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# Multilateralism and Cooperation: Portugal and the USA in the Gulf of Guinea

## *Multilateralismo e Cooperação: Portugal e os EUA no Golfo da Guiné*

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### Summary

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**Abstract:** The alliance and cooperation between Portugal and the United States of America began practically immediately after the independence of the latter. Two maritime powers, with the Atlantic as a fundamental vector of their foreign policies and the defense of Democracy, Human Rights, the Rule of Law and Multilateralism as essential flags. In this context, cooperation in matters of defense and security in the Gulf of Guinea came almost naturally, given that both countries have a very significant commonality of interests in this area. An area where five countries belonging to the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries) are located, which has a fundamental geopolitical and geostrategic interest, given its wealth in oil and natural gas, in addition to other very important raw materials. There are also some threats in this area,

such as piracy, terrorism, illegal fishing and drug trafficking, which are concerns both for the United States of America and for Portugal; therefore, nothing more natural than the existence of a broad consensus in the diplomacy of both countries in relation to this area of the world, which is embodied in a wide range of cooperation initiatives, especially in the areas of maritime defense and security.

**Keywords:** Portugal, United States of America, Gulf of Guinea, Cooperation, multilateralism.

**Resumo:** A aliança e a cooperação entre Portugal e os Estados Unidos da América iniciaram-se praticamente logo após a independência destes últimos. Duas potências marítimas, que têm o Atlântico como vetor fundamental das suas políticas externas e a defesa da Democracia, dos Direitos Humanos, do Estado de Direito e do Multilateralismo como bandeiras essenciais. Neste contexto, a cooperação em matéria de defesa e segurança no Golfo da Guiné surgiu quase naturalmente, dado que ambos os países têm uma comunhão de interesses muito significativa nesta área. Uma zona onde se situam cinco países pertencentes à CPLP (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa), que tem um interesse geopolítico e geoestratégico fundamental, dada a sua riqueza em

petróleo e gás natural, para além de outras matérias-primas muito importantes. Existem também algumas ameaças nesta área, como a pirataria, o terrorismo, a pesca ilegal e o narcotráfico, que constituem preocupações tanto para os Estados Unidos da América como para Portugal; por isso, nada mais natural do que a existência de um amplo consenso na diplomacia de ambos os países em relação a esta área do globo, que se consubstancia num vasto conjunto de iniciativas de cooperação, nomeadamente nos domínios da defesa e segurança marítimas.

**Palavras-chave:** Portugal, Estados Unidos da América, Golfo da Guiné, Cooperação, Multilateralismo.

### 1. Introduction

Multilateralism, which takes the form of adherence to a set of norms and values that make up what is commonly referred to as the 'international community', is also characterised by an active presence and collaboration with other international actors, namely international organisations, other states and non-governmental organisations. It is based on the premise that major international issues can be resolved more effectively through collaboration and cooperation than isolationism and unilateral action. So, quite

naturally, Portugal and the United States of America, which share a set of fundamental interests and values in the international order, particularly with regard to maritime security, freedom of navigation and the fight against piracy and extremist movements, came together precisely to tackle these challenges and threats that plague the Gulf of Guinea region. This has led to close collaboration between the two maritime nations, which obviously benefits them both, but also has a number of positive externalities, particularly for the countries of this sub-region of Africa and for the international community in general.

## 2. Early cooperation regarding maritime security

Portugal and the United States of America are longtime allies. The two countries have maintained diplomatic relations since 1791, with Portugal recognizing the independence of the USA, as early as 1783, even before the final Treaty of Paris (Calvet de Magalhães 1991). Cooperation relationships – specifically in the fields of defense and security – are also very old. Right at the beginning of the bilateral relationship, during the mandates of George Washington, which coincided temporarily with the reign of D. Maria I, the then young American republic requested the support of the Portuguese navy against the attacks of the so-called “barbaresque pirates” (Pavia, 2015). The issue of “barbaresque pirates” continued throughout President George Washington’s two terms, even beyond. The American merchant navy that already traded in the ports of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, following the proclamation of independence, lost the protection that it enjoyed by the British navy, being at the mercy of attacks by pirates that operated in the Mediterranean area, Strait of Gibraltar and Atlantic. Several ships of the American merchant navy were captured and their crews imprisoned in order to obtain ransoms or, alternatively, be sold as slaves. This situation was not new, as King D. Manuel I of Portugal, in 1520, had created the fleet in the strait, precisely to protect merchant ships against the actions of the aforementioned pirates.

This squadron – as we saw created in the

16th century – continued to operate at the end of the XVIII century, protecting merchant navies from pirate attacks, American ships also benefited from the protection granted to them by the Portuguese fleet. The letter that we transcribe below, from George Washington to D. Maria I, illustrates well the American recognition of this action of “security producers” that the Portuguese provided:

### “From George Washington to Maria I of Portugal”

To Maria I of Portugal  
[Philadelphia, March 11, 1794]

Great and good Friend

It was with the most sincere pleasure, that I was informed by your Majesty’s highly-esteemed letter, of the addition made to your domestic happiness, and to the joy of your Kingdom, by the birth of the Princess of Beira. This event, so interesting in itself, is heightened by the favorable escape of the Princess of Brazil, from the danger attached to it.

**Your Majesty has a full claim upon the congratulations of the United States, in every instance of your prosperity, from the noble and friendly part, which you have lately adopted, by granting convoys to our Trade, against the Corsairs of Algiers.**

With the warmest hope, that the Amity, now subsisting between your Majesty and the United States, will be perpetual, I pray God to keep you, Great and good Friend, under his holy protection.

Written at Philadelphia the Eleventh day of March 1794. Your good Friend  
Go: Washington  
By the President of the  
United States of America  
Edm: Randolph <Secretary of State>”

Source:

<http://founders.archives.gov/?q=Recipient%3A%22Maria%20I%20%28of%20Portugal%29%22&s=1111311111&r=2> (Accessed 02/07/2023).

George Washington’s recognition of the action taken by the Portuguese fleet in the Strait did not end there; in a message to the

two chambers of congress this subject is once again referred to:

“MESSAGE TO BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS; RELATIVE TO THE INTERCOURSE WITH FOREIGN NATIONS. FEBRUARY 28TH, 1795.

The friendship of her Most Faithful Majesty has been often manifested in checking the passage of the Algerine corsairs into the Atlantic Ocean. She has also furnished occasional convoys to the vessels of the United States, even when bound to other ports than her own. We may therefore promise ourselves, that, as, in the ordinary course of things few causes can exist for dissatisfaction between the United States and Portugal, so the temper, with which accidental difficulties will be met on each side, will speedily remove them.”

Source:

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=N7ZBAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA105> (Accessed 02/07/2023).

This very significant episode that marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between the two countries seemed very interesting to us, also because of the lessons that we can draw for today. Successive government programs in Portugal with regard to foreign policy have always emphasized that one of their most significant vectors is the transatlantic link (meaning the United States of America) and membership of NATO (Pavia, 2013). More recently, a great focus has also been given to Portugal’s participation in international peace and security missions, highlighting Portugal’s role as an “international security producer” and a “reliable ally” within the scope of NATO, the European Union, of the United Nations and other international organizations such as the CPLP. Now, as we have just demonstrated, this role is not new, it has at least almost five centuries of existence; what has changed is the balance of forces in the international system, with the United States now at the forefront, as Portugal was in the past. Portugal must, therefore, maintain an active, dynamic and independent foreign

policy at the service of the national interest, contributing to international peace and security, as it has always done; this will also be a way of highlighting Portugal's unique role in the world and thus escaping a fate that could ultimately be that of international irrelevance.

### 3. The Gulf of Guinea and its importance

The Gulf of Guinea is an area that stretches from Cape Verde to Angola in the West coast of Africa. It encompasses around 20 countries and is a region very rich in natural resources, where oil, natural gas, gold, diamonds, aluminum, bauxite, among others, stand out. These are the strategic advantages of the oil and gas-rich region of the Gulf of Guinea (Pavia, 2016):

1. It produces mostly "Light Sweet Crude Oil" which is easier and cheaper to refine than Middle Eastern Oil.
2. Most of the production is located offshore which decreases transport and minimize the risks of disturbance and attacks.
3. Proximity to two of the world main consumers of energy, North America and Western Europe, reduces the costs of transportation.
4. The Gulf of Guinea benefit from the absence of maritime transit chokepoints between the region and those parts of the world.
5. It also produces gas: Nigeria is one of the top suppliers of Portugal.

The region has been affected by numerous threats, particularly in terms of maritime security, such as piracy, illegal fishing, drug trafficking, illegal migration and armed attacks against ships. Several international organizations, such as the United Nations, have warned of the dangers of this situation. Two United Nations Security Council resolutions were approved, UNSCR 2018, from 2011 and UNSCR 2039, from 2012, which condemned acts of piracy and called for greater cooperation between the States of the Gulf of Guinea and the international community with the aim of combating this situation. The European Union has also launched some programs and plans in this

*“The first US president, George Washington, recognises the valuable contribution of the Portuguese navy in protecting its merchant ships in the Mediterranean and Atlantic shipping lanes.”*

regard, such as CRIMGO (Critical Maritime Route for the GoG), in 2013; the GoG's maritime strategy, in 2014 and the Action Plan, in 2015. African regional organizations themselves have also been involved, such as Ecowas (Economic Community of West African States), Eccas (Economic Community of Central African States) and GGC (Gulf of Guinea Commission), in addition to the African Union itself.

More recently, the G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea Maritime Security was formed, which also includes other countries such as Portugal, Brazil, Denmark, etc, in addition to the African coastal states.

In bilateral terms there are several agreements, where the cooperation agreement between Portugal and São Tomé and Príncipe stands out, with the permanent deployment of a navy ship, the Zaire, which patrols the exclusive economic zone of São Tomé and Príncipe.

### 4. Some cooperation agreements and programs regarding the Gulf of Guinea

The United States of America has developed a significant set of programs, operations and initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea. Most of them are carried out within the framework of AFRICOM and, within it, within the APS. The Africa Partnership Station (APS) is the U.S. Naval Forces Africa's (NAF) flagship maritime security cooperation program.

The focus of APS is to build maritime safety and security by increasing maritime awareness, response capabilities and infrastructure. Military and training and education exercises are also carried out. Cooperation actions in defense and security, joint military operations, special operations and support allies' missions.

For example: The Sao Tome and Principe Coast Guard has installed a new surface surveillance system, the Regional Maritime Awareness Capability (RMAC), on January 28, 2008. The U.S. Navy-inspired coastal surveillance program uses an automatic identification system and ground-based radar and sensors to enhance awareness of maritime traffic. The project is coordinated by the U.S. Department of Defense and Department of State. Sao Tome and Principe is the first African country to have the program installed and integrated into the Maritime Safety and Security Information System, a global database to track ships all across the world (New Radar System Improves Sea Safety for Sao Tome and Principe, n.d.).

In another example: the U.S. and Portuguese navies have helped the island nation of Sao Tome and Principe to update 44-year-old navigation charts of its principal harbor to improve shipping safety and help attract more commercial maritime trade. On March 14, 2008, Captain John Nowell, commander of Africa Partnership Station (APS), presented a chart of the port of Baía de Ana Chaves, Democratic Republic of Sao Tome and Principe (STP), to Lieutenant Colonel Idalecio Pachirre, commander of the Armed Forces, and Lieutenant Colonel Justino Lima, commander of the Sao Tome and Principe Coast Guard.

The chart was compiled from information gathered by the Navy Meteorology and Oceanography Command (NMOC) and Fleet Survey Team (FST) with the cooperation of Portugal Naval Officer Lieutenant Alexandre Carvalho (New Maritime Chart to Improve Port Safety, Help Economic Growth for Sao Tome and Principe, n.d.).

The final example could be the joint naval military flagship operation Obangame Express (OE), in which Portugal participates actively since the beginning. Sponsored by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), OE is designed to

improve regional cooperation, maritime domain awareness (MDA), information-sharing practices, and tactical interdiction expertise to enhance the collective capabilities of participating nations to counter sea-based illicit activity (International Exercise Obangame Express 2022 Set to Begin, n.d.).

The impact of these cooperation actions and joint exercises were repeatedly emphasized by North American officials: “Maritime security is critical to West Africa’s stability and regional economic prosperity,” said Stephanie S. Sullivan, U.S. Ambassador to Ghana. “The United States is a proud security partner in West Africa. Exercises like this help us learn together – so that we can work better together – to ensure security in the Gulf of Guinea” (USS Hershel “Woody” Williams Joins Partners, Allies for Ex Obangame Express 22, n.d.).

The importance of cooperation with Portugal is also repeatedly mentioned in the final communiqués of the Bilateral Commissions between the two countries:

“44<sup>th</sup> United States – Portugal Standing Bilateral Commission  
Washington, D.C., Lisbon, Azores  
December 17, 2020  
Joint Statement

(...) 6) On Africa, Portugal and the United States reiterated a determination to deepen consultations and to further engage on initiatives of mutual interest. Both sides expressed their willingness to consider support to African countries to counter transnational terrorist threats, including ISIS-affiliated groups, in the region.

7) Both countries recognized defense cooperation as a cornerstone of our relationship and agreed that topics such as the security of the Atlantic, the strategic role of the Azores, and sub-Saharan Africa should continue to be regularly discussed. The SBC also encouraged further collaboration in maritime security and defense capacity building in the Atlantic, with a focus on the Gulf of Guinea. Portugal underlined the proposed Atlantic Center as an important contribution to both maritime and regional security. (...)” (44<sup>th</sup> UNITED STATES - PORTUGAL STANDING BILATERAL COMMISSION JOINT STATEMENT, n.d.).

“Some examples of this cooperation are mirrored in the fact that the Portuguese navy actively participates in US-sponsored exercises and also in cooperation actions with local partners, as is the case in São Tomé and Príncipe.”

As is evident in this joint declaration, the recent creation by Portugal of the Center of the Atlantic, which will be located on the island of Terceira, in the Azores, is also emphasized by the two countries. This Centre, which has already joined by the United States of America, among other Atlantic countries, will focus on the entire Atlantic, but with special attention to the Gulf of Guinea, namely the Defense Capacity Building of the coastal States (The Atlantic Centre, n.d.).

“While the Gulf of Guinea may not be at the top of the transatlantic “to-do” list for the Biden administration, the region remains a strategic area whose growing instability has larger global consequences which require sustained international mobilization. The Gulf of Guinea could be an important and early example of a partner-led and U.S. enabled framework where Europe increases its role as a security provider with support from the United States to address a growing security challenge” (A Transatlantic Approach to Address Growing Maritime Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, n.d.).

Finally, last November (2022), at the United

Nations, the deputy U.S. representative to the United Nations, said this: “The United States has pledged to increase our collaboration and coordination with nations across the Atlantic, as we all share similar concerns about our shared resource. Our naval forces in Africa conduct training and exercises throughout the Gulf of Guinea with our African partners, but also counterparts with from Brazil, Portugal, and other allies” (Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Gulf of Guinea, n.d.).

## 5. Conclusion

Portugal and the United States of America, allies for more than two centuries, both founding members of NATO, with converging interests in almost all areas, especially in the defense of democracy, security, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the charter of the United Nations, in defense of an open, multilateral world and a liberal international order, also share common concerns regarding the Gulf of Guinea region. These concerns are reflected, above all, in threats to navigation security, terrorist menace, illegal fishing, human and drug trafficking, which all combined can be harmful to international peace and security. Hence, joint actions have been undertaken in various areas, but above all in aspects related to the maritime security of that macro-region. Some examples of this cooperation are mirrored in the fact that the Portuguese navy actively participates in US-sponsored exercises and also in cooperation actions with local partners, as is the case in São Tomé and Príncipe. There is also concertation at the level of the two diplomacies in various international organizations such as the United Nations, the G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea Maritime Security, among others. This cooperation, both bilaterally and multilaterally, is an example of win-win cooperation, which also has a spill-over effect on actors in the region and on international security in general.

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