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Congo: Balancing Between East and West



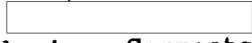
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Summary

Since gaining independence from France in 1960 and declaring itself the first Marxist-Leninist state in Africa, growing economic problems and disillusionment with the lack of Soviet development aid over the last two years have caused Congo to moderate its policies and turn to the West for more assistance. In recent years, under President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, Congo has quickened the pace of its moves toward greater moderation and closer Western ties. Nevertheless, we believe that Sassou still remains committed to a Third World outlook, Marxist controls on political stability, and the need to maintain Libyan and Communist bloc goodwill to ensure his political position at home. 

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During his meeting with US officials, Sassou, as the newly elected Chairman of the Organization of African Unity, will likely want to discuss the conflicts in South Africa, Angola, and Chad, and recommend US support for the UN Economic Program of Action for Africa. We believe Sassou will urge Washington to adopt tougher sanctions to promote change in South Africa and voice opposition to US assistance to UNITA forces in Angola. Sassou is also likely to volunteer to serve as an interlocutor between Washington and his close personal friend, Angolan President dos Santos. We believe

This memorandum was requested by Clark A. Murdock, Director, African Affairs, National Security Council. It was prepared by  West Africa Branch, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division,

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Sassou's ability to broker talks between Libyan-backed Chadian rebels and Chadian President Habre will be limited by his inability or unwillingness to curb Libyan activities in the Congo. [redacted]

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Mounting Economic Problems

Congo has suffered a significant economic downturn in the past three years because of lower-than-expected oil revenues, poor performance of state enterprises, and excessive short-term borrowing to finance development, according to US Embassy reporting. The Embassy reports that Elf-Congo, the major producer and marketer of the country's crude oil--which accounts for 90 percent of exports and about two-thirds of government revenues--has halted all new exploration and development. Congo's current budget for this year has been reduced from about \$915 million to \$455 million. [redacted]

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[redacted] state-owned enterprises in the manufacturing and construction sectors have fallen up to three months behind in paying salaries. Total GDP growth declined sharply to 2.9 percent in 1984 from an average of over 19 percent from 1980-82. Moreover, high borrowing to finance ambitious public investment programs in the early 1980s left Congo with a heavy external debt burden, we estimate to have increased 55 percent from 1979-83. [redacted]

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An urgent need to rein in the Congo's financial expenditures prompted Sassou to devise a recovery program last year that called for major budget cuts, streamlining inefficient state enterprises, and freezing the government payroll. Foreign creditors criticized this program as inadequate, and France--Congo's largest aid donor--told Sassou last December that it would no longer bail the country out economically unless Congo reached an agreement with the IMF on further economic reforms. Earlier this month, officials of the IMF approved a \$27 million line of credit that Congo could draw on to support its reform program and paved the way for the rescheduling of its debt by Paris Club creditors. [redacted]

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Brokering Between Moderates and Hardliners

Although Sassou came to power in a bloodless coup in 1979 with the help of hardline leftists in the military, he has generally followed a more moderate course than Congo's previous military leaders. [redacted] over the last several years he has strengthened the hand of political moderates at the expense of pro-Soviet hardliners. According to the US Embassy, Sassou's Cabinet is composed primarily of

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pragmatic technocrats who favor improved relations with the West and diversification of military suppliers away from the Communist bloc. The Embassy reports that Sassou was unanimously elected to a second five-year term as President and Party Chairman at the party congress in 1984, where he successfully engineered the ouster of several key leftist ideologues.

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Nevertheless, Sassou's efforts to strengthen ties to the West and implement economic reform continue to face strong opposition from hardline leftists. Pierre Nze, a senior party member with close ties to the Soviets, probably is leading the hardline opposition to Sassou. The President replaced Nze as Foreign Minister in 1984 because his views conflicted with Sassou's policy of improving relations with the West. In our view, however, Nze has support in the Politburo--the party's principal decisionmaking body, and the US Embassy reports that last year Nze held a private strategy meeting with fellow hardliners in the party and Cabinet that was attended by the Cuban Ambassador.

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[Redacted] last November Congolese soldiers refused to crack down on students who were rioting over austerity--probably sympathizing with their protest.

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[Redacted] Moreover, budget cuts, lack of spare parts, and mismanagement has reduced military capabilities over the last several years and demoralized some officers.

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Limits to Moderation: Relations with Libya and the Communist Bloc

Although Congo clearly wants to remove some socialist impediments to development and foster closer economic relations with the West, we believe movement will continue to be slow and incremental, and will not entail fundamental abandonment of Congo's self-styled "revolutionary" ideology. Sassou's need to placate domestic leftists, who favor close ties to the Soviets and Libyans, almost certainly will limit Congo's turn toward the West.

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Soviet Influence. In our view, the USSR has both political and military aims in Congo, one of the few African states to have a formal treaty of friendship and cooperation with Moscow. We believe the Soviets' principal

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objectives are to limit Western and Chinese influence, to keep Brazzaville on a socialist path, and to garner its support in international forums. In addition, Embassy reporting indicates that, despite repeated refusals by several Congolese presidents, Moscow still hopes to acquire naval base rights at Pointe Noire and conclude a mutual defense treaty under which it could intervene at Congo's request. We believe the Soviets seek base rights as a contingency should Moscow lose access to neighboring Angola, where Luanda serves as the primary support site for Moscow's small West African naval patrol and periodic Soviet TU-95 naval reconnaissance in the south Atlantic. [REDACTED]

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Moscow's influence in Congo, as in other African countries, rests on its military assistance program. After establishing diplomatic relations in 1964, Moscow quickly displaced France as Congo's principal arms supplier. We estimate that, since the mid-1960s, Moscow has delivered \$200 million in military equipment, including at least 23 MIG-21 fighters and eight MI-8 helicopters. We estimate that the Soviets have 340 advisers assigned to Congo's military and security organizations. The USSR also provides military training for the Congolese in the Soviet Union and in Congo, according to the US Embassy. [REDACTED]

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In addition to military assistance, the Soviets have an active political and cultural exchange program that includes the frequent exchange of party delegations. According to the US Embassy, the Soviets provided approximately 80 scholarships last year, down from a high of 150 in 1983. Over 1,200 Congolese are studying in the Soviet Union, according to the US Embassy. [REDACTED]

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Communist economic aid and trade with Congo is minimal. The US Embassy estimates there are about 300 Soviet civilian technicians, mostly in the health and education sectors. East Germany and Bulgaria also provide some civilian technicians. We estimate that the Soviet Union has provided some \$12 million in economic aid over the past five years. Bilateral trade over the past five years has been fairly stable at \$5-8 million annually. [REDACTED]

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Cuban Ties. The Congolese sympathize with Castro's revolutionary philosophy, and support many of Havana's views on international issues. Cuba has provided technical assistance to the Congo Government in key economic sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, public works and construction, industry, mining and energy, transportation, and trade. Many of these projects are presently stalemated, however, as a result of Brazzaville's financial problems. [REDACTED]

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For Havana, Congo's importance lies in its role as a support base for Cuba's Angolan involvement. Since 1975, the Congolese port facilities and airfield at Pointe Noire and Brazzaville have served as key logistic facilities for resupplying and reinforcing Cuban forces in Angola's Cabinda

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Province. The US Embassy reports that the Cuban military camp in Pointe Noire is used as a holding area for troops waiting to be transferred to Angola. This camp is also used as a rest and recreation area for Cuban troops serving in Angola.

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Press reporting over the past year indicates that Cuba and Congo have a warm political relationship. During 1985, a large number of top Congolese officials visited Cuba, including the National Assembly President, Minister of Education, Forestry Minister, Justice Minister, and Foreign Minister. In December, Cuban politburo member Jorge Risquet--Castro's chief African advisor--met with the Congolese President in Luanda to discuss the struggle of the South African people against the apartheid regime.

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The relationship between the two countries, however, has been characterized by occasional frictions. The US Embassy notes that the poor behavior of Cuban troops stationed in Pointe Noire has alienated the local population. In addition, according to press reports, Sassou occasionally displays annoyance at Castro's messianic view of socialism, charging that the Cuban leader's attitude does not foster genuine solidarity and harmony among socialist nations.

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The Embassy reports that exclusive of the Cubans at Pointe Noire, the Cuban presence in Congo now stands at six diplomatic and consular personnel and about 55 civilian technicians, with an additional 10 to 15 Cubans advising Congolese security forces.

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[Redacted] In addition, approximately 1,000 Congolese students at the primary, secondary, and university levels are studying in Cuba.

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The Libyans. We believe that the Congolese, who are well aware of Libyan leader Qadhafi's proclivity for subverting his opponents in black Africa, will continue to try to avoid offending Tripoli.

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[Redacted] Qadhafi has used Congo as a base of operations against Chad, Zaire, and other moderate central African regimes ever since Libya opened a diplomatic mission in Brazzaville in 1982. Tripoli has used Congo as a base of operations to support Chadian insurgents and several rounds of reconciliation talks have failed following Libyan intimidation of the participants. The US Embassy estimates the Libyan presence to be at least 50, substantially more than needed to administer its small bilateral aid program.

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In addition, Qadhafi apparently has sought to increase his leverage with Brazzaville by offering military and economic aid.

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[Redacted] The US Embassy reports that Libya and Congo are developing a joint forestry project, [Redacted]

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Turn Westward: Closer Ties to France and the United States.

Sassou's pragmatism, in our judgment, is motivated by his belief that increased Western investment and aid are critical to economic development, particularly after oil resources are depleted--which could occur as early as 1990. Moreover, [Redacted]

[Redacted] have complained about the poor quality of equipment, long delays in the delivery of spare parts, and Moscow's recent insistence on advance payments for services. The Congolese have told US Embassy officials that they are unhappy with the quality of Soviet military training, which they said emphasizes political indoctrination at the expense of practical skills. [Redacted]

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Growing French Economic Role. In recent years, Congo has further strengthened commercial ties to France, traditionally its chief economic partner and benefactor. France and other European Community states supply over two-thirds of Congo's imports and purchase 20 percent of its exports as well as providing almost all of Brazzaville's development assistance. The Embassy reports that since 1981 France alone has accounted for slightly more than half of Congo's total annual imports. There are some 500 French technicians in positions throughout the Congolese Government, in addition to the 7,000, private French citizens who, as expatriates and employees of French multinational corporations, dominate the private sector. [Redacted]

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Improved Relations With the United States. Congo's commercial dealings with the United States have increased significantly during Sassou's tenure. Total Congolese-US trade grew in 1984 to a record \$1 billion, making the United States one of Brazzaville's leading trading partners and Congo the third largest US trading partner in black Africa, according to the Embassy. Over 95 percent of this trade consists of Congolese crude and refined petroleum products purchased on the spotmarket by American oil companies, which bought four-fifths of Congo's total oil exports in 1984. Congo recently agreed to accept modest food assistance and military training for Congolese officers that supplement US development, which the US Embassy reports, has averaged \$2 million a year since 1981. [Redacted]

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According to the US Embassy, diplomatic relations with Congo have improved. US officials now have greater access to the media and to senior officials, leading to a greater exchange of views on mutually important issues such as Chad. In addition, Sassou has appointed a resident Ambassador to Washington for the first time, and senior Congolese officials visited Washington several times last year. Brazzaville also has assumed a more balanced position on some foreign policy issues. For example, the Congolese press printed a US response to Soviet disinformation over responsibility for the Korean airline shootdown incident and participated in the Los Angeles Olympics, despite Soviet pressure. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, Congo's actions in international forums have shown no decisive move away from its longstanding alignment with the Soviet bloc and radical African countries. According to the US Embassy, Congo voted against or abstained on every issue of importance to the United States at the United Nations in 1984. In addition, Congo's foreign minister periodically uses harsh "anti-imperialistic" rhetoric and indirectly attacks the United States on issues relating to apartheid, Israel, and Nicaragua in the UN General Assembly. [redacted]

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Prospects

Despite Congo's pragmatic overtures toward the West, hardliners in the government and military almost certainly will continue to exert influence to limit Sassou's strategy. In our view, periodic outbursts of anti-Western rhetoric by leftist officials in international forums--such as the recent anti-Israeli statement made by the foreign minister at the UN--will probably continue, despite efforts by Sassou and other relative moderates to prevent it. In our view, Congo will remain dependent on the Soviets, Cubans, and Libyans, who are prepared to tolerate a certain amount of Western involvement in Congo. We believe that Moscow's attitude could change, however, if events in Angola were to result in the loss of Soviet access to Luanda. Congo's importance almost certainly would increase significantly, and we would expect Moscow to expend substantial resources to encourage the emergence of a more radical regime in hopes of gaining military access. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, we believe Sassou will continue recent efforts to attract more Western economic aid and investment needed to help weather the current recession. We expect to see continued emphasis on private-sector initiatives to promote development, some limited reforms of the state enterprise system, and further efforts to reduce the influence of ideologues who seek to block Western investment proposals. At the same time, we believe Sassou will continue to appease ideologues by continuing the military supply relationship with Moscow, close ties to Cuba, and Libyan access. [redacted]

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In our judgement, Sassou's election as OAU chairman may forestall further challenges to his moves Westward over the near term. Although he will not be immune to attempts to unseat him during his tenure, we believe hardliners probably recognize that Sassou's new role brings international recognition to Congo and could reap economic dividends. Nevertheless, given Congo's turbulent past and the military's penchant for removing leaders, a coup could occur with little warning. Although we believe that, on balance, key military and security leaders still back Sassou, this support could erode rapidly if living standards continue to fall or if the President shows signs of losing control. Should Sassou's political position deteriorate, he probably would attempt to reach a compromise with hardliners, perhaps by offering to slow Congo's move Westward. An increase in hardline influence probably would result in improved relations with the Soviets, diminish US access to senior Congolese officials, and lead to increased anti-Western rhetoric. [REDACTED]

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In our judgment, Sassou would probably be replaced by a more hardline leftist and be excoriated for betraying revolutionary goals through his moderate policies. Although Congo's moves toward the West might be slowed or even reversed, we believe whoever rules in Brazzaville would still have to deal with the United States and Western Europe to preserve essential trade, aid, and investment links. [REDACTED]

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