Russia: signing of a defense agreement with São Tomé and Príncipe

Description

In May 2024, the archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia, leading many analysts to fear a new success for Moscow's diplomatic offensive on the African continent. However, São Tomé wants to maintain a multifaceted foreign policy and not fall into any exclusive dependence.



According to the official legal information portal of the Russian Federation, a military cooperation agreement was signed on 24 April 2024 between Russia and the Central African archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe (STP). It came into force on 5 May.

The agreement stipulates that Russia will train the Santomean armed forces, provide them with logistical assistance, and share intelligence. The Russian and Santomean armies and navies will participate in joint exercises. Russian aircraft and warships will also visit the archipelago. The aim is to combat extremism and international terrorism and to help strengthen international peace and stability. The agreement has been signed for an indefinite period.

A historic Soviet presence

The logical consequence of the Carnation Revolution (April 1974), which stemmed from the colonial wars in Africa, was a relatively rapid process of decolonization. In the autumn of the same year, at the end of the process, the Portuguese government had to negotiate a power transfer with the São Tomé and Príncipe Liberation Movement (MLSTP), then in exile in Gabon.

The new island state in the Gulf of Guinea, surrounded by powerful neighbors, decided to place itself under the patronage of Angola. This partly explains the establishment of a Marxist regime and the presence of Cuban advisors. As for the Prime Minister (1975-1979), Miguel Trovoada was an economist trained in East Germany.

From then on, the Soviet Union acquired a radar station on Monte Café, in the centre-north of the island of São Tomé. Above all, it began to supply the Santomean armed forces with military equipment. Although the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the USSR ended these cordial relations and military equipment, the equipment supplied until then is still in use in the archipelago today(1).

A strategic position

Situated 350km off the coast and with a population of just 225,000, the STP archipelago comprises two main volcanic islands, São Tomé and Príncipe. From its central role in the triangular trade, it has inherited a plantation economy focused almost exclusively on cocoa despite recent efforts to develop tourism.

The archipelago is very poor, has high levels of inequality, and depends on international aid. Vulnerable to external shocks, including the consequences of climate change, the Covid pandemic, and Russia's large-scale war in Ukraine, the archipelago lacks essential infrastructure and suffers from weak institutions and high levels of corruption.

In 2001, the discovery of oil in its territorial waters and the agreement reached the same year with Nigeria on the joint exploitation of natural resources in a defined maritime zone gave reason to believe that the situation was about to

change. Aware of the threats that this windfall could pose to such a fragile state, São Tomé turned to Washington in 2002 to request the installation of an American naval base. This request was initially ignored, as the Americans were preoccupied with the war in Iraq. However, a radar was installed in 2007.

The archipelago's unique position in the Gulf of Guinea, which for a time enabled it to dream of becoming the interface between Central and West Africa and China, makes it particularly vulnerable to piracy, which is one of the consequences of the development of oil and gas activities in poor and politically marginalized regions. Despite a decline in the number of incidents linked to regional collaboration (signing of the Yaoundé protocol in 2013), which has been particularly marked since 2020, the issue of piracy in this part of the world has been a matter of global concern since the 2010s.

Multifaceted diplomacy to meet an immediate need

In addition to these economic and security issues, the archipelago's military has attempted a long series of coups d'état over the last fifty years (in 1978, 1979, 1988, and 1995, but above all, in 2003, 2009, 2018, and, most recently, in November 2022). The acceleration of this phenomenon is directly linked to the financial prospects offered by the future exploitation of oil and the increase in corruption that goes with it.

During the last of these attempts, even the government's assassination of Arlecio da Costa was not enough to reassure the authorities about domestic and maritime security: the victim was, in fact, the head of the "Buffalo Battalion," a remnant of a group of Santomean mercenaries who were behind the coups d'état in 2003 and 2009.

Therefore, Patrice Trovoada, the current Prime Minister and son of the former President (1991-2001) is working even harder to enlist the support of Portugal (signing a cooperation agreement in September 2022), China (September 2023). Even France (November 2023), in particular, to train its land and naval forces. Since Lula's re-election at the end of 2022, Brazil has also signaled its willingness to cooperate.

Since 2017, Portugal has shown renewed interest in its former colonies through the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP). The agreement on the mobility of people between Portuguese-speaking countries (17 July 2021), which the former metropolis has championed, has also earned it the animosity of the European Commission, which launched an infringement procedure in September 2023. The Commission considers the agreement incompatible with the Schengen area's rules.

Despite this activism, the tone has recently changed between the archipelago of São Tomé and Príncipe and its external partners: a week before the signing of the agreement with Lisbon, P. Trovoada rejected the Portuguese President's offer to negotiate reparations for the country's colonial past.

Concerns but measured consequences

Several experts fear that the Russian-Santomean agreement could jeopardize the existence of the CPLP. In their view, the Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa could be the next target of Russia's influence policy. They point to Moscow's successes in the French-speaking world with the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES, a mutual defense pact signed in September 2023 between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger and transformed into a "confederation" on 6 July 2024), as well as the strengthened Russian presence in the Central African Republic and Sudan, and encouraging signs in Senegal and Chad. Portugal and the other Western partners of the CPLP countries, France and the United States, are now in the hot seat.

Cape Verde regretted that the CPLP did not adopt a clear standard position on the large-scale war in Ukraine while acknowledging that this was not the organization's vocation. Cape Verde is one of Ukraine's prominent supporters on the African continent, as demonstrated by the summit for peace in Ukraine organized in Switzerland in mid-June.

This stance could counterbalance the bad impression of STP by Portugal's reaction, which had expressed its "concern" and "apprehension" following the signing of the Russian-Santomean defense agreement. In response to this criticism, P. Trovoada reaffirmed the sovereignty and independence of the archipelago.

It was feared that this agreement would result from Santomean alignment with Russia in international forums. For the time being, the consequences appear to be pretty mixed, particularly regarding the fate of Ukraine. On 23 May 2024, alongside Russia, Serbia, and 16 other allied nations, São Tomé and Príncipe opposed UN General Assembly Resolution 78/282, recognizing the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. Nevertheless, the archipelago was one of the few African participants in the Ukraine Peace Summit on 15 June and, unlike South Africa or Libya, signed the final communiqué.

Note:

(1) Malyn Newitt, “São Tomé and Príncipe: decolonization and its legacy, 1974-90,” *in* Stewart Lloyd-Jones et António Costa Pinto (éds), *The Last Empire, Thirty Years of Portuguese Decolonization*, Intellect, Bristol & Portland, 2003, pp. 37-52.

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Link to the French version of the article

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