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Russia's "Charm Offensive" in Africa: The Case of Angola

GUSTAVO PLÁCIDO DOS SANTOS

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a major blow to ties between Moscow and the African continent. Notwithstanding, for the last decade, Vladimir Putin's Russia has been attempting to re-establish those relations, with its eyes on reverting the economic and financial impact of low oil prices and sanctions, as well as on countering growing international isolation and projecting its influence across other parts of the globe.

Africa, and in particular the sub-Saharan region, has huge potential. On the one hand, it is endowed with abundant natural resources, has a growing consumption market and displays a wide portfolio of potential investment opportunities. On the other hand, the African continent accounts for about a third of the memberships in the United Nations, therefore representing a highly promising base of support for Moscow's initiatives and protection of its interests in international *fora*. Also worth noting is Russia's intention to counterbalance the West's influence in Africa and increase its foothold in the Atlantic, the latter being an integral part of Moscow's new naval doctrine.¹

Angola's potential

Angola has been on the frontline of Russia's expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. Luanda enjoys strong historical ties with Moscow, and is one of the major African powers and non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2015-2016 biennium. In addition, the Angolan government has maintained volatile relations with the West — driven by recurrent accusations related to human rights violations — and is experiencing a difficult economic and financial context, largely due to low oil prices.

Angola was one of the first countries visited by Vladimir Putin in 2006 and, in June 2009, then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev included Luanda in his first official trip to sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, José Eduardo dos Santos' government is one of the main supporters of Russia's foreign policy, as demonstrated by the expression of Angola's "solidarity with Russia in various issues, including Ukraine" by the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Chikoti, in April 2014.²

Although political ties have failed to translate into deeper commercial interactions, it is worth highlighting Angola's potential for Russian companies, especially in terms of mineral resources. Mining is particularly relevant,

1 Roland Oliphant, "Putin eyes Russian strength in Atlantic and Arctic in new naval doctrine" (*The Telegraph*, 27 July 2015).

2 "Angola solidária com a Rússia" (*Lusa*, 8 April 2014).



given Russia's depleting mineral-resource base — as reported by the African Development Bank. The situation worsens when considering the impact of sanctions on the ability of Russian companies to access investment and technology required for cost-effective exploration of resources in Russia.³

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the Africa chapter of the document defining Russia's foreign economic strategy until 2020 makes several references to Angola's investment potential, particularly in terms of natural resource prospection and purchasing, and infrastructure construction.⁴

Development and geostrategy

Russia's geostrategic interests have in assisting development and modernization of African countries an important tool, as they allow Moscow to simultaneously deepen ties and consolidate influence in the region. One of the standouts in this aspect is Moscow's support for space programs in the continent, especially in terms of communications and surveillance satellites.

Russian companies developed and launched into orbit the South-African earth observation satellite Kondor-E, which provides South Africa's armed forces with daily high-resolution imagery. In addition, the satellite is an integral part of Project Condor, a joint satellite system, between Moscow and Pretoria, that according to information gathered by Aljazeera, provides surveillance of the entire African continent.⁵ Moscow also developed and launched into orbit the surveillance satellite EgyptSat 2, which supplies the Egyptian government with high-resolution imagery of Earth for environmental, scientific and military purposes.⁶

Likewise, the Angolan government also benefited from Russia's support in developing its first telecommunications satellite, Angosat1, which is due to be launched into orbit from Russia by 2017. The agreement was signed in 2009 with Rosoboronexport — a state company responsible for exports and imports of defense-related products — and also included training of Angolan technicians and the construction of two control centers, one of which is to be based in Russia.⁷

Having said this, it is possible to conclude that Russia's

assistance to African space programs has geostrategic motivations. In 2014, the digital security company Kaspersky Lab studied a group of hackers, called Ouroboros, responsible for cyber-spying operations against Ukraine and European and American government agencies. The company found that the group uses communications satellites, preferably from operators based in the Middle East and Africa, allowing them to hide their server's exact location. Also worth noting is that, according to Western authorities, the group has links to the Russia government.⁸

Therefore, since the Angolan satellite is being developed with Russian technology and by Russian technicians, and that one of the control centers is located in Russia, it should not be ruled out that Angosat1 may become an additional tool for Russia's intelligence and military services. That being the case, Moscow will be able to gather greater knowledge of the West's military and diplomatic strategies and capabilities. On the other hand, Angosat1 provides Moscow with a greater surveillance reach in sub-Saharan Africa, especially over its interests in Angola's resources and, just as important, over the Gulf of Guinea.

The Gulf of Guinea's strategic importance

Aside from the lure of vast oil reserves, Sub-Saharan Africa is set to produce more gas than Russia by 2040.⁹ Thus, the region becomes a viable alternative for the European Union's aim of diversifying energy sources away from Russia. In this sense, given the geographic proximity, countries such as Nigeria would be in the front line to satisfy Europe's diversification goals. However, instability in Nigeria and its neighborhood positions Angola — one of Africa's most stable energy producers — as a viable alternative.

Together with sanctions, the EU's diversification goals endanger Russia's economic security, as it depends on energy exports to Europe. With this said, the participation of Russian companies in the Angolan energy sector — and thus in the Gulf of Guinea — goes in line with Moscow's geostrategic considerations, i.e. by maintaining Russian energy companies within the sphere of Europe's energy interests. In fact, several state-owned Russian companies have already expressed interest in cooperating with Sonangol in the joint development of gas and oil fields, both in Angola and Russia.¹⁰

Furthermore, entering the Angolan energy sector and exploring resources in the Gulf of Guinea also implies guaranteeing security in the region. In this context, it is

3 "Russia's Economic Engagement with Africa" (*African Development Bank*, 11 May 2011), p. 5. See also Nikolay Pakhomov e Daniel Wagner, "How Western energy sanctions on Russia have backfired" (*Russia Direct*, 23 June 2015).

4 Baruti Amisi, "Africa: Brics Corporate Snapshots in Africa" (*Pambazuka News*, 9 April 2014).

5 Scott Firsing, "Africa is jumping into the space race" (*The Conversation*, 11 May 2015); and, Caroline Hellyer, "Russia returns to Africa amid increasing isolation" (*Aljazeera*, 10 March 2015).

6 "Egyptian reconnaissance satellite launched by Soyuz" (*Spaceflight Now*, 16 April 2014).

7 "Creation of a Satellite Communications System in Angola" (*Eximbank of Russia*, 31 March 2011) and, "Primeiro satélite angolano com centro de controlo em Luanda" (*Lusa*, 28 June 2015).

8 Sam Jones, "Russian group accused of hacking satellites" (*The Financial Times*, 9 September 2015).

9 James Crisp, "IEA: Sub-Saharan Africa will produce more gas than Russia" (*Euractiv*, 30 October 2014).

10 "Rosneft, Bashneft and Gazprom Neft sets sights on Angola" (*Interfax*, 18 February 2015).



worth highlighting the efforts by NATO member-states in promoting maritime security, Portugal's technical-military cooperation with Portuguese-speaking African countries, and joint military exercises within the CPLP and AFRICOM frameworks.

Russia, for its part, has not remained indifferent to this issue. In July 2015, for the first time in 25 years, Russian navy vessels, belonging to the Black Sea Fleet, arrived in the port of Luanda to celebrate the 40 years of diplomatic relations between both countries. However, the stopover also consisted on deepening technical-military cooperation. According to a statement by the Russian embassy in Luanda, there will be more visits of this sort with the aim of contributing "to the consolidation of military cooperation between both countries" and enhancing security in the South Atlantic.¹¹

Russia's defense industry and projection of Moscow's interests

Angola was the only African participant in the International War Games, organized in Russia in August 2015. In a context of international isolation, the games are a means for Russia to strengthen military cooperation with participating countries and display its defense industry. Moreover, Angola was also the sole African country to send military observers to attend a naval exercise in the Caspian Sea, organized within the framework of the International War Games.¹²

Relations between Angola and Russia are mostly characterized by military cooperation and arms sales, allowing Moscow to diversify export markets for its defense industry, while showing its commitment towards contributing for Angola's security.

The Russian defense sector is the country's second largest export industry. Russia is the world's second biggest arms exporter after the United States, exports to 65 countries and has signed technical-military cooperation agreements with 89 countries.¹³ This is a highly profitable industry and one of the few in which Russia can compete in the global market.

Furthermore, given Russia's difficult economic and financial situation, and the fact that a company under sanctions, Rosoboronexport, manages 80% of Russian arms exports,¹⁴ it is hardly surprising that Moscow seeks to project its defense-related exports to other world regions. With this in mind, President Putin has emphasized the importance of strengthening Russia's presence in the

global arms market, including Africa.¹⁵ This shift towards emerging economies played a major part in boosting arms exports in 2014, reaching a record \$13.3 billion — it is expected to once again surpass the \$13 billion line in 2015.¹⁶ In fact, over the last decade, 35.1% of total arms imports in Africa originated from Russia.¹⁷ Angola, for its part, is Russia's biggest customer in the continent. Being the African country with the second largest percentage of GDP dedicated to the military — expected to double by 2019 —¹⁸ one cannot fail to notice how interesting the Angolan market is. In 2013, the government signed a \$1 billion contract with Rosoboronexport for the provision of arms and military equipment, such as fighter jets and helicopters.¹⁹

A challenge to the West

Strained relations between African countries and the West open the door to the expansion of emerging powers' interests on the continent. This tendency is particularly relevant in regards to Moscow, which, due to sanctions and international isolation, regards the projection of its interests in other world regions as a necessary approach for Russia's reassertion in the global arena.

It is increasingly evident that the West is losing ground in Africa to Russia. And by saying the West, one can also refer to NATO, which maintains strained relations with Russia. In fact, it is no coincidence that Moscow's new naval doctrine was designed, to some extent, as a response to NATO's "unacceptable" expansion along Russia's borders. This said, Russia's presence in Africa, namely in the Atlantic coast, poses a challenge to the Atlantic Alliance's geostrategic considerations.

Hence, NATO member-states should create strategic partnerships with Africa's major powers, the likes of which should be underpinned on fomenting positive ties and also on promoting economic, financial, political and social stability. Only then will the West be able to compete with the Russian offensive in the African continent and have greater leeway to promote the deepening and consolidation of democratic institutions. This institutional aspect is key not only to the sustainability of relations between the West and Africa, but also in order to contain the growing presence of emerging powers in the continent.

Angola can play a crucial role in this respect. Deeper ties between Luanda and Moscow allows for access to a market with huge potential, while contributing to Rus-

11 "Navios russos escalam Luanda" (*Jornal de Angola*, 10 July 2015).

12 Jeremy Bender, "11 incredible pictures from Russia's International Army Games" (*Business Insider*, 5 August 2015); and, "India, Angola, Venezuela Observers to Visit Caspian Derby-2015" (*Sputnik*, 3 August 2015).

13 "Russia Seeks to Boost Arms Exports in 2015, Despite Western Sanctions" (*The Jamestown Foundation*, 9 February 2015).

14 "U.S. sanctions Russia's state-owned arms exporter Rosoboronexport" (*Reuters*, September 2015).

15 "Russia Seeks to Boost Arms Exports in 2015, Despite Western Sanctions".

16 Matthew Bodner, "Despite Sanctions, Russian Defense Revenues Soaring" (*Defense News*, 29 July 2015).

17 Mark Anderson e Achilleas Galatsidas, "Global weapons trade targets Africa as imports to Algeria and Morocco soar" (*The Guardian*, 20 March 2015).

18 Oscar Nkala, "Angolan military expenditure to top \$13 billion by 2019" (*DefenceWeb*, 28 November 2014).

19 "Russia will supply Angola with \$1 billion in weapons" (*Rostec*, 16 October 2013).



sia's assertion in two strategically important regions for western powers — Gulf of Guinea and South Atlantic. In addition, Angola is one of the most politically stable countries in the region and pivotal for regional stability, providing Russia with the change to attain greater global prominence, as it demonstrates Moscow's commitment towards promoting regional security. In short, Angola is a strategic country for any world power intending to expand its interests and influence in Africa, the Gulf of Guinea and the South Atlantic.

Nevertheless, it should be taken into consideration that any strategic partnership with Luanda faces considerable obstacles. Overcoming those obstacles entails that Western political decision-making centers regard the current context from a realist perspective and also a willingness to moderate their attitude towards the continent, especially in regards to Angola.

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão
ASSISTANT EDITOR | Gustavo Plácido dos Santos

DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua da Junqueira, 188 - 1349-001 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

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