



THE AFRICAN VECTOR IN RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: THE ANGOLAN CASE (2000-2020)¹

At a time of increased tension with the West, Africa and specifically Angola became the target of a new impetus in the relationship with Russia. African potential offers Russia possibilities for political-diplomatic concertation, military cooperation and very attractive economic relations, emerging as a relevant strategic option with expected benefits for Russia at internal and international levels.

Angola emerges as an illustrative example of Russian international action through cooperation and specifically of the Russian strategy for the African continent. The Russian-Angolan relationship benefits from important historical and political ties, a legacy of the Soviet era, which enabled support for Angolan independence and the construction of the country as it is today. Angola's regional potential and the economic possibilities it offers Russia are equally relevant. The affinity between the two leaders also allows for greater political proximity and the sharing of a common international agenda. Just as Russian foreign policy was guided by different cycles, due to endogenous and exogenous factors, also the relationship with Africa and, consequently, with Angola, had moments of greater development and others of greater stagnation. The African continent is a permanent vector in the Russian international agenda and, in this sense, the times when less attention has been devoted to Africa do not mirror a total lack of interest for the continent, but rather a greater relevance ascribed by Russia to other vectors at certain times within the last twenty years.

The role of the African vector has remained constant in Russia's foreign policy with Vladimir Putin, its weight oscillating only when compared to other vectors at certain times. After the breath given in the first decade of the millennium, after a period of some lethargy and especially after the annexation of Crimea and the consequent climate of tension with the West, Africa and specifically Angola become the target of a new impetus in the relationship with Russia. Given the expected permanence in power of the current Russian leadership, especially after the recent constitutional changes, there seems to be no significant shift in its foreign policy, and the

latest developments in the relationship with Africa appear to be quite auspicious for both sides.

Turning its attention to the international game of chess and trying to counter the United States (US)-centric unipolar order and the emergence of other players such as China or India, the African continent, which garners much of the world's attention, acquires increasing importance in the eyes of the Russians, especially in economic terms. South Africa and Namibia in terms of Sub-Saharan Africa, and Angola within the Portuguese-Speaking African Countries (PALOP, in Portuguese), are states with which Russia wishes to keep a strong connection.

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To its credit, Soviet Russia was a major supporter of decolonisation, the African political and economic elite has studied mostly on Russian soil and its connection to the country is strong and consequently a facilitator of networking, in addition to the arms industry so expensive to the countries concerned. To this extent, both economic and political or even cultural actors will serve national interests in promoting the Russia-Africa relationship. Mechanisms such as the forgiveness of African debt counterbalance the Russian goal of wishing to be the world power in

production and market economy and the importance that nuclear capability still holds for itself. Russia seems to be waging a battle for a multipolar system as a counterpoint to the previous US unipolar system. Finding new allies or reinforcing old friendships becomes therefore vital. The Russian presence in Africa will have to go through a more consistent and organised approach, ultimately enabling the pursuit of Russian national interests in the region.

The political-diplomatic dimension

On the 11st of November of 2020, the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Angola was celebrated. According to the Russian diplomatic representative in Luanda, the fraternal ties that unite the two countries are historic and unbreakable. In the document prepared by the Russian Embassy to mark the ephemeris, Ambassador Vladimir Tararov mentions the important role played by the then Soviet Union in the Angolan conquest of independence and in the consolidation of its State. The diplomat also points out the progressive development of multisector bilateral cooperation in the political, economic and humanitarian areas, as well as cooperation in the international arena for global peace and security. As strategic partners, Tarakov added, there is an interest in expanding and strengthening this cooperation and seeking new political-diplomatic opportunities.

For the Russian Ambassador, Russian-Angolan relations have experienced a new vigour after the two visits made to Russia in 2019 by Angolan President João Lourenço, aided by the military decoration awarded to the Russian Federation on March 23rd and the highest Angolan state decoration to President Vladimir Putin on April 4th of the same year. In 2019, the main instru-



ment was also created, as it points out, for cooperation in the economic sphere, the Russia-Africa Business Council, with a view to developing dialogue between the business circles of the two countries.

Cooperation in the area of education and culture is another important pillar that highlights this relationship. The offer of scholarships in Russian universities to young Angolan students is an important aspect in the cooperation and formation of the African elite, an initiative that has been in place since the Soviet period. Every year, about 1,000 Angolan students are studying at higher education institutions in Russia. As stated in the same publication, the Russian-Angolan relationship is based on the principle of mutual respect for interests, trust and friendship, and the fact that Moscow and Luanda have maintained close cooperation in the pursuit for solutions for regional and international affairs, aligning positions regarding most points of the global agenda and building a world order based on the principles of multipolarity, the rule of international law and respect for all states without exception.

According to President Putin, not only because of its economic potential, but above all because of Russia's perceived image in Angola, the closeness of this connection warrants the furtherance of relations between the two States and the maintenance of an active political dialogue. For his part, the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, highlights Russia's appreciation for the depth of its relationship with Angola, "a friend and partner of time-tested Russia". In 2018, his Angolan counterpart said that Angola was already Russia's main partner in Africa. In the Russian strategy for Africa, Angola seems to take an important role. There is a plethora of examples of diplomatic correspondence, especially from 2000 onward, which are illustrative of the relevance of Russian-Angolan relations. Another important moment that seems to prove the particular nature of the affinity between the two political leaders and their respective countries was the official visit in October 2006 of the then Angolan president to Moscow, charged with enormous symbolism, aimed at "strengthening bilateral cooperation relations, at a time when the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Friendship between the two countries is being cele-

brated". In addition to the usual bilateral talks, intergovernmental agreements and memoranda of cooperation between companies from the two countries, the Angolan president was awarded the insignia of the Order of Friendship, "for his personal contribution to strengthening existing friendship and cooperation."

The military dimension

The Russian presence in the African continent possesses furthermore a military dimension, which historically refers to Soviet technical-military support for African independent and anti-colonial movements and is currently relevant to the Russian arms industry because of the importance of weapon exportation to the African and, in particular, Angolan markets. If, on the one hand, the relevance of Angolan militarisation seems to emerge as a way to increase its potential as a regional power, on the other hand, the Russian-Angolan military closeness seems to be meaningful also as a way of perpetuating the counterpoint to the West in the African continent.

Trying to fill the void in the face of an US recession and the decline of European influence, as well as seeking to balance China's predominantly economic interest in the African continent, Russia appears to maintain its focus on exports of natural resources and armaments.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia is the largest arms supplier in Africa, holding 49% of total arms exports to the continent. Since 2000, the number of African countries importing Russian weapons has increased from sixteen to twenty-one and Angola has been the third largest African customer, marginally behind Algeria and Egypt, since Russia began selling arms to the country in 2015. Angola seems to be a natural choice for Russia in this area of bilateral relationships, given the existing historical ties.

According to Stronski (2020), for Moscow's long-term strategy of arms exports to Africa, it has contributed the fact that the national authorities of those countries still face Russia from the perspective of the ties dating back to the Soviet era and the fact that Moscow has been able to preserve its influence.

The deepening of ties with Africa as one of the main priorities of Russian foreign policy was reiterated by President Putin at the 1st Russia-Africa Forum held in Sochi in 2019 (Signé, 2019). In addition to Russian weaponry being more price-competitive and reliable, an added value offered by military cooperation with Russia, the author argues, is the possibility of repairing and modernising Soviet equipment that may still exist in African countries, as well as the installation of local manufacturing centres that can provide an opportunity for employability and expertise of African workers in the area. In the case of Angola, this possibility was made public by its president during the 2019 Russian-Angolan Business Forum. Regarding other major arms exporters, the conclusion of agreements for the sale of Russian arms does not require particular political or human rights conditions. As Alexandra Kuimova advances, these negotiations are relatively swift and protected by the confidentiality that state secrecy requires, with no need to make detailed records or monitor the sale of arms (cit. in Kondratenko, 2020). Trying to fill the void in the face of an US recession and the decline of European influence, as well as seeking to balance China's predominantly economic interest in the African continent, Russia appears to maintain its focus on exports of natural resources and armaments. As a continent troubled by great instability that poses constant challenges to the international community and fuels the arms market, Africa accounts for near 39% of Russia's defence industry revenue and seems to serve as an alternative to the policy of economic sanctions imposed by the West. Insofar as Angola, marketwise, is a relatively accessible and desirable supplier, it seems to be advantageous to strengthen ties also in the military field. It was to this extent, and as a strategic partner of Russia, that Angola was the only African country invited to participate in the 2015 military exercises, the so-called "I International Military Games".

The economic dimension

The Angolan government's commitment to openness to cooperation and external investment in the exploitation of the natural resources at its disposal seems to be an increasingly consistent political option. A very attractive area for the Russian government and companies. Illustrative of this political intention is the launching of the investment platform "Angola Oil & Gas 2021", an important event for the Angolan government and private sector in terms of commitment to obtain agreements and partnerships for the implementation of projects in the area of oil and gas exploration in a post-pandemic economic recovery phase. The event aims to take significant steps in digitisation and technology, licenses for oil and gas exploration, modernisation of the energy sector and entry into the Angolan market and attract foreign companies.

In addition to Angola being an important strategic partner for Russia in terms of the Russian arms industry, as previously mentioned, also at the level of the energy sector this relationship seems to have a significant weight. Although turnover between the two countries declined in 2018, about a third of what has been recorded so far, standing at \$80 billion USD, according to Dmitry Kobylkin, the then representative of the Russian Ministry of

Natural Resources and the Environment, Angola was 15th on the list of Sub-Saharan African countries in bilateral trade volume. For this reason, and within the framework of the existing Russia-Angola Intergovernmental Commission, the Russian-Angolan Trade Council was established in 2019, for the direction of which Sergey Ivanov, CEO of the important Russian diamond exploration company with a strong presence in Angola, Alrosa, was appointed.

According to Ivanov, this Council's mission is to develop contacts between potential business partners, promote Russian trade in the Angolan market and attract Angolan companies to Russia. He conveyed, moreover, that its role will also involve a close dialogue with the Russian and Angolan ministries and the participation in joint meetings on trade and technical-scientific cooperation. For Ivanov, the creation of this important cooperation mechanism confirms Russia's intention of strengthening commercial ties with the continent and Angola.

The presence of large Russian companies – backed mostly by state capital – in Angola seems to demonstrate not only the importance of the Angolan market, but also the relevance of this type of operators in the pursuit of Russian foreign policy. Operations in Africa, particularly in Angola, carried out by companies such as Alrosa, in the ex-

ploration of diamonds; Gazprom, Rosneft, Lukoil, in the area of oil and gas resource exploration; Yandex in the area of the digital economy or Rosatom in the area of nuclear energy, aim not only to increase their revenues and expand their business area, but at the same time to increase Russia's influence in these countries and convert that economic cooperation into important political and international support at a time of increased tension with the West.

Russian energy policy is an important part of its external action, namely as a political-diplomatic mechanism and for the promotion and defence of what it considers to be the national interest. Let us consider, for instance, the increase in the price of gas for Ukraine in 2014, reported by the Angolan news agency, "Portal de Angola", which states that, following the Ukrainian crisis, the state-owned company Gazprom would increase by 44% the price of gas supply to that country.

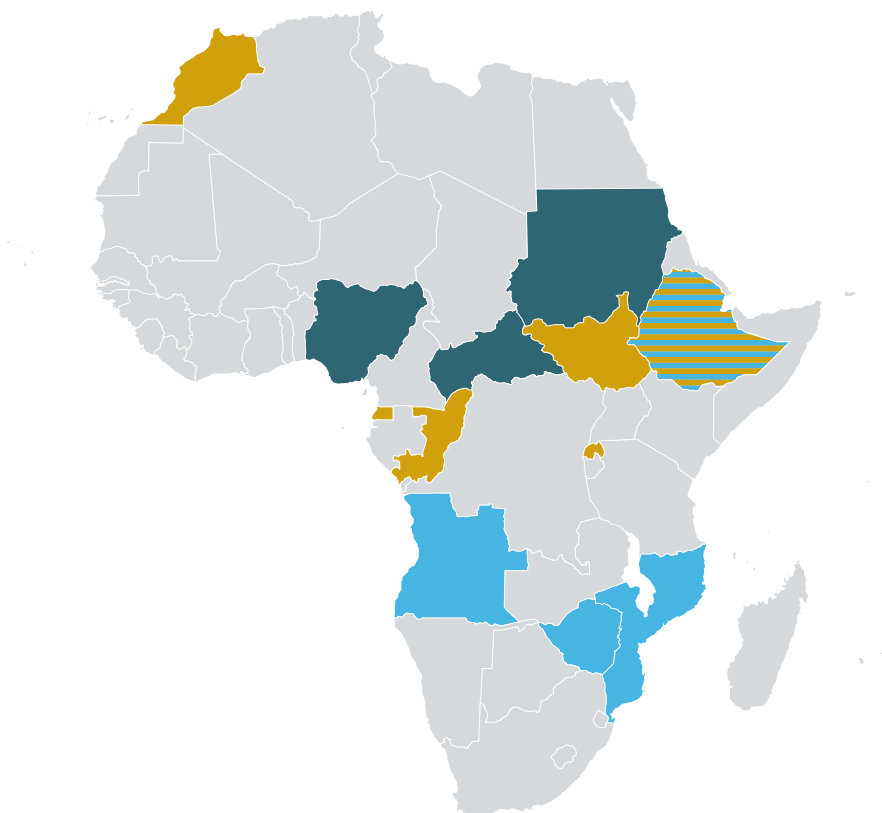
Another important step towards the modernisation of the Angolan state was achieved through a very close partnership cooperation with Russia, in the construction of the first Angolan satellite, Angosat 1, involving an investment of about €270 million Euros. The device was built in 2017 by a Russian state consortium and involved the Russian state-owned special company, Roscosmo. In addition to the construction

FIGURE. RUSSIA'S NEW DEALS IN AFRICA

Fonte: The Moscow Times, 2019.

- **Military and Politics:**
 - Nigeria
 - CAR
 - Sudan

Russia plans to send \$4 billion worth of weapons to African countries in 2019
- **Energy:**
 - Ethiopia
 - Republic of Congo
 - Equatorial Guinea
 - Morocco
 - South Sudan
 - Rwanda
- **Trade:**
 - Angola
 - Ethiopia
 - Mozambique
 - Zimbabwe



and launch of the Angolan satellite, Russia was also in charge of the technical support, as well as the monitoring and maintenance of the device. A new investment was approved by the Angolan government in 2020. This is the project to build a second satellite, commissioned to the Russian company Reshetnev Information Satellite Systems, which will take on all obligations and rights to put the satellite into orbit. In the context of the Russian-Angolan relationship, in addition to close political and diplomatic ties, economic cooperation emerges as a dimension that is intended to be more relevant. Although important steps have been taken over the last few years to breathe new life into it, Angolan expectations seem not yet to have been fully met, and they want political intention to materialise into more concrete actions. Although trade numbers remain below the potential of the Angolan market, Russian-Angolan understanding regarding the exploration of natural resources and at the level of energy diplomacy seems to be consistent. The Russian presence in Angola, and in Africa in general, is requested by African governments and serves as a counterweight to the growth of influence by China and the West in the continent.

Final Remarks

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia advocates a new multipolar international order in opposition to the liberal international order of American hegemony, defending the rule of international law and restraining the importance of the United Nations and multilateralism. During the last 20 years, the Russian international path has been headed towards a greater distancing from the West and an affirmation of its domestic and international uniqueness. Projecting an image of global power, Putin claims the importance of his role in the world and the defence of his strategic interests. More than an integration into the Western system, Russia wants to be respected by its peers and to see its foreign policy agenda acknowledged. At a time when the relationship with the West is shaken by increased tension, distrust and mutual accusations, it feels the need to find a new dynamic of alliances and partnerships in the extra-Western space. With a pragmatic and increasingly assertive foreign policy, it seeks the path of cooperation, strengthening ties and the establishment of partnerships that allow it to avoid international isolation.

To this extent, the African continent as a whole, and Angola in particular, are an alternative to achieve this strategic objective. African potential offers Russia possibilities for political-diplomatic concertation, military cooperation and very attractive economic relations. Since Russian foreign policy is formulated in relation to the "Other", either by extending Western influence in its sphere of influence from post-Soviet space, which is considered vital, or by weakening its economy due to the economic sanctions it is under or even by the anti-Russian Western political narrative, it seems natural that a new breath should be given to other regional areas, such as the ones offered by Africa, with a view to an international balance as regards the West.

Note

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