condition for the consolidation of constitutional order and stability? Probably not, since the structural causes that led to the 2012 coup remain to be addressed. Nonetheless, given that today some crucial elements differ substantially from those of three years back, prospects seem now to be brighter.

The military has been losing power and influence over civil authorities. A key event took place in September 2014, when the president dismissed the head of the Armed Forces and 2012 coup leader, António Indjai, and replaced him with the leader of the presidential guard and confidant of the head of state, General Biague Na Ntan. In addition, the military officials' recognize the need of being discreet and forge new relationships with the international community.¹¹

Furthermore, the present situation in Nigeria differs considerably from 2012, when it enjoyed high oil prices and a relatively stable security context. However, since then the major financial contributor to the ECOWAS budget has seen its situation seriously deteriorated, driving Abuja to seek greater burden-sharing for peace and stabilization missions, in which ECOMIB is included. Developments such as the Ebola outbreak, plummeting oil prices and insecurity in the region hinder the possibility for that burden-sharing to come from ECOWAS member-states.

Angola emerges in this context as a potentially important asset.

Despite also going through a difficult economic situation, Luanda has been prioritizing investment in the Armed Forces. Thus, considering the country's military capacity and experience in the integration of former

9 "Primeiro-ministro adia visita a Angola" (*Lusa*, 17 March 2015)

10 "Angola/Guiné-Bissau: Analisado relançamento da cooperação no domínio da Defesa" (*Angop*, 26 February 2015).

11 In order to gain access to the benefits associated with the SSR, such as retirement pensions, and being under the radar of the United States' fight against drug-trafficking. Memories of the arrest of the Chief of the Bissauan Navy, in 2013, still hover in the air.



rebel fighters into the national Armed Forces, it becomes clear the advantage of having Angola as an active player in Guinea-Bissau.

Having said this, cooperation with Angola represents for ECOWAS both an opportunity—burden-sharing—and a problem—Luanda's presence in West Africa. In a context where traditional donors have been cutting costs, it is unclear how ECOWAS, and specially Nigeria, will find the much needed support and funding in line with strategic interests, i.e. keeping an African rival at bay. Few African countries have the resources and/or willingness to do so.

It will be interesting to see up to what point ECOWAS, in particular Nigeria and Senegal, will allow Luanda to resume cooperation with Bissau. Although that decision is in the hands of the democratically-elected Bissauan authorities, their actions are conditioned by the geopolitical and geostrategic interests of the great regional powers. Nonetheless, when considering that the economic, financial and security situation in West Africa does not show any sign of improving in the near-future, it becomes all the more urgent to garner additional support for ECOMIB.

One needs to acknowledge that in the absence of an efficient SSR it will not be possible to consolidate the constitutional order. A new coup will have serious consequences for the legitimacy of ECOWAS and the way it operates, something which will inevitably undermine Abuja's foreign policy objectives.

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