

South Atlantic crossfire: Portugal in-between Brazil and NATO

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For the past year, a number of crucial issues have come to monopolize NATO's working agenda: relations between NATO and Russia, the organization's new nuclear posture, the geographic reorganization of its strategic commands, and more importantly the revision of its Strategic Concept, have grabbed the media spotlight and the political focus of the 28 member-states, with their respective Heads of State and Government gearing up for the upcoming and highly-expected Lisbon Summit.

In this complex and busy context, it is rather understandable that outside voices – expressing a sense of apparent discontentment with the organization's reformed intentions in the short-run – are given little, if any attention. Due to NATO's polarizing status in the present international society, with many even questioning its *raison d'être*, critics and detractors are only too common in the organization's daily life. However, when it comes to Brazil leading such recriminations, it is probably wise to take time for a thorough analysis.

Indeed, the latest quarrel concerning Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim's spree of public declarations – through which he sought to convey Brazil's opposition to the alleged expansion of NATO's interest to the South Atlantic – may just require such scrutiny. The fact that long-time ally Portugal has apparently acted as the herald of discord only added further surprise to the entire situation.

In this context, the need to tackle NATO's inner evolution, Portugal's calculations and Brazil's own motives, became suddenly more pressing. Consequently, a careful assessment of Brazil-NATO relations is in order.

NATO's evolving debate

The above-mentioned idea is not exactly new. With the implosion of its undeclared main adversary – the Soviet Union – NATO spent a great part of the late nineties trying to figure out its new purpose and range of action. While the crisis in former Yugoslavia exemplified the existence of some remaining threats in the European continent, it was the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan – still ongoing today – that galvanized the Alliance's efforts far from its traditional scenario, sparking a debate over the organization's apparent new global reach and the accompanying geopolitical implications. Calls to include other “democratic partners” in a much broader mechanism soon followed and quickly gained much acceptance within certain policy circles, from Washington to Brussels. Like Australia or Japan, Brazil was then promptly cited as a possible and worthy security partner in this future arrangement. As Nikolas Gvosdev stated, “a focus on deepening the north-south dimension of the Atlantic world might just be what a



faltering US-Europe trans-Atlantic relationship needs to regenerate itself".¹

Hence, to most Western observers, this confluence of interests appeared only natural and an inevitable outcome in the middle term. But such plans were put on hold as NATO entered a 'soul-searching' phase, beginning at the 2009 Strasbourg/Kehl Summit and expected to be concluded in Lisbon. In between, a group of experts led by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was entrusted with producing a draft of the next Strategic Concept, delivered in May 2010. Although Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen will deliver his own final report to the attending leaders in Lisbon, it will be largely based on the Albright Report's recommendations.

While the most controversial one regards the "Establishment of Guidelines for Operations Outside Alliance Borders" – formalizing even further the possibility of 'out-of-area' interventions –, it gives equal focus to the recognition of "A New Era of Partnerships". In acknowledging possible cooperating partners, the report appears to include every possible and imaginable international actor: the EU, the UN, OSCE, Russia, and even the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, one particular region stands out because of the little attention it receives: beyond a brief mention of the Organization of American States and a laudable praise of Latin American leading democracies – who "share with NATO a commitment to global peace and the rule of law"² –, the American continent and the surrounding Atlantic basis appears to be notoriously overlooked throughout the entire assessment. Even more, it is explicitly stated that "with the possible exception of a humanitarian emergency it is hard to foresee direct NATO involvement in this region".³

Despite its provisional status, the Albright Report thus appeared sufficiently innocuous, so as not to interfere with Brazil's inner area of interests. What could have then triggered Brazil's concerns over the Alliance's supposedly newfound interest in this area?

Portugal's lobbying

For the past couple of years, Portugal's foreign policy has actively sought a rebalancing of its primary objectives, seeking to enhance privileged relationships in a fast-paced international order. Among other priorities, the country has started to "pay more attention to the North

and South Atlantic, i.e. the strategic square that connects Lisbon to the US, Brazil and Angola".⁴

It was then no surprise that Portugal tried to emphasize those specific ties in NATO's restructuring debate. Already in 2009, Foreign Minister Luís Amado defended a "refocus of NATO's strategy in the Atlantic's geographic space", where Portugal's "privileged relations with the African continent, the Mediterranean and in particular, Brazil" could be better taken advantage of. At the same time, he rejected the "world policeman" label frequently attributed to NATO, in a clear attempt to preemptively tackle any eventual distrust his proposals could incite.⁵ A year later, Defense Minister Augusto Santos Silva would convey the exact same idea.⁶

Hence, Portugal's position on this matter was perfectly clear to all interested parties: reinforcing cooperation on an equal basis with both Africa and South America in order to tackle common security risks – such as illegal immigration, drugs, arms, human trafficking and terrorism – would be mutually beneficial and would allow for a better understanding of the perils and gains that could spring from this particular region. A connection with CPLP's activities could equally be considered.⁷

However, these suggestions did not find an echo in the Group of Experts, who as previously stated opted to disregard this particular Portuguese contribution. The official reaction would then be left to Minister Santos Silva, who pointed out the existence of an explicit "gap", by "not paying enough attention to the South as it should". Countries like Portugal, he said, "add to the transatlantic debate, the potential of knowing to dialogue with the south and looking to the south" and should therefore be considered in the big picture.⁸

Jobim's talking points

But as Portugal publicized its objectives, Brasília began to raise concerns. Defense Minister Nelson Jobim was then entrusted with the country's response, starting off with a conference in Lisbon, at the National Defense Institute on September 16th, precisely devoted to "The Future of the Transatlantic Community". On this occasion, he wasted

1 Nikolas Gvosdev, "Expand the West by Looking South" (*Atlantic Council*, 7 June 2009).

2 "NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement" (Brussels: NATO, 2010): 29.

3 Idem: 17.

4 Paulo Gorjão, "The end of a cycle: Rebalancing and redefining Portugal's foreign policy" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 3, January 2010): 6.

5 "Luís Amado defende "recentramento" no Atlântico e sublinha papel de Portugal pelas relações com África e Brasil" (*Lusa*, 26 March 2009).

6 "Fórum Roosevelt: Portugal tem capacidade para ajudar a NATO a olhar para o Sul" (*Lusa*, 16 April 2010).

7 For more on Portugal's interests in NATO's new Strategic Concept, see Vasco Martins, "Portugal and the new NATO Strategic Concept" (*IPRIS Policy Brief*, No. 3, June 2010).

8 "NATO: "Conceito estratégico não presta atenção ao Atlântico Sul"" (*Lusa*, 9 September 2010).



no time in getting down to business.

After a detailed analysis of NATO's failure in coming to terms with its subordination to US interests since the end of the Cold War – mentioning Europe's extreme dependence on American military capabilities along the way –, Jobim focused on the organization's mandate to operate worldwide and the risks to international security, arguing that NATO was no substitute for the UN. He then went on to note that it would be "inappropriate" to associate the North Atlantic with the South Atlantic – "a strategic area of vital interest for Brazil" – and that "the security issues of both oceans were notoriously distinct". Likewise, the same could be said of the alleged "Central Atlantic".⁹

Following these declarations, on October 17th, Jobim began a five-day visit to the US where he met with Secretary for Homeland Security Janet Napolitano on matters of aviation security and attended a number of lectures at George Washington University and Johns Hopkins University. But according to Brazilian newspaper *Estado de S. Paulo*, he also took this opportunity to bring up the 'NATO issue' when meeting with Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Arturo Valenzuela, to whom he conveyed the exact same message he had expressed in Lisbon.

But this would not be the end of it. On November 3rd, during the X Conference of *Forte de Copacabana* promoted by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Jobim would again harshly criticize the US and an alleged proposal of "shared sovereignties over the Atlantic", claiming that "neither Brazil or South America could accept that the Americans or NATO claimed any right to intervene in any theatre of operations, under the most variable pretexts".¹⁰

While the gist of his declarations remained the same, on this occasion Jobim managed to provide more insight into Brazil's reasons for mistrusting any eventual NATO role in the South Atlantic. A central point regarded the fact that the US has, until this day, failed to ratify the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea – which gives legal grounds to every state's national claims to its 350 nautical miles of continental shelf, including any exploitation of existing underwater natural resources. Unsurprisingly, to Brazil, formal recognition of this international mechanism is crucial given the overwhelming findings of vast deepwater oil reserves in the so-called "Blue Amazon" in 2007, well within its

Atlantic Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ).

Naturally, the country suddenly became aware of its promising energetic potential in a near future and is understandably conscious of the need to secure and protect its assets from 'outside influences'. That much can be deduced from Brazil's own National Strategy of Defense. The document itself recognizes the South Atlantic as one of the most critical defense concerns and is not shy about declaring the "Proactive defense of the oil platforms" as one of the main goals for the Brazilian Navy.¹¹ Hence the shopping spree for military hardware – including the much-publicized five French submarines – that has taken place over the past couple of years.

And if reasons were needed to incite Brazil's political elite and military to fear for the safety of its national waters, the decision by former President George W. Bush to reactivate the US Fourth Fleet in 2008, operating in the Caribbean and in South Atlantic waters, is currently considered a milestone on the road to such generalized local distrust.

Embedded doubts

When all these factors are taken in sequentially, certain questions are bound to arise: where in all of this process did Brazil see an explicit US – at this point, no need to try to pin it on NATO – grand design to bring the Atlantic Alliance's attention to the Southern waters? Could it be that the South American nation understood Portugal's intentions as the prophetic menacing words of a mere American proxy, seeking to lay the ground for the upcoming crystallization of such a strategy in the Lisbon Summit? If not, then what exactly set off Jobim's outraged declarations towards an approach that is not even close to being consecrated in the upcoming Strategic Concept's revision?

The answer to the first question is plainly clear. As mentioned above, the Albright Report does not constitute the final say on the new Strategic Concept, but it summarizes the basic outlines of the final document that Secretary Rasmussen will present to the Heads of State and Government in Lisbon. Therefore, no major/dramatic change is expected to be made at the last minute, such as a sudden refocus in the South Atlantic. At this point – despite Portugal's best efforts – there is simply no indication, public or otherwise, that NATO is preparing an expansion of its security interests towards the South. Even more, following Jobim's reasoning that US interests will continue to dictate the Alliance's future – a hardly disputed assumption –, the truth is that American foreign policy will most likely continue to be deeply invested for the next decade in the security and stability of the AfPak

9 "Palestra do ministro da Defesa do Brasil, Nelson A. Jobim no Encerramento da Conferência Internacional - "O Futuro da Comunidade Transatlântica"" (16 April 2010).

10 Claudia Antunes, "Ministro da Defesa ataca estratégia militar de EUA e Otan para o Atlântico Sul" (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 4 November 2010).

11 "National Strategy of Defense" (Ministry of Defense, 2008): 20.



scenario while accompanied by an exponential growth of its interests in the Southern Asian region. South Atlantic or South America for that matter will therefore doubtfully constitute serious priorities.

As for the second issue, the fact that Brazil could interpret Portugal's intentions as a threat to its sovereignty and influence in the Atlantic is questionable. Indeed, this historically and culturally-binding alliance has come to symbolize a mutually fruitful relationship. While the friendship of a regional powerhouse with global ambitions has always served Portugal well, the same could be said when it comes to Portugal advocating for a greater focus on Brazil within the EU. This latest dissonance, however, could very well indicate a crack in bilateral foreign consultations. The fact that Portugal was not able to successfully explain its goals¹² is worrisome, but when taking a closer look at the proposals brought forward, the consistency in the country's foreign policy is easily noted. By all means, this is not a question of bringing NATO forces to patrol South American or African coasts, but a calculated way of 'profiting' from the preferential relationships that constitute Portugal's current centers of interest. The desire to strengthen these ties is no secret to anyone – much less, to the parties involved – and the fact that Brazil has apparently overlooked it is equally puzzling, if not disappointing.

But it is the third question that raises more concerns in the long run. If in fact there were no unequivocal suggestions by American authorities for a greater emphasis on Brazil's maritime turf – and again, there is no such indication – and if Portuguese aspirations were wrongly construed as a pre-emptive and covert attempt to bring this issue to the table, what exactly were the grounds behind this latest vocal opposition? The answer is far from complex. With the new Strategic Concept, the Alliance will take one more step in acknowledging that "the potential sources of Article 5 threats have broadened and now include dangers that could arise either inside or outside the Euro-Atlantic region".¹³ The Afghanistan example is not exactly a success story, and consequently does little to prevent any major international distrust towards the organization's global reach. As an emerging power with growing assertiveness abroad, Brazil is naturally aware of every probable obstacle in its path. In that sense, NATO's geographic unrestrained projection capabilities only end up stirring unwanted wariness among every major player with similar

aspirations/agenda. This is the true reason behind Jobim's diatribes: formally allowing an increased possibility of allied interventions outside of NATO's traditional core zone, combined with public calls for greater importance to be given to the South Atlantic, proved simply too menacing for Brazilian diplomacy to ignore.

The need for a balanced approach

Throughout this entire ordeal, one particular voice has remained conspicuously muted. Indeed, to the untrained eye, Africa would seem to have no direct interest in this quarrel. But looks can be deceiving, because in reality not only is every major African power – South Africa, Nigeria or Angola, to name just a few – paying close attention, but most of them can probably sympathize or connect with Brazil's arguments. Unsurprisingly, Brazil's accurate assessment on the predominance of energetic disputes over the coming century is only likely to find sustained support within African elites and in that order, this public spat can never be decisively reduced to a Brazil-NATO or Brazil-US clash of interests.

However, at the end of the day, growing security concerns for certain parts of the continent – the Gulf of Guinea, for instances – only help fuel the notion that some kind of international cooperation is required in order to properly tackle every regional threat. What would Brazil do, far from its own shores, when confronted with a hypothetical NATO support mission in these Atlantic waters or even a follow-up of the organization's Steadfast Jaguar military exercises in Cape Verde in 2006? Its local economic interests would have to be taken into account but it is reasonable to question if they can actually be translated into effective influence in the area. In other words, would Africa also be under Brazil's guard? Unlikely or far-fetched as it may sound, the question arises if one follows through with Brazil's 'South Atlantic turf' reasoning, thus exposing its main conceptual flaw.

But does this mean that NATO and Brazil are condemned to an endless limbo of continuous bickering, with no meaningful cooperation in sight? Long were the days in which Brazil's accession was floated around Western capitals. Still, the truth is security issues abound and they would be certainly better resolved with joint actions rather than unilateral decisions with no kind of consultation. Such was Portugal's intention when it tried to call attention to the wastefulness of the existing relationship.

As Portuguese ambassador to NATO João Mira Gomes recently stated, all parties must approach this conundrum with "no prejudices" and come to terms with the fact that

¹² This topic was again brought up during the CPLP's 10th Defense Minister Meeting in Brasília on November 10th, where Nelson Jobim stood his ground while Santos Silva tried to defuse any existing tensions and doubts.

¹³ "NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement" [Brussels: NATO, 2010]: 19.



“the Alliance is much more than the US”.¹⁴ A permanent consulting structure similar to the existing NATO-Russia Council is unthinkable at this point, but a bilateral trust-building mechanism that could dwell on common security challenges and possible mutual responses could very well symbolize a step within reach. Ultimately, competing interests or conflicting spheres of influence are inevitably bound to produce more friction but instead of seeking to accentuate such differences,

both Brazil and NATO should recognize the wisdom of spending some of their efforts in fixing communication channels. Indeed, much of the substance behind these latest altercations can and ought to be defused with an open-minded and sincere debate over the respective fair share of the worldwide security burden. In that sense, both parties should admit that the time has come for an actual significant dialogue regarding the South Atlantic.

¹⁴ “Relação com Atlântico Sul “sem preconceitos”” (Lusa, 27 September 2010).

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