



THE TEODORÍN SITUATION (PART II): THE GEOPOLITICS OF CHINA AND THE U.S. IN THE GULF OF GUINEA

El caso Teodorín (Parte II): La competición geopolítica entre China y EE. UU. en el Golfo de Guinea

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The essay is divided and published into two parts: each separately assesses the main recent trends in the national and international politics of Equatorial Guinea — spanning roughly between the Covid19 crisis and May 2023. Part II examines the so far unfounded claims regarding the Chinese Navy's plan to build its first Atlantic base in Equatorial Guinea, which has been widely publicized by the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Moreover, this piece delves into the origins and ongoing developments of international legal disputes between France and Equatorial Guinea, specifically concerning the prosecution of Teodorín for corruption in a Paris court. Part I profiled the current vice president, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, widely known by his moniker Teodorín. The resolution of and tensions within both the U.S.-China and French geopolitical and international dimensions provide the main global frames for Teodorín's succession, which is practically set in stone, and quite imminent. The combined introduction in part I and in the conclusion in part II outlines the recent shifts across the domestic political, international geopolitical, and economic domains that have conditioned Teodorín's active and seemingly inevitable rise to the presidency of Equatorial Guinea.



Abstract

Equatorial Guinea; Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue; U.S.-China tensions in Africa; Chinese Naval Base; oil and gas.



Key words

Guinea Ecuatorial; Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue; tensiones en África entre China y Estados Unidos; base naval china; petróleo y gas.

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Fechas

El ensayo se divide y publica en dos partes: cada una de ellas evalúa por separado las principales novedades en la política nacional e internacional de Guinea Ecuatorial, que abarcan aproximadamente desde la crisis del covid-19 hasta mayo de 2023. La Parte II examina las afirmaciones, hasta ahora infundadas, sobre el plan de la Armada china de construir su primera base atlántica en Guinea Ecuatorial, que ha sido ampliamente publicitado por el establishment de la política exterior estadounidense. Además, este artículo profundiza en los orígenes y la evolución actual de las disputas jurídicas internacionales entre Francia y Guinea Ecuatorial, concretamente en relación con el procesamiento de Teodorín por corrupción en un tribunal de París. En la Parte I se presentó al actual vicepresidente, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, conocido por el sobrenombre de Teodorín. La resolución de las tensiones dentro de las dimensiones geopolíticas e internacionales de Estados Unidos, China y Francia proporcionan los marcos globales para la sucesión de Teodorín, que es prácticamente un hecho inamovible e inminente. La introducción combinada en la parte I y la conclusión de esta segunda parte describen los cambios recientes en la política nacional, la geopolítica internacional y la economía que han marcado y dirigido el ascenso activo y aparentemente inevitable de Teodorín a la presidencia de Guinea Ecuatorial.



1. Introduction

To the outside world, Equatorial Guinea is situated between settled geopolitical “zones”. In the eyes and words of an Obama-era ambassador, Equatorial Guinea was exceptional and up for grabs because, as a former Spanish colony and not part of the Anglophone, Francophone, or Lusophone blocks in post-colonial Africa, it was “an outlier or orphan in search of a powerful master or patron” (Fernández, 2021). The well-known branding campaign in the 1990s of the country as the new “Kuwait of Africa” was government-sponsored and directed at the U.S. public in the hope that the regime would receive a welcome, or at least an acceptance, analogous to other non-African oil-rich small states. Journalists continue to rely on derivate imagery, such as an “African sultanate” in the Gulf of Guinea or the “last enclave for American Big Oil in Africa”. Given the reliable position of the country in the portfolios of various U.S. oil and gas firms, exiles also tend to use terms such as the “Emir of Malabo” to refer to President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo or even just the “Satrap”, in reference to the corrupt, tyrannical, and ostentatious provincial governors of the Achaemenid Empire.

In the first part of this two-part essay, published as a separate article in this same journal issue above, I profiled the Nguemist family regime of Equatorial Guinea. Critics are inclined to place the ruling family into an “axis” of secular rogue dynasties, miniatures alongside the Kims and Assads, or at best, as part of an unremarkable regional pattern of the new military kingships of Bongo, Gnassingbé, and Déby in Gabon, Togo, and Chad. The U.S. foreign policy establishment tends to treat president Obiang as a shameful version of Pinochet but is increasingly trying to handle Teodorín, Obiang’s first-born son and soon-to-be successor, as a tiny bin Salman. They show little to no democratic imperialist urge to eliminate the reign of a military junta or a corporate revival of “royalism” that is entirely economically aligned with Texan oil companies and quite uniquely provides visa-free travel to the hundreds of American employees based in or traveling to the country on chartered flights from Houston. Nevertheless, the new commander of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has bestowed upon Equatorial Guinea the dubious

status of being a new potential source of “change” that upends the “whole calculus of the geo-strategic global campaign plans” of the U.S. Army — in relation, of course, to the rumors that Teodorín wishes to host some sort of refuelling and refitting station in Bata for an expanding Chinese navy (U.S. Central Command, 2023).

Teodorín has made seemingly unpredictable moves along wider geopolitical rifts, playing off the only foreign powers which show and shape deep interests in the country, the U.S. and China, to cement the inevitability of his becoming the next president. The main European power in the country is certainly France, which for over a decade has been hosting a targeted quasi-sanctions campaign against Teodorín. Publicly, he tends to ignore his personal prosecution in French courts for corruption, but Teodorín is certainly pushing back via various international channels. These two geopolitical and international dimensions are the leading global horizons necessary for Teodorín’s “stable” rise to power and are interconnected. This nexus is the focal point of this second part of this two-part essay on recent political developments in Equatorial Guinea. The argument posits that the U.S. is effectively offering a hand to assist Teodorín out of the deep hole of reputational damage caused by the U.S. in the early 2000s, as detailed in part I when discussing Teodorín’s prosecution in a California court as part of the Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative — an initiative continued in France. The wildcard story about a Chinese naval base in Bata’s new port has been widely publicized in the U.S. and has become agenda and relation setting. The government of Equatorial Guinea has consistently denied the scheme, even though it was likely drawn from private and provisional chatter. Teodorín (Nguema Obiang Mangué, 2021) took to Twitter to express appreciation for China as a “friendly” and “strategic partner” and dispel, with some uncertainty, that “for now, there is no such agreement”. He continues to post images on social media of back-to-back meetings held on the same day, with, alternately, the U.S. Ambassador of Equatorial Guinea, and with representatives of Chinese state-owned enterprises operating in the country.

The preponderance of the U.S. in the country is made most evident in the fact that it is the only foreign government that permits itself to speak openly and candidly. For example, after the November 2022 presidential election, the U.S. State Department spokesperson (2022) noted the “credible allegations of significant election-related irregularities” and cast “serious doubts about the credibility of the announced results”. The statement proposed that elections, and any new elections, should be seen as an “opportunity” to “tangibly demonstrate” a “commitment to democratic principles”. In contrast, a statement by the EU’s Foreign Affairs spokesperson, made after the U.S. statement, asked the government of Equatorial Guinea to conduct an “exhaustive” investigation into any allegations of “abuse and irregularities” (Rival Times, 2022). Nevertheless, in early December 2022, shortly after both these statements were issued, Molly Phee, the head of the U.S. Bureau of African Affairs and thus Biden’s top diplomat for the continent, cheered Obiang’s “success” and welcomed their “close collaboration”, pointing to a “shared future” where the two countries would “act together” by seizing “opportunities to strengthen” and “enhance our mutual security” (Ntutumu, 2022). The primary backdrop for the new U.S. dynamic “narrative” circling around Equatorial Guinea is the imperative to establish a “contest” where fending off competing Chinese patrons becomes the overriding priority. This is a very necessary expedient to the renewed involvement by Texan oil and gas firms in a dictatorship that is notorious in domestic American media and politics. Even *Foreign Policy*, Washington’s agenda-setting-and-supporting magazine, has published condemnations and democratic appeals to the U.S. government by Tutu Alicante (2022). Alicante is an Ameri-

The wildcard story about a Chinese naval base in Bata’s new port has been widely publicized in the U.S.

can-trained lawyer originally from the island of Annobón in Equatorial Guinea and perhaps the regime's most prominent international "detractor" through his role as the executive director of the Washington-based human rights lobbying NGO "EG Justice", which is primarily financed by the U.S Congress's National Endowment for Democracy.

2. News of a Chinese Atlantic naval base – the U.S. view

The news of China's purported quest for its first military base on Africa's Atlantic coast was first reported on the front page of the Wall Street Journal (2021) — under the headline "China Seeks First Military Base on Africa's Atlantic Coast". The newspaper claimed it received the "exclusive scoop" on a spoon from "classified" intelligence sources at the American embassy in Malabo. Stephen Townsend, the then head of AFRICOM, who is reputed to be a cautious representative of the military consensus, spread the story across prestigious outlets following special briefings in the U.S. Senate and Congress on national security challenges in March and July 2022. For example, the article by AFRICOM's director of intelligence titled "More Chinese Military Bases in Africa: A Question of When, Not If" was published in *Foreign Policy* magazine soon after, which in turn, was followed by the magazine's security staffers own take, titled "Biden Plays Nice with Equatorial Guinea to Spoil China's Atlantic Ambitions" (Miller, 2022; Gramer et al., 2022). A director at the Brookings Institution (2022), commented that while the story was tinged with "suspicion about Chinese motives and motivations" the concern over military use of ports in the Gulf of Guinea "is going to be very real" — echoing the life's work and future career of a former director of the Brookings China Strategy Initiative, Rush Doshi, the author of *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*¹. This book is his reworked Harvard PhD from 2018, and he currently serves as Biden's National Security Council Director for China. *The Long Game* projects a new phase of Chinese foreign policy that started apparently in 2016 with the Trump presidency and the perception in China that the West is in "decline", which "will" be followed by a new outposts of the People Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) the world over. Doshi's conclusion (2021, p. 319), a series of policy initiatives conveyed in certain terms, recommends that it be made clear to "countries that are considering hosting Chinese facilities" that "bases could be targets".

While at least the floating of the "idea" of a base in Bata does not seem to be entirely invented, it does have an inventive function as it takes what seemed like a clinched ally, or better vassal, and returns them to the fold. The port of Bata was inaugurated in 2019, though it was largely completed in 2014 by the main Chinese state-owned contractor for Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative projects. There is a frantic certainty that "more bases seem sure to come", and much speculative talk about China building out port piers capable accommodating aircraft-carriers and nourishing nuclear submarines with limited missile ranges that would need to be fired from somewhere along the Atlantic to reach the U.S east coast and pointing to Equatorial Guinea as "a logical candidate. Piracy is a scourge in the Gulf of Guinea, giving China a pretext" (The Economist, 2022). An exhaustive report on Sino-Equatorial Guinean military relations published by the top American defense think tank — alarmingly titled "Is China Building a New

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¹ Rush Doshi's (2022) *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* was reviewed in the *Comillas Journal of International Relations* no. 23. Available here: <https://revistas.comillas.edu/index.php/internationalrelations/article/view/18418/16224>.

String of Pearls in the Atlantic Ocean?” (Lin et al., 2021), concludes with the phrase that a “new era” of a growing non-economic presence of China in the Global South, has “already arrived”. All Western security analysts and outlets are in complete accord, thereby generating the American foreign policy agenda they report and rely on. They play into the fear in the American imaginary of Chinese expansionism and of overseas bases as symbols of “global power” or “force projection”. Hawkish pieces are characterized by an educated use of military planning terms that turn open expressions by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on the need to fight piracy and protect its citizens overseas, into a new “domino” theory — recalling the dominant geopolitical metaphor of a pre-Vietnam War Cold War.

The Biden administration holds a clear adversarial vision of China in Africa, which it identifies as the “only competitor with the intent and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order”. The Biden administration announced an expanded pivot to Africa after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan during Antony Blinken’s maiden Africa tour in November 2021. In a statement following Blinken’s visit, which an Equatorial Guinean official could have made, the Nigerian foreign minister is quoted by The New York Times (2021) as saying: “Regarding U.S.-Chinese competition in Africa, I mean, I don’t want to sound almost — well, cynical”, but “it’s a good thing for you if you’re the attractive bride and everybody is offering you wonderful things”, he added. “So you take what you can from each of them,” he said. Already in October 2021, before the story broke out, Jonathan Finer, Biden’s Deputy National Security Advisor, visited Malabo. He was accompanied by State Department officials and relayed the message that “the administration has made clear” to “the leaders of the Equatorial Guinea” that a “foothold” advancing China’s “military goals” would “raise national security concerns for us,” and accused China of using “economic leverage” for a scheme that would not “contribute” to the “betterment of security stability” and was not in “the interest” of Equatorial Guinea (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021; Olander, 2021). The U.S. Department of Defense (2022, pp. 144-145) creates the “observation” that the “PRC’s overseas military basing will be constrained by the willingness of potential host nations to support a PLA presence” — that is, “host nations” need to “perform an essential role” in “regulating” any potential “PRC’s military operations”.

It is worth noting that Jonathan Finer was a key advisor to Biden and Kerry when they respectively chaired the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the late-Bush and early-Obama years. Finer also held the prestigious position of Director of Policy Planning at the State Department from 2015 to 2017. During the lull of the Trump years, he worked as the head of political risk at private equity firm Warburg Pincus LLC. This firm, amongst other ventures, has financed all the main operations of the independent Texan oil company Kosmos Energy in West Africa, including its 2017 majority acquisition of the existing Ceiba FPSO (Floating Production Storage and Offloading Unit), situated off the coast of Bata. The network of oil wells surrounding the Ceiba FPSO produced over half of the oil output in the country in 2022, producing 35,000 barrels per day (bpd). It is also worth noting that Kosmos’s stock price quintupled in 2022 compared to the previous year’s lows. Kosmos is a small company with approximately 200 employees, known for discovering and exploiting the prized Jubilee oil field in Ghana (net production of 31,900 bpd in 2022), and it only has a few other ventures elsewhere.

The new AFRICOM Commander, Michael Langley, appointed in the summer of 2022, has made further overtures, stating that the Chinese Navy still has “aspirations” to “build capacity” on the “West Coast” of Africa and that only in a non-public “closed session” he would “be able to lay that out” — while repeatedly noting that “we can’t let them have a base on the West Coast”.

The Biden administration holds a clear adversarial vision of China in Africa

Langley, nevertheless, fears submarine reach “beyond the Indo-Pacific” and senses an “urgency especially in West Africa”. His clear warning came in the form of advising governments in the region not to make “wrong choices in siding with either the PRC or Russia” (U.S. Central Command, 2023). A former Pentagon official welcomed that finally, the “Biden administration” now takes “Chinese inroads in the Atlantic more seriously”, although he considers Angola a more likely initial foothold and suggests that AFRICOM may itself be considering building a base in Equatorial Guinea instead. However, the official warns that if “Obiang dies tomorrow, China might play dirty” and “bribe their way to the top, essentially creating a situation in which the Pentagon builds a base only for Obiang’s successor to hand it over to the People’s Liberation Army”. The only other location in the region that is considered more likely for a new U.S. base is, of course, in the more traditional American stronghold in the region, Liberia, though it is considered significantly less “stable” (Rubin, 2023).

The geopolitical policy-setting independent agency of the U.S. government, the so-called U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC, 2022), has already and immediately in late 2021 noted the need to track the apparent international “attempts” and “efforts” of the PLAN, such as “those seen in the UAE and Equatorial Guinea”. They recommended the creation of a new “report” with a “non-public addendum” that would identify “methods for legislative, legal, diplomatic, and if necessary, physical actions to address PRC encroachment in areas identified as key energy security interests of the United States and its allies”. More recently, the USCC (2023) has expanded its hawkish frame by considering all new ports built out through the Belt and Road Initiative as part of “Chinese-owned and -operated commercial infrastructure” that can provide the PLAN with “leverage” and “control” of “maritime flows” in “peacetime”; “in wartime, the implications are unknowable”. Following these USCC recommendations, the U.S. Congress passed a “National Defense Authorization Act” explicitly tasking the Pentagon to produce a report (“Reports on effects of strategic competitor naval facilities in Africa”). While the report is not public, in May 2023, it was circulated internally to the relevant Armed Services, Foreign Affairs, and Intelligence committees in the U.S. Congress and Senate. It is supposed to contain a “detailed description” of “any agreement entered into between China or Russia and a country or government in Africa” regarding a “naval facility in Africa”, as well as an account of the many “efforts” of the Pentagon to “force” a change in “posture” onto local governments regarding any naval facilities. Only the information contained in this report can further reveal the status of the still entirely imaginary “Chinese naval base” in Bata.

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3. The U.S. Embassy in Malabo

It is unclear to whom this open notice about the Chinese naval base was directed to — mainly at the Chinese foreign ministry itself. Nevertheless, the primary public is domestic, internal to the American establishment, and this configuration needs to be closely considered. The discretion the U.S. enjoys in the country was pointed out by Anton Smith, the Chargé d’Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Malabo (2009, 2009b, 2009c) — whose observation then is arguably even more valid now: the U.S. has “all” “the cards”, “after all, we (via U.S. oil companies) pay all the bills - and the EG leadership knows it”. In his series of internal reports proposing a new policy of “engagement” with Obiang, Smith says the U.S. must bypass both the “specter of a reluctant Capitol Hill” and “opponent human rights N.G.O.’s” — which he dismisses as “dedicated and vicious” “noise”, or, at best, “outdated”. He conceives of the “state” in Equatorial Guinea to be

“rudimentary” rather than “rogue” and considers Obiang as having “reasonably good intentions” and a “benign leadership” and a leader who can steer “the country in the right direction”, but only with the “hands-on engagement” of the U.S Embassy. Following these reports, Smith’s superiors “reprimanded” him during his annual review for “failing to take policy direction from Washington”. Consequently, he was demoted to the position of the Consul General in Halifax, Canada, in 2010. His initially shelved reports have resurfaced as the new unofficial U.S. stance in the country, though it is unclear how the current staff at American Embassy perceives the rise of Teodorín — some former U.S. officials at least consider a “breakdown” possible in light of declining revenues and the unforeseeable consequences of the non-payment of military personnel. Smith himself was promoted around 2015 to the head of the trade and business section of the U.S. Embassy in Madrid. He regularly travelled to Malabo from there, as his wife is from Equatorial Guinea. Writers who have directly interviewed U.S. diplomats and oil executives have observed that “Smith’s arguments” and “recommendations” — including an “upgrade” of the Malabo Embassy by appointing “an experienced ambassador” as well as a “defense attaché from the Pentagon” — seem to have been increasingly “prevailing” (Coll, 2012, p. 995).

Even from an external perspective, one can infer that this putting in motion of this “new” diplomatic strategy was most likely devised by Susan N. Stevenson, who served as the U.S. Ambassador until September 2021. Stevenson’s fluency in Chinese and her previous experience as the press attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and the State Department’s Bureau of Public Affairs, an entity responsible for articulating the U.S. government’s primary foreign policy objectives, likely informed her strategy. By the end of 2021, Stevenson was promoted to an executive role in the U.S. State Department’s intelligence agency, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The Biden administration named David Gilmour as the successor to her ambassadorship. Gilmour’s prior assignments in Chad and Togo involved overseeing analogous scenarios, where he had to “monitor” the dynastic successions of the presidency from father to son. Additionally, he has had significant experience in Chad, supporting the ambivalent strategies of major U.S. oil firms, including ExxonMobil. Gilmour’s inaugural task in Malabo was to coordinate a February 2022 trip by Molly Phee, Biden’s lead envoy for Africa. Phee held separate meetings with Obiang and Teodorín, accompanied by a general from AFRICOM (Wall Street Journal, 2022). She presented Obiang with a symbolic “compass” as a gift. Following this meeting, the Washington desk officer role for Equatorial Guinea was taken up by Martin Regan, a former U.S. Army Major and conflict specialist, possessing the highest security clearance level “above Top Secret”. In late 2022, Teodorín even hosted the deputy director of the CIA at his palace in Bata. By February 2023, Blinken had officially called Obiang to discuss the small and contained outbreak of the “Marburg virus disease”. Needless to say, the transcripts of all these meetings are not public, but one imagines that other “issues” were discussed as well. It has been decades since high-ranking U.S. executive and military officials have visited the country — not since the early 1990s when they were securing the offshore oil and gas fields. These recent high-profile meetings are likely being interpreted by the Equatorial Guinea government as an indication that the U.S. is pursuing a rapprochement with their “new” administration.

During Stevenson’s ambassadorial nomination hearing in the Trump years, she stated that her mandate would serve to “strengthen commercial ties” with Equatorial Guinea in line with Trump’s “Prosper Africa” initiative. She responded to the question about her “philosophical understanding” of the “balance” between supporting human rights and “supporting American firms involved in the oil and gas sector” with the guiding idea that “as long as the oil is flowing”

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there is a “perceived less urgency to address” such delicate balances, as is the case with other oil rich one-party or one-family states. She also had to disclose that her personal “investment portfolio includes funds that may have investments in companies that operate in Equatorial Guinea”. After preparing for the job by presumably reading the internal cables of her predecessors, she says her strategy will include pulling at the heartstrings of the regime by setting up the idea of the “world stage”: “This is important [to] them, the international status” (U.S. Senate, 2019). She does not seem to suggest that U.S. officials should somehow attempt to clean up the reputation of the ruling family abroad — an impossible task attempted and botched in the past by Washington-based private political marketing consultants who tried to compare Teodorín to George W. Bush, who also “had reportedly been a drinker and partier as a younger man before becoming more serious” (Silverstein, 2011). Rather, her self-declared strategy is to “use what is clearly a desire for international recognition” as “a lever to push the government” (U.S. Senate, 2019). The diplomatic pattern of what Anton Smith called “engagement” and “invitation” has now morphed into a genuine appeal to and accommodation of Obiang and Teodorín’s statesmanship.

The Economist (2022) suggests this new strategy is rooted in an American belief that “it can offer what China cannot: a veneer of respectability. For a pariah dictatorship, embarrassed by accusations of corruption and human-rights abuses, that might be tempting”. The Economist itself illustrates this strategy by simply referring to Obiang’s regime as a “pariah dictatorship” without the common and repetitive list-like allusions to the unpolished evils committed by the long-standing regime. They then cite a “U.S official”, who is likely Stevenson herself, who claims that the Obiang regime stated to them “unequivocally that they have no plans to move forward” with a Chinese base. More recently, even though Stevenson is no longer on duty in Malabo, she met with a “friend” for an informal lunch in Washington, who was none other than Teodoro Biyogo Nsue Okomo himself — Obiang’s chief of staff and Teodorín’s uncle (Ntutumu, 2022b). The image and tweet in question was shared by Miguel Ntutumu Evuna Andeme, the current Equatorial Guinean Ambassador in Washington and the son of Alejandro Evuna Owono Asangono, a notable PDGE intellectual and regime propagandist, who oversees all diplomatic missions at the presidency and whose wisdom and experience seem to be appreciated by Teodorín.

In an apparently happenstance act, Teodorín announced in various instances in 2022 that he was revoking approximately 350 licenses used by container ships frequently flying the Equatorial Guinean national flag and called for international collaboration to detect such vessels. This measure is almost certainly related to the ongoing investigation by the U.N. Security Council (2022, p. 334) into the evasion of sanctions by a North Korean coal and fuel importing shipping enterprise, with at least one known representatives “based and operating in Equatorial Guinea”. The Lloyd newsletter, the “established leader in accurate shipping news”, confirms that progress has been made on de-registration under the flag of Equatorial Guinea (Meade, 2023). While there is no publicly available evidence linking such measures to a type of counter-gesture of rapprochement by Teodorín, the timing and sequence is indicative. It is worth noting that the U.N. Security Council investigation also established that there is a relatively recent presence of North Korean technical assistants in the country, primarily involved in IT infrastructure and the establishment of secure government communications. Current government officials fear surveillance due to a profound distrust of the French company Orange, that still operates the country’s only internet rails through the Africa Coast to Europe cable system. In 2018, Huawei was contracted to build a new communication line between Malabo and Bata. Nevertheless,

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there was a massive breach of internal government emails dating from 2017 to early 2022, with approximately 120 gigabytes of data hacked from the government's centralized servers, via a vulnerability in Microsoft software. This data cache has selectively been shared by the anonymous wikileaks — like organization DDosSecrets (2022). What is certain is that the U.S. now possesses an x-ray of the administration's communication.

4. The powers of debt and industry – China's view

While I have tried to establish the current status of the base based on all available public information, the practical reality is that the Chinese Navy is the largest in the world by number of ships and has confined itself to a single overseas base, a small logistics support base in Djibouti opened in 2017, with the first port call by a supply ship only occurring in March 2022. The base was announced in 2015 and approved by Xi Jinping as Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the PRC in 2013, after the evacuation of 30,000 Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011 proved challenging for the PLAN. China's primary concern is being able to support and evacuate its citizens in West Africa in the event of a local conflict or to combat piracy, especially against Chinese fishing vessels in the Gulf of Guinea — which raked in considerably more piracy incidents than the Gulf of Aden. In any case, in the past years, piracy in both gulfs has been drastically reduced to an almost insignificant amount by deployments of other naval forces, principally European. Any PLAN vessels, when crossing into the South Atlantic, usually call on commercial ports of friendly nations for replenishments, especially at Cape Town. The PLAN has conducted sporadic escorts in the Gulf of Guinea — in 2018, it held an antipiracy exercise with the navies of Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, and Ghana (Martinson, 2019).

It seems rather likely that this mirage of a Chinese plan for a naval base in Bata is similar to the media alarm in 2015, now totally subsided, regarding a “potential” base at the Chinese-built Walvis Bay port in Namibia (USCC, 2020). Only Alex Vines (2023) from the Chatham House think tank based out of London — who knows the country well as he was the main author of various Human Rights Watch reports on Equatorial Guinea for many years — has deviated from the U.S. “narrative” and proposes that while there may be an obvious interest in the PLAN wanting “berthing rights” in the commercial or “mixed-use” port of Bata for its vessels, there is really very “little evidence of plans for a full-fledged base so far”. An anonymous Chinese military official simply said the Wall Street Journal report “is not true” and noted that the U.S. has “frequently hyped information about China building overseas military bases to bloat the ‘China threat’ theory”, while simultaneously noting that “even if China plans to build an overseas support base”, “it is normal for China to build a support base somewhere out of humanitarian rescue reasons”. He added: “if China is going to build its second overseas base, it will release information openly and in advance” (Global Times, 2021).

The idea of a Chinese naval base in the country can, I think, be traced back to a former Equatorial Guinean Ambassador in Beijing, as already reported over half a decade ago by Jin Hao (2016), the military correspondent for the state-owned Phoenix News. In the article, the journalist quotes “military sources” who told him that an unnamed country “on the West Coast of Africa and facing the Atlantic Ocean” was “interested in having China build a military base a few years ago”. Nevertheless, at least at that point in time, “China ultimately rejected the proposal, a clear signal that it has no intention of confronting the US in the distant oceans”; though it was certainly considered “strategic” that “if China were to build a naval base there” it

China's primary concern is being able to support and evacuate its citizens in West Africa in the event of a local conflict or to combat piracy

would “also act as a sharp knife straight into the Atlantic Ocean, the backyard of the US Navy”. It is unclear whether the new “intelligence” from the U.S. Embassy in Malabo dates back to this public report published by the Chinese press, in Chinese, quoting Chinese military officials, or to more recent communications between, for example, President Obiang and Marcos Mba Ondo, the former long-time Ambassador of Equatorial Guinea to China until 2015, and currently the President’s delegate at his own Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Alternatively, any new information may have been picked up from informants or from heavily used lines of communication during the pandemic — for example, during the meetings held in the summer of 2021 between the PDGE secretary, Osa Osa, the first lady, Constanca Mangue, and the Chinese Ambassador in Malabo, Qi Mei. These meetings were held to discuss an upgrading and “enrichment” of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Currently, Equatorial Guinea sits on the relatively low third-tier status of a “comprehensive cooperative partnership” with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These initial contacts led to an in-person meeting between the Chinese Ambassador and Obiang and Teodorín in August 2021, as well as phone call between Xi Jinping and Obiang in late October 2021 (Chinese Embassy, 2021).

Previous high-level meetings in Beijing between Obiang and Xi Jinping were held in 2015 at the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation and in 2018 after a new “bilateral cooperation agreement” was established between the two countries during the China-Africa Defense and Security Forum, the first of its kind, hosted by China’s Ministry of National Defense. In early 2015, the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, visited Malabo to inaugurate the new Equatorial Guinean Foreign Ministry building financed with Chinese aid and presided over the ceremony that elevated Equatorial Guinea to its current third-tier status with China. China has had continuous relations with, and an embassy in, Equatorial Guinea since 1970, and there is no open sign of change in Chinese activities in the country. Apart from some military aid in the final years of the Macias regime, during which it was also the country’s largest aid donor (Jensen, 2019 p. 714), “cooperation” has revolved entirely around infrastructure and on “trade and investment”, including on various industrial and “economic diversification” projects in the forestry and fisheries sector, and crucially in the energy sector.

Key projects include the Djibloho hydroelectric dam, which has made Rio Muni energy-independent and a potential energy exporter in the region. The dam on the Wele River is adjacent to the giant and delirious construction site for the new administrative capital city, Djibloho, also known as *Ciudad de la Paz* (“City of Peace”). Notably, this construction site consumed half of the government budget in 2016, and work was paralyzed due to an accumulation of arrears owed to Chinese construction firms. From 2013 to 2017, public revenue contracted by 45%, and public expenditures fell in the same proportions. This situation was precipitated by a historical low of oil prices, not seen before the invasion of Iraq, and forced the government to seek out an emergency loan of almost \$300 million from the IMF by 2018, which represents a kind of bailout of Obiang by the U.S.

Debts are certainly escalating, but how they are being forgiven, compounded, or transformed is unclear. Chinese state-owned banks are still by far the largest creditors in the country, though official figures are unavailable, it is widely estimated that this sovereign debt amounts to 50% of GDP, one of the highest rates for any country in relation to Chinese creditor banks. The most recent data indicates that in 2017, a Chinese bank made an additional loan of \$772 million to complete the still-unfinished city of Djibloho. According to the “Chinese Loans to Africa” database, this marks the largest individual loan disbursement to date. Starting in 2012, Equatorial

A new “bilateral cooperation agreement” was established between the two countries during the China-Africa Defense and Security Forum

Guinea commenced repayment on an at least \$2.5 billion debt, primarily repaid through regular oil shipments — approximately 11,000 bpd managed by the Sinochem Corporation for The Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank) and an “Unspecified Chinese Government Institution”. These loans were secured via deposit accounts opened by the Government of Equatorial Guinea at the Exim Bank, into which the government is also obligated to deposit proceeds from its share of hydrocarbon exports (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2023). This is part of a complex global network of so-called “dark debt” that is not recorded as external public debt, and quite secretive “loans for oil” arrangements that suit “resource-rich but cash-poor states” “permanently teetering toward bankruptcy” (Oliveira & Vallée, 2021).

Speculation is rife that China could exert pressure on its debtor nations. The idea is explicitly part of a semi-designed Pentagon “narrative” or, at the very least, a prescribed “talking point”. The guidelines for the drafting of the new report created by the U.S. “China Commission” outlined above emphasize the need to give as much public exposure as possible to “PRC involvement” in “financial transfers to, and facilitation of corruption and/or financial influence activities in key oil and gas-exporting countries” (USCC, 2022). Think tanks, such as the Carnegie Council, often refer to the controversial strategy of “debt-trap diplomacy” — where Chinese loans are issued to deliberately saddle countries with debt to turn them into a political advantage — an accusation which has been a source of controversy and debate among academics and analysts in recent years (Chilufya & Saldivar, 2023). In any case, Teodorín seems to have reached a settlement, as Chinese contractors have resumed their work in Djibloho on an array of new ministerial and residential buildings and a vast presidential palace and parliament in early 2023. The city already has a functioning new university, the Afro-American University of Central Africa (AAUCA), now majority owned by German-Turkish former Kickboxing champion Sakir Yavuz, via his company “Perfect Timing Holding” operated out of Las Vegas and headed up since 2022 by the former Brazilian Minister of Education under Dilma Rousseff. Equatorial Guinea is very much interested in elevating itself to an “international” as well as “strategic” plane, as the U.S. ambassador Stevenson duly noted.

During the UN General Assembly in September 2022, the Equatorial Guinean Foreign Minister, Simeon Oyono Esono Angue, openly welcomed a new Chinese global security “architecture” while very publicly meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. In early 2023, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its “Global Security Initiative Concept Paper” which, at point 12, simply calls for a strengthening of “maritime dialogue” to tackle piracy and “safeguard maritime peace and tranquillity and sea lane security” (China, 2023). Wang Yi’s term ended in early 2023, and he had a reputation in Western media for promoting an aggressive and expansionist “wolf warrior diplomacy”, a term that the new Minister of Foreign Affairs of China called a “narrative trap”: “those who coined the term and set the trap either know little about China and its diplomacy or have a hidden agenda [and] disregard of facts” (China, 2023b). In Beijing, in March 2023, Oyono then met with Qin Gang, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs who was promoted from his position of ambassador in Washington. Oyono, discussing relations with China and the West but implicitly extending the idea to his own country, opposed “interference in China’s internal affairs under the guise of human rights” and added that “nothing can stop the deepening of friendship and cooperation with China”. During their meeting, Qin Gang repeated the official stance of supporting “Equatorial Guinea in independently exploring a development path suited to its national conditions” and upholding “high-quality development and expand high-level openness”. He also cited Xi Jinping’s agenda-setting speech from November

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2021 at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Dakar about a new “China-Africa community with a shared future in the new era” (China-Lusophone Brief, 2023).

Xi Jinping concluded his Dakar speech by quoting Leopold Senghor, the Senegalese poet and first president of Senegal, who once wrote: “let us answer ‘present’ at the rebirth of the world” and finished on a note about combining the “mighty strength of the 2.7 billion Chinese and Africans”. To be sure, the rhetorical “soft-power” of this seemingly pan-African-Chinese vision has limited reach beyond their appearance as translated texts on the Chinese Foreign Ministry website and as booklets available at Chinese embassies. Only ideologically aligned newspapers tend to quote these elaborate visions at length, something Qin Gang remarked on as well: “we make trending topics and find ourselves in the spotlight more often. But we don’t have enough microphones, and our voice is not loud enough. Some are still hogging the microphones, and there are quite many noises and jarring notes about China”. The Chinese Foreign Ministry continues to perceive the monopoly and dedicated focus of the international consensus as part of the American-led revival of a “Cold War mentality” aimed at creating a “new Cold War to contain China”. At a press conference with Qin Gang, in reply to a question about the “widening conflict of interests” in the “China-US relationship”, he immediately provided the example of the U.S. fighter jet shooting down a Chinese high-altitude surveillance balloon over California in early 2023: “even the United States did not believe it posed a physical threat. However, in violation of the spirit of international law and international customary practices, the United States acted with a presumption of guilt. It overreacted, abused force, and dramatized the accident, creating a diplomatic crisis that could have been avoided”. His message that “the US perception and views of China are seriously distorted” due to its own “domestic politics” of “hysterical neo-McCarthyism” would seem to apply also to the Chinese naval base in Bata story (China, 2021, 2023b).

The imaginary creation of a new geopolitical frontier is the opposite of the previous entirely indirect and distant approach of the U.S. towards Equatorial Guinea

5. Corporate and soft power

The imaginary creation of a new geopolitical frontier is the opposite of the previous entirely indirect and distant approach of the U.S. towards Equatorial Guinea. Even recently, the U.S. “diplomatic footprint in Equatorial Guinea” was “miniscule”, with less than a handful of staff and a remarkable lack of “soft power” activities (U.S. Senate, 2008). There was no resident ambassador for over a decade after an “incident” in early 1994 when John Bennett, the U.S. Ambassador, apparently overheard a death threat while driving in his car with his windows down after visiting a cemetery, after which he was accused of both witchcraft and interfering in a previous election. While Bennett was quite insistent that “there is no rule of law” in the country, his critique of recent U.S. policy is aimed at its commitment to maintaining the “fiction that there should be a rule of law here”: “there was a Constitution, it had to be followed, that type of thing” (Voice of America, 2016). During the almost entire oil boom period, the outpost was left vacant, and the embassy was even closed in 1996. The Bush administration reopened it in 2004 without a resident ambassador for several years afterwards, as relations quickly soured during the infamous collapse of Riggs bank in 2005. The bank’s collapse was precipitated by a massive money laundering scandal that obviously implicated its largest depositor, Obiang, and publicly exposed his family’s network of assets in the U.S. It was widely reported that Obiang’s account held up to \$700 million, deposited in many instances in suitcases of 100\$ bills (U.S. Congress, 2004, p. 165; Oliveira, 2022).

In this period, the U.S. government delegated its “policy” to the oil companies, which “painstakingly laid the groundwork for U.S. influence”, according to a 2008 study of Equatorial Guinea by Antony Blinken, titled “The petroleum and poverty paradox”, which he wrote while serving as the staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Joe Biden. Blinken adds that despite the absence of diplomats, the U.S. could rely on the oil executives to be their “effective advocates”, due to their “familiarity” with the “Equatoguinean government”. He commended the actions of the “reputation-conscious oil majors”, especially ExxonMobil and its then CEO, Rex Tillerson, for pushing Equatorial Guinea to join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) — a standard for publishing otherwise secret data on contracts, licenses, revenue collection and spending. For various reasons Equatorial Guinea’s candidacy for EITI membership in 2010 was cancelled, and while the supporters of Gabriel Mbaga Obiang Lima, the former Hydrocarbons Minister, reapplied in 2019, the EITI Board rejected the country again in 2020 because of a lack of “commitment” to civil society “stakeholders”.

Anton Smith’s unease was rooted in the divide he saw between the reality of Texan companies, who practically monopolized oil and gas exports, and the Chinese, who received most of the “credit for assisting the country’s development by undertaking high-profile projects” of infrastructure and development such as the semi- to well-functioning energy and water supply in the cities. He wanted the U.S. to provide an alternative, a “moral compass”, to the “econo-colonialism of the Chinese” and painted the picture of a “door” that was “wide open” for “additional American involvement, both official and private” — warning that “by remaining aloof we cede a fertile field to others (e.g., the Chinese)”. Smith also notes that the C.I.A. liaised with the Obiang government directly, including to warn him of the movements of pirates and mercenaries, for example in 2009 when Niger Delta militants raided the Presidential Palace in Malabo (U.S. Embassy, 2009c). It is likely that Obiang was also given advance notice of the coup attempts that were arrested long before mercenaries reached the country, such as the 2004 Wonga coup financed by Mark Thatcher. I would speculate that this was the case as well in the still obscure 2017 attempt, as Obiang, in an interview with *France 24* (2018), claims his “own sources” indicated to him that the coup attempt was coming “out of France” and Chad. In the Bush and Obama years, military support to Obiang was rerouted through Israel and Ukraine, primarily in the form of “services”, especially of military training and foreign military personnel, rather than in the shape of hardware and equipment which was almost entirely Russian (Coll, 2012). It is worth noting that more recently Obiang has additionally relied on military support from Zimbabwe and Uganda, who enjoy a first and second-tier diplomatic partnership rankings with China.

Following the “Smith report” recommendations has been a steep uphill, and primarily, narrative battle. This is because already a quite popular and prestigious media genre covering Obiang’s and Teodorín’s misdeeds has grown and withered for two decades. Most notable these include writings by Peter Maas, now editor at the *Intercept*, by Ken Silverstein, a former *Harper’s Magazine* editor, and Steve Coll, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and Pulitzer Prize Board member. These types of profiles usually never fail in finding an everyman or a prominent exile to give them a quote about how Americans “should help us. Saddam Hussein, he was a dictator, and the whites decided to get rid of him. They should help us, too” (Maas, 2005). Silverstein (2014) dedicated about 70 pages of his *The Secret World of Oil* to his indignance at Teodorín’s purchase history. In his case, his aspirations are primarily literary and secondarily for “regime-change”. Silverstein, in an interview says, “the tales” or the “Godfather-type clan in Equatorial Guinea”, of “corruption and debauchery are like something out of a Garcia Marquez novel” — which he

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interspersed with some not fact-checked exaggerations like Teodorín apparently “commissioning about a billion-dollar yacht”. Silverstein speaks directly about what could be done: “corruption is so endemic” and “political repression is so vile, that you just have to think: do we have to do business with these people? Do we need Equatorial Guinea’s oil that desperately?” (Mother Jones, 2014). This cultivated humanitarian sanctioning reached its apogee in several short chapters dedicated to Obiang and Teodorín in a recent New York Times #1 bestseller book on “Big Oil” by MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow (2019, p. 130). The audiences for these works are entirely internal to the U.S. — Maddow accuses Obiang of not “looking to fund universal pre-K” — an Americanism for public funding of preschool care. While the chapters build up to and revolve around Rex Tillerson, ExxonMobil’s CEO (up to 2017) and Trump’s Secretary of State thereafter, she rehashes the works of other American journalists to presumptuously explain: “and that is how the black gold, the excrement of the devil, the natural resources [...] under the seabed of Equatorial Guinea ended up producing giant pots of money for the Obiang family”.

Over the past decade, the country’s economy has shrunk by almost 80%. For the first time last year, the value of gas exports exceeded that of oil exports. The centrepiece of Equatorial Guinea’s economy is an LNG complex located at Punta Europa on Bioko Island, next to Malabo airport, which exports the vast majority of gas in the country, and registered a 10% increase in 2022. This was the clearest and only sign of recent growth. This is why the most important economic sign and “lifeline” for the regime was the commitment secured by Obiang in Washington in December 2022 from Chevron executives regarding “new projects”, held after his meeting with Joe Biden during the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit (PDGE, 2022). By chance in 2020, Chevron accidentally found itself owning over 60% of the country’s hydrocarbon production as part of its much larger buyout of a small independent, Noble Energy, which owned most of the new gas fields in the country and had a large stake in Marathon Oil’s LNG complex at Punta Europa. After some negotiations and an attempt in early 2022 to sell off its Equatorial Guinean offshore concessions that pipe gas into the LNG complex for 1\$ billion (Reuters, 2022), Chevron seems to have decided to develop its regional plans in the shallow waters of the Bight of Biafra to boost LNG exports to Europe. The stabilizing of local and geopolitical developments — and favorable production-sharing agreements for their share of oil and gas sales (Appel, 2019) — likely influenced Chevron to stay and invest. This is by far the most important economic development necessary for the securing of the country near-term future — under Teodorín.

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6. The failure of the French courts

Twice in the past few years, the French *Cour de Cassation*, the highest court of appeal, upheld the 2017 “ill-gotten gains” ruling by a French penal court or *Tribunal correctionnel*, which mandated the seizure of Teodorín’s former mansion in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. A French lawyer and Rachida Dati, the former minister of Justice under Sarkozy, had advised the Equatorial Guinean ambassador in Paris to continue to appeal the decision for a fee of almost half a million euros. The mansion, implicated in a money laundering offense, is currently valued at around €50 million. The six-story property, boasting 101 rooms, including a private nightclub, is currently occupied by Equatorial Guinea diplomats. Teodorín warned on his Twitter account that if his diplomats were expelled, the French Ambassador in Malabo would be treated in kind. Equatorial Guinea had already started a case against France at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) regarding immunities of high-ranking officials from French courts in 2016, mak-

ing the actual confiscation currently impossible. Equatorial Guinea (2022) has initiated new proceedings against France at the ICJ, trying to stop the sale of property by French authorities. The legal dispute revolves around competing definitions of the words “diplomatic” and “personal” property, as paperwork seems to prove that Teodorín sold the property back to the state of Equatorial Guinea in 2012². The legal confusion revolves around a fundamentally different understanding of public and private, and indeed a conflation of it in Equatorial Guinea. Before and at the beginning of the oil boom, a cash-poor state resorted to compensate its ministers and other high officials with a maze of property leases, exclusive rights, or concessions to operate or monopolize certain sectors of the economy — or “rents”.

Both those prosecuting and defending Teodorín have supplied evidence regarding the alleged sources of misused funds. The network of “private” shell companies used to manage the government’s “public” finances, including the original purchase of the Paris mansion, dates back to at least 1991. Witness accounts trace the source of Teodorín’s funds to an export fee, a “revolutionary tax” levied by his private forestry company SOMAGUI, consisting of 15,000 francs CFA (30\$) for every cubic meter of wood exported primarily by a Malaysian firm, Shimmer International, owned by Rimbunan Hijau (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). Teodorín also apparently imposed a “30% levy on all imports of the country” at the port of Bata, which was under Teodorín’s “personal and direct control” — according to an IMF economist who stumbled upon this income stream when figuring out why the government accounts had almost no import tax revenue (Silverstein, 2011). Teodorín’s state lawyer in Paris had insisted that his “logging company SOMAGUI SL” had only “private shareholders” and was “up to date with its tax obligations, such that the State of Equatorial Guinea need not claim any damages arising from the misappropriation of public funds” (Equatorial Guinea, 2017). The new case against France is being led again by Obiang’s long-time justice minister, Juan Olo Mba Nseng, who, contrary to mistaken assumptions, appears to be working in support of Teodorín. He is Constanca Mangué’s maternal uncle, studied in Moscow in the 1970s, and is apparently ardently anti-colonial, in the anti-European sense (Diario Rombe, 2017; Jeune Afrique, 2020).

Officials from Equatorial Guinea and elsewhere perceive the high-profile ill-gotten gains case as primarily a political attack, kickstarted in 2008 by Transparency International’s celebrity lawyer William Bourdon — founder of the strategic litigation Human Rights NGO “Sherpa”, the Mitterrand’s family lawyer and a great-grandson of the rubber baron Édouard Michelin. To them, the relatively new legal doctrine of *biens mal acquis* represents an unfair singling out of the families of Central African leaders, which were put in motion by various French judges in the case of Equatorial Guinea only after the realization that no oil and gas concessions were going to the French oil major Total, which is still ever present but clearly diminishing in the region. During the 2010s, the long-standing French corporate monopoly or dominance in a variety of sectors, such as gasoline and telecommunications (and formerly forestry and construction) were pushed back and even eliminated by other concessionaires, and in particular the state oil and telecoms companies, GEPetrol and GETESA — in this context, it is important to mention that in 2016 the French company Orange successfully received compensation of

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2 The extensive new annexes submitted by Equatorial Guinea (2022) is quite revealing. The Paris property seems to have been purchased by Obiang in 1991 through Swiss shell companies and then passed on to Teodorín: “On 19 September 1991, the building located at 42 Avenue Foch in Paris was acquired by the following Swiss companies: Ganesha Holding SA, GEP Gestion Entreprise Participation SA, RE Entreprise SA, Nordi Shipping & Trading Co Ltd, and Raya Holdings SA”; “On 18 December 2004, Mr. Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangué became the sole shareholder of the five Swiss companies and thus acquired ownership of the building”.

around \$50 million in French courts, for its loss of monopoly. In addition, the civil party and key witness in the case against Teodorín was the well-known Paris-based leader of a one-man opposition group, Salomon Abeso Ndong, who does not shy away from calling for the overthrow of the government and current constitution (Jeune Afrique, 2021). Abeso Ndong is an ardent enemy of the presidential family. A former used car salesman and self-appointed president of the opposition in exile, he runs a party website, “cored.fr”, with various tabs leading to graphic and disturbing accusations and accounts of political assassinations, police torture, cannibalism and incest.

Teodorín’s persistence is evident in the promotion of his close ally, Carmelo Nvono-Ncá, to the position of Ambassador in Paris in October 2022. This effective diplomat, previously stationed in Brussels, has also been the lead agent in the ICJ-mediated border delimitation dispute with Gabon — originally triggered by Gabon’s military annexation of the islets of Mbañe, Conga, and Cocoteros in August 1972, following the close advice of the Quai d’Orsay, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Yates, 2017). The ICJ judges’ imminent resolution of this fifty-year conflict will determine which of the two countries will have the authority to issue oil and gas concessions in the 2000 square kilometers of what is known in Equatorial Guinea as “Block EG-29”. The proven oil and gas reserves in this area will then be shared with either French or Texan drilling companies that have demonstrated an interest, also for over half a century, in these large and totally untapped shallow waters of the Bay of Corisco, on the mouth of the Muni River, and thus a prime site for significant oil and gas deposits.

7. Conclusion to Part II

Teodorín (2023) condemned his “radical opponents” in a seemingly out-of-the-blue but ever-green tweet statement about those who “have sold their souls to the devil” and are undertaking “strategies and pacts” that aim to “destroy everything that the country has achieved since our independence”. The perception of foreign interference in domestic affairs is indignantly reproached with pseudo-anti-colonial claims of the double standards of European governments and the universal standards of international NGOs who do not appreciate local political realities and differences, including by Obiang himself (France 24, 2018). For example, why are the superrich large family fortunes in the West not systematically framed in a similar light as arising from the “theft” of their own societies, and why is it only African leaders and small countries who are subject to a clear alternative imaginary of a completely different political system and targeted with such redistributive international legal tools. The high-profile persecution of leading government figures in Western courts is then perceived and equated with a slow “coup” to unseat the president’s chosen successor. Currently, neighboring or global powers with regional interests show no interest in engaging in a neo-imperial project of “state-re-formation”. In any case, such attempts simply reinforce the legitimizing ideology of the regime, which is sustained by the paranoia, real or imagined, of takeovers sponsored by former colonial powers.

The country’s ranking in the qualitative indices compiled by political rating agencies (Freedom House, Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, etc.) barely oscillates and if anything, has slightly worsened in the past decade. The well-researched Ibrahim Index of African Governance for 2022 is quite telling as the country’s overall bottom rung of 51/54 is only uplifted by its second place in the Security and Rule of Law component, which partly measures the capacity to thwart a coup. The country invariably figures towards the very bottom

The high-profile persecution of leading government figures in Western courts is then perceived and equated with a slow “coup” to unseat the president’s chosen successor

of all these rankings, alongside, for example, Libya and Burundi. In a country without a history of civil war or much internal political instability, such a ranking serves to communicate that high-level officials have near-total impunity. These rankings tend to uphold a narrative of an incompetent “tin-pot” “kleptocratic” “banana republic” on the verge of failure — a “failed state” or object of facile “transformation”. They channel the tireless hopes of exiles that a low reputation for associational, press, and business freedom could translate into increasing pressure by Western powers and even regime change.

The ten-year trend provided by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation is the all-purpose label “democratic backsliding”, which precisely coincides with Equatorial Guinea’s almost ten-year recession. This contrasts with the more peaceful previous boom period that deployed widespread financial co-optation of opposition figures through political appointments but also recalls Obiang’s more unstable early oil rule, which was characterized by severe political repression. In the boom, the government could even afford to make involuntary appointments and prompt political enemies, keeping a close eye on any facilitated or expected embezzlement of public funds, to prepare a pretext for an always ready penal punishment. Nonetheless, the heir apparent, Teodorín, or at least the trinity known as “OCONTE” (Obiang-Constancia-Teodorín), seem to possess sound political instincts and have a complete set of followers and allies, at least domestically and more than enough internationally between the U.S., China, and the OPEC states.

On external fronts, the government relies on world-class legal advisors, while internally, it tends to establish monopolies in all other political and economic domains while disregarding or suppressing any association or organization perceived as a threat. One may speculate that from the perspective of the upper echelons of the government as well as of the oil and gas executives successfully operating in the country, any intermittent and humdrum Western suggestions to cede or yield executive power, channeled mainly through NGOs or non-executive multilateral agencies, are as incongruous as faulting the CEO of a family-owned corporation for the lack of an internal democratic structure that would lead to their own replacement — and their total loss of social power. In the corporate world, only the board can remove a CEO, and after the overcoming of elaborate factionalism, the extended family board and their international backers have already appointed a new executive in waiting.

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