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## Hillary Clinton's visit to Angola: Moving beyond petro-politics?

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On 9 and 10 August, Hillary Clinton made the fourth visit of a US Secretary of State to Angola. In Luanda it was announced that this 24 hour stopover was the longest ever made by a top US official. Previously, Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos had met informally with President Barack Obama at the G8 meeting in L'Aquila, Italy, and Foreign Minister Assunção dos Anjos visited Washington last May. These are indicators of an ever-more confident nation: Luanda feels it is gaining international leverage and relevance, not only because of its oil wealth but also as an emerging regional power.

Indeed, oil remains the country's main asset. Clinton's visit was obviously framed by North-American national interest in assuring reliable sources of energy. However, both from the Angolan and the US perspective, this meeting went beyond that topic, including discussions of

democratisation, health, agriculture, environment and regional security, demonstrating that the two countries now have a fuller relationship, one that extends beyond energy issues. Finally, a broader geopolitical contest is taking place in Africa, one that cannot be ignored. The most quoted sentence by Secretary Clinton in the Western press was, "I'm not looking at what anyone else does in Angola. I'm looking at what the United States can do to further and deepen our relationship". Not only is the US seriously looking at others' activities and involvement in the country, but it is Angola who has been able to influence the chess game of foreign influences and investments in its territory for its – or, more accurately, for the ruling government's – benefit.

Since the end of the civil war in 2002, Angola has achieved very high rates of economic growth. According to *The*



*Economist*, its growth averaged 18% in recent years. However, the country still has a low Index of Human Development, ranking only 162nd in 2007. Life expectancy only reaches 37 years. These general statistics provide a glimpse of the internal contrasts of Angola. Oil wealth does not benefit the majority of the population, but makes the country an obligatory stopping point for the international community. Currently the world's 11th largest oil exporter, Angola became the largest supplier to China and is presently the sixth largest US supplier.

Clinton's visit is inevitably bound by the sheer importance of these numbers. Moreover, both ExxonMobil and Chevron, which are responsible for over half the country's oil production, have operated in Angola for decades. Gulf Oil, a Chevron subsidiary operating in the still hazardous region of Cabinda, has been present in the country since Portuguese colonial rule and throughout years of civil war. Doing business in Angola is part of these corporations' genetic code, and that will not be easily disturbed by Chinese companies.

That is why, at least in public, conversations about oil were not prominent: there is mutual confidence in the current relationship. Even a discourse of greater transparency of government and companies can be endorsed with few practical actions. The issue of central importance is, as a senior State Department official held, "the importance of Angola as an energy supplier, and (...) that Angola has the necessary technical capacity (...) to (...) facilitate the production and export of oil". The short-term priority is "to ensure that the US has access

to stable and affordable energy supplies", i.e. sources beyond the Middle East.

This could not sound better to Angolan ears. New oil and natural gas reserves have been discovered in offshore Cabinda in deep water blocks, which require much capital, expertise and technical capacity to explore. Unsurprisingly, it is Chevron, together with Sonangol (Angola's national oil company, its golden goose and, as Ricardo

Soares de Oliveira states, the key to the regime's survival), Total and ENI (and not China's Sinopec), who is drilling the deposits. US enterprises were granted contracts in the new refinery in Lobito, as well as in the new liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Soyo. Angola thus manages to keep the world's most advanced energy companies working in its waters to expand its production. Moreover, it is able, through Sonangol's stakes, to gain experience and transfer knowledge to Angola. The company is also investing, with Chevron, in a LNG plant near Pascagoula, Louisiana. This will, if good management is maintained, enable the company to become a growing player in the oil industry.

In sum, regarding oil, there is, as Angola's expert Tony Hodges affirms, a desire to "encourage a non-conflictual relationship". Ultimately, however, it is the US who needs Angolan oil, not Angola who needs the US market.

This calm and beneficial relationship in the oil field explains why during Clinton's visit discussions of oil were so low-key. Instead, the US focused on other areas – a strategy to counter China's approach, which is solely

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focused on guaranteeing access to natural resources. Angola saw these cooperation efforts as a signal of its growing importance, as well as an opportunity to please its citizens, with the upcoming presidential elections in mind. This is why we have seen Angolan ministers so pleased at presenting their efforts on good governance, combating HIV, and agricultural development. The visit allowed them to show a humanist face while obtaining the blessing of a high-profile international figure. Thus, this visit was used as much for internal as for external affairs. In view of this, the American discourse on democracy, accountability and transparency was well received by state officials. Clinton's stance was based on the "premise that [Angola is] moving in the right direction", a position less harsh than the one adopted in Kenya. As such, enough latitude was given to the hegemonic MPLA party to avoid accusations of corruption, human rights abuses or postponement of democratic reforms.

When Secretary Clinton pressed for the holding of presidential elections "in the near future", the Foreign Minister grabbed the opportunity to explain that only with proper conditions will the elections occur, which is to say that they will most likely be postponed until 2010 (they were planned for 2009). Concerning other issues, such as accountability, rule of law, and separation of powers, only UNITA, the main opposition party (which holds 16 seats at the Parliament, against 191 of the MPLA), raised the issue that too much power is concentrated in the presidency, and human rights abuses are still common.

In other fields, Clinton signed cooperation deals to fight HIV - increasing the US aid contribution from US\$7 million to US\$17 million; to support Agriculture (US\$6 million in credit assistance); to expand technical support to mini-hydroelectric plants; and also opened prospects for collaboration on environmental issues. Agricultural dis-

cussions, in particular, pleased Angolan officials. Once a major agricultural producer and exporter, it is now estimated that 95% of Angola's arable land is not used. With presidential elections on the horizon, this assistance was welcome. However, US\$6 million amounts to nearly nothing, and how the money will be distributed raises major concerns. The few benefiting from this assistance may very well be MPLA members or close supporters, as has often been the case with aid distribution. This program is largely symbolic, but it signals the interest the US has in developing the agricultural sector, as illustrated by Chi-

quita's project in Benguela province, which will create 3,000 jobs.

Angola receives these projects willingly to ease internal economic pressure and diversify the economy. Similarly, externally it also sends signals of a growing nation. The country is gaining importance as a US ally, challenging more traditional friends such as Kenya or South Africa. As an emerging regional player, the US consulted José Eduardo dos Santos regarding the situation in

Somalia and the DRC, opening the possibility for Angolan armed forces to train their Congolese counterparts. Any kind of intervention is only possible at this stage with American support. Nonetheless, it is doubtful that Luanda desires a stable and strong Congo to compete with its own current growth.

Regional political power is something that Angola can only hope to achieve through US cooperation. Even if China provides oil-backed credit in attractive terms (the exact value remains unknown - from US\$2 billion in 2004 up to possibly US\$11 billion), no major political influence can be derived from that alone. Moreover, the US remains

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Angola's main trading partner. However, Angola has been able to keep its options open by juggling between foreign countries that are keen to win Luanda's friendship. Angola maintains good relations with such different countries as the US, China (José Eduardo dos Santos visited Beijing last December), Russia (Dmitry Medvedev visited Luanda this June), South Africa (Jacob Zuma will make his first official state visit on 20 August), Cuba (Raúl Castro was in Luanda in February and July), Brazil (José Eduardo dos Santos met President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in L'Aquila) and Portugal (official state visit to Lisbon in July). Clearly,

at the international level, Angola's leadership is enjoying strong prestige and is playing it to its strengths. Luanda's legitimacy still owes plenty to foreign reconnaissance and funding. However, internal pres-

Luanda's legitimacy still owes plenty to foreign reconnaissance and funding. However, internal pressure for broader economic and social development and democratisation cannot be ignored. Clinton urged Angola to "deliver the results of democracy to the people". Although the MPLA rule is certainly legitimate, it can hardly be viewed as democratic and the American administration recognizes this. But pressing harder for a democratic agenda would imperil the US relationship with Angola.

sure for broader economic and social development and democratisation cannot be ignored. Clinton urged Angola to "deliver the results of democracy to the people". Although the MPLA rule is certainly legitimate, it can hardly be viewed as democratic and the American administration recognizes this. But pressing harder for a democratic agenda would imperil the US relationship with Angola. The current tone of relations accentuated the difference between the American and Chinese approaches to meeting Angolans' expectations, without undermining the government. The Angolan government continues to endeavor to turn this political discourse to its advantage, using the upcoming elections to release domestic pressure, and keeping the situation and the country under control.

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