

A safe bet: Portuguese Technical-Military Cooperation with Lusophone Africa

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Whenever the relations between Portugal and the Portuguese Speaking African Countries (PALOP) are brought under a serious debate, the tumultuous decolonization process and the inherent historical baggage are bound to arise and constrain, in some form, any intended line of progressive thought. And although the burgeoning close ties between the former metropolis and its past African colonies have belied the worst fears of a permanent strategic detachment between these countries, for all purposes, the weight of past wounds is still a force to be reckoned with, especially when attempts are made to further advance such relationships in the present international framework.

Within this context, one particular feature associated with Portuguese cooperation efforts towards its African peers tends to fall under the radar. Indeed, despite its relative success, the Technical-Military Cooperation (TMC) agreements between Portugal and the PALOP states generally goes unnoticed. Given the cited painful memories associated with the multiple violent independence struggles that erupted in the 1960s, one would think that this particular domain would not attract serious political attention so easily or obtain such meaningful results, for that matter. However, the importance, and even the necessity, of these programs quickly became unquestioned.

Indeed, as the majority of these young postcolonial states began to deal with the harsh reality of building effective and accountable security sectors – in most cases entirely from scratch and, most importantly, following a widespread trend of internal strife – they also came to acknowledge the need for external support in such endeavors, as their urgency and scope became overwhelming.

For its part, Portugal was only too willing to step up and provide the necessary assistance, for it understood this opportunity as a natural follow-up in its involvement with countries who still remained strategically important for its own national interests. Moreover, cultural and historical ties helped to sustain this approach, and as further economic investments made their way into Lusophone Africa, Portugal found itself in a preferable position to effectively grant the desired support to these countries. Consequently, TMC was presented as a useful instrument for the training and supporting of nonpartisan militaries subordinated to the legitimate and sovereign local democratic institutions and generally included in a broader framework of respect for the rule of law and good governance. While this agenda might have appeared overly optimistic, it was inarguably necessary given the domestic conflicts developing on the ground.



Hence, this specific form of cooperation can be traced back to 1978, although the first formal TMC agreements were only signed in 1988, first with Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe and Mozambique, followed by Guinea-Bissau a year later. Angola, however, remained a unique case due to its civil war, which ended up delaying the signing of a general agreement until 1996.

From these origins, the TMC programs have thus made successful and lasting impacts. Indeed, structured around multiannual plans, the TCM efforts have been consistently renewed throughout the years, demonstrating the acute interest that they retain amongst the targeted countries' authorities. The general success and appeal of this approach can also probably be attributed to its wide range of action, as it involves a myriad of possible and valuable interventions, from capacity building, to military training – in Portugal or in the country in question – sanitary assistance or even logistical support.

Out of all of these areas, military training understandably receives the greatest focus. As it so happens, recent figures estimate that in the past two decades, more than 6.000 military personnel from Lusophone Africa – half of them from Angola¹ – have received specific training, with 140 currently attending military courses in Portuguese defense institutions. Conversely, as of September 2010, 84 Portuguese officers were also still engaged under the TMC framework carrying out multiple cooperation projects in PALOP countries, providing technical assistance to their local peers.² Moreover, resources are also constantly allocated to nurturing the development of these countries' own security education institutions, like Angola's Higher Institute of Military Training or Mozambique's Military Academy in Nampula.

Assistance in organizing, rationalizing or, in most cases, building from scratch elite structures and branches of military command has also received significant Portuguese attention and investment. São Tomé and Príncipe's burgeoning Coast Guard, Angola's Special Forces and the overall support to all these countries' General Staffs of the Armed Forces, duly demonstrates Portugal's concern with crafting credible and modern local militaries.

Yet, is there an underlying rationale to these bilateral undertakings? Often enough, the possibility that this type of military assistance could occasionally trump more virtuous goals or "reward" unworthy/unlawful authorities tends to mitigate any intended objective. However, contrary to most critics' doubts, Portuguese authorities never ever really understood TMC as dissociated from the larger picture of Portuguese cooperation aid to this set of countries.

On the contrary, as Defense Minister Augusto Santos Silva puts it, TMC allows Portugal to provide a "contribution

for the international order, development of national capabilities and the establishment of communication ties that can propel further cooperation in other areas".³ TMC efforts are thus seen as an integral element of Portugal's overall approach to developing countries, and most importantly with the Lusophone world.

Above all, TMC's concept fully recognizes that untrained or undisciplined militaries are frequently found at the root of civil unrest and conflict and thus their transformation and professionalization are crucial for any attempt – domestically initiated or internationally backed – to tackle such problems. Moreover, TMC initiatives complement existing development strategies, following the reasoning behind the "Human Security" approach, and are therefore highly-regarded in any serious strategic planning.⁴

On a more realist note, one should also bear in mind how developments in civil-military relations on the ground equally affects the interests of any third party – in this case, Portugal – with its own agendas and connections at risk when local situations deteriorate. As such, while the international community at large may be afraid of entering a security quagmire by engaging in TMC with new, weak states, Portugal clearly felt it was its responsibility to actively assume the role of preferential partner towards these countries in reforming their own security sectors.

But how effectively is TMC used in the prosecution of Portuguese foreign policy? In other words, is it considered a worthy bargaining chip in any eventual dispute or are the relations with these countries so far advanced, that any fallback would likely be hard to achieve? The answer lies precisely with the specific nature of this kind of cooperation. As it so happens, military ties of this sort are usually extremely resilient to any political mood swing and tend to endure in time, especially so when the official discourse wears down and the public novelty fades away. In this context, the example of Guinea-Bissau comes to mind, as it is a constant reminder of how pressing security needs can rapidly overcome political breakdowns, stalemates or indecisions. Portugal's continuing interest and TMC efforts in the case of Guinea-Bissau are therefore proof that these situations are not so easily reduced to an "all or nothing" logic.

Be as it may, Portuguese TMC with Lusophone Africa is not without its merits, as it clearly and actively contributed over the years to the reform and development of several precarious security sectors, whose continuing mismanagement and unlawfulness could have had catastrophic consequences for state stability and viability, and, inevitably, for Portugal's own interests. With the recent visit by Secretary of State for Defense and Maritime Affairs, Marcos Perestrello, to most of the PALOP countries, a

1 "Três mil militares angolanos formados por Portugal" (*Lusa*, 7 May 2010).

2 Figures provided by the Portuguese General Staff of the Armed Forces.

3 "Santos Silva destaca importância da cooperação técnico-militar" (*Lusa*, 19 January 2011).

4 See "Human Development Report 1994: New Dimension of Human Security" (*United Nations Development Program*, 1994).



new phase in TMC appears to be in the works. Building on the program renewals in 2010 with Angola and Mozambique, new opportunities for the enhancement of TMC are bound to surface. Naval construction and overhauling in Cape Verde, assistance in the expansion of Angola's continental platform and delimitation of its maritime boundaries, participation by PALOP forces in Portuguese contingents in peacekeeping missions, or even generalized cooperation in defense industries are some of the possible ways forward already identified.⁵ After more than two decades of fruitful activity, it is safe to say that TMC is by now fully entrenched in the overall spectrum of bilateral relations between Portugal and its former African colonies. Nevertheless, in a fast changing international security environment, challenges are sure to emerge and, understandably, the continuation and evolution of Portugal's TMC program will remain vital in helping the PALOP countries better address their future security needs.

⁵ "Apoio a extensão da plataforma marítima angolana marca nova cooperação técnico-militar -- Marcos Perestrello" (*Lusa*, 14 February 2011). See also "Portugal propõe a Angola alargamento da cooperação militar à indústria e tecnologias" (*Lusa*, 5 May 2010); and, "Novo acordo de cooperação Portugal/Moçambique na defesa" (*Lusa*, 4 March 2010).

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