

Spanish and Portuguese imperialism join the new scramble for Africa

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Government officials in Lisbon and Madrid are signaling their intention not to lag behind in the new scramble for Africa led by the United States and Europe's main colonial powers during the twentieth century such as Britain and France.

Amid explosive social conditions in Portugal and Spain—with youth unemployment rates at 34 percent and 56 percent, respectively—both countries aim to regain influence in the Gulf of Guinea through military interventions and the use of proxy forces. Spanish and Portuguese business and military circles are seeking to profit from the region's energy resources, while channeling social tensions in their respective countries toward militarism and war.

Last month, Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy visited Malabo, capital of the former Spanish colony Equatorial Guinea, to participate in the African Union (AU) summit. It was the first visit to Equatorial Guinea by a Spanish head of government in 23 years.

In his speech, Rajoy, the only European leader invited to the summit, promised that if Spain was elected to hold one of the non-permanent member seats in the United Nations Security Council in 2015-2016, he would assist in the “rebirth” of Africa through commerce and investment.

“We want to invest in Africa,” Rajoy said, “as we once did in Latin America.” He noted that trade between Spain and Africa has grown by 250 percent over the last 10 years and now exceeds trade between Spain and Latin America.

Rajoy reminded the African leaders of Spain's participation in the “peacekeeping” and “humanitarian” (i.e., imperialist) wars on the African continent—in Mali, Somalia and the Central African Republic. “When an AU soldier looks at his side, he finds a Spanish soldier,” Rajoy stated, referring to the 400 Spanish troops currently deployed in five missions led by the European Union (EU) and France.

A day before Rajoy's visit, at a joint press conference in Madrid with the secretary general of NATO, Anders Fogh-Rasmussen, Spanish foreign minister Manuel García Margallo, singling out Equatorial Guinea, said that Africa “represents a continent of extraordinary importance for Spain.”

Rajoy's visit was soon followed by Defence Minister Morenés's remarks to the Spanish Congress. He announced that Spain, in close cooperation with Portugal, was preparing

counseling and land, air and sea military training programmes in countries in the Gulf of Guinea. He said it had become necessary to take “concrete actions” in response to the growth of piracy in the area.

Morenés declared that stability and security on the southern shore of the Mediterranean were “key to the safety of Spain.” He added that addressing the “risks and threats that arise” was “a top priority for our defence.”

He referred to “large economic interests in Africa,” especially in relation to oil dependency, with 10.5 percent of Spanish oil coming from Nigeria. He also spoke of “investments in infrastructure, as well as agricultural, industrial and fishing interests.”

Morenés called for a more aggressive NATO intervention in the region, complaining of divisions among the imperialist powers over policy in the region. “Unfortunately,” he said, “neither the Spanish nor French leadership has managed to convince quite a few of our partners and allies in the EU and NATO that the southern Mediterranean, the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea, in that order, are fully part of our immediate security environment.”

At an international conference in Lisbon, Portugal's foreign minister, Rui Machete, said that Portugal was “on the front line” in the battle against insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea—a problem that required a concerted international response. Referring to piracy, he declared, “We must focus on preventing the phenomenon and not reacting in the aftermath, which is much more expensive and difficult.”

He added, “We can't forget that the Gulf of Guinea is crisscrossed by important shipping routes for international trade. Imagine the devastating effect on our economies and our companies, the financial and logistical costs, of a deterioration of security in these shipping lanes.”

The Gulf of Guinea is a large gulf in the southeastern Atlantic, located on the central-west coast of Africa, bordering Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin, Togo, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sao Tome and Principe. The importance of this region was spelled out at a meeting on foreign affairs of the Council of the European Union held in March of this year under the title “EU Strategy in the Gulf of Guinea.”

The report issued at the meeting stated: “The EU is also committed to supporting the sustainable exploitation of natural resources in the region, including hydrocarbons. Europe imports about half of its energy needs, of which nearly 10 percent of its oil and 4 percent of its natural gas come from the Gulf of Guinea.

“Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon are significant suppliers of crude oil, and Nigeria of natural gas. The region’s proximity to Europe with easy sea access gives it a comparative advantage over the Middle East for our oil needs, and Europe remains a primary export market for other regional products, including forestry, agricultural and mineral resources.”

The report continued: “The region is an increasing magnet for European investment, not only in the natural resources, but in the consumer goods and services sectors, including mobile telephony. That combines with a growing importance as a potential market for exports as the region’s economic growth accelerates.”

The report cited “threats” to European interests, including terrorism, piracy, oil theft, illegal fishing and organised crime in the form of trafficking in drugs, human beings, arms, rough diamonds and counterfeit medicines. Such “threats” have repeatedly been used by the major powers as pretexts to launch imperialist wars in Africa.

Another major threat raised by the document was social discontent due to “unemployment around 40 percent, with levels of youth unemployment at over 60 percent,” “insufficient economic opportunities,” “food insecurity in the countryside,” and “rapid urban population growth...creating tensions amongst urban populations.”

The spreading civil war in the Middle East lends the Gulf of Guinea even greater strategic importance for imperialism. There is now an international competition between the United States, the former European colonial powers, China, Japan and India, all of which are looking at the African region as a safer and more reliable source of energy.

The US and Europe are trying to lessen their oil dependency on the Middle East and undermine China’s growing influence in Africa. Today, China is Africa’s biggest trading partner, with approximately US\$200 billion worth of trade in goods. The US and the European powers have attempted to secure advantages over China through military interventions in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic.

The calls by Madrid and Lisbon for stepped-up intervention comes after conferences and reports on the region by the major foreign policy think tanks of both countries. Instituto Diplomático, a think tank created by the Portuguese Foreign Ministry in 1994, recently organised an international conference titled “Security in the Gulf of Guinea.” The main lecturers included the Portuguese foreign minister, high-ranking military personnel from Portugal and Brazil, academics, and other experts on the region.

Spain’s state-financed think tank Instituto Elcano also gave high priority to regaining influence in the region in its report, “Towards a Strategic Renewal of Spanish Foreign Policy.” The report stated that Spanish foreign policy “has to elaborate an integral strategy of action in the area of Sahel, from the Gulf of Guinea to the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.... Considering that the business ties between Sub-Saharan Africa and Spain are intensifying rapidly, this economic relation has to be translated into the political sphere.”

The report went so far as to state that “loyal participation within the EU does not mean Spain has to renounce thinking and acting for itself,” opening the door to military intervention without the support of Madrid’s allies.

The militaristic report also warns that Spanish foreign policy has to convince the Spanish population that it “provides benefits in the terrain of democracy, security, prosperity and knowledge.” It is necessary to look for “social support,” the report states.

Conscious that the Spanish working class has been historically hostile to the Spanish armed forces and its foreign interventions, Instituto Elcano calls for a propaganda campaign to convince the population that imperialist interventions will bring economic and security benefits.

Both the Spanish and the Portuguese army played a brutal role in the colonial wars of the twentieth century. The Portuguese army put an end to the First Republic in 1926 and initiated the Ditadura Nacional, which lasted until 1974. During this period, the army participated in colonial wars from 1961 to 1974—in Angola, Goa, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea and Cape Verde.

The Spanish army, later assisted by France, participated in the wars against Moroccan nationalists in the early 1920s. Many officers who participated in these wars, including Francisco Franco, Spain’s dictator from 1939 to 1975, supported the military coup of July 1936 against the Popular Front government.

Both countries have also participated actively in the wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Both host important military bases for operations in Africa.

Portugal is headquarters of the Allied Joint Force Command, currently responsible for providing assistance to NATO missions in Africa. Spain has America’s Morón Air Base, one of the most strategic points controlled by the US in Europe, and the Rota Naval Station, close to the Gibraltar straits.



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