

**A REVIEW OF THE PORTUGUESE STRATEGIC CONCEPT OF
NATIONAL DEFENCE: THE RESPONSE TO CHANGES IN THE
INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM**

Luana M. B. Oliveira, Institute of Social and Political Sciences, University of
Lisbon, luanamendoncabo@gmail.com

Pedro Antunes Ferreira, Military Academy, ferreira.pna@exercito.pt

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the structural reconfigurations of the Strategic Concept of National Defence (SCND), analysing the influence of the dynamics of a volatile international system and the way in which Portuguese foreign policy adapts to these dynamics. A qualitative, interpretative methodology was adopted, based on a review of the literature and a comparative documentary analysis between the 2013 SCND and the 2023 Major Options of the SCND (MOSCND), supplemented by the study of official speeches and interviews. The first part provides a historical contextualisation of Portuguese foreign policy, with particular attention to priority areas and the planning of means of action within the international system, highlighting the evolution of core priorities. Subsequently, the current changes in the international landscape are analysed, demonstrating the need for a new approach in the face of emerging threats. The analysis identifies the main concerns for Portugal, highlighting the need for a rigorous new SCND to address structural weaknesses. It is concluded that, although Portugal maintains its traditional pillars (European, Atlantic and Lusophone), the effectiveness of the new Strategic Concept depends on overcoming weaknesses in the national strategic culture, greater investment in the Armed Forces and greater mobilisation of civil society around security and defence issues.

Keywords: Portuguese Foreign Policy; National Defence; Strategic Concept of National Defence; International Security.

RESUMO

O presente artigo aborda as reconfigurações estruturais do Conceito Estratégico de Defesa Nacional (CEDN), analisando a influência das dinâmicas de um sistema internacional volátil e a forma como a política externa portuguesa se adapta a essas dinâmicas. Foi adotada uma metodologia qualitativa e interpretativa, assente na revisão da literatura e na análise documental comparativa entre o CEDN de 2013 e as Grandes Opções do CEDN de 2023 (GOCEDN), complementada pelo estudo de discursos oficiais e entrevistas. Numa primeira parte, procede-se à contextualização histórica da política externa portuguesa, com especial atenção às áreas prioritárias e ao planeamento dos meios de ação no sistema internacional, destacando a evolução das prioridades centrais. Posteriormente, analisam-se as transformações atuais do panorama internacional, evidenciando a necessidade de uma nova abordagem face às ameaças emergentes. A análise identifica as principais preocupações para Portugal, salientando a necessidade de um novo CEDN rigoroso, capaz de responder às fragilidades estruturais existentes. Conclui-se que, embora Portugal mantenha os seus pilares tradicionais — europeu, atlântico e lusófono —, a eficácia do novo Conceito Estratégico depende da superação das fragilidades da cultura estratégica nacional, de um maior investimento nas Forças Armadas e de uma maior mobilização da sociedade civil em torno das questões de segurança e defesa.

Palavras-chave: Política Externa Portuguesa; Defesa Nacional; Conceito Estratégico de Defesa Nacional; Segurança Internacional.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the international landscape has been marked by high instability, characterised by the emergence of new threats and priorities, necessitating the rapid adaptation of national strategies in the face of major emerging powers. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a reconfiguration has become evident, with direct impacts on the formulation of states' foreign policies. The new dynamics of the international system have defined the domains of security and defence as priorities, making rapid adaptation to new challenges and demands imperative (Rodrigues, 2021; NATO, 2025).

The Portuguese situation, influenced by this external context and, domestically, by structural and political weaknesses, highlights the urgency of reviewing the priorities, potential and vulnerabilities of the Strategic Concept. Within this framework, this article seeks to answer the following question: How have transformations in the international system shaped the priorities and operating model of Portuguese foreign policy?

This article analyses how Portuguese foreign policy is simultaneously influenced by changes in the international system, as reflected in changes to the concept of National Defence. Furthermore, it aims to assess the potential and limitations of Portuguese foreign policy in the face of the new dynamics of the international system.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative approach, focused on an interpretative analysis of the evolution of Portuguese foreign policy in the context of changes in the international system. The research is based on a documentary analysis and a review of the literature, enabling an in-depth understanding of the evolution of the Portuguese SCND.

In the first phase, a review of the relevant academic literature was conducted, incorporating theoretical contributions in the field of the evolution of the concept of security, changes in the international system and Portuguese foreign policy. The aim of this phase was to establish the conceptual framework for the research. In a second phase, a comparative documentary analysis of various sources was carried out, focusing primarily on the 2013 SCND and the recent proposal to revise the 2023 MOSCND. This analysis aimed to gain an understanding of the continuity and changes in national strategic priorities. In a third phase, open-ended interviews were conducted with Major-General João Vieira Borges and Professor Licínia Simão, which allowed for a deeper exploration of the topics already analysed.

Furthermore, the research begins with a historical contextualisation of Portuguese foreign policy, moving on to an analysis of contemporary transformations in the international system and concluding with an analysis of the implications encompassed by the MOSCND.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF PORTUGUESE FOREIGN POLICY: POST-1974 TO 2013

The revolution of 25 April 1974 marked a turning point in Portugal's role within the international system, leading to a redefinition of its priorities and foreign policy stance. Portugal's democratic transition took place against an international backdrop characterised by the divergence between the world's major powers, the US and the USSR, and the emergence of the European Economic Community (Rezola, M. 2016). Against this backdrop, three crucial pillars were established in Portuguese foreign policy: rapprochement with the European continent through the consolidation of diplomatic ties with the main European states; the building of diplomatic relations with Portuguese-speaking African states; and the deepening of the Atlantic link, which was imperative for security and defence (Magone et al., 2006). With the end of the Colonial War, the authoritarian and imperial past also came to a close, giving way to a transformation into an integrated and consolidated democracy within the European sphere. The so-called 'European option', according to Nuno Severiano Teixeira, constitutes the main innovation, representing both an economic and strategic opportunity and bringing new dimensions to defence (Teixeira, 2004).

Gradually, Portuguese foreign policy came to be based on Portugal's geographical position on the western semi-periphery, focusing on the European and

Atlantic axes, both of which remain imperatives today (Teixeira, 2004). This was also the case in the establishment and strengthening of diplomatic and cooperative relations, particularly with Brazil, Spain and Portuguese-speaking countries. In this regard, the CPLP Project was implemented, which enhanced the projection and reinforcement of Portugal's distinctiveness, becoming a platform for dialogue and trade between the hemispheres (Galito, 2019).

In the field of security and defence, there has been a shift from the traditional defensive approach to a cooperative and shared security approach. National Defence came to be understood as an extension of diplomacy, with the Portuguese Armed Forces operating in various theatres of operations, within the scope of peacekeeping and humanitarian aid operations, notably in Africa and the former Yugoslavia. This national military presence reaffirmed Portugal's participation in the international peace and security agenda and its commitment to a new role within the international system. This commitment was also demonstrated through Portugal's involvement in the independence process of East Timor, which highlighted Portugal's role as part of the global governance system (Magone, 2006). NATO proved to be a platform for promoting strategic-military multilateralism in the Atlantic axis, as well as serving as a means for the modernisation of the national Armed Forces (Galito, 2019).

With the end of the Cold War, it was understood that a period of peace and stability was beginning, leading to defence issues taking a back seat in favour of

cooperation and diplomacy. This scenario proved to be out of step with reality at the start of the 21st century, with the direct attack on the United States on 11 September 2001. An international landscape emerged characterised by non-state threats, notably transnational terrorist organisations, and the invocation of the principle of collective defence within international alliances. The reorientation of US foreign policy towards a new, more aggressive and interventionist national security strategy had a significant impact on relations with Portugal. Faced with the American ambition to intervene in Iraq, this gave rise to strong tensions and differences within the national political context regarding Portugal's position on the American intention. Portugal ultimately chose to support its ally, as evidenced by the Lajes Summit in 2003, which marked the starting point for the future invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, the series of Russian cyberattacks against Estonia in 2007 presented a new priority scenario for defence and the need to reconfigure defence strategies to provide more robust responses to new hybrid threats (Cabrita, 2019; Nunes, 2022).

Gradually, the international situation deteriorated, marked by events such as the 2008 financial crisis and the escalation of regional instability in the Middle East and North Africa. Consequently, the 2013 SCND reflected this instability and insecurity, highlighting the need for operational cooperation and a strengthening of its contribution to international security, particularly in the context of the commitments arising from its alliances and membership of international

organisations (Dias, 2021). This Strategic Concept was characterised by a more comprehensive and broad-based approach in terms of the challenges, priorities and opportunities for Portuguese foreign policy. In this regard, the involvement of the Portuguese Armed Forces in various theatres of operations – notably the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, Operation Sophia (the European Union’s military operation EUNAVFOR MED SOPHIA), and participation in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), have cemented recognition of their proficiency and ability to adapt to diverse operational demands (Dias, 2021). Furthermore, its involvement in regions such as the Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa represents the convergence of national and shared interests and the deepening of cooperation within NATO and the EU. In this context, integration into initiatives such as the 5+5 Initiative, which is an intergovernmental forum for cooperation in the Western Mediterranean, has proved fundamental for participation in joint military exercises and the acquisition of specialised skills. These elements have been crucial for asserting the country’s presence on the world stage and its contribution to the promotion of international peace and security.

At the same time, the impact of the economic and financial crisis led to a greater emphasis on diplomacy and economic cooperation between 2011 and 2014, as well as the implementation of fiscal austerity measures. In this context, the

Portuguese economy was particularly constrained due to the intervention of three institutions: the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. Consequently, Portuguese foreign policy has been marked by the emergence of economic diplomacy as a priority for Portuguese diplomatic missions. Thus, embassies and consulates have taken on the role of economic agents to promote Portuguese companies, products and brands abroad, with the aim of internationalising the Portuguese economy. The aim is to boost the activities of economic agents and stimulate foreign direct investment, with the central objective of increasing employment and external competitiveness and, consequently, revitalising the national economy (Sousa, 2019). In this regard, priority was given to restoring national credibility abroad, primarily through the country's economic improvement and the capacity and initiative of Portuguese diplomacy in attracting foreign investment (Lopes, 2017).

4. MAJOR OPTIONS FOR THE STRATEGIC CONCEPT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE

Over the last decade, there has been a marked increase in instability and insecurity within the international system, with repercussions at the domestic level. This highlights the substantial internationalisation of conflicts and the intensification of geopolitical divergences, with increasing complexity, involving both regional and

international actors, who are exploited to achieve national objectives (Rodrigues, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the growing interdependence between states and the need for investment in critical infrastructure and crisis management. The resurgence of Russian expansionist ambitions with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 served to demonstrate to Europe the imperative need for European states to rethink their security and defence strategies in the face of a classic interstate war, as well as the need for the European Union's strategic autonomy in the fields of security and defence, as highlighted by Professor Licínia Simão in an interview (personal communication, 13 May 2025).

Similarly, as evidenced in the latest SCND and the MOSCND, there is a continuing need to strengthen national capabilities in critical infrastructure, particularly in the energy, water, food and cybersecurity sectors, ensuring security that is developed across all sectors of society (Licínia Simão, personal communication, 13 May 2025).

Furthermore, the stance of the new Trump administration in the United States has demonstrated a redefinition of its traditional partnerships and a new position within the international system, with repercussions primarily on its actions within NATO. In this regard, Order No. 9986/2022 established the Council for the Review of the National Defence Strategic Concept, in order to adapt priorities and modes of operation in the face of new global challenges and dynamics (Presidency of the

Council of Ministers & Ministry of National Defence, 2022). The draft MOSCND was drawn up, setting out structural changes in terms of priorities, threats and the main means of action and investment (Assembly of the Republic, 2023b). At present, this draft has been approved for submission to the Assembly of the Republic for debate. This document outlines clear structural changes compared to previous SCNDs, presenting a different and more structured vision in light of the current international system.

In light of this new global environment, a cohesive and forward-looking strategy is imperative, one that is prepared to respond to new threats such as terrorism, cyber-attacks and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Borges, 2006). With this in mind, and to avoid delays in updating the SCND, it is proposed that the review be carried out every five years, as well as the creation of a monitoring process to ensure the implementation of strategic guidelines across the various sectoral government areas (Assembly of the Republic, 2023b).

Given the context of instability described above, the document demonstrates an understanding of the imperative need to strengthen a global strategic vision, reinforcing Portugal's previous commitments as a contributor to and promoter of the international security architecture. It highlighted the need for European states to take greater responsibility for the development of their security and defence, in order to respond to growing threats. In this regard, the document highlights the need for

greater investment in and modernisation of the Armed Forces to ensure integrated and enhanced action across the operational domains of land, sea, air, cyberspace and space. It also highlights the importance of strengthening national strategic autonomy by fostering the defence economy and national scientific and technological capabilities. In general, the new MOSCND proposal is based on reinforcing the commitments and priority areas already present in the SCND, currently in force, but with a greater commitment to developing better strategic planning and promoting investment in Armed Forces capable of ensuring national integrity and sovereignty, as well as cooperating to ensure peace and stability in the international system (Assembly of the Republic, 2023b).

5. AREAS OF INVESTMENT

The Armed Forces are an active element of a state's defence policy, and there is currently a clear need to develop the Portuguese military structure in order to ensure a continuous response to the new challenges posed by a highly complex and unstable international system (Bernardino, 2019). To achieve this goal, it is imperative to reassess human, material and financial resources. To this end, the current government has committed to increasing investment to 2% of GDP and focusing on the development of the defence economy. In March 2026, Defence Minister Nuno Melo confirmed compliance with this target set at the NATO Summit

in The Hague, in accordance with the criteria validated by the organisation. However, data from the NATO Secretary General's 2025 Annual Report indicate that only 21.2% of this investment was directed towards expenditure on equipment, whilst 45.24% was concentrated on personnel costs, including military and civilian personnel costs and pensions. Despite the increase in defence investment, Portugal remains below the average compared to the budgetary efforts of the other allies, both within NATO and the EU, with regard to the modernisation and strengthening of military capability, highlighting the need for a greater budgetary allocation to ensure greater readiness in the face of new demands and challenges (NATO, 2025).

The Military Programming Law No. 1/2023 represents one of the approaches aimed at modernising, operationalising and sustaining the armed forces system, which seeks to address certain shortcomings by planning for increased public investment in armaments and equipment. This law provides for substantial expenditure, with a particular focus on the Navy and Air Force, which are imperative given Portugal's Atlantic position (Assembly of the Republic, 2023a).

Furthermore, it focuses on boosting investment in the national economy within the defence industry, through support for innovation and development and the creation of skilled jobs, in order to enhance Portuguese competitiveness and contribute to the European effort towards strategic autonomy (Assembly of the Republic, 2023a). According to Nuno Melo, since the end of 2023 there has been a

40% growth in the defence industry, ensuring an increase in skilled employment. Additionally, in line with the Army's 'Land Force 2045' programme, significant investment has been allocated towards the modernisation of the Portuguese Army.

With regard to human resources in the Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General PilAv Alfredo Pereira da Cruz highlights shortcomings that require special attention, particularly in terms of recruitment due to a lack of incentives and interest among young people in military life, and the retention within the military institution of specialist staff, sergeants and officers (Cruz, 2004).

To achieve this dominance in the defence and security sector, an informed and mobilised Portuguese civil society is necessary to support this strengthening of military capabilities. This element is essential for the implementation and viability of the national strategy, so as to operationalise potential capabilities, converting them into tangible and functional resources to guide a specific objective (Reis, 2013).

Thus, the institutionalisation of a new culture and structures for debate and strategic consultation has proved to be an asset, through the promotion of platforms for discussion and decision-making on planning in terms of risks and opportunities in relevant areas (Reis, 2013).

At the same time, there are significant gaps in Portuguese strategic culture, as noted by Bruno Cardoso Reis (2019): "We lack the capacity for analysis, planning and coordination of all state resources to anticipate or respond to attacks, crises and

emergencies”. This gap was also highlighted by the Strategic Concept Review Cycle, which proposes the creation of a National Security Council (NSC) as a solution. As emphasised by Major-General João Vieira Borges in an interview (personal communication, 2 May 2025), “The current Superior Council of National Defence is confined to the area of National Defence, alongside the functioning of other advisory bodies in the security sector, but reporting to the Prime Minister rather than the President of the Republic (Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces). The CSN would facilitate the integration of information and the coordination of actions, particularly at the level of decision-making, with considerable advantages in terms of security and defence”. In this way, an integrated and realistic view of the essential elements for national security could be achieved.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this article leads to the conclusion that the formulation of the SCND, and consequently of foreign policy, has been profoundly shaped by structural changes in the international system, reflecting a continuous adaptation to an environment of instability. This research faces certain limitations; notably, the analysis focuses on the MOSCND approved by the Council of Ministers in 2023, which is still under consideration for parliamentary debate, making it impossible to assess concrete results of its implementation. Furthermore, the

qualitative approach based on documentary analysis, literature review and official discourses limits the analysis to some extent to the institutional perspective of the State.

Since the Revolution of 25 April 1974, Portugal has consolidated a model of international integration based on three structural pillars: European, Atlantic and Lusophone. The evolution of the SCND thus highlights the strengthening of Portugal's commitment as a provider of international security and stability through the participation of its Armed Forces in NATO, UN and EU missions, taking on an assertive stance and capitalising on opportunities and the political returns from its contribution.

However, the current dynamics of the international system, in particular the increase in conflicts and threats, have highlighted the imperative need for a strategic reconfiguration of the 2013 SCND. The 2023 MOSCND reflect this need, introducing a more comprehensive approach to contemporary threats in areas such as cyberspace and national resilience, whilst also providing an action plan to address existing gaps within the Armed Forces framework to ensure internal and external integrity and security.

In this regard, investment programmes have been established within the Armed Forces and the defence industry to address some of these gaps and contribute to the European effort to achieve a degree of strategic autonomy. However, certain

limitations persist that constrain the effective implementation and scope of a coherent strategy, notably a lack of commitment from civil society and certain shortcomings in Portugal's strategic culture.

It is concluded that in these times of high complexity and instability in the international system, it is vital to establish a SCND that reflects the dynamics of the international system and aligns strategic objectives with available resources, anticipating challenges and opportunities. Thus, to achieve this, a structural strengthening of defence investment is required, along with the promotion of strategic culture and the mobilisation of civil society; all these elements are crucial for guaranteeing national security and affirming Portugal's position in the international system.

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