



Portugal once commanded an empire of 14 colonies on four continents

Portugal, today, is not the most powerful country in the European Union, nor does it have the largest economy in the world. But in the not-too-distant past, it was at the top, dominating a true global empire and positioning itself as the most entrepreneurial nation on the planet. From the 15th to 18th centuries, great navigations helped to find new lands and to explore everything that could be gained from them. Many of the colonies were under its tutelage for centuries as was the case in East Timor, for example, which separated from Portugal only in 1975 .

It was only in the 20th century that this Empire was dismantled. Portugal was the pioneer European country in its unification as a National State. The consolidation of the Portuguese State took place in the 13th century, when the other European countries were still organized in small and highly fragmented duchies. This early unification of Portugal allowed the advance in commercial relations and boosted the interest in navigation in search of new markets.

It was only in the 15th century, however, that Portugal would become a colonial empire. The conquest of Ceuta in North Africa (now a part of Spain), which took place in 1415 , is usually considered as the starting point of the Portuguese Empire. From then on, Portugal would be the first and the most enduring colonial empire in the world, with dominions on four continents. The fruits of the great navigations benefited three Portuguese dynasties : the Avis; the Habsburgs; and the Bragança , in addition to the successor Portuguese Republic. The initial impetus for Portuguese expansionism was military and religious evangelizing, only later driven by commercial interest. Spanish unification under the "Catholic Kings" resulted in the impossibility of Portugal resisting alone against a monobloc Peninsula. The game of alliances was not possible any more and Portugal had to gain power otherwise.

This greatly increased the pace of conquests and navigations. In the 14th and 15th centuries, spices from the East were especially attractive to the European market, so Portugal invested in a new route to acquire them with a monopoly. The path chosen by Portugal to reach the East was around the African continent. This route had never been done by commercial vessels and was relatively unknown, so the complete circuit took more than a century to complete. But this time yielded advantages for Portugal, which conquered several points on the African coast to secure and support their circumnavigation of the continent. At each point where they established themselves during trips, trading posts were created, from which various products or slaves were extracted. When the Portuguese arrived in the East, they had finally consolidated a route that became known as the African Periplo, which was long, but very advantageous for the Portuguese Empire. Portugal's profits came from the African continent and especially from spices in the East.

When Spain was unified as a National State in 1492, it launched itself onto the sea looking for a new route to the East, by going west. On this pioneering trip Cristóvão Colombo came across new lands, attracting the attention of Portugal as well. Historical documents show that throughout the long-lived African Periplo, the Portuguese learned about new lands, but did not conquer them. With the new dispute with Spain, however, the two countries, Portugal and Spain, negotiated the division of lands in the world under the auspices of the Pope through the Treaty of Tordesillas, which designated the lands to the east of an imaginary line that passed 370 leagues west of Cape Verde as owned by Portugal and the lands west of that line of possession by Spain.

Portugal was slow to pay attention to Brazil and its wealth. The profits obtained in the East (Macau, Goa and other colonies) were more interesting. It was eventually the fear of losing Brazilian land that made the Portuguese worry about Brazil. It became so important for Portugal that in the 19th century, in the midst of a crisis caused by the expansion of the Napoleonic Empire, the Portuguese Royal Court was completely transferred to Brazil, as well as the centre of the Portuguese Empire. Thus Portugal sustained the economy of the Metropolises by the exploitation of its Colonies. But from the same 19th century, the Portuguese Empire began to fragment.

In 1822 Brazil became independent and throughout the century the Portuguese Empire had to face the attack from other European countries as it tried to maintain its colonies in Africa and Asia. The end of the 19th century marks a new phase of Colonialism that is now called Imperialism. Eventually during the 20th century, the Portuguese Empire came to an end with the loss of administrations in Macau and Timor-Leste.

Portuguese foreign policy has always been supported by the management of external dependencies. It had at its core two vectors: the continental and the Atlantic. And it has three major structural axes, the European, the Atlantic and the Portuguese-speaking countries , which have remained constant for several centuries, changing only in degree and shape, depending on the distribution of power in the international system.

The last major redefinition that changed the balance between these axes was the result of the Portuguese democratic transition, which, according to Samuel P. Huntington, inaugurated the third wave of democratisation . The dilemma between "reinforcing the role of Portugal as a Western power and NATO, the search for convergence with the former colonies and with third worldism and the alignment with the USSR" has been overcome. After the events of April 25 , 1974 , and the inauguration of the 1st Constitutional Government in 1976, Portuguese foreign policy focused on the European option, complemented by its presence in the Atlantic Alliance, of which Portugal is one of the founding members.

Portugal is integrated into the institutions of the European Economic Community, later the European Union; is a member of NATO; and an ally of the main maritime power, the USA (until the Second World War, the main maritime power had been the United Kingdom, the Luso-British Alliance being the oldest alliance in force in the world and for centuries it has been a central element of Portuguese foreign policy, and still is today.)

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Tatiana Rita de Moraes MA is a Research Assistant with the U K Defence Forum

Editor's note : The original paper has been divided into 3 parts to facilitate publication as an abbreviated part-work which will be published here here. The full paper with footnotes will be found at [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

Part 1