

# Angola's Role in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Unique Opportunity

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Angola has for the second time in its history secured a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC). In all likelihood, the 2015/2016 mandate will grant Luanda a more active voice in the defense of national interests, in particular on matters related to the Gulf of Guinea and the Great Lakes. It is also worth noting that in January 2014 Angola assumed the rotating presidency of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR).<sup>1</sup> The simultaneous presence in the UNSC and ICGLR adds greater diplomatic visibility and represents a relevant window of opportunity. If Angola's interests over the Gulf of Guinea generically fall on commercial and economic matters, driven by the threat posed by the piracy phenomena, those related to the Great Lakes region have a more multidimensional nature, making this region of tantamount strategic importance.

Recent events in the Great Lakes region, namely the UN offensive approach against rebels in eastern DRC—in 2013 the UN mission's mandate in the east of the country was extended and an unprecedented "intervention bri-

gade" was created through Resolution 2098—mean that presence in the UNSC and the ICGLR presidency places Luanda at the front line of security-related matters concerning Kinshasa. In fact, the Angolan president, José Eduardo dos Santos, has a clear notion of the danger and threat posed by a weak and insecure DRC government, and he knows the need for an active role in the fight against the rebels is of vital importance.

On October 20, 2014, Luanda hosted a ministerial defense meeting between the ICGLR and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). One of the focal points was the progress in the disarmament process of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a rebel group active in the east of the DRC and comprised of mostly ethnic Hutu Rwandans, many of whom were involved in the 1994 genocide. Considering the slow progress, the ministers reiterated the need for military action in case the January 2015 deadline is not obeyed. Given Angola's interests in the country, and the leading role in the ICGLR and UNSC, it is worth asking: What would be Luanda's role in a military intervention?

The recent strengthening of bilateral relations between Angola and Rwanda should in theory allow for a quick understanding over a joint military action. This is in fact crucial since both countries are two of the most militarily capable nations in the region and, equally important, with probably the greatest interest in the rebel group's elimination. Moreover, joint action would substantially increase the mission's military, logistical, financial and material capabilities, at the same time guaranteeing bet-

<sup>1</sup> The ICGLR is a intergovernmental regional forum for resolving armed conflicts, maintaining peace, security, stability, and reconstructing the conflict-ravaged region. For an in-depth analysis of Angola's role and interests in the region, see Gustavo Plácido dos Santos, "Angola: Towards Supremacy in Sub-Saharan Africa?" (*Portuguese Journal of International Affairs*, No. 8, Spring/Summer 2014), pp. 23-32.

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ter preparation over the stabilization process in a post-FDLR scenario.

Conversely, in the absence of a regional military intervention it is highly likely that Rwanda will initiate a unilateral operation in eastern DRC. Under this scenario, the resulting instability would have negative implications for regional cooperation, and it would also represent a step back in the ongoing deepening of relations between Kigali and Kinshasa. Luanda's aim of regional stability would be severely hampered.

The prompt launch of an eventual military operation is contingent on political will and also on strong leadership of a government that is committed to putting pressure on regional actors. Equally relevant is the fact that the intervention will in principle have the support of the international community, which until recently had failed to undertake concrete and concerted actions aimed at tackling instability in the DRC. On the one hand, international support provides international legitimacy to the military intervention while, on the other hand, it goes along with the aim of securing "African solutions for African problems". This is therefore a significant opportunity for the continent in the sense that it represents a milestone in emancipating itself from external meddling.

In the event of intervention and the suppression of the FDLR, Luanda would emerge as a key-actor in the mediation and resolution of conflicts in the African continent. Nevertheless, Angola's gains are not limited to this. In

fact, Luanda's goal of diversifying the Angolan economy relies on stability in the DRC. The railway that connects the Lobito port in Angola's Atlantic coast to the border with the DRC may turn out to be a strategic means of transport for the outflow of minerals sourced in the Congolese eastern province of Katanga—famous for its vast cobalt and copper deposits. In other words, apart from security challenges, greater instability in eastern DRC will clash with Luanda's economic interests and plans.

Furthermore, regional stability does not only depend on military campaigns to tackle rebel groups. The reintegration of thousands of Rwandan FDLR fighters is vital for the sustainability of the DRC's peace and stability. Such a task will be hard and complex to undertake. Nonetheless, Angola may play an important part in the process. Authorities in Luanda can collaborate with their Rwandan counterparts in adapting the reintegration programme of former Angolan fighters to the FDLR context. Accordingly, Luanda has a unique opportunity to leave its mark, not only as a central actor in the suppression of rebel groups, but also in the reintegration of former fighters. It is exactly in this role as peace and security provider in the region where Angola may take the greatest advantages and benefits of its presence in the UNSC.

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