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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2024-06-28

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Rocha, J. S. (2021). Political pressures and hesitations, Portugal, the United States of America and the operation Nickel Grass: Final stages on the way to the end of the Portuguese colonial empire. In Dani Asher (Ed.), *The Creation of New States and the Collapse of Old Empires In the XX Century: Acta.* (pp. 226-233). Jerusalem: Israeli Commission of Military History.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://www.icmh-cihm.org/en/what-we-do/publications/acta>

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Political Pressures and Hesitations.

Portugal, the United States of America and the Operation Nickel Grass Final stages on the way to the end of the Portuguese colonial empire.

A Portuguese historian once wrote, "international relations have multiple requirements that can only be thought of on the basis of absolute realism and skilful calculation of currently available forces. Among them is the strategic function of a territory, not only for the state that owns that territory but also the appraisal of the interest it represents for other 'securities'. However, the strategic value of a territory will only add value to the State that holds it if that State has diplomatic skills and capacities to exploit the conditions of the moment in order to ensure an advantage position."¹

It was this advantage that the Portuguese authorities sought to ensure from the moment when, diplomatically coerced by Washington, they had to authorize the use of its air base located in Lajes, Azores, considered by the United States of America (USA) military planners to be an indispensable support base for the airlift operations to aid Israel in October 1973, the so-called *Operation Nickel Grass*.

American Historian J. P Cann writes in his book "Counter-insurrection in Africa," that Portugal was the first colonial power to reach Africa and the last to leave.²

In fact, and unlike other colonial powers, Portugal, assumed the pursuit of an objective that many considered unattainable, and decides to fight for the maintenance of its colonies. Despite limited national resources, Portugal was able to maintain, almost simultaneously, a large military engagement in three separate theatres (Angola, Mozambique and Guinea) during a period of time of thirteen years.

In 1973, the war in those territories was at its height and, without anticipating the military revolution that, on 25th April 1974, would put a definitive end to the war and lead to the independence of the former Portuguese colonies, the political and diplomatic negotiations between the USA and Portugal on the subject of *Operation Nickel Grass* turned out to be one of the last attempts carried out by the Portuguese authorities in order to obtain weapons and other military equipment urgently needed to fight guerrilla movements, especially in Guinea-Bissau.

The Portuguese empire, the first global empire in history and the oldest of the modern colonial empires, was born in the early fifteenth century and survived into the twentieth century with a configuration that, roughly, was set at the end of the seventeenth century. From the former vast empire, at the beginning of the 1970s only a small fraction of territories remained. Distant and with little support by the metropolis, they scattered around the East (Goa, Macau and Timor), the Atlantic (Archipelagos of Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe) and the African continent (Angola, Mozambique and Guinea).

In the second half of the nineteenth century the disappointment felt in the comments of the Portuguese public opinion on questions related to colonial possessions, which were considered a big drain of financial resources and, due to their scarce development, unable to originate significant revenues for the Portuguese State, and the need to respond to the resurgence of interest in Africa by other European countries, has conditioned both domestic and external action of the Portuguese policy makers forcing them to follow more closely the question and to adopt more effective and rapid decision-making processes in relation to Empire issues.

During this period, and contrary to the path followed by other colonial powers that privileged the effective occupation of their possessions as a way of establishing colonial sovereignty, Portugal continued to rely solely and exclusively on the defence of the historical rights conferred on it by the discovery and conquest of territories, neglecting their occupation and development.

At the end of the 19th century a "circle of fire" was established around Portuguese African possessions, a circle of greed which, fueled in particular by Britain, Portugal's oldest ally, threatened the alleged acquired rights and forced the authorities in Lisbon, driven by the ultimatum presented by Great Britain to Portugal on January 11, 1890, to a real commitment to preserve its imperial dominion.³

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century the transformation of formal sovereignty into effective domination intensified, especially with the mobilization of large expeditionary military contingents to Angola and Mozambique during the years of World War I and with a progressive and effective territorial dispersion of the colonial administrative structure of the Portuguese State as a way to deter the ambition of other colonial powers.

After the end of World War I, the ideals promoted by the League of Nations that emerged from the 1919 Peace Conference led to the emergence of a strong current of opinion that advocated the need for colonial powers to act for the benefit of indigenous peoples and to promote the development of their possessions and at same time their integration into the international community.⁴

Current of opinion that caused founded concerns within the disorganized and unstable Portuguese State regarding the future of its colonial empire and that favoured the emergence of a movement within large sectors of the Portuguese society that rose in defence of the colonies and whose action ended up contributing to the fall of the first Portuguese Republic in 1926.

In July 1930, the publication of the so-called "Colonial Act" reaffirmed Portuguese sovereignty over its territorial overseas possessions in a legal and constitutional manner, considering it to be permanent and irrevocable at a time when the interpellations within the League of Nations concerning the Portuguese colonies were multiplying.

The so often voiced fears regarding the existence of movements interested in promoting territorial rearrangements and a new division of the African colonies became a reality in the international diplomatic stage from 1935. Great Britain was interested in improving its relations with Germany and in this sense the authorities of both countries agreed, underestimating the aggregating and central role that in Portugal was attributed to the Empire issue, on a plan to revise the colonial partition with special focus on the redistribution of Portuguese and Belgian colonial possessions in Africa.

World War II diverted international attentions from Portuguese colonial issues, but they did not disappear altogether. Despite the neutral status assumed by Portugal during the conflict, the Portuguese colony of Timor in Asia was invaded by Dutch and Australian allies as well as by Japanese enemy forces, while African colonies manage to achieve some economic improvements.

Fears of a new partition of Africa would fade at the end of World War II, and a new threat would gradually emerge: decolonization in Asia and Africa.

It can be said that in the economic, ideological and institutional fields, at the end of the war the Portuguese Empire has somehow strengthened, however, in the political field the positive results are much less evident if one takes into account the increasing anti-colonial pressure that existed in several circles and international institutions that made the defence of the imperial formula hitherto followed by Portugal untenable.

Until the mid-1950s, Portuguese policy-makers sought, with remarkable commitment in various international fora, to convey the idea that Portugal's course on colonial issues was in line with the most recent and modernizing conceptions followed by the major European powers, and at the same time they put into practice timid development plans in the now designated "overseas provinces", a cosmetic and semantic alteration of the previously used "colony" designation. The designation "Empire" had also been changed to "Overseas".⁵

Portugal's accession to the United Nations (UN) in December 1955, delayed for almost a decade by the Soviet Union's veto over a supposed failure to comply with Portuguese neutrality during World War II, causes an illusory sense of rehabilitation of the country and its dictatorial regime on the international stage but ultimately attracts new and more incisive attention to the Portuguese colonial issues.

The first year of the 1960s is a key milestone in the UN's action on colonial issues in general and with special penalizing repercussions on Portugal. Established in the General Assembly of the Organization the right of all peoples to self-determination and independence, a list was approved of non-autonomous territories that had to accede to the independence, list that contemplated all the Portuguese colonies.

The first year of the 1960s is a key milestone in the UN's action on colonial issues in general and has special penalizing repercussions on Portugal. Established in the UN General Assembly the right of all peoples to self-determination and independence, a list of non-autonomous territories that had to accede to independence was approved, a list that included all Portuguese colonies. In the following 15 years there was lively debate about the Portuguese colonial question and a declared UN support for the various liberation movements that gradually emerged in the Portuguese colonies. But during that time the Portuguese representatives in that organization never abandoned the intransigent defence of the colonial policy followed by the Portuguese government and the supposed integrationist characteristics of that same policy.

But if at the sessions of the UN General Assembly, countries have followed the voting intentions of the majority, in the backstage of diplomacy Portuguese colonial policy was able to gather support in the group of Latin American countries; European countries like France and Germany and Asian countries such as Japan and the Philippines. The United States authorities themselves had a somewhat ambiguous position on this subject, especially as they had to ensure a favourable outcome of negotiations with the Portuguese authorities, negotiations that were vital to the achievement of the broader US strategic objectives.

Diplomatic relations between Portugal and the USA have been, from the beginning and at different moments in history, conditioned by various kinds of factors that dictated the approach or the separation of these two old allies. Of all the factors involved in the complex diplomatic interaction between the two countries, the geo-strategic and ideological factors deserve special mention, as Calvet de Magalhães points out.⁶ The first, clearly the most relevant one, acted mainly in a positive way and favouring the approximation of the parties while the second factor, the ideological one, conditioned negatively these same relations, favouring the consequent estrangement.

In the bilateral negotiations carried out following the request for the use of Lajes Air Base in the Azores by US military forces in support of the "Nickel Grass" operation, these two factors were also present and decisively influenced the outcome of those negotiations.

It can be said that the importance of the strategic position of the Portuguese territory to the United States interests arose as soon as the first official contacts established between the authorities of both countries

(1783-1786). Special attention was given since then to the Portuguese archipelagos in the Atlantic and especially to the Azores. Those islands have since become an essential point of support for US-European naval trade, an importance that has been consolidated throughout the twentieth century when they become a strategic support base for global military operations led by the US.

The key moments of the US approach to Portugal emerge during World War II, in the 1940s; intensified in the 1950s and are mostly related to the geostrategic value of the islands of the Azores and Lajes airbase.⁷ Very briefly, we may consider the following relevant for bringing together the two countries; the Portuguese-American agreement in 1944 to establish naval and air bases on the island of Santa Maria, talks about Marshall aid, the ceding of military facilities in Lajes to the Americans in February 1948, the involvement of Portugal in the Atlantic Alliance from 1949 and, in 1951, the signing of a Mutual Aid Agreement for Defence (January) and the Defence Agreement between Portugal and the U.S. (September).⁸

Portugal's accession to NATO in 1949, unquestionably important in terms of defence, ended up being fundamental for the attainment of national interests, especially in the political field. NATO played a key role in mediating the diplomatic relationship with Washington, and it was through NATO that Lisbon came to negotiate major economic, financial and military benefits.⁹ In the years following NATO membership, Portugal sought to secure official and public support for the maintenance of the Portuguese colonial empire with its various Allies, especially in the United States. But in this matter, American political philosophy was irreversibly colliding with the objectives set by the Portuguese authorities, as evidenced before and during the diplomatic contacts initiated with a view to the implementation of Operation Nickel Grass in October 1973.

Despite the apparent good understanding between Portuguese and American authorities, diplomatic relations between the two countries suffered a first but significant setback in the mid-1950s.¹⁰ Faced with the occupation of the Portuguese enclaves of Dadra and Nagar Aveli by Indian Union military forces, the Portuguese authorities tried in vain to get Washington to condemn the invasion of those territories. This issue was very complex and led diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Portugal to their lowest point. For the first time, the American authorities publicly revealed clear objections regarding Portuguese colonial issues.

The official positioning of the U.S. authorities, decisively influenced by a very active internal public opinion, had definitely changed with respect to European colonialism in general and in particular to Portuguese colonial policy.

In short, the United States' approach to Portugal in the first years of the second post-war proved to be of mutual interest for the pursuit of the Portuguese and North American objectives over several years during which the aforementioned strategic factor almost always influenced parties to promote the

rapprochement while the ideological factor “tipped the plates” in the direction of incomprehension and mutual estrangement.

In the years following the end of World War II, Portugal undertook an approximation to the United States in order to obtain guarantees of security and maintenance of its colonial empire, while the U.S. authorities sought to guarantee access to advanced bases, such as that of the Azores, considered vital for the projection of its military power.

The Involvement of Portugal in the Operation “Nickel Grass”

The factual and historical backgrounds to the October 1973 conflict, some of which came immediately at the end of World War I, are widely known and are abundantly described in the works of several international authors, so we will not dwell on them at this occasion.

However, we would like to briefly and succinctly contextualize the events, noting that in 1973 the attention and interests of the two main world powers, the main actors of a rather hot Cold War, converged in this region of the world. In addition to all other known aspects of this Cold War, there were also a number of economic interests and political differences raised by the Arab-Israeli question that placed the United States and its European allies in opposing fields.

In the last quarter of 1973 the divergence of views on the Middle East between the United States and its allies was essentially due to economic issues related to their dependence on oil and energy resources of various kinds.

Aware of the need for rapprochement with European allies in order to alleviate existing differences over the Middle East, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger declared 1973 “the year of Europe.” Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was patronizing the modernization and improvement of Egyptian and Syrian military capabilities.

“The Yom Kippur War leads the US and the USSR to abandon the *Détente* started by Nixon and Brezhnev with the SALT I agreements, and places them in the role of suppliers of “clients” with irreconcilable purposes.”¹¹

At the beginning of October 1973 the United States authorities took up the purpose of providing urgent military assistance to Israel through the massive shipment of military equipment via an airlift operation. Because of the distance separating the US mainland from Israel, this airlift could only be operated by ensuring that there was at least one intermediate point of supply for the aircraft involved in what would be known as “Operation Nickel Grass”.

Given the refusal of support declared by several European countries, Portugal, with defence agreements previously signed with the US authorizing the use of the Portuguese Air Force base of Lajes in the Azores

by United States airplanes, would ultimately prove to be the key for the success of the airlift operation that had been planned by the US authorities.

While existing bilateral agreements allowed the right of transit and landing US military aircraft on that Atlantic base in peacetime, its use by American forces to directly assist a country involved in an armed conflict had political implications for Portugal as it could be interpreted internationally as assuming a belligerent alignment with Israel.

Forcing a swift and official decision on the part of the Portuguese authorities, Washington, through Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the first request for the use of airspace and transit of American aircraft was delivered in Lisbon as early as 12 October 1973. The request caught the Portuguese rulers unprepared and caused serious reservations since, at that time, Portugal had not yet recognized the State of Israel, there being only discrete diplomatic relations between the two countries, but mainly because Israel openly criticized Portuguese colonial policy.

Informed of the request placed by the American authorities, the Portuguese President, Américo Tomás expressed his opposition to the granting of authorization of transit and use of the Portuguese air base. His arguments were simple: "Israel was an adversary of Portugal on the African question; the United States acted in the same way by despising Portugal and promoting the passage of legislation in the Congress that was hostile to the interests of Portugal and also, because Portugal did not want to antagonize the Arab countries.¹² Moreover, he considered that the United States had never fulfilled the compensations agreed in the various Azores Agreements and, at the same time, he criticized the embargo imposed by that country on the "Purchase of war material or equipment that could be used for military purposes".

American diplomats countered and argued in Lisbon with the benefits that the authorization to use Lajes Airbase would bring to the strategic interests of both countries and warned that the results would run counter to these interests in the event of Israel's defeat in the on-going conflict by lack of timely military assistance.

While agreeing with the aforementioned communion of interests, Portuguese diplomacy, drawing attention to the risks that Portugal would take, insisted on obtaining political and military counterparts so that the possibility of satisfying the request could be considered. And the main counterpart would be the provision by the US, discreetly for implying a violation of President Kennedy's embargo of Red Eye land-based missiles, needed for the war operations in Guinea-Bissau.

In 1973, ten years after the war began in that territory, Portuguese military forces lost their aerial supremacy, which had been decisive in the fighting against pro-independence forces that were being armed by the Soviet Union and from whom they received land-air missiles SAM-7 (Strella) with which they began to shoot down Portuguese Air Force airplanes operating within that theatre of war.

Despite the pressure of Portuguese diplomacy, Henry Kissinger only considered viable, and yet only after the immediate authorization of transit of US aircrafts, seek to influence the action of American legislators in a sense that was more favourable to Portugal. The US supply of the Red Eye ground-to-air missiles was promptly denied and the US Secretary of State advanced the possibility of the US providing military assistance to Portugal should any retaliation arise from the use of Lajes Airbase.

Portugal was at that time the only European ally that the United States could resort to but it was also a vulnerable country that the American authorities considered to be able to coerce in order to obtain a favourable outcome for their most pressing needs.

Aware of the inevitability of having to give in to American requests, the Portuguese authorities insisted in the risks that the transit authorization supposedly entailed and tried to assure that the US Congress would cease the approval of legislation contrary to the interests of Portugal; support on the international scene; the rejection at the UN Security Council of Guinea's independence, unilaterally proclaimed on 24 September; and the "scrupulous execution" of the Azores Agreements, in particular of the counterparts and, finally, the supply of the Red Eye missiles.

Annoyed at the lack of a favourable response from the Portuguese Government and anticipating the possibility of a stalemate, President Nixon sent the Portuguese Prime Minister a formal letter of "unusual abruptness" in which, refusing to grant the compensations required by the Portuguese Government for the use of Lajes Airbase, threatened "to leave Portugal to its fate in a hostile world".¹³

Nixon, using one of the most important mechanisms of diplomatic coercion - the ultimatum - emphasized the exceptional motives of the US request and "required Portugal's cooperation in order to end the war in the Middle East."

Noting the pressure from Washington and recognizing the need to maintain the US as an ally, the Portuguese authorities acceded to the request for transit at a time when, it is known today, transport planes had already taken off and were en route to the Azores.

Operation Nickel Grass lasted for 34 days, until November 15, 1973, during which a total of 1269 American transport planes of all types transited through Lajes Air Base.

After the operation, the diplomatic relations between the two countries were again marked by a certain alienation from the United States towards Portugal to the point that in late 1973 the United States did not have an ambassador in Lisbon, the Portuguese capital city.

The Portuguese government, grappling with the imminent collapse of what remained of the Portuguese Empire, sought to benefit from the request for use of the Lajes Airbase and all it was achieved was that Kissinger interceded in Congress in favour of Portugal in the face of risks that had been assumed. Washington also ended up adopting positions more favourable to Portugal's interests at UN Security Council sessions on the issue of Guinea-Bissau's independence.

Regarding the supply of missiles, the Portuguese diplomacy persistently continued to seek to ensure, in late November 1973 Kissinger, with President Nixon's approval, proposed that, with US mediation, the missiles to be supplied by another country and that country would be ... Israel, since it would have missiles of the same type captured to the Egyptian forces during the Yom Kippur war.

In addition, the support granted to the Operation Nickel Grass effectively led to the implementation of reprisals against Portugal by the Arab nations, clearly noticed in the intensification of criticism to the Portuguese colonial policy as well as by the boycott imposed on the sale of oil and that Portugal sought to circumvent by resorting to Spain's solidarity and support for its political alliances in southern Africa. At the beginning of 1974 Portugal's vulnerability in the international system was total.

The struggle for the maintenance of the Portuguese colonies was mainly a political demand but the difficult final role was assigned to the military of the Portuguese Armed Forces who from 1961 to 1974 fought and died on the different fronts of combat.

¹ Macedo, J. Borges de (1987), *Portugal na perspectiva estratégica europeia*, Revista Estratégia (4), Instituto de Estudos Estratégicos e Internacionais.

² Cann, J. P. (1998), *Contra-Insurreição em África, 1961-1974 - O Modo Português de Fazer a Guerra*. Estoril: Edições Atena

³ ALEXANDRE, Valentim (2017). *Contra o Vento: Portugal, o Império e a Maré Anticolonial (1945-1960)*. Lisboa: Temas e Debates. ISBN: 978-989-644-457-0, pp. 11-17

⁴ Idem, pp. 20 *et seqs.*

⁵ Aires Oliveira, P. (2017, May 24). *Decolonization in Portuguese Africa*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History. Ed. Retrieved 25 Jul. 2018, from <http://africanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e41>, p. 3 *et seqs*

⁶ CALVET DE MAGALHÃES (1987). José, *Portugal e os Estados Unidos — relações no domínio da defesa*, in *Estratégia. Revista de Estudos Internacionais*, Número 3, p. 35-36.

⁷ ROCHA, Jorge Silva (2015). *Planeamento de Defesa e Alianças. Portugal nos Primeiros Anos da Guerra Fria (1945-1959)*. Lisboa: Comissão Portuguesa de História Militar. ISBN: 978-989-8593-04-7, p. 92 *et seqs.*

⁸ On the 1944 Portuguese-American agreement see Rodrigues, Luís Nuno (2004), “O Acordo Luso-Americano dos Açores de 1944 / The 1944 Portuguese-American Azores Agreement”, and Rodrigues, Luís Nuno, et al (Coord.) *Portugal e o Atlântico, 60 Anos dos Acordos dos Açores / Portugal and the Atlantic, 60 Years of the Azores Agreements*, (2004), Lisboa, CEHCP. See also Rodrigues, Luís Nuno, (2005), *No Coração do Atlântico: os Estados Unidos e os Açores (1939-1948) / At the Heart of the Atlantic: the United States and the Azores (1939-1948)*, Prefácio Editora, Lisboa.

⁹ Rocha, J. M. L. S. (2018), *Defence planning and alliances: Portugal in the early years of the Cold War (1945–59)*, *Portuguese Journal of Social Science*, 17:1, pp. 63–77, doi: 10.1386/pjss.17.1.63_1.

See also Telo, António José, *Portugal e a NATO, Um pequeno poder numa grande aliança / Portugal and NATO, a small power in a major alliance*, in Ferreira, José Medeiros, (2001) (Coord.), *Política Externa e Política de Defesa do Portugal Democrático / Foreign Policy and Defence Policy of the Democratic Portugal*, Lisboa, Edições Colibri, pp. 124.

¹⁰ Rodrigues, Luís Nuno, (2002), *Kennedy-Salazar: a crise de uma Aliança. As relações Luso-Americanas entre 1961 e 1963 / Kennedy-Salazar: the crisis of an Alliance. Portuguese-American relations between 1961 and 1963*, Lisboa, Editorial Notícias, pp. 26-27.

¹¹ ANTUNES, José Freire (2000), *Portugal na Guerra do Petróleo: os Açores e as Vitórias de Israel, 1973*. Carnaxide: Edeline. ISBN: 972-95032-7-3, p. 50.

¹² Idem, p. 53 *et seqs.*

¹³ Idem, p. 60 *et seqs.*