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The Case for Surveillance Drones in Angola

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Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, are becoming increasingly relevant in defense and security issues, with a growing number of countries acquiring and/or developing this technology: as far as it is known, 85 countries have military-grade UAVs, 78 of which have drones with only surveillance capabilities.[1]

On the African continent, the majority of UAVs in action are part of counter-terrorism missions led by Western powers. There are 12 African countries with UAV technology, but only four of them are currently developing it.[2] Nevertheless, the number of African countries with UAVs is expected to increase, either due to the nature of present threats — organized crime, terrorism, and others — or growing competition between regional powers.

Most African countries have territories that are vast, of difficult access and sparsely populated. Thus, given that threats to security and stability in Africa are generally present in the most isolated regions and have a transnational nature, this makes their detection a complicated task. There is therefore a crucial need for developing effective intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capacities that take into account the budget constraints affecting some African countries.

UAVs can perform long duration and dull missions in areas of difficult access without putting the lives of crew members at risk. This, in turn, makes it easier to monitor maritime resources, piracy attacks, offshore gas and oil operations, as well as illegal immigration, organized crime and terrorism. Also worth noting is the fact that UAVs are less costly in the long term.[3]

Estimates suggest that the global market for UAVs will more than double over the next decade, from the current $6.6bn to $11.4bn.[4] Considering that in 2014 Africa recorded the world's largest growth in military spending,[5] one can clearly see how attractive this market is for the UAV industry. Accordingly, if in 2005 there were 195 active UAV development programs, in 2011 that number rose to 680.[6] Since, at least in theory, greater competition generates less costs, one can fairly say that more emerging countries will be able to afford this technology.

That being said, and considering that Angola's major sub-Saharan rivals — Nigeria and South Africa — already own UAVs, it is worth asking why it has failed to follow suit. Moreover, given that the Angolan Armed Forces (FAA in the Portuguese acronym) are one of Luanda's main foreign policy vehicles, it is crucial for it to keep up with the times, i.e. to endow them with the capabilities provided by UAVs. Doing so is all the more relevant when considering that Angola's features make the purchase of drones a rational choice.

1 Niall McCarthy, "The Countries Importing The Most Drones" (*Forbes*, 18 March 2015).

2 Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa. See "World of Drones: Military" (*New America*, 2015).

3 Paul Scharre e Daniel Burg, "To Save Money, Go Unmanned" (*War on the Rocks*, 22 October 2014).

4 "Teal Group Predicts Worldwide UAV Market Will Total $91 Billion in Its 2014 UAV Market Profile and Forecast" (*Teal Group*, 17 July 2014).

5 Sam Perlo-Freeman, Aude Fleurant, Pieter D. Wezeman e Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2014" (*SIPRI*, April 2015).

6 Micah Zenko, "10 Things You Didn't Know About Drones" (*Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2012).

The potential of drones in Angola

Angola has a vast and largely isolated territory, whose land borders are porous and poorly controlled. The lack of an effective border patrol is in itself a threat to stability, as it allows potentially destabilizing groups to organize. Illegal immigration is also a cause for concern, as it affects the socioeconomic order and provides a fertile ground for criminal activities.

Angola has every interest in guaranteeing security within its territory, notably in what could have an economic impact. The government's goal to diversify the economy beyond oil requires security and stability along trade routes — both land and sea — and in those regions which are, or will be, at the core of diversification efforts.

Territorial waters are particularly key to the future of Angola's economy. With a 1,600km coast line and an Exclusive Economic Zone representing 40% of sovereign territory, the task to protect offshore oil and other sea-related economic activities is a challenging one. This is exacerbated when considering territorial disputes with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) over maritime border delimitations in the Cabinda region — the source of most of Angola's oil production.

Also relevant is security and stability along international trade routes crossing the Gulf of Guinea and the South Atlantic. The international community acknowledges Angola's centrality in this dimension, as insecurity in Angola's waters will have repercussions in those trade routes.

In fact, the hijacking of an oil tanker off the Angolan coast in January 2014 reveals the urgency for developing better ISR capabilities. However, that is no easy task given that Angola's navy is by far the most limited branch of the FAA.[7]

Aware of these limitations, Luanda has been investing in the modernization of maritime surveillance systems, as reflected by the order of six A-29 Super Tucano planes from Brazil in 2012,[8] and the government's decision in March 2005 to go ahead with the implementation of a National System of Maritime Surveillance (Sinavim). Aimed at improving the navy's monitoring and surveillance capabilities, Sinavim also establishes the use of surveillance drones.[9]

Angola is the second largest military spender in Africa, having doubled its defense spending since 2005 and recording a 6.7% growth between 2013 and 2014.[10] It is likely to double again until 2019, driven by the rising demand for military and surveillance equipment, including UAVs.[11] The huge investment in the FAA, coupled with training programs with militarily advanced countries — such as Brazil, China, EUA, Portugal and Russia — positions Angola as one of the most capable countries in Africa to operate and service this technology.

Moreover, despite the impact of low oil prices, and the resulting 17.2% cut in the 2015 budget share for defense and security,[12] Luanda's regional ambitions and security requirements require a continued investment in those sectors. In fact, Angola's financial constraints can and should work as an additional motivation for a shift towards more cost-efficient equipment.

That is even more so when considering that Angola's security context does not call for a military force with a focus on offensive capabilities. Contrary to other African countries, Luanda does not have an immediate threat to its stability and territorial integrity. As matter of fact, Angola's challenges require complementarity between surveillance and offensive capabilities.

A favorable international context

Together with Western powers, the United Nations intends to expand the use of drones in Africa. In 2013, UAVs were deployed to the DRC as part of MONUSCO's operations, providing crucial imagery that ultimately helped to vanquish the M23 rebel group. Notably, the deployment of five UAVs represented a mere 1% of the mission's annual budget. This has led a UN official to state "that drones, or the capacity for aerial visualization, is a capacity every mission should have with very few exceptions".[13]

Therefore, the purchase of UAVs by Angola would represent an important strategic maneuver, boosting Luanda's international projection and potentially consolidating it as an African security-provider. In a nutshell, owning UAVs would be a wager on the future, as it would have the potential to streamline Angola's decision-making process regarding FAA's participation in international missions.

Furthermore, Luanda has been promoting deeper ties with some of the major emerging powers aspiring to become key actors in the defense and security industries, namely in the promising global UAV market. Among these, one can highlight Brazil, China and Russia.

China is positioning itself to become one of the major global UAV exporters. It has been pointed out that by 2023 the Aviation Industry Corporation of China will become the world's largest company in this sector. Regarding the African continent, in 2014 China supplied five armed drones to Nigeria and surveillance drones to unspecified African countries.[14] In what concerns Angola, although there are no records of Chinese UAVs in the FAA's inventory, one should not exclude that to happen in the future. After all, in October 2013, both countries announced their intention to strengthen military ties and boost military exchanges.

Russia is already the world's second largest arms exporter and saw its exports jump 37% since 2005.[15] Moscow's biggest buyer of military equipment in Africa is Angola. Ties between

7 "Chapter Nine: Sub-Saharan Africa", *The Military Balance* (2014).

8 Luanda also purchased seven patrol boats. "Angola busca cooperação brasileira para implementar Programa Naval" (Governo Federal do Brasil, 6 August 2014).

9 Francisco Galamas, "Angola Modernizes Navy to Protect Maritime Resources" (*World Politics Review*, 8 October 2014) and "Angola avança com sistema nacional de vigilância marítima e reforço de meios" (*Lusa*, 5 March 2015).

10 "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2014" (*SIPRI*, April 2015).

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

12 The 2015 Budget was revised in February 2015. "Angola corta mais de 17% nas despesas com Defesa e Segurança em 2015" (*Diário de Notícias*, 23 February 2015).

13 Sophie Pilgrim, "Are UN drones the future of peacekeeping?" (*France 24*, 9 April 2015).

14 Megha Rajagopalan, "China is really interested in the military drone business" (*Reuters*, 30 April 2015).

15 "Trends in International Arms Transfers" (*SIPRI*, March 2015).

both countries were strengthened in October 2013 with a $1bn agreement between Russia's state arms exporter Rosoboronexport and Luanda for the provision of Su-30k fighter jets, Mi-17 helicopters and other technology. At the time, Moscow showed its willingness to deepen ties, notably in the field of military technology.[16] Considering that Rosoboronexport intends to increase its share in the global UAV market over the next 10 years, particularly among developing countries, it would not be a surprise to see Angola as a recipient of Russian UAVs.

Brazil has recently entered the UAV market. In 2014, FT Sistemas S.A., one of Brazil's biggest producers of UAVs, announced its first sale to an African country, in a deal brokered by the country's Ministry of Defense.[17] The company's chairman stated his goal to "operate more in countries where Brazil has strategic influence, political and economic alignment, and also with non-traditional ones, in terms of [this technology's] exports".[18] Good relations between both countries — and Brasilia's strategic interest in the South Atlantic — position Angola at the center of the company's international focus. In light of this, one should expect this relationship to contribute to the introduction of UAVs in Angola.

Conclusion

UAVs open new possibilities in Africa's security and stability context. This technology provides better ISR capabilities, helping to tackle threats and mitigate their impact in the fragile African economies.

Such is the case with Angola. Luanda is going through a challenging economic and financial situation which calls for a shift in investment priorities, while not undermining the path taken since the end of the civil war in 2002: socioeconomic development, politico-diplomatic assertion, and the modernization, capacity-building and regional projection of its armed forces.

Economic development is contingent on securing national sources of revenue, notably oil. On the other hand, diversification efforts require a safe and stable environment. When considering the potential threats to security and stability, along with the unfavorable economic and financial conditions, one realizes that the necessary modernization of the FAA can and should involve less conventional military equipment that nonetheless ensures better and more cost-effective control over the territory.

With smaller purchase and operating costs than any manned alternative, UAVs are in line with the need to contain government expenditure. There is no need to concentrate the bulk of investment in military equipment exclusively with offensive purposes.

The UAV market offers excellent future prospects, partly explaining why an increasing number of countries has shown interest in this market niche. Luanda's good relations with some of these countries, especially in the defense and security dimensions, suggest the possibility that, in the near future, UAVs will be hovering over Angola's most isolated and poorly controlled strategic regions.

Angola's rise in the regional and international setting calls for its armed forces to keep up with the times, i.e. modernize and adapt to the ever changing circumstances in sub-Saharan Africa. Failure to do so would result in Angola losing ground to sub-Saharan rivals and postpone its consolidation as a regional power and security-provider.

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

17 "Flight Tech Conquista Contrato Na África" (FT Sistemas, 28 July 2014) and "Brasileira vence concorrência para exportar drone à África" (*Valor Económico*, 8 August 2014).

18 "Empresa vê mercado promissor para drones no exterior" (*Agência de Notícias Brasil-Árabe*, 10 September 2014).

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