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Angola's Foreign Policy: Pragmatic Recalibrations

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ABSTRACT

The interconnectedness between domestic security and international relations has defined Angola's post-colonial history. To survive various domestic security challenges, the country deployed considerable resources in two areas. Internally, Angola invested disproportionately in a strong security sector to deal with the immediate threats posed by opposing parties. Internationally, it focused diplomatic efforts on nurturing relations with key strategic allies, notably the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Cuba, to help shape external environments to its advantage. This strategy has succeeded in ensuring regime survival. With the end of the civil war and as the regime sought to consolidate its gains, an important foreign policy recalibration took place that resulted in the development of a strategic partnership with China. Recently, internal expectations and demands for fast economic growth within a democratic political system have meant that relations with mature democracies like the US are likely to take precedence. The paper assesses the trajectory of Angola's foreign policy as a reflection of its desire to manage three key historical challenges. These are survival, between independence in 1975 and the end of the civil war in 2002; reconstruction and growth, from the end of the civil war to the present; and the approaching task of democratic development. The paper suggests that for each stage, Angola has embraced a major international partner – the former USSR for survival; China for reconstruction and growth; and the US for democratic development.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AGOA	African Growth and Opportunity Act
BRIC	Brazil, Russia, India and China
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FNLA	Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (National Front for the Liberation of Angola)
GRAE	Governo Revolucionário de Angola no Exílio (Revolutionary Government of Angola in Exile)
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PLUA	Partido da Luta Unida dos Africanos de Angola (Party of the United Struggle of the Africans of Angola)
Sonangol	Sociedade Nacional de Combustíveis de Angola (National Society of Energy of Angola)
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organization
TIFA	Trade and Investment Framework Agreement
UNITA	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

INTRODUCTION

Angola came into being as an independent state under traumatic circumstances. In the months before Portuguese rule ended in November 1975, the country quickly descended into civil war after three nationalist movements, the FNLA,¹ the MPLA² and UNITA,³ failed to find common ground on how to share power and wealth in post-colonial Angola. With the help of foreign allies, the FNLA and UNITA used military force in an attempt to dislodge the MPLA from the capital city of Luanda before independence in time to replace the departing Portuguese colonial authorities. Zairian and South African troops invaded Angola in an attempt to place the FNLA and UNITA, respectively, in power. The MPLA took similar action by obtaining Cuban assistance to hold Luanda successfully until independence was proclaimed. As the MPLA's leader, Agostinho Neto, declared Angola's independence, the sound of heavy artillery could be heard in the background as advancing FNLA/Zairian troops were stopped on the outskirts of the capital. The UNITA/South African advance was also stopped south of Luanda, largely owing to Cuban military intervention. Failure to dislodge the MPLA from Luanda before independence did not deter its foes from attempting to overthrow its nascent government. It marked the start of a protracted civil war in which UNITA was the main internal enemy, and South Africa, Zaire and the US were the main external adversaries.

In the years since independence, Angola has pragmatically recalibrated its foreign relations and sought key global backers to survive the traumatic first decades as an independent country and to develop a viable post-colonial, post-conflict state. Angola's relations with the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (hereafter referred to as the USSR), played a critical role during this period. Having progressed beyond the survival stage, and with the USSR defunct, China has become Angola's main external backer in its current stage of reconstruction and growth. As this stage evolves into a higher stage of democratic development, Angola can be expected to seek an ever-closer relationship with the US. The paper discusses Angola's foreign policy as a response to internal dynamics and its use as an important survival tool for the MPLA government since coming to power.

FOREIGN POLICY AS A SURVIVAL TOOL

Foreign policy refers to the conduct of a state's global engagements to achieve, consolidate or advance specific strategic objectives in relation to other states. Some countries use foreign policy as a tool to accumulate and display power on the world stage, whereas others simply use it to achieve more modest domestic goals. Most African countries fall into the second category. Having achieved sovereignty under difficult and often violent conditions, and with few strategic resources to exercise that sovereignty effectively, many African countries craft and execute their foreign policies as a critical instrument to secure external assistance to solve their domestic problems. Angola exemplifies this trend.

Since gaining independence from Portugal in 1975, Angola has faced severe domestic, regional and international challenges. Angola's dominant domestic reality for the first 27 years was civil war. It faced an unfavourable regional environment dominated by two enemies, namely Apartheid South Africa and Mobutu's Zaire; and it was an important Cold War battleground. From the outset, the post-colonial leadership recognised the connection

between domestic security, regime survival, and regional and international politics. This realisation forced the new Angolan government into allocating considerable resources to foreign relations. The instinctive foreign relations pragmatism of the ruling MPLA has enabled Angola to achieve impressive successes, especially at the regional level, despite the odds against it. Faced with seemingly insurmountable domestic challenges, the MPLA government regularly recalibrated Angola's international relations as a tool for engaging external allies that could help it to overcome those challenges. During the critical years following independence and through much of the 1980s, Angola relied heavily on the USSR and Cuba. Their assistance was critical in enabling the MPLA to survive regular South African military incursions into Angolan territory, which had the dual purpose of disrupting SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) operations into Namibia and providing assistance to UNITA.⁴ Combined with US support, South African assistance, especially in training and logistics, played a critical role in transforming UNITA into a powerful semi-conventional force which, by the late 1980s, posed a serious threat of overthrowing the MPLA government. The true measure of South Africa's impact on UNITA's transformation is illustrated by the rebel movement's survival as a fighting force for a decade as an international pariah – between 1992 and 2002 – after its leader rejected the outcome of Angola's first multi-party elections and resumed the civil war.

When the civil war ended in 2002, the Angolan government undertook another major recalibration of its foreign relations to align with changed domestic, regional and international dynamics. At the domestic level, the government's main internal nemesis, UNITA, had been defeated on the battlefield and was desperately averting implosion after the death of its founder and long-time leader, Jonas Savimbi, who was killed in combat. This enabled the government to turn its focus to consolidating its power by demonstrating the capacity to govern unencumbered by the weight of war. This meant building strong post-colonial and post-conflict foundations capable of delivering fast economic growth, political stability and social cohesion as a counterweight to the structural violence that dominated social interactions. At the regional level, the government's circle of enemies became a circle of friends. This was because the MPLA had played a critical role in the liberation of both Namibia and South Africa, the overthrow of the Mobutu regime in the former Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo – DRC) in 1997, and the return to power of Denis Sassou Nguessou in Congo-Brazzaville in the same year. These changes effectively halted regional support for the MPLA's internal adversaries.⁵ At the international level, the Angolan government recalibrated its foreign policy to take full advantage of China's own consolidation as a global power. In many ways, China – a fast-growing, resource-hungry, illiberal power – is Angola's ideal global strategic partner in this particular phase of post-war growth. China is able and willing to provide the massive quantities of capital and specialised labour that Angola urgently requires to undertake its ambitious reconstruction plans as a critical first step to achieve accelerated economic growth capable of addressing acute levels of poverty. Although China's assistance is conditional – such as its stipulation of access to Angola's natural resources, especially oil – unlike the West, it does not demand transparent governance as a key condition for assistance.

The current Angola–China strategic partnership will be tested for two reasons. Firstly, despite the magnitude of the post-conflict rebuilding efforts being financed by Chinese capital, the expectations and aspirations postponed by Angolans for 27 years are too great to be adequately satisfied in the near future. Secondly, as recent events in Angola attest,⁶

its citizens are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with a regime which many consider to be corrupt and dictatorial. To survive growing domestic pressures to satisfy both economic and political aspirations of the citizenry, the governing MPLA is likely to use pragmatism again as its main compass, as it moves away from heavy reliance on the Asian giant towards closer relations with the US and other mature democracies.

ANGOLA AND THE MAJOR POWERS: ENSURING SURVIVAL, RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Angola–Russia relations

The anti-colonial liberation war in Angola, as with most such conflicts elsewhere on the continent, relied heavily on external support – both regionally and beyond. The complexities and peculiarities of the colonial society in Angola produced several nationalist movements which were as violent to settler rule as they were to each other. To defend themselves against this two-sided mortal threat, the Angolan nationalist movements had to cultivate and sustain external connections. However, given the fractious nature of Angolan nationalism, newly independent African states emerging in an era of Pan-Africanism were reluctant to take sides by supporting a single movement. Instead, most African states focused on the noble, but ultimately futile, effort of promoting unity among Angolan nationalist movements. Unity would not occur for a number of reasons. The colonial power saw the MPLA as a dual threat. Victory for the MPLA would result in the dismemberment of the ‘Portuguese nation’ and the installation of a godless communist regime in the jewel of the Portuguese empire. The other nationalist movements were opposed to an MPLA victory because it represented the denial of distinct national identities and aspirations for two of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in the colony. The Ovimbundu of central Angola and the Kicongo of northern Angola would be denied the opportunity to recapture the pre-colonial glory of their respective kingdoms. The Ovimbundu, who provided the backbone of UNITA support, and the Kicongo, from whom the FNLA drew much support, saw the eventual collapse of the colonial order as the last opportunity to rebuild their nations. Both groups perceived the prospect of building a new multi-national state dominated by elites, which included the mixed-race offspring of Portuguese settlers, as tantamount to neo-colonialism.

Faced with this reality on the ground, the MPLA reached out to various groups and countries around the world which shared its ideological perspective. Although the MPLA developed important political and diplomatic connections in some African and European countries with socialist governments, the USSR provided the bulk of its support.⁷ Angola–Russian relations can be traced back to the early stages of Angola’s liberation struggle, which began in 1961. The MPLA received political, diplomatic, financial, logistical and training support.⁸ Many key MPLA political and military leaders, including President José Eduardo dos Santos, were trained in the USSR. This ‘political and practical support assistance’ was granted because, for the USSR, the MPLA was among those nationalist movements in Southern Africa which were ‘fighting for a just cause’.⁹

In many respects, the MPLA owes the survival of its regime to the support it received from the USSR. Soviet assistance proved vital to the MPLA at two critical junctures. In 1975 Soviet support enabled the MPLA to avoid defeat at the hands of internal rivals, the FNLA and UNITA, which, with the help of South Africa and Zaire, were poised to take over the capital city of Luanda before independence. Then, in 1987, Soviet support enabled the MPLA and Cuban forces to defeat South Africa at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. The latter paved the way for peace in Southern Africa, thus ensuring the survival of the MPLA regime. Soviet support enabled the MPLA to consolidate power between these two important historical events.¹⁰ This took the form of substantial assistance to avoid total economic collapse in the wake of the massive and precipitous exodus of Angolan settlers before independence. Soviet and Cuban officers and functionaries attempted to fill the vacuum left by the departing colonial administration by providing technical advice to the new Angolan government and helping to manage various forms of support they were pouring into Angola. This effort had mixed results. Militarily, the intervention assured the survival of the regime. However, Soviet assistance in other spheres, such as agriculture, industry, education, health, infrastructure building and fisheries, resulted in varying degrees of failure. This was mainly because Soviet and Cuban development plans for Angola followed a socialist blueprint for which a newly independent country was not ready.

Despite the mixed results, the USSR and Cuba persisted with their efforts in Angola because they had important ideological and geostrategic interests at stake. For the USSR, the MPLA's victory and success represented an important blow to Western imperialism.¹¹ As the West and the USSR indirectly competed by expanding their alliance blocs, Angola's decision to join the Soviet fold was a critical victory. Besides Angola's value in the East versus West geostrategic competition, the country was also valuable as a Soviet ally because it provided an important entry point to immense mineral riches of Central and Southern Africa. Additionally, Angola had a vibrant and modernising economy, and controlled access to a key strategic maritime route.

Taken together, these ideological and geostrategic factors help to give a fuller perspective on Soviet involvement in Angola. Whereas, during the Cold War these factors assumed paramount importance, the end of which drastically reduced their significance. Although there was a commercial dimension to the Angola–Soviet relationship, it was not strong enough to sustain that relationship through the period of Soviet disengagement from Africa, which lasted from Gorbachev to Yeltsin. Without the ideological rationale and with ample mineral wealth of its own, Russia could not justify dedicated attention to far-away places like Angola when urgent attention was required to address domestic challenges.

For Angola, Soviet disengagement demonstrated the perils of overreliance on a single major international backer. For the MPLA regime, this had near-fatal consequences as it was left to fend for itself once the conflict reignited after the 1992 electoral fiasco. The MPLA government had to face rearmed, well-rested rebels intent on achieving through bullets what they were unable to accomplish by votes. Without Soviet (or Cuban) assistance, and facing an international arms embargo imposed by the UN, the Angolan government was seriously threatened by UNITA rebels, who overran much of the country with relative ease. Ironically, the rebels were now relying heavily on former Soviet bloc countries for their logistical supplies and for pilots to deliver them to the UNITA-

controlled territory. In the post-Soviet era, former Warsaw Pact weapons were available in abundance on the black market, which UNITA rebels exchanged for diamonds.

In many ways, the trauma in Angola associated with the collapse of the USSR negatively affected Angola–Russian relations for much of the 1990s. It also significantly depressed the returns on the considerable support the USSR had provided to the MPLA. From the collapse of the Bicesse peace process (1991–1992) to the end of the civil war in 2002, Angola–Russian relations went through a tepid period for several reasons. The momentous changes associated with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR affected Russia's positioning on the world stage. No longer engaged in the ideological confrontation with the West, Russia withdrew from direct engagement in key Cold War battlegrounds like Angola. This left its main client – the MPLA government – 'orphaned' virtually overnight. Immediately after the Cold War and during the Bicesse peace process, Russia's involvement was aligned with the US and Portugal, as members of the UN Troika of Observers in Angola. The troika was committed to playing a constructive and neutral role in Angola's transition from war to peace. Accordingly, Russia was not in a position to act as the MPLA's key backer, as the USSR had done for the previous decade and a half. During much of the 1990s, while the Angolan government successfully survived the most lethal period of the civil war without the support of old ideological allies in Moscow and Havana, Russia focused on achieving domestic stability as a key precondition to reclaiming a prominent role in international relations.

By the early 2000s, Russia had recaptured some of its international clout as a member of the Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) countries.^{12,13} However, engagement with another BRIC member, China, offered Angola the highest immediate benefits after the end of the civil war in 2002. A new era in Angola–China relations did not lead to a further cooling in Angola–Russia relations. To the contrary, renewed Russian relevance in international affairs made the possibility of rekindling relations with a former ally an enticing prospect for Angola. President José Eduardo dos Santos used the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the 1976 Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation between Angola and the USSR¹⁴ to visit Russia from 30 October 2006 to 1 November 2006. Commemorating a treaty that had played a significant role in the survival of his regime had considerable symbolic significance in its own right. It was also an ideal occasion to revitalise and reshape the relationship between the two countries, beyond its previous heavy emphasis on security co-operation during the Soviet era. This post-ideological, post-security focus was made clear during Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Luanda in 2009. The final communiqué at the end of Medvedev's visit affirmed both countries' intention to develop partnerships in key areas, namely mining, energy, transport, telecommunications, military-technical co-operation, health and education.¹⁵ In other words, economics will now dominate Angola–Russian relations. Unlike in the past, however, Russia will be the pursuer, courting Angola for lucrative contracts in energy, diamond and telecommunication sectors through the provision of important inducements. Significantly for Russia, Angola, as an increasingly important global energy player, also represents a potentially important ally as Medvedev attempts to address what the Russians perceive to be 'complex and nontransparent' pricing mechanisms in global oil markets.¹⁶

Realistically, it is unlikely that relations with Russia, despite being refreshed, will ever have the vital importance for Angola that they once had. Domestic and international

conditions have changed dramatically since the days when the Angolan regime's survival depended on support from Moscow. Besides, Angola has a new best friend in China.

Angola–China relations

Angola and China have formally agreed to establish a 'strategic partnership'.¹⁷ This is further evidence of the importance both countries place on a relationship that has grown steadily since China granted diplomatic recognition to Angola in 1983 and which has accelerated since the end of Angola's civil war. Angola is one of Africa's top oil producers, China's largest oil supplier on the continent, and China's largest trading partner in Africa.

China's relationship with Angola has a long history that can be traced back to the early stages of the liberation struggle against Portugal in the early 1960s. This involvement has consistently reflected both long-term strategic calculations and short-term pragmatism by the Chinese government. Long-term calculations resulted in China's careful and sustained engagement over the decades. These calculations were based on China's assessment of Angola's potential at various levels, especially as a supplier of raw materials, its geostrategic position in both Central and Southern Africa, and the likelihood of Angola playing a leadership role in either or both regions.

Pragmatic calculations enabled China to make and shift alliances with the three nationalist movements, depending on which appeared strongest at the time. China supported the MPLA in the early 1960s when this movement took the leading role in initiating the anti-colonial struggle. With the creation of GRAE¹⁸ by Holden Roberto in 1962, China shifted support towards this Angolan 'government'. In the mid-1960s Chinese assistance in the nationalist cause in Angola shifted again, this time towards Jonas Savimbi's embryonic movement, UNITA.¹⁹ China's support of UNITA was not surprising. As a nationalist group, UNITA claimed to represent a significant segment of the population and was likely to have a prominent role in an independent state. In the 1970s, however, China hedged its bets by resuming its provision of assistance to Holden Roberto's FNLA. This time, China calculated that the militarily stronger movement,²⁰ the FNLA, was sure to play a key role both in the run-up to independence and in post-colonial Angola. In hindsight, China's early engagement in Angola was misguided because it was based on optimistic analysis of the transition to independence. It did not take into account the possibility of civil war and the triumph of military power, which was determined mainly by external intervention, in that transition. Consequently, in the end neither UNITA nor the FNLA was capable of achieving power by political or military means. Instead, power went to the nationalist movement that was supported by one of China's main nemesis. This partly explains China's long hiatus – from 1975 to 2004 – from Angola.

China returned to Angola in a major way in 2004. Two important sets of factors brought the two countries into this mutually beneficial relationship. At the end of the civil war in 2002, Angola was in desperate need of external support to initiate a massive post-conflict reconstruction programme. Also in 2002 then Chinese President Jiang Zemin announced his country's 'going out' strategy²¹ intended to position China as a key player in the current phase of globalisation by extending and consolidating commercial links throughout the world.

China was not the Angolan government's first choice for external strategic partnership after the war, as its preference lay with Western countries. However, the West rebuffed

Angola's best efforts to seek post-conflict reconstruction support by attempting to hold a donors' conference. The West responded to Angola's requests for this conference with demands for greater transparency and accountability in the management of substantial inflows of oil revenues, before any idea of a donors' conference was seriously considered. A debilitated regime which had staked considerable political capital on the promise of a post-conflict economic boom could not afford to meet Western demands for several reasons. Firstly, this would have delayed the launch of the post-conflict reconstruction programme, thus jeopardising peace and security, because the government would have lacked the necessary capital to finance it. Secondly, the MPLA leadership, as good students of Soviet history, understood the perils of openness and transparency in a society undergoing a series of concurrent transitions. These involved moving from a one-party system to a multi-party democracy; from centralised planning to a market economy; from a controlled press to a free press; and from tense state-church relations to expanded religious freedoms. In sum, it involved moving from a closed to an open society. Thirdly, the regime was corrupt and its ruling members had no interest in financing the reconstruction programme with the considerable resources they had extracted from the state during the decades of conflict.

The West's rebuff forced the Angolan government into what turned out to be the ideal partnership for this specific phase of post-conflict reconstruction. China was in a position to provide what the West could not – cheap money and even cheaper labour – in exchange for oil. China made no demands that could be construed as interference in its internal affairs, which was equally important for Angola.

China's calculated indifference about other countries' internal affairs can be partly explained in relation to its own democratic and human rights deficits. However, this posture is mainly a reflection of the hyper mercantilism triggered by the 'going out' dimension of China's overall development strategy for the first two decades of this century. Zemin's guidance for China to seize the opportunities presented by 'the new situation of economic globalisation' was straightforward: 'bring into play our comparative advantages, consolidate our existing markets and open new ones in an effort to increase exports.'²² Angola represented more to China than a new market for its exports. It was equally significant that Angola was soon to become China's main supplier of crude oil, in exchange for loans to finance post-conflict reconstruction and to establish the economic base for long-term growth.²³

The extent of China's assistance with post-conflict reconstruction in Angola has been well documented in the literature on the 'Angola mode'. This is the Chinese practice of lending billions of dollars to African countries for infrastructure development in exchange for resources.²⁴ There is a lack of analysis on how the average citizen in Angola perceives China's involvement in their country. Most Angolans are amazed by the scale and the pace of reconstruction being carried out by Chinese workers with Chinese funds. However, recent reports suggest that not all is well in the Angola–China relationship.²⁵ The Angolan government views China as a strategic ally, whereas common citizens are more preoccupied with immediate rewards, or the lack thereof, from the economic boom brought about by Chinese presence. As Chinese companies meet their labour demands with Chinese workers, only a negligible number of Angolans are able to find jobs in the many construction sites that abound throughout the country. There is also resentment resulting from Angolan entrepreneurs being crowded out by Chinese businesspeople who have competed aggressively for space in the service sector.²⁶

Most Angolans have seen the post-colonial promise delayed by civil war which coincided with the emergence of a rapacious elite that appropriates immense amounts of public funds. Accordingly, they cannot be counted on to wait indefinitely for the benefits of independence which, for many, was understood in terms of rapid improvements in socio-economic conditions. The tension that begins to emerge at the level of the Chinese and Angolan worker provides an initial indication of the impatience and anxiety within Angolan society about prospects for fulfilling post-colonial aspirations. There is growing impatience because, while a small minority of individuals who are politically well connected have been quick to grab disproportionate shares of national wealth, the vast majority survive in poverty-stricken conditions. There is also growing anxiety because Angolans are aware that their oil wealth is impermanent. China provides an enticing model for the MPLA government in terms of fast economic growth and centralised political control. However, it is in conflict with the aspirations of most Angolans who, in addition to economic growth, also yearn for a growing and vibrant civil society, for which the Chinese model does not make provision. Angola is likely to resolve this dilemma by forging stronger strategic relationships with Western countries, especially the US, as it looks ahead to the post-reconstruction period.

Angola–US relations

Angola–US relations have been pursued mainly along two parallel lines: a smooth and solid economic lane running alongside a remarkably complex, and often rocky, political path. The positive and mutually beneficial nature of Angola–US economic relations began in the 1930s when important hydrocarbon deposits were first discovered in Angola. Since then, oil's importance as a major source of revenue for Angola has increased, partly because of the sustained presence and massive financial investments by American companies. Oil significantly diversified the colonial economy beyond coffee and other agricultural products, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, but it became the dominant commodity after independence. American investments and expertise played a considerable role in the rapid expansion of Angola's oil production during the 1980s and 1990s. By the late 2000s, Angola had surpassed Nigeria as sub-Saharan Africa's major oil producer.²⁷

The accelerated growth of Angola's oil sector began after independence, in a period when most of its other economic sectors were severely affected by the exodus of skilled settlers during decolonisation. As industrial and commercial agricultural production ground to a halt, healthy oil revenues generated from the operation of foreign oil operators, including American companies, enabled the new Angolan state to fulfil its basic requirements. Ever since, oil revenues have provided a financial lifeline for the Angolan government.

Angola–US relations outside the economic sphere have a complex history, driven by Cold War factors and Angola's domestic struggles. Although the US emerged from the Second World War as a superpower, its existence was threatened by the rise of the USSR as an ideological rival. To counter this threat, the US relied heavily on traditional allies, including Western European colonial countries like Portugal. As the Cold War got under way, nationalist movements were rising throughout many of Europe's overseas possessions. Many nationalist leaders in Africa recognised the momentous power shift that had resulted from the Second World War, and the rise of a new superpower, which had, especially since Woodrow Wilson, championed the self-determination of all people.

Some colonial powers, notably Britain and France, opted to grant independence to their African possessions. Resource-poor Portugal chose to retain control, mainly for economic reasons. Its 'overseas provinces' provided the country with both a source of important raw materials and a captive market for its goods. This economic rationale partly explains the ferocity of Portugal's response to initial nationalist demands for Angola's independence, which began in the 1950s and escalated into an armed struggle in the 1960s and 1970s.

The liberation struggle in Angola presented the US with a policy dilemma of how best to respond to peripheral events that, nevertheless, were occurring in an area of growing geostrategic importance. The US pursued the pragmatic, but ultimately conflicting, approach of continuing to support Portugal while establishing links with the Western-leaning FNLA. Within the Cold War context, no realistic alternative was available for the US. This was because Portugal was a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation ally and the MPLA's communist pedigree – the result of the merging between the Angola Communist Party and the PLUA²⁸ – disqualified it from being a potential ally.

The collapse of the Portuguese colonial regime in 1974 elevated Angola as an issue of strategic importance for the US. The country's rapid descent into civil war and the prospect of a pro-Soviet regime significantly affected regional dynamics in Central and Southern Africa. The US showed heightened interest in the unfolding crisis in Angola by modestly increasing support to the FNLA. However, direct intervention was out of the question because the crisis did not rise to a level where American intervention was either desirable or justifiable.²⁹

Following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the US re-evaluated its policy towards Angola and selected the country as one of the places where communism could be rolled back. To achieve this central tenet of the Reagan doctrine, the US found a willing and ready ally in UNITA, which was catapulted to international relevance as a consequence. Over time, especially after the repeal of the Clark Amendment allowed for direct US assistance, UNITA also achieved renewed domestic relevance. This was mainly because of its rapidly growing military capacity, demonstrated by the rapid expansion of its guerrilla activities throughout the country in the 1980s. By the end of the decade, UNITA had succeeded in placing the ruling MPLA on the defensive, both militarily and politically. Generous military assistance had enabled the Angolan insurgents to control virtually the entire countryside.

The precariousness of the governing MPLA's situation at the military, political and economic levels became starkly apparent with the changes in the former Soviet bloc. Without Soviet backing, the MPLA had little choice but to accept a US-inspired plan for peace in the region, which involved independence for Namibia and peace for Angola.

Angola welcomed the 1990s with the confidence that the new decade would finally usher in a period of post-colonial peace. A peace treaty to end the war and set the stage for democratic transition was signed in 1991 and the first multi-party elections were held in 1992. Tragically for Angola, neither the peace treaty nor the elections ended the civil war. The governing MPLA won the legislative elections and its candidate, incumbent President Dos Santos, won the first round of the presidential elections. Claiming widespread electoral fraud, Savimbi refused to participate in the second round of presidential elections and reverted to his strategy of seeking power through military means. Both the MPLA and the international community felt betrayed by Savimbi's decision to return to war. The US extended diplomatic recognition to Angola shortly after the elections, partly as a reward

for the Angolan government's move towards democracy. However, in the early 1990s the US and the international community lacked effective mechanisms to prevent UNITA from exercising the option of military force. This was because the rebels had weaned themselves off US dependence, thanks to their control of diamond mines. The diamond trade earned the rebels several hundred million dollars per year during the 1990s. Severe international sanctions against UNITA eventually took a toll on the rebels' operational capacity, thus allowing the MPLA to survive another military challenge. It would take another decade for the war to finally end. The precipitating factor was the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002, who was killed in combat.

With the end of the civil war, the Angolan government expected international sympathies to be translated into tangible offers of assistance, as it embarked on the colossal task of rebuilding the country from nearly three decades of devastation. The government expected that Western countries, in particular, would rush in with assistance because they were perceived as being partly responsible for the destruction inflicted upon Angola, owing to their support for UNITA rebels during much of the conflict. The MPLA government vigorously lobbied for a donors' conference immediately after the war. Much to its disappointment, however, such a conference never took place. Western countries viewed the civil war as an internal Angolan matter and, therefore, dismissed suggestions of culpability or responsibility. Moreover, many Western governments found it difficult to justify spending taxpayers' funds to rebuild a resource-rich country that had developed a reputation as one of the most corrupt in the world. For the West, especially the US, Angola's problem did not reside in the lack of funds but in its lack of a transparent government.

By withholding support for the donors' conference, the US signalled displeasure with the Angolan government's lack of transparency in the management of public finances, especially of funds accrued from the sale of oil and diamonds. During the civil war, billions of dollars in oil revenues had bypassed the National Bank of Angola³⁰ and were managed directly from the Futungo de Belas presidential palace. Human Rights Watch estimates that over a five-year period from 1997 to 2002, an estimated \$4.2 billion in oil revenues 'disappeared from government coffers, roughly equal to all foreign and domestic social and humanitarian spending in Angola over that same period.'³¹ While consistently disapproving of corruption in Angola, the US also encouraged the Angolan government to take concrete steps to improve governance.

Since then, the Angolan government has made positive changes in response to US requirements. These include the publication of oil revenues on the Ministry of Finance website since 2003; the introduction of the Integrated Financial Management System in 2008; regular audits of Sonangol³² and the publication of results; and the adoption of the Law of Public Probity in 2010. The changes have been well received and rewarded by the US, and have resulted in increased trade between the two countries. Mineral fuel and crude oil make up the lion's share of trade, accounting for \$9.3 billion of the \$10.8 billion respectively in total two-way trade.³³ However, Angola and the US have also established a framework for expanded economic relations through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). AGOA provides reforming African countries like Angola with 'the most liberal access to the US market available to any country or region with which the US does not have a Free Trade Agreement.'³⁴ Angola became eligible for AGOA in 2003 and signed a TIFA with the

US in 2009. The US–Angola Strategic Partnership Dialogue Agreement signed on 8 July 2010, formalising ‘increased bilateral partnerships in energy, security, trade and democracy promotion’,³⁵ represents an important qualitative step forward in US–Angola relations.

For Angola, a strategic relationship with the US is appealing for political, economic and security reasons. Politically, Angola is moving along a path of democratic transformation that began in 1991 with the end of a single-party Marxist regime. This process has been violent and traumatic, as evidenced by the inconclusive electoral process of 1992 and the return to civil war lasting for another decade, and has yielded a system that is still dominated by the MPLA. However, there are clear signs that Angola is taking small steps towards maturing into a full-fledged democratic system. Parliament is becoming increasingly important and respected for its role as the key institution in which society’s main political issues are debated and solutions found. The private press has grown quickly. It provides a healthy counterbalance to the dominant political and economic elites by consistently uncovering and questioning instances of abuses of power and illicit enrichment. The growing non-governmental organisation (NGO) community continues to play an important role, especially where accountability of the regime is concerned. Angola’s youth are showing signs of moving past the barrier of fear, which is perhaps even more important than the developments in parliament, the press and the NGO community. They have taken to the streets to demand greater government transparency and accountability, as well as greater access to economic opportunities for citizens. As they grow, these forces will continue to push Angola towards more liberal democracies like the US and away from China’s illiberal model; even though the latter holds far greater appeal for the ruling MPLA. From an economic perspective, Angola has much to gain from expanding the relationship with the US beyond the oil sector, especially in rebuilding its once-vibrant agricultural sector.³⁶ Finally, Angola and the US also share important security interests, namely maritime safety and security and regional security. With much of Angola’s oil being explored offshore and given increasing US reliance on the Gulf of Guinea’s oil, maritime security is likely to become a key element in Angola–US relations. Regional security in Central Africa, especially in the DRC, is an area in which both Angola and the US will continue to pay close attention. For Angola, the DRC currently represents its main source of external threats in the form of illegal immigration. The influx of hundreds of thousands of Congolese searching for economic opportunities brings with it important destabilising political, social and economic factors, which the Angolan government cannot ignore. The government will not only work to stop the influx but also to alleviate the main push factors behind the population movement. This involves the achievement of peace and stability in the DRC. The US is also pursuing the same goal to fulfil one of the Obama administration’s policy objectives in Africa, which is to prevent and resolve conflicts. As articulated by President Obama in his address to the Ghanaian Parliament in Accra on 11 July 2009, the US is ‘ready to partner through diplomacy and technical assistance and logistical support’,³⁷ as African states seek ways to resolve conflicts on the continent. Unsurprisingly, conflict resolution is the US Department of State’s priority in Africa.³⁸

Notwithstanding their shared strategic interests, how relations between Angola and the US mature will depend on Angola’s ability to continue its democratic transformation, while vigorously pursuing anti-corruption measures. The dynamics of Angola’s democratic transformation, as well as the realities and perceptions of continuing corruption, will continue to provide an ample supply of irritants to Angola–US relations. Firstly, Angola is

a democratic state in the sense that a multi-party political system is in place. However, the governing MPLA has such a disproportionate set of advantages conferred by its control of key levers of national power – especially economic, security and informational, but also legislative and judicial power – that it effectively overwhelms the opposition to the point of making democratic rotation of power practically inconceivable, at least for several decades. The MPLA increased its representation in the 220-seat National Assembly (parliament) from 129 seats (54% of the vote) in first legislative elections held in 1992 to 191 seats (82% of the vote) in the second legislative elections held in 2008. The main opposition party, UNITA, dropped from 70 seats (34% of the vote) in 1992 to 16 seats (10% of the vote) in 2008. Although 10 additional opposition parties elected members of parliament in 1992, only three opposition parties were able to elect representatives in 2008. The opposition parties' internal weaknesses partly explain their poor performance at the polls.³⁹ However, the MPLA's ability to buy, coerce, advertise and legislate provides it with an unassailable political position. The country's new constitution, which the National Assembly passed in January 2010, provides other equally ominous signs of a problematic democratic trajectory. It all but eliminates checks and balances by formalising an overwhelming concentration of power in the executive. The new constitution abolishes direct presidential elections by stipulating that the leader of the party with the most seats in the National Assembly automatically becomes state president. It further prevents the Council of Ministers from initiating legislation, and creates Ministries of State⁴⁰ with resources and responsibilities that eclipse those of line ministries.⁴¹ In addition to effectively controlling the executive and the legislative branches, the president also appoints the constitutional and Supreme Court judges.

Besides the MPLA's continuing preference for some aspects of democratic centralism, its inability to tackle corruption effectively may constitute a perennial irritant in Angola's relations with the US. Notwithstanding President Dos Santos' recent pronouncements, corruption in Angola remains entrenched and widespread.⁴² As a recent Human Rights Watch report points out, 'massive corruption and mismanagement of the country's wealth' has made the Angolan government 'a symbol of the depredations of a resource-rich, but unaccountable government.'⁴³ Worse still, evidence suggests that the Angolan presidency is 'the epicentre of corruption'⁴⁴ in society.

As a recent Congressional report suggests, democratic development and governance will continue to be key determinants in how the US, especially Congress, views its relationship with Angola.⁴⁵ Despite the new strategic dialogue, Angola was unable to prevent the closing of the bank accounts belonging to its embassy in Washington, as a consequence of a Congressional investigation of improper attempts by an Angolan government official to transfer \$50 million to accounts in the US.⁴⁶ As its relations with the US deepen, Angola will realise that the US does not shy away from carefully scrutinising and continuously recalibrating relationships with friends.

CONCLUSION

Although Angola has had few successes in its 36 years of independence, foreign relations are clearly the exception. Persistent diplomatic efforts by the Angolan government to solve the daunting domestic challenges it inherited at independence have yielded important

results, including the end of the civil war in 2002. The government's ultimate victory on the battlefield is only partly attributable to the military prowess of its armed forces and the UNITA rebels' propensity to overplay their strategic and tactical advantages. Above all, success in foreign relations can be attributed to the MPLA's recognition of the inextricable connection between Angola's domestic security and foreign relations. At independence, the MPLA recognised that its survival involved thwarting its neighbours' hostile intentions. Given its lack of resources, the MPLA leadership engaged international friends and secured their assistance to this end.

When the process of regime consolidation was threatened in the 1980s because of resurgent rebel military activity and rising regional and international pressure in the form of increased financial military assistance for the rebels, the Angolan government's diplomatic efforts ensured that it once again secured sufficient external support to ensure survival. In the 1990s, internal and external threats were magnified following the collapse of Angola's main external backer, the USSR. Against the odds, Angola's often-unconventional diplomacy, which involved developing an intricate network during the 1990s for procuring arms on the international black market to circumvent a stiff arms embargo, ensured that it prevailed over the rebels.

It is equally significant that Angola responded to its post-conflict internal challenges of reconstruction by looking abroad. When Western countries did not respond to its pleas for financial assistance, Angola shifted its diplomatic attention eastward and succeeded in developing an important strategic partnership with China. Through persistence and constant recalibration, Angola's foreign relations have enabled the regime to survive. However, challenges remain, especially at the domestic level. Democratic transition and the challenges of transparent governance will dominate Angolan politics for the foreseeable future. They are likely to become even more complicated when long-time President José Eduardo dos Santos leaves the stage. Angola's foreign relations will again play a critical role in meeting the looming challenges. This time, the focus will be on wooing the US and other mature democracies to complement the assistance currently provided by China and to help Angola stay on course as it moves towards positive peace.

ENDNOTES

- 1 FNLA – Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (National Front for the Liberation of Angola).
- 2 MPLA – Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola).
- 3 UNITA – União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola).
- 4 Although it failed to install UNITA in power in 1975, South Africa continued to provide assistance to the Angolan rebels until it withdrew from Namibia in 1989.
- 5 South Africa was UNITA's main regional backer until the collapse of the Apartheid regime. Mobutu's Zaire was the main regional backer for the FNLA until its collapse as a military force soon after being defeated in the first round of the civil war (1975–1976) by joint MPLA/Cuban/Soviet forces. Zaire's support then shifted to UNITA, especially after Namibia's independence in 1990 and the end of Apartheid in South Africa in 1994.
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 - 39 UNITA faced serious internal difficulties resulting from the death of its founder and leader, Jonas Savimbi, in 2002. Savimbi's penchant for regular and thorough purges of his organisation all but guaranteed that no capable successor emerged after his death. The FNLA, the third historic nationalist movement-turned-opposition party, descended into paralysing internal squabbles. None of the opposition parties which emerged during the multi-party era has been able to muster the financial means, develop organisational skills, or create a political message with sufficient resonance to win sufficient popular following to threaten the governing MPLA.
 - 40 There are two current ministries of state: Civil Affairs led by Carlos Feijó and Security Affairs led by General Hélder Vieira Dias 'Kopelipa'. A third ministry of state, for Economic Coordination, was created but disbanded shortly thereafter when the minister, Manuel Nunes Júnior, was replaced in a government reshuffle in October 2010.
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