

# Portugal and Mali: An Unwelcome Minimalist Approach

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In response to France's military intervention in Mali in January, the Portuguese government issued a statement acknowledging that the ongoing "Operation Serval" constituted "an important contribution in order to avoid the trend towards destabilization in that region".<sup>1</sup> And, in one of those political coincidences that sometimes happen, French President François Hollande and Portuguese Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho had a meeting scheduled for January 17, which coincided with the initiation of France's military intervention in Mali. During the joint news conference at the Elysée Palace in Paris, Passos Coelho declared Portugal's support for French intervention.<sup>2</sup> However, Portuguese support would only be political and diplomatic. As Prime Minister Passos Coelho explained, "the current circumstances do not allow Portugal to contribute at military level". Due to severe financial difficulties, Passos Coelho explained that Portugal was unable to send combat troops to support the French military intervention.<sup>3</sup> Still, Portugal would "participate

in the efforts, within the European Union (EU), which would be developed in relation to Mali".<sup>4</sup> Also on January 17, an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) took place in Brussels. With the deepening crisis in Mali, the FAC finally decided that it would be established the European Union Training Mission (EUTM Mali), which would be "responsible for providing the Malian Armed Forces with military training and advice".<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Portuguese Prime Minister signaled a possible Portuguese contribution to EUTM Mali later on. In his view, "the Portuguese Armed Forces can make a contribution at the level of military training. That is a contribution that is within our reach and is in line with our financial possibilities".<sup>6</sup> Apparently, Portugal would have made a different kind of contribution if financial conditions allowed. So, at first glance it seems that recession is undermining Portuguese foreign policy. Indeed, within the framework of the United Nations (UN), NATO and the EU, Portugal has not missed an opportunity to express its solidarity with its allies in recent years. This guidance has been followed by successive Left and Right governments and, except in the case of the 2003 Iraq war, has not put up until today any kind of internal political division. Thus, a more robust Portuguese contribution to the French military Operation Serval

1 "Situação no Mali" (*Ministérios dos Negócios Estrangeiros*, 15 January 2013).

2 "Entretien avec M. Pedro Passos COELHO, Premier ministre du Portugal" (Présidence de la République, 17 January 2013).

3 In April 2011 Portugal requested financial assistance. As part of the bailout provided by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund the Portuguese government has been living under strict budget supervision. See Paulo Gorjão, "Fate and Freedom: Portugal and the European Financial Crisis", in Theodore Couloumbis, Andrea Dessi, Thanos Dokos, Paulo Gorjão, Ettore Greco, Dimitris Katsikas, Charles Powell, and Dimitris A. Sotiropoulos, *Southern Europe in Trouble: Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges of the Financial Crisis* (GMF/IAI, Mediterranean Paper Series 2012), pp. 41-47.

4 "Portugal vai "participar nos esforços" da UE no Mali: Passos Coelho" (*Lusa*, 17 January 2013).

5 "Mali" (Council of the European Union, Foreign Affairs, Press Release, 17 January 2013).

6 "Portugal disponível para missões de formação no Mali" (*Lusa*, 17 January 2013).



would have made sense. Moreover, at a time when Portugal benefits from the European solidarity, in the form of the Economic Adjustment Programme, its absence alongside the French in Mali is all the more incomprehensible. Unfortunately, at a time when France needs the help of its European partners Portugal is not at its side.

Portuguese foreign policy has a clear stake in what goes on in Mali, and a Portuguese contribution towards stabilization of West Africa, the Sahel region, and the Maghreb would address many security concerns. Among other issues, it would affirm Portuguese foreign policy as a security provider in Africa, solidify Portugal's energy sources, and it would reinforce Lisbon's diplomatic status as partner to the West African and Sahel states looking for allies to fight creeping Islamism and drug trafficking.

Since the end of the Cold War, Portugal's doctrine of intervention has stopped being motivated solely by historical factors or geographic proximity and extended into the larger realm of regional and international security.<sup>7</sup> The new doctrine has become a crucial factor for the external credibility and contributed to consolidate Portugal's position as a producer of international security.<sup>8</sup> Thus, within the framework of the UN, NATO and the EU, the Portuguese police and military have gone to work in locales as diverse as Afghanistan, Kosovo, Chad, and Timor-Leste. Indeed, in the post-Cold War context, Portugal has been a significant contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, bearing in mind its GDP *per capita* and its size. In the last two decades, the Portuguese police and military have participated in 20 peacekeeping operations. This curriculum has strengthened its credentials not only as a security provider but also when applying for a seat in international institutions such as the UN Security Council. On the other hand, regarding energy security, as stated in a report by a US think tank, energy suppliers have been increasingly willing to use their energy resources to pursue strategic and political goals. In turn, energy consumers are finding their growing dependence on imported energy means greater strategic vulnerability. Thus, nowadays the reliable and affordable supply of energy is an increasingly prominent feature of the international political landscape.<sup>9</sup> As noted elsewhere, oil and gas are transitioning from "a trade commodity" to the "the pre-eminent strategic resource on the planet, whose acquisition, production, and distribution will increasingly absorb the time, effort, and focus of senior government and military officials".<sup>10</sup> In the post-Cold War, "countries can

be divided into energy-surplus and energy-deficit nations [and] energy-deficit states are building or strengthening strategic ties with current (or likely future) suppliers to enhance their advantages".<sup>11</sup> Like other countries, Portugal also aims to safeguard its energy security, understood as the effort to diversify the sources and types of energy,<sup>12</sup> i.e. an energy mix as diverse as possible, as well as the "access to sufficient energy resources at reasonable prices for the foreseeable future free from serious risk of major disruption of service".<sup>13</sup> The political crisis that has dragged on in Mali since 2012 has potentially destabilizing effects throughout West Africa, the Sahel region, and the Maghreb. The al-Qaeda-linked terrorist attack against the Tigantourine gas facility near In Aménas, Algeria, confirmed it. The Portuguese government cannot help but be concerned over these facts, bearing in mind that it gets 49% of its gas from Algeria and 48% from Nigeria. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the Secretary-General of the Portuguese Intelligence System (SIRP),<sup>14</sup> Júlio Pereira, told the obvious in a hearing on the Defense Committee of the Portuguese Parliament: instability in Mali could affect gas and oil supplies to Portugal.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, if there were no other reasons, the mere fact that two Lusophone countries – Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau – are situated in West Africa is reason enough to make the region relevant from the Portuguese point of view. The attention received by West Africa and the Sahel from the European Union further reinforces its importance. And, although West Africa and the Sahel are not as important to the Portuguese foreign policy as Southern Africa, that is slowly changing. Due to political, economic and strategic considerations, there is an increasing perception that countries like Ghana and Senegal, among others, deserve additional attention from the Portuguese government.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is possible that this year the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Paulo Portas, will visit some of these countries.

Thus, Lisbon's caution is difficult to understand. During the press conference between Hollande and Passos Coelho, a journalist asked the Portuguese Prime Minister if Portugal could provide other forms of assistance,

7 Nuno Severiano Teixeira, "Portugal no Chade: um dever humanitário" (*Público*, 25 January 2008).

8 See Nuno Severiano Teixeira, *Contributos para uma Política de Defesa* (Ministério da Defesa Nacional, 2009), pp. 21, 29 and 199.

9 John Deutch and James R. Schlesinger [Chairs], David G. Victor [Project Director], "National Security Consequences of U.S. Oil Dependency" (New York, CFR, 2006), p. 3.

10 Michael T. Klare, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy* (Metropolitan Books, 2008), p. 7.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 14 and 20.

12 Celeste A. Wallander, "How not to convert gas to power" (*International Herald Tribune*, 6 January 2006).

13 Barry Barton, Catherine Redgwell, Anita Rønne e Donald N. Zillman, «Introduction», in Barry Barton, Catherine Redgwell, Anita Rønne e Donald N. Zillman (eds.), *Energy Security: Managing Risk in a Dynamic Legal and Regulatory Environment* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 5.

14 The SIRP is the system that integrates the internal (SIS) and external security (SIED) intelligence agencies.

15 "Chefe das 'secretas' para problemas no fornecimento de gás" (*Correio da Manhã*, 29 January 2013).

16 See Paulo Gorjão, "Portugal and Ghana: The Gateway to West Africa?" (IPRIS Viewpoints, No. 112, January 2013); and, Paulo Gorjão, "Portugal and Senegal: Don't Let the Tail Wag the Dog" (IPRIS Viewpoints, No. 98, June 2012).



such as medical support. Passos Coelho cited financial difficulties to evade the question. Yet, the range of options available to the Portuguese government was not only between sending combat troops and providing military training within the framework of the EUTM Mali. Another option would be to provide logistical support, including transport aircraft, and perhaps medical assistance, even if for a short period of time. This would be much less expensive than sending combat troops, but it would nevertheless represent a significant expression of Portuguese commitment at a crucial political and military stage. Moreover, some European countries that traditionally pay attention to the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa immediately offered their logistical support to France. Portugal stands alone in its minimalist approach. Spain, whose foreign policy Portugal always follows closely, made available a Hercules C-130 as well as a hospital ship. Moreover, European countries like Bel-

gium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom offered at least logistical support to the French intervention in Mali.

The Portuguese government will send only one staff officer and six instructors to Mali.<sup>17</sup> Even within the context of this minimalist approach, Portugal is among the EU countries that will contribute less to the EUTM Mali. This contribution puts Portugal at the level of those countries that have no special interest in West Africa and the Sahel. If possible, and as soon as possible, Portugal should re-evaluate its position. The least one can ask is that, while maintaining a minimalist approach, Portugal must increase its contribution.

<sup>17</sup> "Portugal vai enviar militares para o Mali" (*Lusa*, 6 February 2013).

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