

Chapter 13

Portugal, Angola, and NATO: New Horizons for the South Atlantic and the Role for Portuguese Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

Portugal, a founding NATO member, holds a strategic role in diplomatic relations with Portuguese-speaking states, particularly in the South Atlantic, where most of its former colonies are located. Over its 76-year history, NATO has expanded beyond its traditional sphere, recognizing the need for global partnerships to uphold security. The 1996 Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) between Portugal and Angola exemplifies a strategic alliance that goes beyond historical and cultural ties. The DCA reinforces bilateral relations while promoting NATO's core values, such as collective security and regional stability. Given the South Atlantic's growing relevance, Portugal aligns NATO's interests with those of Angola in areas like maritime security, counterterrorism, and combating illicit trafficking. This chapter examines how Portugal's cooperation with Angola strengthens its role within NATO, reinforcing its geopolitical influence. Additionally, it analyses how this partnership projects NATO's values and presence in Africa and the South Atlantic.

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INTRODUCTION

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), founded in 1949, was established as a political and military alliance to ensure collective defense among its members, and was initially focused on deterring Soviet expansion (NATO, 2024a).¹ Among its twelve founding members, Portugal has maintained a unique position, not only as a transatlantic actor but also as a former colonial power with deep-rooted ties to Africa. As the Alliance enters its 76th year in 2025, its strategic priorities continue to evolve, increasingly encompassing regions beyond the Euro-Atlantic core. In this context, and in a more interdependent world, the African continent has emerged as an important space within NATO's southern strategy, with growing concerns about terrorism, piracy, irregular migration, cyber vulnerabilities and external geopolitical competition driving this shift (Fasola, 2025).

Portugal's engagement in NATO is shaped by its post-authoritarian transformation. The 1974 Carnation Revolution marked the end of the *Estado Novo* (Dictatorial regime) and initiated a process of decolonization, including the independence of Angola. These developments allowed Portugal to redefine its foreign policy away from imperial frameworks and towards multilateralism and Atlantic engagement (Teixeira N. S., 2011). This repositioning has strengthened its diplomatic influence in NATO. It allowed Portugal, within the Atlantic Alliance, to capitalize on its historical and linguistic ties with Portuguese-speaking Africa to promote cooperation initiatives in the field of security, even though this dynamic already exists on a bilateral level, and is most evident in Portugal's strategic relationship with Angola (Ministry of Defense, 2019).

Angola's relevance in international security has grown in tandem with NATO's reorientation to the south. As the second largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, a key maritime player in the Gulf of Guinea and a regional diplomatic player, particularly through institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), Angola is increasingly recognized as a central player in African and Atlantic security (Kuol, 2023). At the same time, Angola has signalled a departure from its Cold War-era alignment with Russia, hosting the U.S. Secretary of Defense in 2023 and expressing interest in Western military systems (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025).

This geopolitical repositioning coincides with a broader shift in NATO's strategic discourse. While the Alliance remains anchored in its collective defense mandate, its recent Strategic Concept (2022) emphasizes cooperative security, resilience, and partnerships beyond its borders. In this framework, other actors, including non-member countries like Angola, are no longer seen only as aid recipients or security liabilities but as credible potential partners with regional agency and influence. At the same time, this evolution raises critical questions about legitimacy, sovereign-

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