

New Energy War in West Africa? Tension Builds in the Gulf of Guinea

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The strategic framework and the correlation of forces in the Gulf of Guinea — one of the most significant and growing energy resource regions of the world — is changing rapidly. A new era in security arrangements for the region is beginning.

The region is moving from an area of low technology defense and security systems, and minimal command and control at national levels, to one of growing sophistication, higher mobility, and the potential for military confrontation.

The five-year, \$250-million Equatorial Guinea maritime security program – essentially the build-up of an integrated naval and air capability – announced on February 24, 2010, signalled the start of a re-defined strategic architecture in West Africa . It has brought a coherent military-security framework into life, highlighting issues which are vital to the welfare of the regional states in a way in which some earlier boundary disputes were not.

Given the strategic maxim that military planning must be based to a large degree on the capabilities, rather than the stated intent, of neighboring or competing states, the move by Equatorial Guinea serves as a focus for response and activities by regional strategic planners. Capabilities take years to develop; intent can change in moments. This means that Equatorial Guinea 's neighbours must address changing realities.

Gen. Ashfaq Kayani, Pakistan 's Chief of Army Staff, is fond of saying that it takes 30 years to develop an army up to corps level, whereas political realities can change a nation's intent overnight. This means that defense planners must develop capabilities over the long term to be ready for any rapidly-emerging eventuality. In the Gulf of Guinea context, the Equatorial Guinea Government of Pres. Brig.-Gen. (rtd.) Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, has, in fact, been quietly shaping its defense capabilities over the past few years, particularly as its offshore energy assets come on stream and produce revenue surpluses. This has given Equatorial Guinea profoundly more wealth than, say, two decades ago. As well, the offshore Equatorial Guinea oil and gas producing areas are often contestable — or at least close enough to cause friction — with neighbors (Gabon , Nigeria , Cameroon).

Equatorial Guinea , too, has often had a fractious relationship with its major neighbor, Nigeria , even though Malabo has depended on Abuja for subsidies and even military training and security coverage.

Equatorial Guinea's contract with the MPRI subsidiary of the US defense corporation, L3, made public in late February 2010 (but actually shaping up well before that), highlights the reality that Equatorial Guinea intends to be a major player in Gulf of Guinea security; that it has the capacity to influence sea lane security to and from Nigeria and Cameroon; and that

it will not be a passive participant in the region. A number of incidents have occurred in recent years to indicate that Equatorial Guinea forces – components of the Guardia Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial (GNGE) – will take aggressive action with regard to what they feel might be penetrations or violations of Equatorial Guinea 's sovereign space or economic zone.

Part of this activist stance is based on the reality that there is – or has been – no cohesive and professional command and control structure in place in Equatorial Guinea , other than personal links between arbitrarily-ranked colleagues of Pres. Obiang, all of who are ethnic Fang, as is the President. The ranking of the Minister of Defense, Antonio Mba Nguema, and the Vice-Minister of Defense, Anthonio Ndong, as a lieutenant-generals, for example, is arbitrary when the total manpower strength of the GNGE is only in the neighborhood of 3,500, including a significant number of foreign nationals in key slots (such as aircrew and maintenance). The rank of lieutenant-general implies command of a corps-sized unit, or an Army, with numbers in the region of 20,000 or more.

The substance of the latest agreement with MPRI/L3, however, is significant, especially as MPRI – which is undertaking the latest Equatorial Guinea military expansion – had been called in, at the insistence of the then US Administration of Pres. Bill Clinton, in 2000 to “democratize” and “professionalize” the Nigerian Army, even while it was working on a contract initiated with Equatorial Guinea in 1998 to help train the Equatorial Guinea military. The MPRI training package with the Nigerian Army did not go well, especially as the Nigerian Army had just emerged from successfully fighting a range of wars and peacekeeping operations in Africa with few resources and yet remarkable success.

[Lt.-Gen. Victor Leo Malu, the Nigerian Chief of Army Staff, questioned MPRI's plan to reduce the size of the Nigerian military from 100,000 to 50,000, and MPRI's need to have access to sensitive military information. GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs has first-hand knowledge that the then-Nigerian Government of Pres. Olusegun Obasanjo was warned at the time, by external advisors, that MPRI had questionable capabilities and motives, as well as ill-suited background, for training the Nigerian Army, and the Nigerian Government was warned as well of MPRI's legally questionable rôle in providing actual combat operational command to Croatian forces engaged in ethnic cleansing in the Krajina area of what is now Croatia, during the Yugoslav break-up in the 1990s. Nonetheless, Pres. Obasanjo, unwilling to alienate the Clinton Administration, dismissed Gen. Malu rather than resist the MPRI demands.]

Now, however, MPRI is engaged in helping a state which has, arguably, potential concerns with Nigeria , making it difficult for MPRI to re-engage in Nigeria , even if the Nigerian Army was so inclined.

But the new MPRI/L3 initiative with Equatorial Guinea is – as its title suggests – maritime-oriented. Even though the MRPI contract with Equatorial Guinea was announced in March 2010, the company was recruiting for former US military personnel in December 2009 to meet the contract. It sought personnel in security, search and rescue, detainee processing, information technology, logistics/maintenance, and administration, with hirings to begin in “the early months of 2010”. Experience in maritime security, with a background of employment in the US Navy or Coast Guard was desired, along with some trainer skills.

L3's announcement on February 24, 2010, was that MPRI had been awarded a \$58-million firm-fixed-price task order with the Government of Equatorial Guinea to establish a Maritime

Security Enhancement Program (MSEP). This task order was the first part of a multi-year contract, with a potential value of approximately \$250-million. The MSEP was designed to provide nationwide coastal surveillance coverage for Equatorial Guinea .

Jim Jackson, general manager for MPRI's International Group, noted: "This important contract award represents a strategic opportunity to contribute not only to the vital maritime security of Equatorial Guinea , but also provides a thoughtful approach toward establishing long-term stability for the entire region."

The MSEP contract envisions completion of a surveillance site network and operations centers in Equatorial Guinea within three years. This would be followed up by two years of sustainment and maintenance support for an estimated contract total of five years.

In fact, the emphasis of the contract - given the hiring pattern - implies a greater emphasis on physical security, rather than merely the integrated surveillance system, although that is clearly part of the program. GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs sources in Malabo said that new Equatorial Guinea program would include AIS (automatic identification system), radar, and command and control. The program could expand to include L3's Raytheon/Beech King Air-based aerial surveillance systems, as well as light patrol vessels. MPRI was also to train oil workers in anti-piracy tactics as part of the contract.

Significantly, the new Government of Nigeria under Acting Pres. Goodluck Jonathan is known to have begun looking at an integrated national surveillance and response system, linked through a command and control function with all the Armed Services, the Intelligence Community (IC), Police and Customs. The concept had been proposed a year earlier, but the Government of Pres. Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was even then becoming paralyzed politically for a number of reasons.

Equatorial Guinea , Nigeria , Gabon , and São Tomé and Príncipe all recognize that they have common security threats, quite apart from any potential friction between them, and with other neighbors such as Cameroon (with which Nigeria recently concluded a difficult dispute over the sovereignty of the Bakassi Peninsula).

Freedom Onuoha, a research fellow at the African Centre for Strategic Research and Studies at the National Defence College in Abuja, writing in *African Security Review*, Vol. 17, No. 3, published by the South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies in 2008, cited a "recent study commissioned by Royal Dutch/Shell" as saying that between 100-million and 250-million barrels of oil was stolen each year by bunkerers or vandals, putting the cost, at an average US\$60 a barrel, at around US\$15-billion a year. This was, he said, in addition to other costs to the Nigerian State due to oil pipeline sabotage, and other related activities. As well, the Nigerian Government Inter-agency Maritime Security Task Force on Acts of Illegality in Nigerian Waters (IAMSTAF) was told on December 5, 2008, by President of the Nigerian Trawler Owners Association (NITOA), Mrs Margaret Orakwusi, that the rising spate of piracy, sea robberies, poaching, bunkering, and other illegal operations in Nigeria's territorial waters and seas (with the exception of illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta region) have cost the country more than N25-billion in less than four years. Mrs Orakwusi told the task force that the country's fishing industry had witnessed at least 293 documented sea robberies and pirate attacks between 2003 and 2008, which she said had culminated in loss of lives and destruction of vessels and trawlers.

Significantly, and without any increase in budget, the Nigerian Navy literally “bootstrapped” its way back into a reasonable operational capability over recent years, rebuilding ships which had been thought to have been beyond salvage. As a result, and without fanfare, the Nigerian Navy has re-emerged as a factor in the Gulf of Guinea region.

Nigeria, however, faces a far greater challenge than Equatorial Guinea. Its coastline and offshore facilities are in a far more complex situation than those of Equatorial Guinea, and the volume of facilities, pipelines, and traffic are far greater. Moreover, Nigeria continues to address a militant, armed opposition force – MEND: the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta – which has fractured into a number of groups in the oil- and gas-producing Niger Delta region. Acting Pres. Jonathan, as a former Governor of Bayelsa state, one of the major energy-producing Niger Delta states, is highly aware that the legacy of his brief Administration (until the April 2010 Presidential elections) must be to address and bring under control the Niger Delta crisis.

Whereas the Equatorial Guinea forces have been growing, commensurate with the financial surpluses generated by energy exports, the Nigerian Defence Forces have faced growing constraints. Former Pres. Olusegun Obasanjo, although once a military head-of-state in Nigeria and a former Army general, had, as an elected President, fully embraced the US Clinton Administration’s view that the Nigerian military should be suppressed and kept on a reduced budget. Even so, the Nigerian Armed Forces, as with the Navy’s example, were able to adapt to the situation.

The new security paradigm, however, implies that the Nigerian Government will now be forced to act rapidly if it is to contain its own security concerns and also retain its dominance of the Gulf of Guinea. The Nigerian National Security Advisor during the Obasanjo Administration, Lt.-Gen. (rtd.) Aliyu Mohammed Gusau (who is now back in that role with the Jonathan Administration) successfully drafted the framework for a Gulf of Guinea Commission to begin developing offshore security modalities from the immediate Gulf of Guinea region down to Angola and South Africa.

Abuja may now need to revive that, while it also deals with its own approach to developing a strategic asset protection program to safeguard pipelines, installations, sea routes, and so on. This will be significantly larger in scale and in conceptual thinking than the Equatorial Guinea approach.

But, as noted above, Equatorial Guinea has expanded its military capabilities considerably in recent years, relying heavily on foreign contractors and mercenary military personnel. During the past decade, the Guardia Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial (GNGE)’s Naval Division has obtained two lightly-armed (Typhoon G mounting of an Oerlikon 20mm cannon with electro-optical guidance) 24.8m (LOA) Shaldag Mk.II fast patrol vessels (acquired 2005) from Israel Shipyards Ltd.; the Air Wing has obtained at least two new Enstrom 480B Guardian turbine helicopters which are used on maritime duties (delivered 2007); the Air Wing has also acquired a steady supply (now totaling six) of Ukraine-surplus Mil Mi-24V Hind helicopter gunships (deliveries in 2001, 2004, and 2007), and at least one Mil Mi-172 utility helicopter; the Air Wing has also obtained four Su-25 strike aircraft variants (two Su-39s, Su-25TM second generation variants, transferred from Ukraine and possibly carrying Kopyo (Russian: Spear) radar for air-engagement combat, along with RVV-AE/R-77 air-to-air missiles, and Kh-31 and Kh-35 anti-shiping missiles), along with two Su-25UB trainers. The Air Wing also obtained one Antonov An-32 twin-turboprop VIP transport, which was lost, with all hands, in April 2008; it has two Czech Aero L-39 advanced jet trainer/strike aircraft, and

possibly one An-26 transport aircraft. The Presidential flight has one Agusta A109 VIP helicopter, a Dassault Falcon 50 and/or a Falcon 900, a Yak-40 executive jet, and the one Mi-172 helicopter, and an Embraer ERJ145EP executive jet. Virtually all of these rely on foreign aircrew and maintenance personnel, and mostly operate from Malabo airfield, where the bulk of the Air Wing operates.

One helicopter, at least, is based at the airfield at Bata, the northernmost of the two major towns on the mainland coast.

Much of the Equatorial Guinea hydrocarbon wealth has been derived from fields around Bioko Island, the seat of Government and the capital, Malabo. However, the mainland region — until recently fairly neglected apart from its timber resources — borders at the Atlantic on areas claimed by Cameroon and Gabon. A dispute between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea over an island off the mouth of the Ntem River in Cameroon remains unresolved. A dispute with Gabon over sovereignty over the Gabon-occupied Mbane area and its associated islands is under United Nations mediation. The potential for disputes over rights to the coastal waters remains high, and could lead to confrontation in the oil and gas producing Corisco Bay area.

Equatorial Guinea faces a significant geographic challenge to its limited, albeit growing, maritime and air forces. It is a challenge which can only be met through the application of tight coordination and high technology. As well, it will require significant support from Equatorial Guinea's very limited policy planning and diplomatic resources. Indeed, the lack of forward-looking planning and diplomatic resources makes the likelihood of clashes over disputed areas and assets more likely, particularly if accidental or provocative cross-border movements by neighbors stimulate reaction by Equatorial Guinea forces.

[Significantly, Bioko, the main island territory of Equatorial Guinea, and Río Muni, the mainland territory, were never historically a single country. Spain, which was the colonial power controlling both territories, brought the two areas under a single administration, as two provinces, in 1956. The United Nations asked Spain, in 1963, to grant independence to the provinces, and this was done in 1968. At the time, Spain did not wish to give separate independence to each of the two provinces, because Madrid was in the throes of attempting to push Britain into handing Gibraltar over to Spanish control. To have allowed self-determination in Bioko and Río Muni separately was perceived to have opened the door to Britain allowing the Gibraltans to entertain a separate vote on whether to opt for Spain or opt for sovereign independence. The Fang population, which now controls Equatorial Guinea, is from Río Muni, and has gradually subordinated and reduced the Bioko population, comprised mostly of Bubi ethnicity. Some Fang migration to Bioko began in 1924, when a labor shortage caused the Catholic Church to indent workers from the mainland for cocoa production. The Fang migrants proved unsuitable, but a significant Fang population remained on Bioko.]

Nigeria, by contrast, has a more concentrated area of concern around the Niger Delta, but still has a large exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to monitor — as does Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon— with regard to illegal fisheries. But the Nigerian situation has greater challenges because of the complexity of the onshore energy assets, including pipelines, coupled with an historical pattern of ethnic and political differences, both within the Niger Delta region and with regard to the Delta states' relationship with the Nigerian Federation.

Nigeria, unlike Equatorial [Guinea](#), has developed a defense and security framework over

five decades of independence and a century of modern military structures as a component of the British military system. The current dynamic, however, has been characterized by rising capabilities and ambitions by the Equatorial Guinea forces, and severely constrained capabilities in the Nigerian Armed Forces due to budgetary constraints and Continent-wide military responsibilities in peacekeeping.

Nigeria has, in the past decade, begun a process of using technology in its civil sector – particularly telecommunications – to leapfrog moribund and paralyzed structures. Nigeria’s revived approach to integrated, national-level real-time security intelligence coupled to command and control would, if it is adopted, help re-assert Abuja’s strategic leadership in the region. Despite its population size — at around 150-million – Nigeria has, like most sub-Saharan African states, devoted relatively little of its GDP to defense.

The following comparative statistics [derived from World Bank and GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs archives] — while not entirely like-for-like — are significant in helping shape a balanced view of the region:

Cameroon: Population est. (2008) 18.9-million; GDP (2008) \$23.4-billion; Defense expenditure (2001) \$211.1-million.

Equatorial Guinea: Population est. (2008) 660,000; GDP (2008) \$18.53-billion; Defense expenditure (2004) est. \$126.2-million.

Gabon: Population est. (2008) 1.45-million; GDP (2008) \$14.43-billion. Defense expenditure (1996) \$91-million.

Nigeria: Population est. (2008) 151.32-million; GDP (2008) \$212.08-billion; Defense expenditure (2007) \$979.3-million.

São Tomé and Príncipe: Population est. (2008) 160,000; GDP (2008) \$170-million; Defense expenditure (2004) est. \$126.2-million.

These are static snapshots, and do not reflect the dynamics of the region, the respective economic potential versus overhead responsibilities of each society, or the relative inertia of each government, but they do indicate latent capability to some extent. What is emerging, because of the evolving discovery and exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits in the region, is a more strategically mobile and competitive framework. Many of the old boundary issues, as well as the prospect for the movement of societies as a result of wealth opportunities (not evenly distributed), mean that stability can no longer be guaranteed.

A more competitive regional environment, in which very tangible economic resources such as hydrocarbon deposits are at stake, coupled with growing wealth, will demand the kind of increasing reliance on technological solutions to security challenges which are now beginning to emerge.

Analysis from GIS sources in Malabo and elsewhere in the region.

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