

## Repositório ISCTE-IUL

---

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2021-08-05

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Seabra, P. (2021). 'Despite the special bonds that tie us': Portugal, Brazil, and the South Atlantic in the late Cold War. *Cold War History*. 21 (3), 357-374

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.1080/14682745.2020.1832471](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2020.1832471)

Publisher's copyright statement:

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Seabra, P. (2021). 'Despite the special bonds that tie us': Portugal, Brazil, and the South Atlantic in the late Cold War. *Cold War History*. 21 (3), 357-374, which has been published in final form at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2020.1832471>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Publisher's Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

---

### Use policy

Creative Commons CC BY 4.0

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a link is made to the metadata record in the Repository
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

---

## **'Despite the special bonds that tie us'**

### **Portugal, Brazil, and the South Atlantic in the late Cold War**

**Pedro Seabra**

#### **Abstract**

As the Cold War entered the mid-1980s, concerns over the Brazilian nuclear programme lingered on through world stages. In this context, Brazil's 1986 proposal for a Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS) emerged as an opportunity to recast the country's external profile; yet, unexpected reservations emerged from the unlikely of its partners, Portugal. I argue that while Portugal's initial positioning was fuelled by broader Western concerns, including misperceptions over Brazil's nuclear ambitions, the official predisposition towards such a project eventually shifted, following changes in Portugal, the region, and the world.

**Keywords:** Portugal; Brazil; South Atlantic; ZOPACAS; Cold War

## Introduction

As the Cold War entered the mid-1980s, concerns over the scope of Brazil's nuclear programme lingered on through world stages. Shrouded in secrecy under the previous guise of military rule, and characterised by multiple attempts to circumvent the restrictions of a nascent, but increasingly tight non-proliferation regime, Brazilian authorities were often on the defence. The strategy involved reassuring the international community of the peaceful intent behind its nuclear research, all the while remaining adamant on securing and nurturing technological autonomy. In this context, following the slow transition to civilian rule, Brazil's proposal for a Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic (ZOPACAS, in its Portuguese acronym) in 1986, represented an opportunity for the country to recast its external profile as a constructive actor; yet, unexpected reservations emerged from the unlikeliest of its traditional partners, Portugal.

This stance was particularly puzzling when considering the state of transatlantic ties at the time. Despite bumps in the road for most of the post-World War II period, strong historical-cultural connections still bounded both countries. New democratic affinities after the 1985 civilian transition in Brazil and the economic potential of Portugal's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in the following year, also fuelled sizeable confidence in closer consultations on issues of common interest abroad. Shared expectations notwithstanding, ZOPACAS in fact represented a surprising point of discord, as Portugal outright abstained from Brazil's proposal at the UNGA, thus throwing a wrench in bilateral relations. Two years later, however, Portuguese officials changed gears and began to vote in favour consecutively thereafter. What accounted for Portugal's opposition to an initiative led

by Brazil? What incited the diametral variation over such a short period of time? And what did this episode mean for Brazil's external ambitions under a civilian guise?

Facile assessments would pin the root causes on an unavoidable Portuguese bias towards allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EEC, to the detriment of a concerted stance with Brazil. However, such conclusions underestimate the complexity of the situation, and take insufficient account of key intricacies. Not only did Western countries never reached a consensus on a collective position regarding ZOPACAS, but Portugal also did not hesitate to go against the US and other key European allies when altering its vote in 1988. Thus, I argue that the Portuguese decision-making process went beyond mere alliance-driven automatism and sought to strike a careful balance while adhering to a Western-led agenda. This balance was, in turn, manifested through different approaches over a short time span. There were sufficient differences over Africa already, to incite some distrust over Brazil's plans for the region from the start. However, as the day of the vote in 1986 drew closer, it became paramount to reaffirm Portugal's role within the West. Misperceptions over Brazil's undisclosed nuclear activities and their potential impact for the South Atlantic were thrust into the equation as part of broader international unease on the topic. Portugal course-corrected in 1988 and adjusted its susceptibility towards ZOPACAS and its chief proponent after key changes in Lisbon, in the region, and in the world occurred, thus paving the way to reassess its support.

The relevance of this turn of events is further heightened when acknowledging that Portuguese hesitations became token manifestations of how the international community was wavering between engaging with a newly-democratic Brazil and distrusting poorly-formulated initiatives in the domain of non-proliferation. At a time when Brazil required and

expected external support to validate the outreach of its new forays, not even previous assumptions about Portugal's allegiance could be counted on, thus demonstrating that their bilateral relations also remained more grounded in rhetoric than in concrete commitments. To understand the characteristics of Portugal's position on ZOPACAS is, therefore, to understand the fragilities in Brazil's proposal and how it was perceived by a considerable part of the world at large at that specific moment in time.

Overall, this article's contribution is framed by a broader push for a more global history. In particular, it heeds Schulz and Fischer's call to use the Cold War period to reinterpret Brazilian initiatives that displayed an independent streak, and juggled key partnerships in pursuit of its national interests.<sup>1</sup> This requires bridging seemingly diverging topics, such as non-proliferation issues and the content of Brazilian-Portuguese relations, in order to bring to light a previously neglected episode that created a diplomatic conundrum upon its creation. This episode was, in turn, centred on ZOPACAS, a singular multilateral platform, that history has often overlooked. The onus placed on its success (or lack thereof) has led to two direct consequences: (1) a glaring lack of research into its track-record over the years; and (2) the fostering of blanket assumptions about an alleged consensus during its formative years.<sup>2</sup> The fact that ZOPACAS encompassed a region as wide and diffuse as the South Atlantic has also worked against a more systematic historical study.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederik Schulz and Georg Fischer, "Brazilian History as Global History," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 38, no. 4 (2019): 408-422 at 416-17. See also Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Rodrigo Mallea, Matias Spektor, and Nicholas Wheeler, eds., *The Origins of Nuclear Cooperation: a Critical Oral History between Argentina and Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro/Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars/Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2015), 99-100; Sergio de Queiroz Duarte, "Brazil and the nonproliferation regime: a historical perspective," *The Nonproliferation Review* 23, no. 5-6

Past contributions on related topics during the second half of the 1980s provide a pertinent backdrop to explore these predicaments. For one, the window of opportunity for a transatlantic rapprochement between Brazil and Portugal, heralded by the parliamentary election of Tancredo Neves in 1985, has only been, so far, tentatively explored.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the South Atlantic region at that time essentially continues to be portrayed as still reeling from the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war, and scarred by the persistence of both the Angolan conflict and the Apartheid regime in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the fact that global tensions remained fairly high due to the uncertainty over new disarmament negotiations between the US and USSR, and fallout from the Euromissiles crisis, meant that ‘between 1981 and 1985, many in East and West believed themselves to be living in a new era of acute nuclear danger’.<sup>5</sup>

---

(2016): 545-558 at 547; Paulo Wrobel, *Brazil, the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Latin America as Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone* (Brasília: Fundação Alexandre Gusmão, 2017), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Carvalho’s doctoral thesis remains to this date the only meaningful academic effort tackling Brazilian-Portuguese relations with an impact on the years under study here. Thiago Carvalho, “Identidade de Ânimos, Diferença de Propósitos As Relações entre Portugal e o Brasil (1974 – 1985)” (PhD diss., ISCTE-IUL, 2016). For works that also highlighted discrepancies between rhetoric and results in previous periods, see Amado Luiz Cervo and José Calvet de Magalhães, *Depois das Caravelas: as relações entre Portugal e Brasil, 1808-2000* (Brasília: Edunb, 2000); Williams da Silva Gonçalves, *O Realismo da Fraternidade Brasil-Portugal: do Tratado de Amizade ao Caso Delgado* (Lisboa, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Stella Krepp, “A view from the South: the Falklands/Malvinas and Latin America,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 15, no. 4 (2017): 348-365; Andrew Hurrell, “The Politics of South Atlantic Security. A Survey of Proposals for a South Atlantic Treaty Organization,” *International Affairs* 59, no. 2 (1983): 179–93; Chris Saunders and Sue Onslow, “The Cold War and southern Africa, 1976-1990”, in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 222-243.

<sup>5</sup> Ruud van Dijk, “Nuclear Weapons and the Cold War,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 275-291 at 287. See also Francis J. Gavin, “Nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation during the Cold War”, in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 395-416.

Conditions were thus ripe for misunderstandings to arise from multiple sides and ZOPACAS quickly came to prove an acute example in that regard.

As more and more archives concerning the late 1980s become available to scholars, I resorted to original primary sources from the Historical-Diplomatic Archive of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Historical Archive of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (also known as Itamaraty), to explore and substantiate these propositions. Even though this documentation does not account for the positions of every single actor involved in ZOPACAS, it does allow for a confident depiction of the views of both its main proponent and its unexpected critic.

The remainder of this article reads as follows: I begin by recapping Brazil's nuclear progress up until the mid-1980s in order to contextualize how a non-proliferation initiative for the South Atlantic could have potentially been perceived as cause for concern by the international community. Next, I explore the state of Portuguese-Brazilian relations to justify expectations of more concerted bilateral positions in 1986. The rationale for ZOPACAS is then laid out in greater detail and juxtaposed against the fallout the project incurred from Portuguese officials, followed by their ensuing turnaround. By shedding light on a little-studied multilateral mechanism for the South Atlantic, I argue that Lisbon's initial positioning was fuelled by broader Western concerns, including misperceptions over Brazil's nuclear ambitions. A more favourable reassessment was only possible two years later, following a combination of key internal, regional and international changes.

**A 'complex tapestry of indigenous, largely unsafeguarded, nuclear research efforts'**

From their early origins, Brazil's nuclear ambitions have been characterised by an underlying drive to secure autonomous technology as a way to modernize the country's economy and secure increased autonomy within the constraints of the international system. However, such goals were also intrinsically dependent on outside assistance.<sup>6</sup> In fact, progress was only achieved in the mid-1960s, with the US serving as chief linchpin. However, after Washington stopped the necessary supply of nuclear fuel, West Germany emerged as a key alternative. A complex deal with Bonn was then struck in 1975 to construct up to eight reactors and provide enough expertise to manage a complete nuclear-fuel cycle.

At the same time as Brazil was exploring the field of potential nuclear suitors, the country did not abandon the multilateral route *per se*, especially when sensing the possibility of new normative constraints on its own ambitions. Yet, Brazil's input on this front often proved contradictory. The 1959 Antarctic Treaty, which foresaw the first international denuclearised zone, for example, was only ratified by Brazil in June 1975. On the other hand, the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited nuclear tests in the atmosphere and outer space, warranted near-immediate adherence, much like the following 1967 Outer Space Treaty that outlawed weapons of mass destruction in orbit.

However, the 1964 military coup that brought down the Goulart government reinforced the need to protect the country's nuclear programme from further external limitations. The process leading up to the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco, which aimed to create a Latin American Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ), proved illustrative. Following military-

---

<sup>6</sup> See Carlo Patti, "The origins of the Brazilian nuclear programme, 1951–1955," *Cold War History* 15, no. 3 (2015): 353-373; Matias Spektor, "The evolution of Brazil's nuclear intentions," *The Nonproliferation Review* 23, no. 5-6 (2016): 635-652.



issued orientations, Brazil fought for ambiguous provisions that allowed for peaceful nuclear explosions (PNEs) within the sub-continent, while also pushing to indefinitely delay its ratification.<sup>7</sup> The following year, Brazil doubled down and took an equally confrontational line against the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Lastly, the country participated in negotiations over the 1971 Seabed Arms Control Treaty, but opted-out at the last minute.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Brazil's overall standing in multilateral circles amounted to a blend of mixed signals, coupling active participation with occasional backtracking. Seen from the outside, this did little to abate suspicions over the country's intents.

However, as Brazil entered the 1980s, its nuclear ambitions faced a changing set of variables. Increasing economic austerity, US-led legal pressures, and technological hurdles that stood in the way of fully implementing the 1975 agreement with West Germany, all brought the bulk of civilian nuclear efforts to a halt. Internally, these restrictions led to the birth of a parallel nuclear programme run by the various military branches.<sup>9</sup> This then led to a key contradiction: as the country began to display new signs of political liberalization – exemplified by the 1979 amnesty law or the promised return to a multiparty system –

---

<sup>7</sup> Brazil declined to waive a provision in Article 18 stating that the treaty would only take effect when all regional parties became members. Instructions by Brazilian President Costa e Silva to his negotiators were clear: 'Sign the Treaty; Await the implementation of the conditions imposed by Brazil, Argentina and other countries, before [proceeding with] ratification and entry into force'. Records of the 40<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council n. 104, 4 October 1967, Arquivo Nacional do Brasil [Hereafter ANB], Secret, p. 2. Available at: [www.sian.an.gov.br](http://www.sian.an.gov.br). Given the ensuing lack of ratification by Argentina, Chile and Cuba, Brazil was left essentially unconstrained from a legal standpoint.

<sup>8</sup> Jozef Goldblat, "The Seabed Treaty," *Ocean Yearbook* 1, no. 1 (1978): 386-411 at 389, 397, 399.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Barletta, (1997), "The Military Nuclear Program in Brazil", Stanford University/Center for International Security and Arms Control Working Paper, n. 10.

information over Brazil's nuclear programme, conversely, became less transparent.<sup>10</sup> External assessments recognised this conundrum, based on a 'complex tapestry of indigenous, largely unsafeguarded, nuclear research efforts' but expected nothing less than a continuation of such pursuits, as Brazil fast approached the turnover to a civilian government in March 1985.<sup>11</sup>

On top of all this, media reports surfaced on the real outcomes of the parallel efforts, with military authorities conveying a possible 1990 timeframe for the development of a nuclear weapon, contingent on a final political decision.<sup>12</sup> Such statements helped to lift the veil on some of the activities, but also heightened previous concerns that Brazil could indeed develop nuclear-grade capabilities. Even if these 'domestic proponents of a weapon option (...) represented a distinct minority', the contradictory signals piled on, feeding into the narrative that Brazil was indeed on the brink of soon becoming a threshold state.<sup>13</sup>

### **'A competitor but [still] an ally'**

---

<sup>10</sup> Leonardo Bandarra, "A luta contra o Tordesilhas Nuclear: três momentos da política nuclear brasileira (1969-1998)" (Master's thesis, University of Brasília, 2016), 77-78.

<sup>11</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, 'Brazil: Nuclear Program Under Neves, National Intelligence Daily,' 15 March 1985, Top Secret, p. 3. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Enéas Macedo Filho, "Brasil a partir de 90 poderá ter a bomba," *Jornal de Brasília*, 22 January 1984, 13; Leila Reis, "Brasil deverá ter sua primeira bomba atômica em 1990," *Folha S. Paulo*, 28 April 1985, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Spektor 2016, 636; Barletta 1997, 18. Suggestions that Brazil could carry out a PNE on the eve of the 1985-presidential inauguration as a celebration to the end of the military regime, were nonetheless quickly discarded by the top brass. Mallea, Spektor, and Wheeler 2015, 152-154; Carlo Patti, "Brazil in Global Nuclear Order" (PhD diss., University of Florence, 2012), 209.

As Brazil grappled with the intricacies of its nuclear ambitions, the country juggled various external partners. Portugal, however, remained a constant, more due to previous historical-cultural connections than to wider geopolitical dividends. Albeit 'marked by paradoxes, exemplified by a rhetoric that gave common bonds a relevance that did not correspond to the facts', Portugal's status in Brazil warranted regular accolades.<sup>14</sup> This symbolical hold was largely owed to the persisting influence of deeply Lusophile Brazilian elites in tandem with a sizeable Portuguese community in the country, who often succeeded in nudging the official line towards Lisbon whenever it so required.

Yet, as Brazil's military consolidated its grip on power after the 1964 coup, it began to reduce the alignments it had previously entertained, including any plans of a Luso-Brazilian Community that might box in its aspirations of autonomously reaching out to Africa.<sup>15</sup> The defining moment came with Portugal's democratization in 1974, which produced two ripple-effects. The almost-immediate one concerned the ensuing decolonization of Portuguese colonies in Africa. Sensing an opportunity to dispel previous unsavoury associations with the Salazar regime and make headway with the newly-independent countries, Brazil moved quickly to position itself as an alternative partner.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Carvalho 2016, ii.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Wayne A. Selcher, "Brazilian Relations with Portuguese Africa in the Context of the Elusive "Luso-Brazilian Community",," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 18, no. 1 (1976): 25-58.

<sup>16</sup> The swift recognition of Guinea-Bissau's independence on 18 July 1974 or of the MPLA government in Angola on 6 November 1975 attested to the new Brazilian orientations towards Africa. See, for example, Jerry Dávila, *Hotel Trópico: Brazil and the Challenge of African Decolonization, 1950-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press 2010).

However, this approach also heralded an incoming logic of competition with Portugal for the same space of influence in those same countries. All the more so, as Portugal sought to reimagine its African credentials and navigate the social-economic consequences of a hasty decolonization, the overt hostility of new Marxist-led governments in the former colonies, and occasional attempts at mediating between local warring sides.<sup>17</sup> One route adopted to circumvent these issues was precisely to try and reinvent Portugal's post-colonial role, as an exclusive bridge-builder between Africa and the West. This, in itself, presupposed not giving leeway to any other novel actors.<sup>18</sup> Despite the prosaic diplomatic formulas that populated official discourse and deemed Brazil a 'competitor but [still] an ally' in Africa, a zero-sum perception of each country's interventions and opportunities in Lusophone countries prevailed.<sup>19</sup>

The second outcome of Portugal's democratization was its membership application to the EEC. Presented as the linchpin of a wider strategy to recover from years of dictatorship rule and anchor the country within the regional integration project, it was also perceived as an opportunity for Brazil to benefit, even if indirectly, from an emerging trade bloc. Still,

---

<sup>17</sup> António de Figueiredo, "Portugal and Africa," in *Portugal in the 1980s: Dilemmas of Democratic Consolidation*, ed. Kenneth Maxwell (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), 89-108; Carlos Gaspar, "Portugal's policies toward Angola and Mozambique since independence," in *Regional Conflict and U.S. Policy: Angola and Mozambique*, ed. R.J. Bloomfield (Algonac: Reference Publications, 1988), 40-74.

<sup>18</sup> See Norrie MacQueen, "Portugal and Africa: The Politics of Re-Engagement," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 23, no. 1 (1985): 31-51; Bruno Cardoso Reis and Pedro Aires de Oliveira, "The Power and Limits of Cultural Myths in Portugal's Search for a Post-Imperial Role," *The International History Review* 40, no. 3 (2018): 631-653; Bruno Cardoso Reis, "Decentering the Cold War in Southern Africa: The Portuguese Policy of Decolonization and Détente in Angola and Mozambique (1974-1984)," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21, no 1 (2019): 3-51.

<sup>19</sup> Jaime Gama, *Política Externa Portuguesa (1983-1985) – Selecção de Discursos e Entrevistas do Ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros* (Lisboa, Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, 1985), at 286-287.

results on this front proved elusive.<sup>20</sup> Its greatest impact was felt instead in the rearrangement of Portuguese foreign policy priorities, with a new focus on Europe. That included discussions on international issues under the European Political Consultations (EPC) format, where Portuguese diplomats claimed policy expertise on issues pertaining to Africa and Brazil.<sup>21</sup>

This new pillar of external engagement, in turn, complemented existing Atlantic ties, traditionally manifested in deep relations with the US, and active participation within NATO.<sup>22</sup> Despite lacking material capabilities to impact the wider bipolar fray, Portugal fully subscribed to a staunch anti-USSR discourse. Support across the Portuguese centre-left/centre-right political spectrum for NATO's security umbrella also remained high and on a par with broader European distrust over any kind of Soviet-led disarmament proposals.<sup>23</sup> By late 1985, a new minority government led by Prime-Minister Cavaco Silva even acknowledged that, due to

---

<sup>20</sup> Carvalho 2016, 295-305; António de Siqueira Freire, "O impacto da adesão à CEE nas relações luso-brasileiras," *Estratégia*, no. 5 (1988): 71-78.

<sup>21</sup> On August 1985, Portugal began to take part of the EPC as an observer, before becoming a full member the following year. See Álvaro de Vasconcelos, "Portugal and European Political Cooperation," *The International Spectator* 26, no. 2 (1991): 127-140; João de Matos Proença, "A Cooperação Política Europeia," *Estratégia*, no. 4 (1987-1988): 159-168.

<sup>22</sup> For Portuguese foreign and security interests in the 1980s see Scott B. MacDonald, *European Destiny, Atlantic Transformations. Portuguese Foreign Policy under the Second Republic, 1974– 1992* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993); Kenneth Maxwell, "Portuguese Defense and Foreign Policy: An Overview", in *Portuguese Defense and Foreign Policy since Democratization*, ed. Kenneth Maxwell (New York: Camões Center for the Study of the Portuguese-Speaking World, 1991), 1-13; Nuno Severiano Teixeira, "Portugal, a Europa e os Estados Unidos: uma perspectiva histórica", in *Regimes e Império: As Relações Luso-Americanas no Século XX*, ed. Luís Nuno Rodrigues (Lisboa: IPRI/FLAD, 2006), 147-159.

<sup>23</sup> For the weight of anti-Soviet views amidst Portuguese priorities see Álvaro de Vasconcelos, "Portuguese Defence Policy: Internal Politics and Defence Commitments", in *NATO's Southern Allies: Internal and External challenges*, ed. John Chipman (London: Routledge, 1988), 86-139.

renewed tensions in Europe, peace could not ‘just result from desirable disarmament, namely nuclear. Weapons are an instrument of politics and because of that, disarmament will only lead to a solid peace if, meanwhile, suitable political solutions are found’.<sup>24</sup> Even though Cavaco was forced to share the spotlight with then-President of the Republic, Mário Soares – who favoured a parallel diplomacy track of his own that seldom coincided with the government – no particular dissonance emerged when it came to upholding such Western views.<sup>25</sup>

The consequences for Brazil of this Portuguese alignment were significant. In 1984, Itamaraty had already concluded that Portuguese foreign policy ‘supported initiatives aimed at politicizing the human rights issue, identifying itself in this respect with the propositions followed by Western countries’. It also regretted that Portugal ‘did not express concern with the discriminatory nature’ of the NPT or with the need of Brazil for ‘full access to nuclear technology’.<sup>26</sup> Two years later, the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon reached similar inferences, demonstrating the difficulties in finding common ground.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Pedro Pires de Miranda, *Política Externa Portuguesa 1985-1987 – Selecção de Discursos e Entrevistas do Ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros* (Lisboa: Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, 1987), at 15-16. Subsequently, Foreign Minister Pires de Miranda also acknowledged the limitations that a country like Portugal faced, when stating ‘negotiations over disarmament matter to all. Which doesn’t mean that all should participate in them’. *Ibid.*, at 141.

<sup>25</sup> For more on their frail institutional relation, though, see, for example, Mariteresa Frain, “Relações entre o Presidente e o primeiro-ministro em Portugal: 1985-1995”, *Análise Social* 30, no. 133, (1995): 653-678.

<sup>26</sup> Preparatory memorandum to the visit of the Brazilian State Minister to Portugal, 6 February 1984, Historical Archive of the Brazilian Ministry of External Relations apud Carvalho 2016, 292.

<sup>27</sup> Telegram from the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon to Brasília n. 24A, 10 January 1986, Arquivo Histórico do Ministério das Relações Exteriores do Brasil [Hereafter AHMRE], Microfilmed, Tape 2193-23.09-86, Secret, p. 5.

However, at this point, any obstacle seemed fairly surmountable owing to two developments. First, not only was the Brazilian military already proceeding with the long-delayed civilian transition, but the incoming democratic affinity with the Portuguese government appeared sufficient to inoculate any niche disagreements. Second, Portuguese-leaning views continued to abound at the top of Brazil's political echelons, as evidenced by President-elect Tancredo Neves' visit to Portugal in 1985, which was met with euphoric levels of enthusiasm on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Brazilian officials continued not to shy away from expressing a preferential bias towards Portugal.<sup>29</sup> Relations were considered 'excellent, due to the inexistence of bilateral problems, to the fluidity in dialogue and to the disposition in every side to bestow them with greater substance'.<sup>30</sup> By 1986, the shared emphasis on democratic traits and promising economic opportunities in Europe appeared enough to instil a new bilateral cycle.

### **'A reasoning of prudence' for the South Atlantic**

In April 1985, Brazil's carefully orchestrated transition of power faced an unexpected challenge. The sudden death of Tancredo Neves forced the elected VP José Sarney to assume the presidency in a fragile position. Not only did he lack Neves' legitimacy, but he was also required to consolidate himself politically, both at home and abroad, as he faced dire

---

<sup>28</sup> José Fonseca Filho, "Tancredo: Democracia une Brasil e Portugal," *Estado de S. Paulo*, 29 January 1985, 6. *Diário de Notícias*, "Reencontro em democracia," *Diário de Notícias*, 29 January 1985, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Carvalho 2016, 273.

<sup>30</sup> Telegram from the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon to Brasília no. 3A, 3 January 1986, AHMRE, Microfilmed, Tape 2193-23.09-86, Secret, p. 1.

economic consequences from the lingering 1982 Latin American sovereign debt crisis. This required avoiding confrontation with the still-powerful military, and assuming a greater role in international affairs. On the first front, the decision to carry on with the parallel nuclear programme reflected the need to keep the military appeased. On the second, the South Atlantic quickly emerged as a useful geopolitical scenario.<sup>31</sup>

Sarney's first speech at the UNGA on 23 September 1985 laid out the initial groundwork to reset Brazil's profile. In this speech, Sarney pledged to seek out an 'area of peace, shielded from the arms race, the presence of nuclear arms and any form of confrontation originating in other regions'.<sup>32</sup> During the following months, the details of what exactly that area entailed remained restricted to internal deliberations within Itamaraty.<sup>33</sup> However, the main motivations for Brazil's proactivity were straightforward: competition with Argentina for regional influence, concerns over trade and communication lanes, the potential to expand relations with Africa, and the desire to keep the area exempt from East-West geopolitical disputes. All in all, Brazil envisioned a 'political focus' on the South Atlantic

---

<sup>31</sup> Patti 2012, 217-219; Mallea, Spektor, and Wheeler 2015, 10; Octávio Côrtes, *A Política Externa do Governo Sarney: O Início da Reformulação de Diretrizes para a Inserção Internacional sob o Signo da Democracia* (Brasília: Fundação Alexandre Gusmão, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Brasil, Presidência da República, *Pronunciamento do presidente José Sarney, por ocasião da abertura do debate geral da XL Assembléia-Geral da ONU, Nova Iorque, 23 de setembro de 1985* (Brasília: Presidência da República, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Significant insights can be found in a memorandum drafted by Itamaraty at the time. See Dispatch n. 0808/86 DNU/DAF-I/DAM-I/PGUE-Z20 from the Ministry of External Relations to the National Security Council, 28 July 1988, ANB, Secret. Available at: [www.sian.an.gov.br](http://www.sian.an.gov.br). A redacted version was leaked to the press in the days leading up to the UNGA session. Estado S. Paulo, "Brasil quer paz no Atlântico Sul", *Estado de S. Paulo*, 16 October 1986, 7.



that presupposed a multilateral discussion not subject to the dictums of external powers.<sup>34</sup> Brazilian diplomats were also fairly realistic over possible outcomes. Rather than advancing a detailed institutional structure, they expected a ‘long and complex process that requires the consideration of an ample range of problems’, with no specific deadline in sight.<sup>35</sup>

Brazil attributed considerable emphasis to the aspect of cooperation, aiming to provide a ‘positive operational nature’ that could entice African member states.<sup>36</sup> However, that also served the purpose of masking the more important traits in the security domain, including multiple references to the unwanted military presence of countries from outside the region. Through this initiative, Brazil hoped to make military activity in the South Atlantic more difficult and ‘increase the political onus that every foreign power would incur, if they were to pursue’ such a course of action.<sup>37</sup> This reliance on a naming-and-shaming strategy showcased both Brazil’s material limitations and its self-awareness of the constraints of a bipolar order. However, it also reflected the different sensitivities that Brazilian authorities faced at home, as exemplified by its care not to curtail the operational capabilities of its own military.<sup>38</sup>

The balancing act with regard to the nuclear field, however, proved more complex as it involved making the proposed denuclearization of the South Atlantic compatible with Brazil’s autonomous pursuits. When considering the geographic limits of ZOPACAS, for

---

<sup>34</sup> Dispatch n. 0808/86, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9. Shiguenoli Miyamoto, “Atlântico Sul: zona de paz e cooperação,” *Lua Nova* 3, no. 3 (1987): 20-23.

instance, Brazilian diplomats decided to abide by a looser criterion in order to include more Sub-Saharan African countries. The only exception was in the south where the perimeter would strictly align with parallel 60° S, i.e. the line along which the Antarctic Treaty regime began to be enforced. This way, Brazil was able to signal its adherence to an already fairly-established non-proliferation framework. This strategy became further evident when ZOPACAS was also cast as a follow-up to other related initiatives, including the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace (IOZ), the Declaration for the Denuclearization of Africa, and the Treaty of Tlatelolco.<sup>39</sup>

The latter case, in particular, involved squaring the circle over the country's commitments at that point. Indeed, it required the outright overlooking of Brazil's non-ratification of Tlatelolco and its overall inapplicability in the region. Convinced that the lack of such formalities would not prove an insurmountable obstacle, Brazil presented itself as fully abiding with the spirit of the treaty's dispositions. No meaningful external backlash was expected to surface based on such technicalities alone. Instead, ZOPACAS would assist with two important goals for the country's nuclear agenda: to 'resist the constant pressures to sign the NPT with more solid arguments' and to 'sustain an overall position in favour of vertical and horizontal non-proliferation'.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, even though military officials perceived the

---

<sup>39</sup> See Roberto Abreu Sodré, "1986 – XLI Sessão Ordinária da Assembléia Geral da ONU – Ministro Roberto de Abreu Sodré," in *O Brasil nas Nações Unidas 1946-2011*, ed. Luiz Felipe Seixas Corrêa (Brasília: Fundação Alexandre Gusmão, 2012), 571-584 at 476. The IOZ set the precedent for subsequent proposals on other zones of peace worldwide by emphasizing a broader regional disarmament that went beyond non-proliferation concerns, while the Declaration for the Denuclearization of Africa was an integral part of the campaign against the Apartheid regime and its nuclear ambitions. Brazil had provided previous support at the UNGA in both cases, which meant any linkages with ZOPACAS were not expected to incite any particular controversy.

<sup>40</sup> Wrobel 2017, 62.

project as an ‘exploratory political-juridical instrument’ and an ‘appeal to out-of-area countries’, they also still recommended ‘caution’ in subsequent negotiations, with ‘the purpose of avoiding discriminatory dispositions that limit Brazil’s engagement, especially in the nuclear field, in the context of the NPT’.<sup>41</sup>

Above all, Brazilian diplomats believed a ‘reasoning of prudence’ should prevail amidst the entire process.<sup>42</sup> ZOPACAS was thus conveyed as both part of ‘an on-going process, searching for peace (...) without expecting to obtain immediate results’ and as a ‘conceptual shield’ against the ambitions of external actors.<sup>43</sup> Its priority was to address the South Atlantic in a multilateral format by discursively targeting belligerent behaviour. Meanwhile, the focus on a regional non-proliferation drive only presupposed nominal constraints on existing nuclear-weapon states, without foreseeing any actual enforcement. On 29 May 1986, Foreign Minister Abreu Sodré formally requested the UN Secretary General to include ZOPACAS in the agenda of the upcoming UNGA session, convinced of the proposal’s receptivity abroad.<sup>44</sup>

### **‘In principle, we should abstain’**

---

<sup>41</sup> Appraisal by the National Security Council – Creation of Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic, 06 August 1986, ANB, Secret, p. 1. Available at: [www.sian.an.gov.br](http://www.sian.an.gov.br).

<sup>42</sup> Dispatch n. 0808/86, pp. 8, 14

<sup>43</sup> Fernando Albuquerque Mourão, “Zona de Paz e Cooperação no Atlântico Sul,” *Política e Estratégia* 6, no. 1 (1988): 49-60 at 49; Eugénio Vargas Garcia, “Questões estratégicas e de segurança internacional: a marca do tempo e a força histórica da mudança,” *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 16, Special Number (1998): 99-120 at 117.

<sup>44</sup> UN General Assembly, ‘Request for the Inclusion of an Item in the Provisional Agenda of the Forty-first Session - Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic’, 29 May 1986, A/41/143. Available at: <http://www.un.org/documents>

Initial reactions to Brazilian overtures were positive if not encouraging. In mid-July, for instance, Western ambassadors stationed in Brasília deemed ZOPACAS a 'significant contribution for problems in the area that overcomes the traditional reservation of Itamaraty in defining policies with regional contours'.<sup>45</sup> However, in order to win over a convincing margin of validation at the UNGA, Brazil required more concrete displays of support. In the context of the new rapprochement heralded by Tancredo Neves the previous year, Portugal was identified by Itamaraty as a key partner to enlist.

The first effort came during Sarney's visit to Portugal in May 1986, where he pledged Brazil would 'do everything to keep the South Atlantic as a zone of peace'.<sup>46</sup> However, divergences over Portuguese foreign policy towards Africa between Prime-Minister Cavaco Silva and President Mário Soares, hindered any progress in discussions.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, a concrete formal proposal of exactly what Brazil envisioned for the South Atlantic was also still lacking at this point. The topic of ZOPACAS as a fleshed-out project was only really brought up for the first time the following August, in Brasília, as part of regular consultations between both Foreign Ministries. Brazil then officially requested Portugal's support due to 'Lisbon's

---

<sup>45</sup> Telegram from the Portuguese Embassy in Brasília to Lisbon no. 465, 9 July 1986, Arquivo Histórico-Diplomático do Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros de Portugal (Hereafter AHDMNE) (S7.E9.P8/60569), p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Brasil, Presidência da República, *Almoço no Palácio Real de Sintra, 5 de maio de 1986* (Brasília: Presidência da República, 1986).

<sup>47</sup> This was evidenced when a harsher condemnation of the Apartheid regime in the final communiqué, as per Sarney's original suggestion, was scratched due to possible fallout for the Portuguese community in South Africa. See Teresa Cruvinel and Cida Fuentes, "Comunicado conjunto consumiu um dia de discussão e afinal saiu tímido," *O Globo*, 9 May 1986, 3; Carlos Eduardo Lins da Silva, "Comunicado conjunto divide Brasil e Portugal," *Folha de S. Paulo*, 9 May 1986, 4.

special bonds with countries bordering the South Atlantic'.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the initial reaction by Portuguese Foreign Minister Pires de Miranda was one of caution. Even though Portugal supported overall disarmament attempts, he considered that these issues fell, first and foremost, within the framework of political consultations within NATO and the EPC. He therefore refrained from committing to any definitive position.<sup>49</sup>

What accounted for this first token of resistance, considering the state of bilateral relations in the summer of 1986? For one, Portugal's *ab initio* position on ZOPACAS was already more substantiated at this point than Pires de Miranda let on. Indeed, before his trip to Brasília, Portuguese diplomats had evaluated the project based on the scarce information available. While 'comprehensible in the purity of its principles', Portugal deemed ZOPACAS as containing a level of 'conspicuous opportunism' by including countries that were experiencing internal unrest, such as Angola, with the sole purpose of restricting the intervention of 'exogenous' powers to the region and, thus, reserving for Brazil a prime role as interlocutor in Africa.<sup>50</sup> The opposing views regarding the two countries' spheres of influence in a post-colonial African context became even more evident when the ministerial encounter was reported from very different national perspectives: in Brazil, local press perceived it as an excessive submissiveness by the Portuguese to its Western allies, whereas in Portugal, the

---

<sup>48</sup> Telegram from Brasília to the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon no. 74, 4 September 1986, AHMRE, Folder 17.03.04 - 'Travels and Official Visits Brazil-Portugal', Confidential, p. 9

<sup>49</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Portuguese Representation to NATO no. 736, 26 August 1986, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Assessment by the Directorate of Defense, Security and Disarmament Services, "Denuclearization and demilitarization of the South Atlantic", 5 August 1986, p 1 apud Telegram from Lisbon to the Portuguese Representation to NATO no. 736, 26 August 1986, AHDMNE, (P.2.15/152717).

differences over how best to engage with Africa took centre stage.<sup>51</sup> Such redlines already foreshadowed deeper disagreements to come.

Two additional developments consolidated the preliminary assessment made in Lisbon. The first emerged when ZOPACAS won the support of the Socialist bloc one day after Pires de Miranda's visit. Czechoslovakia's Ambassador to Brazil at the time, Václav Malosik, announced that the USSR, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria would collectively endorse the upcoming Brazilian resolution at the UNGA.<sup>52</sup> This incited suspicion in Western capitals that Brazil's proposal was not as politically innocuous as they had been led to believe in the first place.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the credibility of the denuclearization discourse that ZOPACAS seemed to embody came under fire. On 8 August, reports of possible secret nuclear testing facilities in the Serra do Cachimbo raised new questions over the transparency of Brazil's nuclear activities and effectively brought to light

---

<sup>51</sup> For the Brazilian position see Gilberto Alves, "Portugal não apóia paz no Sul," *Correio Braziliense*, 21 August 1986, 8; *Jornal de Brasília*, "Portugal leva a OTAN plano de paz Brasileiro," *Jornal de Brasília*, 21 August 1986. For the Portuguese perspective see José Henriques Coimbra and Hermano Alves, "África é traço de desunião luso-brasileira," *Expresso*, 23 August 1986, 3; *Diário de Notícias*, "Realidade e retórica," *Diário de Notícias*, 26 August 1986, 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Jornal de Brasília*, "Socialistas vão apoiar proposta brasileira," *Jornal de Brasília*, 22 August 1986, 11.

<sup>53</sup> *Estado de S. Paulo*, "Virada de bordo," *Estado de S. Paulo*, 24 August 1986, 3. Those concerns arose from a similar proposal by the Socialist bloc at the UNGA, calling for the implementation of a so-called 'Comprehensive System of International Peace and Security' that pushed for demilitarization on a global scale. This substantiated resolution 41/92 in 1986. Aware of the undesired connections, Brazilian diplomats at the UN were instructed to 'reject incisively any attempts by the socialist group to correlate it with the proposal from that group (...). There are indications that the possibility of those attempts occurring are real'. Postal dispatch n. 8.811, General Instructions for the Delegation of Brazil to the XLI United Nations General Assembly, 20 October 1986, AHMRE, Folder G13.2.2 - 'Multilateral Policy', Confidential, p. 4.

its parallel nuclear programme.<sup>54</sup> Even if the utility and scope of such sites was soon called into question, they nonetheless drew further scrutiny into the overall lack of accountability and safeguards that Brazil's nuclear ambitions appeared to regularly exploit.<sup>55</sup>

Impervious to how its proposal was being construed across the Atlantic, Brazil ramped up consultations in the days leading up to the UNGA, confident that it would obtain near-consensus. However, Western countries remained divided over how to best engage with this project. The divisions became apparent within NATO, the EPC, and the Barton Group.<sup>56</sup> On the one hand, the US objected on the grounds of previous concerns with the expansion of NWFZs worldwide, the potential use of such initiatives for propaganda purposes – especially after the public support by the Socialist bloc – as well as its defence of the principle of freedom of the seas.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, the UK was quickly convinced to support ZOPACAS because it would end up being designated as a South Atlantic country in its own right, thereby reinforcing its territorial claims against Argentina.

Traditional axes of alignment for Portuguese diplomacy thus seemed to pull in irreconcilable directions, with the remaining European allies largely uncommitted. On top of that, a concerted Brazilian diplomatic push began to emphasize the 'constructive nature' of

---

<sup>54</sup> Folha de S. Paulo, "Serra do Cachimbo pode ser local de provas nucleares," *Folha de S. Paulo*, 8 August 1986, 1, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Alan Riding, "Brazil and the Bomb: Questions Arise Anew," *The New York Times*, 21 September 1986, 20. See also Mallea, Spektor, and Wheeler 2015, 37-38, 129-132.

<sup>56</sup> Telegram from the Portuguese Permanent Representation to the UN to Lisbon no. 523, 23 October 1986, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), p. 1. The Barton Group informally convened under the UNGA First Committee on Disarmament and International Security and by 1986 included every EEC member state, Australia, Canada, Greece, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Turkey, and the US.

<sup>57</sup> Telegram from Brasília to the Brazilian Permanent Representation to the UN no. 1791, 11 September 1986, AHMRE, Box 1 - G13.3, Folder 'Policy on Blocs and International Organizations 1986', Confidential, p. 4.

an initiative built upon ‘concepts and expressions consecrated in UN doctrine’ as well as its coherence ‘with the highest values and interests of the West’.<sup>58</sup> Brazil’s delegation at the UN was seen as exerting a level of particularly ‘uncommon pressure’ in order to secure a favourable vote from Portugal.<sup>59</sup> Yet, only on 27 October, mere hours before plenary voting occurred, did Lisbon issue clear instructions to its representatives: ‘In principle, we should abstain, except if we become isolated amongst NATO allies’.<sup>60</sup>

Even though priorities were now straightened out, Portugal’s fear of isolation was not unfounded, as the tallied votes soon came to demonstrate. Resolution 41/11 creating ZOPACAS received 124 votes in favour, including from such NATO countries as the UK, Iceland, Greece, Turkey, Spain, Norway, Canada, and Denmark. Inversely, it warranted one vote against (the US) and eight abstentions (Portugal, France, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, West Germany, and Japan). Subscribed by 20 states bordering the South Atlantic – with the exception of South Africa, then-occupied Namibia, and countries with overseas territories in the area – the new initiative nominally established a demilitarised regional space, ideally free of external aggressions and weapons of mass destruction. It also called for annual UNGA validation so as to ensure its place in the international agenda.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Telegram from Brasília to the Brazilian Embassies in Bonn, Brussels, Canberra, the Hague, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Ottawa, Paris, Rome, Stockholm, Tokyo and Wien no. 14547, 15 October 1986, AHMRE, Folder CX460 – ‘Policy on Blocs and International Organizations’, Secret, pp. 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> Telegram from the Portuguese Permanent Representation to the UN to Lisbon no. 542, 27 October 1986, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Portuguese Representation to the UN no. 391, 27 October 1986, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> UN General Assembly, ‘Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic’, 27 October 1986, A/RES/41/11. Available at: <http://www.un.org/documents>



### **In the ‘absence of an unequivocal and legally binding commitment’**

A riposte by Brazil did not take long. In an article entitled ‘Portugal disappoints’, considered to have been ‘whispered by Itamaraty’, the abstention was deemed to have created an ‘unpleasant new fact in the relations between Brazil and Portugal and seems to be the result of the rapprochement between such a European country and the US’.<sup>62</sup> Backstage ‘persuasion work’, in the form of personal *démarches* by US Ambassador to the UN General Vernon Walters, was brought up as additional reasoning for such an ‘incomprehensible’ position.<sup>63</sup> From a Brazilian perspective, the fact that all the African Lusophone countries had also voted in favour only added further insult to injury.<sup>64</sup> Reinforcing these reactions, Sarney’s own personal ‘shock’ over the Portuguese vote was conveyed through diplomatic channels.<sup>65</sup>

How to best account for Portugal’s decision in light of this backlash? One possible explanation resides in the previously-described divisions between the two countries over Africa. However, the weight of this variable had already decreased significantly after every Lusophone partner declared they would adhere to ZOPACAS. Going against a project that

---

<sup>62</sup> Telegram from the Portuguese Embassy in Brasília to Lisbon no. 716, 29 October 1986, AHDMNE (S7.E9.P8/60569), pp. 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Telegram from the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon to Brasília no. 1913, 4 November 1986, AHMRE, Folder CX460 - ‘Policy on Blocs and International Organizations’, Secret, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Telegram from Brasília to all diplomatic missions n. 14574, 30 October 1986, AHMRE, Folder CX460 – ‘Policy on Blocs and International Organizations’, Secret, pp. 2-3; Telegram from Brasília to the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon no. 684, 30 October 1986, AHMRE, Folder CX460 - ‘Policy on Blocs and International Organizations’, Secret, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Telegram from the Portuguese Embassy in Brasília to Lisbon no. 727, 29 October 1986, AHDMNE (S7.E9.P8/60569), p. 1. *Expresso*, “Abstenção de Portugal na ONU decepciona Brasil,” *Expresso*, 22 November 1986, 5.

these countries had subscribed to and co-sponsored would appear an ill-advised strategy to secure Portuguese clout in the continent. Even more so after those same countries unsuccessfully lobbied Portugal to support resolution 41/11.<sup>66</sup> Another factor took greater precedence when staking a position against ZOPACAS.

The choice to abstain reflected, first and foremost, an unmistakable subscription by Portugal to core Western tenets of the time, which trumped any semblance of special relations with Brazil. Even if policy recommendations from Washington were not unreservedly welcomed during this period, Portugal's overall commitment to the West remained unwavering.<sup>67</sup> This was best manifested in the transposition into Portuguese diplomatic reasoning of two arguments to vindicate its position on ZOPACAS.

The first one consisted of reservations regarding initiatives conducive to a loose miscellany of denuclearised zones. Given how the limits of ZOPACAS targeted an area covered by the North Atlantic Treaty, it could conceivably include key supply routes for Western Europe.<sup>68</sup> Such an interpretation was repeatedly paraphrased by Lisbon, based on allied statements derived from consultations within NATO. US Ambassador Lynn Hansen proved to be the most vocal in this regard when conveying his frustration with such enterprises, mostly because 'each time we vote positively, we find more resolutions proposing areas we can't

---

<sup>66</sup> Telegram from Brasília to the Brazilian Embassy in Lisbon no. 684, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Between 1985 and 1987, Portugal and the US became embroiled in a dispute over the slow implementation of the 1983 Lajes airbase renewal agreement, in Azores. So much so that formal bilateral consultations had to be convened, with Cavaco Silva advocating a hard-line stance: 'the US should understand Portugal was a trusted ally but not [a] subservient [one]'. Aníbal Cavaco Silva, *Autobiografia Política – Tomo I* (Camarate: Círculo dos Leitores, 2002) at 249.

<sup>68</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Permanent Representation to the UN no. 470, 11 November 1987, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), pp. 1-2.

accept, like the ones covering high seas. We feel less and less enthusiasm for this sort of patchwork' of denuclearised zones.<sup>69</sup> This talking point was to be explicitly adopted by Portuguese diplomats in their subsequent assessments of ZOPACAS.<sup>70</sup> Similar discussions over the impact of such zones were also carried out within the EEC, given how they could force the concentration of nuclear arsenals into other regions, most notably in Europe.<sup>71</sup> At Portugal's urging, the topic was then brought up at the EPC's Working Group on UN-Disarmament, responsible for coordinating this specific policy area.<sup>72</sup>

The second related argument that underscored Portugal's abstention concerned the international evaluation of Brazil's nuclear forays.<sup>73</sup> All the more so, as the country's tribulations became increasingly public. The fact that Brazil had yet to accede to the NPT and fulfil all the formalities for the ratification of Tlatelolco had already warranted the 'most direct

---

<sup>69</sup> Service Information, "XLIV Quarterly Meeting of the North Atlantic Political Committee with Disarmament Experts on 1-2 October", 7 October 1987, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), pp. 6-7.

<sup>70</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Permanent Representation to the UN no. 470, pp. 1-2.

<sup>71</sup> For the Western *ad principio* stance on this kind of denuclearization proposals see Lykourgos Kourkouvelas, "Denuclearization on NATO's Southern Front: Allied Reactions to Soviet Proposals, 1957-1963," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 4 (2012): 197-215; and James Stocker, "Accepting Regional Zero: Nuclear Weapon Free Zones, U.S. Nonproliferation Policy and Global Security, 1957-1968," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015): 36-72.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Service information, "Extraordinary meeting of the Working Group UN-Disarmament on April 1st", 6 April 1987, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), pp. 2-3; Service Information, "Meeting of the Working Group UN-Disarmament on 21-22 September", 24 September 1987, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Permanent Representation to the UN no. 470, pp. 1-2. Portuguese diplomats found particular solace that similar concerns were circulated in think-tank circles. SIPRI, for instance, classified the resolution on ZOPACAS as an 'abstruse document' and urged Argentina and Brazil to join the NPT, or at least to become fully-fledged parties to the Treaty of Tlatelolco in order to 'demonstrate seriousness of intent to "shield" the South Atlantic from the arms race and especially from the presence of nuclear arms'. SIPRI, SIPRI Yearbook 1987 (Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1987), at 405-406.

criticism possible to be made' in earlier Portuguese assessments.<sup>74</sup> However, on 4 September 1987, Sarney went further by announcing his country had finally mastered the technology to autonomously enrich uranium. The fact that such a step was key to both developing an independent nuclear energy industry and building an atomic bomb was not lost on external observers. That announcement was soon followed by the Goiás radiological accident on 13 September, the result of hazardous waste contamination. Following in the footsteps of the 1986 Chernobyl accident, it generated considerable media attention and highlighted the contradictions in Brazil's nuclear pursuits.<sup>75</sup>

Hence, in the 'absence of an unequivocal and legally binding commitment not to develop nuclear weapons', the EPC Working Group on Non-Proliferation classified Brazil as a 'sensitive' country. Even though it did not bind member states, the reasoning went that the continuing development of unsafeguarded nuclear fuel enrichment facilities, the lack of any agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the existence of the parallel programme, still warranted sizeable concern. Faced with this scenario, Portuguese diplomats concluded there was a feeling of 'high political risk associated with the implementation of ambitious nuclear programmes, both civilian but especially military, in countries that, like Brazil, simultaneously exhibited the characteristics of both the First and

---

<sup>74</sup> Assessment by the Directorate of Defense, Security and Disarmament Services, p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Marlise Simons, "Radiation Accident in Brazil Stirs Misgivings Over Nuclear Program," *The New York Times*, 13 October 1987, 14. The fact that the Brazilian Navy continued to advocate for a nuclear submarine also did little to sway concerns over the civilian oversight of these activities. Luiz Pinguelli Rosa, "A nebulosidade da política nuclear," *Folha de S. Paulo*, 31 December 1986, 3; Roberto Godoy, "Presidente aprova a construção do submarino atômico brasileiro," *Estado de S. Paulo*, 12 April 1987, 9.

Fourth Worlds'.<sup>76</sup> Keen on continuing to assume Western assessments as part of its own decisions, Portugal was thus encouraged to stick with its original abstention.

### **'Despite the special bonds that tie us'**

Following the public rollout of ZOPACAS, Brazil found it difficult to secure wider support for a project it had initially deemed an easy win. When a new resolution was tabled in October 1987, Portugal interpreted it as a mere 'attempt of a procedural manoeuvre to keep the issue alive' at the UNGA.<sup>77</sup> That much was admitted by the Brazilian Permanent Representative to the UN, Paulo Nogueira Batista, when classifying the new text as 'simple, straightforward and uncontroversial' in a bid to pre-empt possible critics.<sup>78</sup> However, any change from an abstention to a vote in favour would also lead to an implicit acceptance of resolution 41/11 from the previous year. Accordingly, Portugal's position remained inflexible, and not even Mário Soares' visit to Brazil in April 1987 led to any change. 'Despite the special bonds that tie us to Brazil', instructions from Lisbon to maintain the abstention were adamant.<sup>79</sup> The new resolution merited 122 votes in favour (two fewer than in 1986), one against (the US), and the same eight abstentions as in 1986.

---

<sup>76</sup> Service information, "Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic", 31 August 1988, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), pp. 1-5.

<sup>77</sup> Telegram from the Portuguese Permanent Representation to the UN to Lisbon no. 5274, 4 November 1987, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> UN General Assembly, "Forty-second Session of the General Assembly – Provisional Verbatim Record of the Sixty-third Meeting", 10 November 1987, A/42/PV.63, 10. Available at: <http://www.un.org/documents>

<sup>79</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Permanent Representation to the UN no. 470, p. 1.

Unfazed by these results, Brazilian diplomats persisted, convinced of the usefulness of ZOPACAS in carving a new role for Brazil abroad. The group's first official Ministerial Meeting was then convened for 25-29 July 1988, in Rio de Janeiro. Its most important outcome was a unified call for greater institutionalization of contacts.<sup>80</sup> Originally idealised as a loose informal forum, the signatory parties now agreed to meet periodically and provide an organizational framework to better cooperate across the South Atlantic. Hefty non-proliferation goals were thus pushed aside in favour of more immediate and tangible opportunities.

Initially, this turn of events did not instil any particular change of heart in Portuguese diplomats, who saw the Rio meeting as failing to overcome 'ambiguities of a political, economic, nuclear, and geo-strategic nature' that had already been previously identified.<sup>81</sup> However, despite this candid evaluation, just two months later, Lisbon issued instructions to change the abstention to a vote in favour in the ensuing 1988 UNGA session.

The outlook hardly appeared propitious for such a turnaround. On the one hand, the core rationale for ZOPACAS remained unaltered, which meant that past objections still appeared to remain valid. On the other hand, even though Portugal's decision to abstain in 1986 had been accompanied by a group of equally dissenting NATO/EEC allies, this time around the country stood alone in altering its position. Previous concerns over not being isolated amongst other like-minded countries seemed to now be relegated to the background. What drove this abrupt revision after two years of marked scepticism?

---

<sup>80</sup> Marcelo Jardim, *A Zona de Paz e Cooperação do Atlântico Sul* (Brasília: Instituto Rio Branco, 1991): 5.13.

<sup>81</sup> Service information, "Zone of Peace and Cooperation in the South Atlantic", pp. 1-5.

Officially, the priority attributed to the reasoning on which Portugal's previous position had been based had decreased over time. In particular, there were preliminary indications that Brasília was willing to entertain a dialogue with the West on non-proliferation issues, as exemplified by its ratification of the Seabed Treaty in August of that same year. Even if considered only a minor development, this was perceived as potentially conducive to a 'process that makes feasible an agreement with the IAEA on "safe guard controls" over its parallel nuclear programme'.<sup>82</sup>

However, developments on other fronts probably had a greater bearing on the sudden volte-face. Internally, Cavaco Silva now led a new majority government, following elections in July 1987, which gave him greater legitimacy to determine the country's foreign policy. If anything, the abstention on ZOPACAS had led to the perception of an excessively pro-US posture that compromised the intended balance with other geographies of interest.<sup>83</sup> As Portugal anchored itself more and more into the EEC, its previous care to avoid staking a position diametrically opposed to the US became less warranted. Likewise, by reversing course on ZOPACAS, Portugal was able to reset political dialogue with Brazil – following Cavaco Silva's own visit in June 1988 – and simultaneously harmonise its position with Lusophone countries in Africa, thus lending more coherence to its southern forays.

On the other hand, the regional and international contexts had evolved since 1986. New efforts were being carried out in terms of mediating the Angolan conflict, with Portugal

---

<sup>82</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Portuguese Permanent Representation to the UN no. 545, 17 October 1988, AHDMNE (P.2.15/152717), pp. 1-2.

<sup>83</sup> Álvaro de Vasconcelos, "Conclusion". In *Portuguese Defense and Foreign Policy since Democratization*, ed. Kenneth Maxwell (New York: Camões Center for the Study of the Portuguese-Speaking World, 1991), 80-92 at 90.

seeking to play a more central role. These attempts required abating controversy over any previous regional positioning that could jeopardize its neutral role. Meanwhile, concerns that the spread of new denuclearised zones would lead to a corresponding escalation of tensions on European soil had largely subsided.<sup>84</sup> This turn of events came in the footsteps of the much-publicised 1986 summit in Reykjavik between Reagan and Gorbachev. Even though arms reduction talks soon stalled, it was conducive enough for the subsequent Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. As it entered into force in June 1988, this agreement attested to the seriousness of the renewed US-USSR dialogue, as well as the likelihood of new commitments between the two sides in the near future. By reconsidering its original position, Portugal was thus able to present itself as keeping up ahead of the curve of forthcoming international events.

Acknowledging this sudden reversal, a voting justification soon followed. Two years after initially abstaining 'in principle', ZOPACAS was now deemed by Portugal to fall in line with UN goals, while abiding by internationally-recognized norms and freedoms. Consequently, Brazil secured a coveted vote that showcased the appeal of its proposal for out-of-area countries and defused a lingering but increasingly solitary opposition by the US to its plans. On 14 November 1988, a new vote took place at the UNGA, warranting 144 votes in favour (22 more than the previous year), one against (the US) and seven abstentions (one fewer than the previous year).

## **Conclusion**

---

<sup>84</sup> Telegram from Lisbon to the Portuguese Permanent Representation to the UN no. 545, p. 2.



What did this singular episode mean for Brazilian external ambitions under a civilian guise? By setting out its proposal for ZOPACAS in 1986, Brazil took a leap of faith as to how it would be received externally. Emerging from a difficult transition, and with its parallel nuclear programme still under indirect military tutelage, advancing a regional denuclearization project as one of the first foreign policy initiatives did not seem the most obvious of choices. Nevertheless, it represented a unique opportunity for the government to signal a new constructive role in this domain. However, the story of how ZOPACAS came about, and how it triggered a series of misperceptions, can only be understood when also acknowledging the previous hits and misses of Brazil's nuclear ambitions. Its previous erratic engagement with the non-proliferation regime ultimately worked against the innocuous narrative that Itamaraty was so keen on promoting for the South Atlantic. Even though Brazilian designs for the South Atlantic only suffered a dent in their immediate recognition, the unexpected opposition that Brazil faced also foreshadowed further difficulties it would encounter in starting from scratch in international arenas.<sup>85</sup>

How to then account for Portugal's alternating opposition over such an innocuous regional initiative? As a staunch supporter of the West, Portugal was not impervious to developments in Brazil, but they also did not necessarily rank highly amongst the country's priorities. Broader non-proliferation concerns over Brazil were more likely adopted through osmosis than by their impact on national interests. This line of argument came into play not because it affected Portuguese stakes, but because it was so engrained in Western perceptions of Brazil. In order to burnish its Western credentials before core allies, the logical step for Portuguese diplomacy was to subscribe to such views and to incorporate them into

---

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Côrtes 2010.

its own evaluation. That said, even if Brazil had been deemed a credible non-proliferation actor, Portugal would still likely have abstained at first, given the lack of information on the project. In addition, the underlying competition for influence in Africa implied that any initiative with this kind of geographic range would invariably be distrusted initially.

As archival sources on the 1980s become further declassified, scholars might find additional threads on this topic worthy of pursuing in a bid to establish supplemental global history linkages. The Portuguese turnaround in 1988, in particular, still requires further triangulation with other European sources, as soon as they become accessible, in order to ascertain the true extent of EPC consultations during this period. Moreover, subsequent years of ZOPACAS's activity warrant additional work to ascertain exactly how the international community perceived the utility of such a forum and the credibility of a proponent such as Brazil.

Yet, despite the historic-cultural connections reflected at the highest levels, as well as the intent to bring Portugal and Brazil closer together under a new democratic impetus, ZOPACAS also brought unexpected fault-lines to the forefront. To be sure, official rhetoric continued to retain a predominant hold.<sup>86</sup> However, the opportunity to translate the political good-will, first heralded by the election of Tancredo Neves, into meaningful consultations on international issues, quickly faded away. The fact that ZOPACAS was a product of its time, also meant it was contingent on contextual adjustments throughout the late 1980s. Once changes at home, in the region, and in the world began to take place, so did Lisbon's predisposition towards its existence. Bilateral relations soon entered an all-too-familiar pattern, relying 'today as yesterday, and, for the relief of everyone, on the misconception of official

---

<sup>86</sup> Carvalho 2016; Cervo and Calvet de Magalhães 2000.

declarations and bilateral commissions'.<sup>87</sup> By serving as a barometer of sorts over how to understand ZOPACAS in a changing multilateral landscape, Portugal played its part in this story. The impact of its original stance, however, did not endure and was soon absorbed and forgotten by history.

---

<sup>87</sup> Marcello Duarte Mathias, *Os Dias e os Anos – diário 1970-1993* (Alfragide: D. Quixote, 2010), at 72.