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# Gabon's Foreign Policy: What Role in Regional Peace and Development?

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### HE Noël Nelson Messone

Excellencies; Ladies and gentlemen;

First, allow me to say how honoured I feel for having been invited to give a speech here at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the illustrious Chatham House.

I thank director Alex Vines for your kind introduction and indeed the Africa Programme at Chatham House, and I congratulate Ambassador Sanni for having made this event possible.

I have been invited to discuss the subject of 'Gabon's Foreign Policy: What Role in Regional Peace and Development?', along two sets of questions:

- First, Gabon's vision for ensuring its stability and that of its neighbours;
- Second, Gabon's options for strengthening links with both traditional and more recent partners.

Since independence, Gabon has been a stable country, barring the 1964 coup attempt and the turmoil that led to the return to multiparty politics in the 1990s. Even when electoral cycles have generated tensions, as the last presidential election, the country has been able to avoid destabilizing violent strife.

Gabon's foreign policy has traditionally focused on promoting regional peace and security. Gabon's consistent involvement in regional crises and conflicts can be traced back to 1977, when the country hosted the OAU (Organisation for African Unit) Summit in Libreville. From that point on, the late President Omar Bongo Ondimba adopted a diplomatic orientation of involvement in most of the conflicts that African countries were facing.

Gabon's peace diplomacy was at play in various situations, including the conflict between Chad and Libya, and intrastate conflicts in Chad, Angola, the DRC crisis leading to President Mobutu's departure, the coup d'état in São Tomé and Príncipe, or the Burundi crisis.

This policy trajectory is a result of Gabon's preventive inclination and its potential exposure to the negative consequences of regional conflicts. It is therefore a key element of Gabon's domestic and international policies.

In the 1980s to 1990s period, Gabon began to diversify its partners, both to reinforce domestic security, but also in the pursuit of economic cooperation for its development objectives.

In the 1990s environmental issues emerged as a policy priority in Gabon, when 11 per cent of the country was set aside as national parks.

Gabon's regional peace and security environment is still characterized by persistent challenges and threats. In this context, what could be a vision for ensuring the domestic stability of Gabon and that of regional neighbours?

### **Ensuring the stability of Gabon and its neighbours**

#### 1. Ensuring domestic stability

In African countries, domestic peace and stability are essential for the pursuit [of] development objectives. Stability depends on the capacity of countries to ensure basic rights and freedoms, as well as the rule of law. Stability is therefore linked to improving and advancing good governance.

Countries could also adopt values and practices that promote domestic stability. In the case of Gabon, a key element has been the practice of dialogue cycles between political actors that have often taken place following electoral crises, or when questions of national interest have to be discussed.

The recent post-presidential election tense situation is getting back to normal, due to such a political agreement that led to a new government which includes members of opposition parties.

Earlier, in January 2015, President Ali Bongo Ondimba implemented a recommendation of the political establishment to create a National Council on Democracy. This council has a consultative role in political reforms, and is chaired by an opposition figure.

Political dialogue will continue to be a key feature of political stability in Gabon. For this practice to ensure, it is essential to reinforce the culture of peace among the Gabonese population.

In the future, sustaining stability requires that other factors and policies be brought to bear.

First, Gabon needs to strengthen its capacity to face and deal with emerging challenges and threats to its domestic peace and security, namely illegal exploitation of natural resources, transnational crime, and illegal migration.

Along these lines, it is important to manage contending claims over natural resources by population that may escalate into destabilising outright conflicts. Populations need to be informed on the benefits of sustainable natural resources management and land uses.

Second, in the face of demands for equal participation in decision-making processes by the population, policies that ensure equality will be essential. President Ali Bongo Ondimba has already initiated a policy of equal opportunities for all. At least 30 per cent of women and youth should be designated for public office. This measure is meant to tackle the problems of nepotism and favouritism in administrations.

Third, reducing and eliminating corruption is called for, to promote equal opportunity, justice, economic growth and development. Efforts have been marked by a requirement for those in high public office to declare their assets. Furthermore, a commission on illegal wealth and assets has been created with investigative powers.

Fourth, there is a need to adopt policies that have a rapid and sustained effect in tackling youth unemployment and social problems. Various projects are undertaken to train young people in entrepreneurship. Efforts have been made in implementing a social security system and a medical insurance system.

Fifth, investment in social infrastructure such as social housing, water and power connections are powerful in improving the living conditions of the majority of the population.

Sixth, the effective management of political dialogue with external partners may act in ways that take into account the specificities of the country. On the other hand they may act on the basis of preconceived ideas and apply misguided pressures.

Since 13 September, Gabon is engaged in a political dialogue with the European Union. The Gabonese government values very much this exercise. Both parties are reviewing some of the recommendations made by the EU electoral mission during the presidential election in Gabon. There have been sharp

disagreements on certain questions under discussion. Careless publicity on such disagreement could derail the process and incite radical behaviour from the opposition.

##### 2. Ensuring the stability of neighbouring countries

Gabon stability has always been considered in the light of stability in neighbouring countries. Gabon now chairs the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), headquartered in Libreville.

Gabon has consistently committed considerable resources for regional peace and security actions, namely:

- Convening and organizing peace conferences and meetings, including behind the scene meetings;
- Staging mediation processes;
- Initiating regional peace missions with military components, and recently bringing together bilateral and regional peace initiatives with larger United Nations peace operations;
- Taking a leading role in tackling new threats and challenges to peace and security.

The long conflict in the Central African Republic is certainly the most prominent instance of Gabon's effort in the stabilization of another country, managing negotiations between protagonists, negotiating the conditions of an electoral transition.

Since the November 1996 army mutiny that set off instability in CAR, Gabon has been present for more than 20 years and was part of the first International Follow-up Committee to the 1997 Bangui Agreement. An African force of 750 personnel was set up and commanded by a Gabonese General (MISAB).

And [a] few days ago, I chaired an important extraordinary meeting of the council of foreign ministers of the ECCAS, on the situation in the CAR. A key decision was for regional countries to set up a special brigade in support of MINUSCA, to tackle insecurity in lawless border areas. Gabon will maintain its engagement in the CAR, and ensure that its military contingent there is trained in peacekeeping operations norms.

#### **New challenges and a need for regional action**

Gabon and neighbours in west and central Africa, all face new challenges and threats to peace and stability, for the years to come. In this perspective, what are Gabon's options with its regional partners?

First, the most pressing regional challenge is fighting the terrorism of Boko Haram, and other groups trying [to] set foot in the region. These organizations are increasingly relying on financing their activities with illegal trading in products like ivory, rhino horns, and bush meat – not to mention illicit drugs.

Ensuring regional stability will further require the following actions by Gabon and its neighbours:

- Jointly tackling the illegal circulation of light and small calibre weapons. ECCAS has already adopted a protocol on this question;
- Fighting cross-border illegal activities, namely illegal fishing activities and other illegal exploitation of national resources;
- Fighting elephant poaching;
- Combating piracy on the Gulf of Guinea.

Gabon is taking the opportunity of its chairmanship of ECCAS to promote new regional strategies and to strengthen those already in place.

Second, it is often forgotten that a key factor of the CAR crisis is elephant poaching. Furthermore, other central African countries could soon seize the opportunity of its recognised leadership to champion the need to fight deforestation and other environmentally detrimental activities. Initiating joint policies to protect the environment and fight climate change is essential.

Third, progress in regional integration policies could have destabilizing effects, particularly in the area of free circulation of persons and goods. It is important for countries in the region to effectively cooperate in managing the free circulation of persons in a region facing various security threats.

### **Options for strengthening links with traditional and new partners**

Since 2009, under the leadership of President Ali Bongo Ondimba, Gabon has [been] set to become an emerging country by 2025. This emerging Gabon vision has three pillars: the development of an industrial base; the development of service sector; the development of a green and blue economy. The pursuit and implementation of this vision is the main objective of Gabon's foreign policy today.

But Gabon will also maintain its commitment to the traditional objective of promoting peace and security in its regional sphere, particularly in a context of persistent crises and of new crosscutting peace and security challenges.

These two elements create new strategic options for reinforcing Gabon bilateral relations with its partners. To this effect, both sides could advance the following priorities:

1. The strengthening of bilateral cooperation in the area of peace and security to tackle the new and crosscutting challenges that Gabon and its partners face today. Terrorism impacts all regions of the world. Maritime piracy, including piracy in the Gul of Guinea, is another threat that affects many of Gabon's partners. Gabon shares with its partners the unwavering determination to fight terrorism and piracy.  
Taking joint actions in tackling the problem of migration, particularly illegal migrations, is a related challenge that offers an opportunity for Gabon and its partners to cooperate. Gabon has been a destination and transit country for migrants.
2. The pursuit of cooperation in tackling the global challenge of climate change and promoting environmental protection are the foundations of the Green and Blue Gabon vision, which is seen as fundamental to the country's economic future. It is today the priority focus of Gabonese foreign policy. President Ali Bongo Ondimba just received a two-year mandate as coordinator of the African Heads of State Committee on Climate and the Environment (CAHOSCC).

Gabon has committed a large portion of the country's territory dedicated to national parks with the intent of preserving the fauna and flora that could be assets for ecotourism and scientific research.

With the Blue Gabon initiative, Gabon has dedicated 18,000 square miles of ocean – or 23 per cent of Gabon's ocean area – as protected from uncontrolled commercial and illegal fishing. Threatened marine species now have a blue haven on the west coast of Africa.

Gabon is working with its partners on actions to advance the sustainable management and exploitation of forests, as well as to combat the illegal exploitation forest, land and maritime resources.

3. The promotion of public-private partnerships in implementing the 2025 Emerging Gabon Vision. The main objectives for Gabon are: the diversification of the economy through the development and the creation of sustainable youth employment.

With all its partners Gabon seeks to promote direct investment in various sectors, namely logistics infrastructures, energy and water, but also agriculture, value-added local processing, services and tourism, and social programmes benefitting the population such as housing.

In conclusion, while economic diplomacy is the dominant feature of its current foreign policy, Gabon will continue its efforts for a peaceful and stable African continent, as the country pursues its own domestic political and economic reforms.

It is important that Gabon's traditional and new partners lend their support in these efforts. Gabon is confident that with strengthened cooperation, threats can be contained and stability can be sustained.

Gabon will also maintain its leadership role and responsible stand in the global challenge of climate change and environmental conservation.

Support and cooperation with our partners required from them an understanding of the particular domestic dynamics of the country.

Working with our partners in this direction could yield positive results in the future of our relations.

I thank you very much for your attention.