

NATO'S REINFORCED MARITIME POSTURE AND ITS IMPACT FOR PORTUGAL¹

O REFORÇO DA POSTURA MARÍTIMA DA ALIANÇA ATLÂNTICA E O IMPACTO PARA PORTUGAL

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Abstract

In 2018, NATO decided to reinforce its maritime posture and soon after, in 2019, to restructure its standing naval forces. Over the years, Portugal has contributed significantly with its seapower to the commitments of the Atlantic Alliance and is now called upon to participate in robust maritime forces that can respond to the challenges of the future. This article analyses NATO's reasons for reinforcing its maritime posture, what this decision entails, and the possible impact of these changes for Portugal. The findings show that, over recent years, significant changes in the global geostrategic environment have influenced NATO's decision to reinforce its maritime posture. To achieve this, it will need standing naval forces that are robust enough to deal with current maritime risks and threats. This presents several challenges, but also opportunities that Portugal can exploit if it wishes to play a larger role in strengthening NATO's maritime posture.

Keywords: Atlantic Alliance; Maritime Posture; Seapower; Impact for Portugal.

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Resumo

A NATO decidiu, em 2018, reforçar a sua postura marítima e, logo depois, em 2019, reestruturar as suas forças marítimas permanentes. Portugal, que tem contribuído significativamente ao longo dos anos com meios do seu poder militar no mar para os compromissos da Aliança Atlântica, vê-se agora confrontado com a participação em forças marítimas robustas que possam responder aos desafios do futuro. Este artigo analisa a necessidade de uma nova postura marítima da Aliança Atlântica, de que forma se manifesta e que impacto para Portugal podem ter as mudanças que se perspectivam. As conclusões mostram que as alterações significativas no ambiente geoestratégico mundial ocorridas nos últimos anos influenciaram a decisão da NATO de reforçar a sua postura marítima e que esta se consubstancia na necessidade de forças marítimas permanentes suficientemente robustas para lidarem com os atuais riscos e ameaças no domínio marítimo. Elencam, finalmente, vários desafios, mas também oportunidades, que se colocam a Portugal e que podem, se devidamente aproveitadas, contribuir para o reforço da postura marítima da Aliança Atlântica.

Palavras-chave: Aliança Atlântica; Postura Marítima; Poder militar no mar; Impacto para Portugal.

1. Introduction

NATO's 2010 strategic concept aimed to adapt the organization to a geostrategic environment where new threats to the security environment were emerging. The concept consists of three pillars (2010, p. 5): collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. The preface acknowledges that:

While the world is changing, NATO's essential mission will remain the same: to ensure that the Alliance remains an unparalleled community of freedom, peace, security and shared values. [This will require the ability] to deploy robust military forces where and when required for our security.

After the strategic concept was approved, NATO published its maritime strategy (NMS) in January 2011 (NATO, 2011). In this document, the organization acknowledged that collective security could not be achieved without maritime security².

The maritime strategy (NATO, 2011) is fully aligned with the strategic concept and defines the roles of NATO's maritime forces (Figure 1): collective defence, crisis management, cooperative security, and maritime security.

² Since 2008, Somali piracy had irreparably compromised freedom of navigation in the Western Indian Ocean. To address this problem, NATO launched Operation *Allied Provider*, and later Operations *Allied Protector* and *Ocean Shield*. The latter only ended on 16 December 2016. During this period, several task forces were established, with different participants and compositions but all with the same goal: combating maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia.



Alliance Maritime Strategy

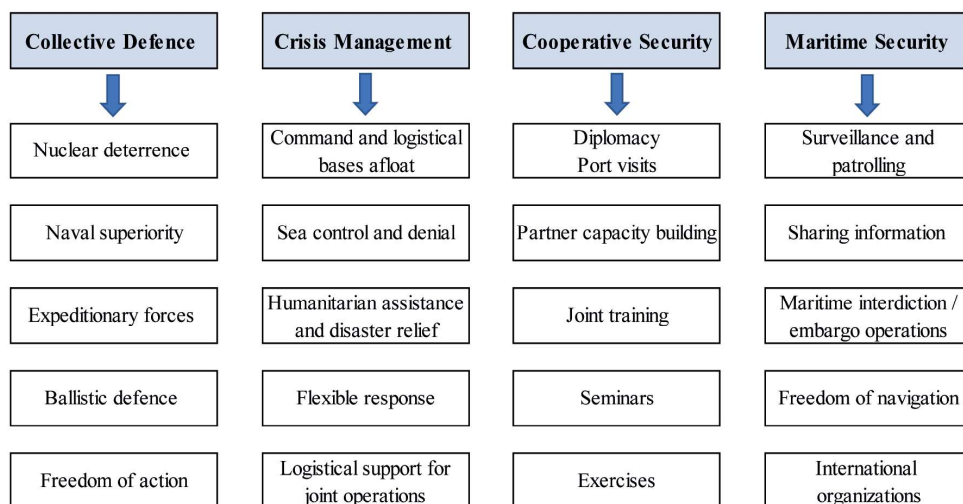


Figure 1 – Alliance Maritime Strategy

Source: NATO (2011).

NATO is aware that seapower not only provides mobility, lethality, range, interoperability, resilience and great flexibility, but is also a powerful instrument to convey strategic messages. In 2018, NATO decided to reinforce its maritime posture, which is an essential aspect of its ability to deter attacks and protect its allies. That decision led to the approval, in 2019, of a new policy on NATO's standing maritime forces.

Portugal's national white defence papers reflect the country's desire to play an active role in the alliances of which it is a member, especially NATO.

Paragraph three of the Strategic Concept on National Defence (CMR, 2013), Alliances and partnerships, states that:

The vital alliance for Portugal's security and defence is the Atlantic Alliance. Defending our territorial integrity and national cohesion are inseparable from our participation in NATO. The acknowledgement of Portugal as an international security provider, its participation in overseas military missions and contribution to the security the global commons takes place mainly within the framework of NATO.

Furthermore, as the Military Strategic Concept (MDN, 2014) states:

Collective Defence - Protecting the territory of allied nations. The concept of Collective Defence is enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and its aim is to ensure a collective commitment to defend the allied nations in the event of an attack against one or more members of the Alliance; this will require a credible defence force.

Moreover, strategic objective no. 7 of the Strategic Directive of the Armed Forces General Staff 2018-2021 (EMGFA, 2018) states that:

To increase the Armed Forces' contribution to National Defence through external action. This objective aims to increase the participation of the Armed Forces in missions and operations within the framework of NATO, [...], as well as through other bilateral and multilateral partnerships, according to the priorities set by the political authority and to the need to ensure their interoperability with allied forces.

However, to meet the challenges posed by the Atlantic Alliance's reinforced maritime posture, Portugal will need, as described by Melo (2019, pp. 35-36), "a useful and minimally capable navy", that is, a navy that can provide presence, deterrence and power projection. This will require capabilities, which in turn require investment.

Therefore, this study is relevant not only because it addresses a current topic, but also because it analyses the possible consequences for Portugal of NATO's political and military decision to reinforce its maritime posture and restructure its standing naval forces, as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with it.

This study addresses NATO's reinforced maritime posture and its impact for Portugal.

The study uses an inductive reasoning methodology, a qualitative research strategy and a case study research design. The data were collected through a literature review and semi-structured interviews with recognised experts with various perspectives on the topic (Table 1).

Table 1- Interviewed experts

Interviewee	Role
VADM Alexandre Reis Rodrigues	Former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Navy – 1st Portuguese Admiral to command a NATO naval Force (APR 95 to APR 96)
Mr. Manuel Rosa Mendes	Navy Officer in the Reserves A4 – Budget Officer – Executive Management Division - NATO International Staff (IS)
Dra. Catarina A. Lopes	<i>Deputy Head of Section, Plans, Operations Division - IS</i>
BG Nuno Lemos Pires	Deputy Director at the Directorate-General for National Defence Policy of the Ministry of National Defence
VADM José Pereira da Cunha	Former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Navy – 3rd Portuguese Admiral to command a NATO naval force (JAN 2009 to JAN 2010)
Ambassador João Mira Gomes	Portuguese Ambassador to Spain Former Portuguese Permanent Representative to NATO Former Secretary of State for National Defence and War Veterans
CAPT Grad. in COM José Vizinha Mirones	SNMG1 Commander during the second semester of 2020
CDR Ferreira de Azevedo	Former Navy representative to DELNATO
Professor Maria Raquel Freire	Full Professor of International Relations - Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra
ADM Fernando Melo Gomes	Former Chief of Staff of the Navy – 2nd Portuguese Admiral to command a NATO naval force
VADM Alberto Silvestre Correia	Naval Commander. MILREP from 2016 to 2019 and 4th Portuguese Admiral to command a NATO naval force

Three delimitations were defined for this study: time, location and content (Santos & Lima, 2019, p. 42).

Temporally, the study covers the period from 2010 (the publication of NATO's current Strategic Concept) to the present day.

In terms of content, it addresses the issues arising from NATO's reinforced maritime posture, the reform of its standing maritime forces and its impact for Portugal.

In terms of location, this study covers NATO's Area of Responsibility (AOR), where its standing maritime forces operate.

2. Reinforcing the Atlantic Alliance's maritime posture

This second chapter examines why NATO must reinforce its maritime posture. Specifically, it addresses the geopolitical ambitions of two global powers, Russia and China, which may pose significant challenges to the Atlantic Alliance in the future.

2.1. Actions by the Russian Federation

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to an escalation of sanctions, dangerous rhetoric and deep distrust that resulted in brinkmanship by Moscow at levels that had not been seen since the Cold War (Day, 2018). Day (2018, p. 2) even states that, at the time, NATO-Russia relations were "close to historic lows".

Since then, NATO has focused on the territories of its Eastern European allies, as outlined in its defence and deterrence posture. That same year, NATO implemented assurance measures to respond to Russia's increasing assertiveness³, which aimed to communicate the Atlantic Alliance's cohesion, and especially to reassure the countries on that border, which felt insecure due to their proximity to Russia. These measures also contributed to "reassure" public opinion in those countries, which had begun pressuring NATO to reinforce its presence, capabilities and preparedness. The goal was to change the balance of conventional forces to deter a "resurgent, revisionist and increasingly capable Russia". One of the tasks assigned to NATO forces was developing a Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea region (Day, 2018, p. 1). This posture was recently reaffirmed at the NATO Summit of Heads of State and Government, held in Brussels on 14 June 2021 (NATO, 2021a).

For Day (2018, p. 2), in addition to these conventional military actions, the critical variables that drove NATO's defence and deterrence posture along its eastern flank were the scale and speed at which Russia was modernising its military power, a change in doctrine and an increasingly aggressive nuclear rhetoric. Additionally, the deployment of modern anti-access / area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities along NATO's entire eastern flank gave Russia the power to reduce (or even block) the freedom of movement of allied forces in those waters (Day, 2018).

In September 2018, Russia conducted a large-scale exercise codenamed Vostok 2018. It was its largest exercise since 1981 (when 100,000 troops participated in exercise Zapad-81), with 300,000 soldiers from all branches of the Russian armed forces taking part in the drill. The Vostok 2018 exercise included 80 ships, including Russian navy combat and logistic ships (TASS, 2018). Vostok 2018 was part of a pre-planned cycle of large-scale exercises that

³ This assertiveness consists of constantly showcasing its military might and capabilities in surprise drills, which aim to demonstrate the flexibility and speed at which Russia is able to mobilise large numbers of troops and forces on NATO's eastern border.

involved all Russian military commands and aimed to strengthen command and control (C2) and forces integration. These exercises aimed to test and improve troop preparedness, strategic mobility, military logistics and joint operations between armed force branches. However, the navy was particularly relevant in 2018, when it was present in different maritime areas, including the Sea of Okhotsk, the Bering Sea and the Avacha and Kronotsky Bays, in Kamchatka Peninsula in far eastern Russia, which shows that Moscow wished to test its ability to conduct maritime operations in different theatres (Boulègue, 2018).

Moreover, Russia has engaged in aggressive disinformation campaigns in the media, in order to sow discord and confusion in NATO countries. For Day, Russia's meddling in Western democratic processes through election rigging and cyber interference was simply the continuation of Moscow's "long history of political interference". Finally, Russia has used its energy resources to intimidate and influence neighbouring countries for several years.

According to Tome (2018), Russia's outward assertiveness was largely the result of Putin's vision:

[...] the implosion of the USSR was a "geopolitical disaster" because Russia lost something that it "owned", creating an imbalance of power in the world which the United States exploited to become a unipolar power, and NATO exploited to expand, but now Russia is again emerging as a great power willing to take its place in a multipolar power structure. (Tome, 2018, p. 70)

As Howard and Czekaj have admitted (2019, p. 13), of all post-Soviet territories, Putin's Russia is a powerful force that can confront any of its neighbours, whether or not they are members of NATO, including the Baltic States, Romania or Bulgaria, if they somehow find themselves isolated and without foreign support.

The "NATO 2030: United for a New Era" agenda approved at a Brussels Summit held in 21 June 2021 describes an era marked by geostrategic competition, in which the Atlantic Alliance must adapt to meet the needs of an increasingly demanding strategic environment, marked by the return of systemic rivalry, a continuously aggressive Russia, the growing influence of China and of emerging disruptive technologies, in addition to numerous transnational risks and threats (NATO, 2020, p. 17). As for Russia, the document states that Moscow has attempted to gain power over the former Soviet territories, regularly undermining their sovereignty and territorial integrity and systematically blocking these nations from joining NATO. This agenda sets a higher level of ambition for NATO and provides clear guidelines on how the Atlantic Alliance can continue to adapt politically and militarily to address existing, new and future threats and challenges by performing its three core tasks (collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security) and reviewing the current Strategic Concept (NATO, 2021a).

On the other hand, Russian aggression is not limited to Ukraine and Georgia. Moscow has had an assertive posture in both the Arctic and the North Atlantic and increased its air and naval activity near important maritime choke points in the Barents, Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Seas. It has also attempted to gain influence in the Mediterranean basin and in Africa. In addition to using conventional military power, Russia has taken more radical actions using an impressive hybrid toolkit that ranges from offensive cyber operations to state-sanctioned assassinations (NATO, 2020, p. 16).

Day had expressed a similar opinion in 2018, when he warned that, if the recent past was any indication, Russia was prepared to use all means at its disposal – from hybrid tactics to conventional operations and nuclear threats – to leverage its power over the Atlantic Alliance. That is, Moscow's ultimate goal was to “break Allied consensus and reduce Washington's say in the future of European security” (Day, 2018, p. 2).

However, in a seminar organized by the National Defence Institute, the Portuguese Institute of International Relations and the Luso-American Development Foundation on *The United States, NATO and European Security. The future of the Atlantic Alliance*, held on 24 November 2020, Livia Franco, Pedro Costa Pereira and Charles Kupchan agreed that the election of the new US President was an opportunity to strengthen, and even renew, the “transatlantic link”, to establish a true partnership in which NATO would continue to play a major role in Euro-Atlantic security. Therefore, the European countries of the Atlantic Alliance should aim to become autonomous in terms of capabilities, as this will be essential to ensure that the transatlantic partnership is not merely a relationship of dependence (Franco, Pereira, & Kupchan, 2020).

US President Joe Biden expressed a similar same opinion at the Munich security conference, reiterating that “the transatlantic alliance is the strong foundation on which our collective security and our shared prosperity are built”, and that “the United States is fully committed to our NATO Alliance, and I welcome Europe's growing investment in military capabilities that enable our shared defence”. Biden acknowledged that Putin wishes to weaken the European project and NATO: “He wants to undermine the transatlantic unity and our resolve, because it's so much easier for the Kremlin to bully and threaten individual states than it is to negotiate with a strong and closely united transatlantic community” (Nikkei Asia, 2021).

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Russia's invasion of Crimea has shifted the focus back to collective defence and to the preparedness of truly capable naval forces. This led to the political and military decision to strengthen the Alliance's maritime posture in 2018. This decision aimed to reinforce NATO's seapower capabilities by having forces that can be deployed in high-intensity scenarios at high readiness.

The reason for this reinforced maritime posture and for NATO to restructure its standing forces can be found in all official summit declarations since the Wales Summit held in 2014. The official statement of the Brussels Summit (2018) confirmed that NATO clearly wished to strengthen its maritime posture.

2.2. Actions by the People's Republic of China

In 2020, the Department of Defense annual report to the US Congress, titled *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, openly states that Beijing was attempting to establish a new overseas military base that would allow it to project (and sustain) military power at significantly greater distances from its territory (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020). The report states that China's military strategy is based on the concept of active defence, which combines the principles of strategic defence with offensive action at the operational and tactical levels. This accurately describes China's

actions to defend its interests outside its borders. Active defence is based on the principle of avoiding armed conflict while maintaining the ability to respond if (and when) challenged (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 27).

In 2019, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) mainly focused on longstanding regional threats. However, it was already taking on a larger role worldwide, as defined in China's defence policy and military strategy. Beijing stressed the need to meet the targets set for 2020 and 2035, which aimed to align the PLA's transformation with China's overall modernisation to provide the country a "world-class" military by the end of 2049 (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020). The Chinese government did not explain what it meant by "world-class" military⁴, even though this objective was first announced by Xi Jinping in 2017 (O'Hanlon, 2020). The report mentioned above, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, stated only that China's national strategy indicated that Beijing was likely to attempt to develop, by the middle of this century, a military at least equal, or even superior, to the US military or to that of any other great power that China might consider a threat to its sovereignty, security and development.

Moreover, the programmes to modernise the Chinese navy left no room for doubt. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had modern and flexible capabilities, as it had replaced its older generations of ships with limited capabilities with new multi-role combatants⁵. Since 2019, the PLAN has modern naval capabilities with advanced anti-ship, anti-aircraft and anti-submarine weapon systems and sensors. The US Department of Defense reported that, in 2019, China had more seapower assets than any other country, with a battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines, including more than 130 major surface combatants (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 44).

A 2019 white paper titled *China's National Defense in the New Era* addresses Beijing's sovereignty, security and interests. The document clearly states that safeguarding all of the above is the main goal of China's national defence in the new era. One of the many objectives that China has set for its defence is precisely safeguarding its overseas interests (People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 7). China's military strategic direction for this new era is clear: it follows the principles of defence, self-defence and post-strike response, and adopts the active defence model, which states that "we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked" (People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 9).

China's overseas interests are crucial to its national interests. One of the missions of the armed forces is to protect the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese people, organizations and institutions abroad. To achieve this, the PLA actively promotes international security and military cooperation and adapts the mechanisms required to protect those interests. To address any deficiencies in its foreign operations and support, the PLA will focus on building capabilities that can be deployed to the far seas and procure overseas logistics facilities that

⁴ *China's 2019 Defense White Paper* lists only the strategic objectives to develop China's national and military defence in the new era, which include "fully transform the people's armed forces into world-class forces by the mid-21st century" (People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 10).

⁵ The PLAN implemented an ambitious shipbuilding and modernisation programme that included submarines, surface combatants, amphibious warfare ships, aircraft carriers and auxiliary ships, as well as an extensive programme to develop advanced weapons, sensors and command and control capabilities (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020).

enhance its ability to accomplish its military tasks (People's Republic of China, 2019, pp. 14-15).

Thus, Beijing has offered an official justification for the need to acquire military bases "overseas". According to the report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, Chinese officials consider that having military bases abroad not only provides China the ability to project power but enables it to support future conflicts, send diplomatic signals, enact political change, develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation and train military forces. Finally, the same report suggests that a Chinese military logistics network could enable China to monitor US operational intelligence (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 129).

China opted for logistics facilities in the South Atlantic because, in 2019, 9% of China's total oil imports came from Angola (the country was China's fourth crude oil supplier that year) (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 170). The problem of general maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea may have also played a role in this choice, especially as China's military base in Djibouti, established in 2017, enabled it to have naval assets in those waters, which are regularly employed to escort civilian ships travelling through the Gulf of Aden. In 2019, the Chinese navy deployed its 31st, 32nd and 33rd task forces since 2008 and continued to conduct counter piracy operations in those areas of the Western Indian Ocean (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 125).

In May of this year (2021), in an interview to Associated Press, US General Stephen Townsend, Commander of U.S. Africa Command, warned that a growing threat from China is emerging not only in the Pacific, but also in the Atlantic. The general stated that Beijing was in the process of acquiring a new military base overseas, this time on Africa's west coast, to provide logistical and technical support to its submarines and aircraft carriers. Townsend added that China had already approached several countries, from Mauritania to Namibia, to inquire about establishing this type of facility, which will be critical in any future conflicts (Castronuovo, 2021).

According to the white paper *China's National Defense in the New Era*, international strategic competition was on the rise in 2019. The US had adjusted its national security strategy and had significantly increased its defence expenditure to acquire nuclear, space, cyber and missile defence capabilities. Beijing stated that this policy by the US had undermined global strategic stability. NATO continued its enlargement, reinforced its military presence in Central and Eastern Europe and conducted several military exercises. Russia was determined to strengthen its nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities for strategic containment, while simultaneously protecting its territory and strategic interests. The European Union (EU) was attempting to boost the integration of its security and defence, in order to become more independent. The international strategic environment was thus undergoing profound changes (People's Republic of China, 2019, p. 2).

At the last NATO Summit, held in Brussels on 14 June 2021, China's international policies and growing external influence were viewed with concern. One point that was stressed was how China's ambitions and assertive behaviour presented systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to the security of the Atlantic Alliance, and that Beijing's coercive policies (which were in direct opposition to the principles set out in

the Washington Treaty) were further cause for concern. China was adding more warheads to its nuclear arsenal at a rapid pace but was secretive about the modernisation of its military and was cooperating militarily with Russia by participating in exercises in the Euro-Atlantic area. The official Summit declaration stresses the Atlantic Alliance's concerns regarding China's frequent lack of transparency and use of disinformation (NATO, 2021a).

Therefore, it was mainly for geostrategic reasons that NATO felt the need to strengthen its maritime posture and adapt its standing maritime forces to the current environment of geopolitical competition. Moreover, some member states have expressed concern that the Atlantic Alliance is lagging behind in comparison with the growing assertiveness of a revisionist power (Russia) and a rising power (China), and that this will require a response.

Given China's, and especially Russia's posture in a variety of maritime areas that often intersect with NATO's area of interest, the only way for the Atlantic Alliance to respond effectively to the numerous challenges posed by both powers is by increasing its seapower capabilities, and by ensuring that they are more capable, robust and equipped with more technologically advanced systems.

Against this background, it is foreseeable that a geopolitical competition will take place between China and Russia and the West. For Ribeiro (2020, p. 3), this conflict will force "NATO and the European Union to step up their involvement inside and outside their borders, in an attempt to counter the strategic expansion of these two actors".

3. Restructuring the Standing Naval Forces

This chapter addresses the process to restructure the Standing Naval Forces (SNF), which are both a nuclear maritime capability and one of the main instruments of the Atlantic Alliance's maritime posture.

3.1. Reasons for restructuring the Standing Naval Forces

As a result of NATO's political decision to reinforce its maritime posture, the military authorities were given the task of reviewing and approving a new concept of employment and a new policy for SNF. The resulting document was approved on 31 July 2019. It aimed to create the conditions to restructure these forces, which NATO relies on to achieve its Military Strategic Objectives. Although this document is confidential, and therefore its contents cannot be reproduced, it is clear that it aimed to review the composition, missions and tasks of the standing naval forces, as well as to improve some specific aspects relating to operations, chain of command, and command and control, in order to improve their efficiency, combat capabilities and preparedness, and consequently their deterrence capacity and ability to protect the integrity of the Atlantic Alliance.

3.2. SNF missions

As defined by NATO (2021b), through their presence and participation in cooperative operations and activities, SNF contribute to the security of the Atlantic Alliance through three essential functions: strategic, security and warfighting.

The strategic function refers to the fact that the presence of naval forces creates strategic and deterrent effects, as it demonstrates that NATO is willing to use its assets without constraint. Having flexible naval forces at high readiness provides decision makers a broad range of political and military options (NATO, 2021b).

As for the second function, maritime security has become one of NATO's main maritime activities. Maritime security operations aim to ensure a safe and secure maritime environment. Furthermore, as naval forces are ready and flexible, they can be deployed in a variety of missions and tasks.

The warfighting function is what makes naval forces a crucial deterrent in peacetime and in crisis. They can be deployed in conventional, nuclear deterrence and ballistic missile defence operations to promote the security of the Atlantic Alliance, provide deterrence and defence in adjacent waters, and project power. These standing naval forces are designed to operate in the full range of military operations and transition relatively easily from low-intensity to medium- or even high-intensity operations.

Naval exercises are essential to develop combat skills and increase interoperability between allied forces, so they are prepared for all types of operations at all times. Some specific areas and skills should be included in future exercises, including, for example, protecting sea lines of communication, providing rapid reinforcements to available capabilities at all times, defending against carrier strikes, projecting amphibious forces, anti-submarine warfare capacity, countering hybrid threats in the maritime domain, missile defence, and countering threats in cyberspace (NATO, 2021b).

On the other hand, the SNF are rapid response forces that can be used against any potential opponent, which provide NATO with a permanent, credible and flexible maritime capability for the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force Maritime, a set of forces that can be deployed rapidly to respond to any unforeseen events, and that can be employed in operations and other activities, when and where needed.

The SNF's involvement in crisis management is another sign that the Atlantic Alliance is committed to supporting crisis response operations, as well as to ensuring the ability to sustain and support efficient expeditionary forces.

Finally, these forces are an instrument of cooperative security that offers valuable opportunities to improve interoperability, regional security, and stability by supporting partners' capability building efforts through port visits, training and exercises. The constant presence of these forces and their availability for a variety of tasks provides an important contribution to maritime security. Rather than operate in a specific region, they can be deployed in the AOR of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), as well as in operations outside the AOR, upon decision of the North Atlantic Council.

3.3. SNF's composition

According to MARCOM (2021), the SNF operate under the Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM), which has been headquartered in Northwood, UK, since it became the operational command for all Atlantic Alliance maritime operations in December 2012.

According to NATO (2021b) the SNF are available at all times because they are an integral

part of the maritime component of the NATO Response Force (NRF). The SNF are divided into four individual groups: Standing NATO Maritime Group (SNMG) 1 and 2 and Standing NATO Mine Counter Measures Group (SNMCMG) 1 and 2.

These standing maritime groups are multinational forces made up of ships from several Allied countries, which perform different types of missions, from exercises to operations, as determined by NATO. They are instrumental because they are the visible face of the Alliance's presence in different areas and regions, they demonstrate the solidarity among Alliance members, conduct routine diplomatic visits to different countries, support partner engagement and provide a wide range of maritime military capabilities to the missions they are assigned.

The SNMG operate at any time the operational needs of the Atlantic Alliance require it. The SNMCMG are multinational forces that are primarily deployed in explosive ordnance search and disposal operations and conduct live munitions disposal operations to minimise the threat of mines from World War II that are still a danger today.

Both SNF groups are an essential part of the NRF and perform a wide range of roles, including humanitarian support. They can be deployed at short notice and are generally the first assets to enter a theatre of operations. When the NRF are activated, these four groups are enhanced and reinforced with assets on standby. Even though each SNF group usually operates as a cohesive and autonomous naval task group, they can be combined for exercises, NRF operations, or specific operations.

Each SNMG includes a commander, an international staff, and several designated units consisting of two to six ships from contributing Allied nations (usually frigates or destroyers), a replenishment tanker, with one of the ships in the force operating as the lead ship. Both SNMCMG include a commander and an international staff, a command and control ship, a minimum number of naval Mine Counter Measures (MCM) units and an MCM dive team.

3.4. SNF' efficiency

To address this subtopic, a content analysis of the interviews conducted with experts from different areas (identified in Table 1 in the introduction to this article).

Most interviewees agreed that the Atlantic Alliance must reinforce its naval presence in several regions, especially in critical areas, or else it runs the risk of leaving empty spaces that Russia and China will not hesitate to occupy in the short term. On the other hand, the US' strategic withdrawal in many geographical areas (to focus on the Indo-Pacific region) means that European member nations must be more involved in their area of strategic interest. Some interviewees (A. R. Rodrigues, email interview, 15 December 2020; C. A. Lopes, email interview, 16 December 2020; M. R. Mendes, email interview, 2 January 2021) added that SNF deployments must be planned in close coordination with the navies of member nations because the Atlantic Alliance's naval forces can only become more efficient by leveraging their ability to link the SNF with national task groups equipped with advanced capabilities that can deploy quickly.

Some interviewees (N. L. Pires, email interview, 23 December 2020; J. P. Cunha, email interview, 27 December 2020) stated that more than efficiency, the SNF's effectiveness may

be at stake if they are deployed in missions that require a greater number of ships and, especially, more combat power. Therefore, allies must step up their collaborative efforts to provide the SNF with capabilities that enable them to accomplish the tasks required by NATO, while exploiting all opportunities to gain visibility and garner public support in various countries. The interviewees argued that it makes no sense to provide assets that cannot be deployed in a context of nuclear threat or generalised conflict.

As some interviewees noted (F. Azevedo, email interview, 18 January 2021; J. V. Mirones, email interview, 9 January 2021), the SNF have performed different roles over the years. However, as available and flexible forces, they are able to perform a wide range of tasks and are limited only by international maritime law. For example, they were used in counter-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean, and, later, to provide support during the migration crisis in Southern Europe. However, after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the SNF began to be deployed in missions to protect the Eastern European allies. Therefore, the interviewees predict that how they will be used in the future will be the topic of extensive discussion.

Finally, some interviewees listed some problems raised by these forces, in their opinion: member states find it difficult to provide the force flow required for the mission; they must be capable of projecting and sustaining forces; they require appropriate training; they require operational skills and availability at short notice (A.S. Correia, email interview, 25 January 2021; F. Azevedo, *op. cit.*).

3.5. Advantages of SNF

Another important aspect that should be addressed is whether SNF will regain their former relevance, as in the past it was common to have robust naval forces with several frigate / destroyer type vessels and at least one fleet replenishment tanker. This will help identify measures that can be used to encourage Member States to increase their contributions to SNF. To achieve this, a new content analysis was performed on the interviews.

Overall, interviewees agree that Europe clearly depends on the US and that the robustness of SNF reflects the US interests at any given moment (A. R. Rodrigues, *op. cit.*; J. M. Gomes, telephone interview, 6 January 2021). However, for some interviewees (A. R. Rodrigues, *op. cit.*; M. R. Mendes, *op. cit.*), significant cuts in the budgets allocated to maintaining existing naval military capabilities, in order to channel funds for other capabilities, could help explain the change in posture by many allied countries.

As the Cold War ended, the focus shifted to peace support operations, and the emergence of disruptive threats – such as transnational terrorism – over the last 30 years has led many countries to disinvest in their pure combat capabilities. As a result, there is currently a shortage of conventional combat capabilities in a variety of areas, but especially naval and air capabilities. In addition to this disinvestment, many countries have simultaneously reinforced their coastguard capabilities or other assets suitable for low-intensity operations (F. Azevedo, *op. cit.*; J. V. Mirones, *op. cit.*). These choices are reflected in today's navies, which lack quality and combat capabilities. Therefore, the Alliance must focus on a clear maritime strategy (F. Azevedo, *op. cit.*; J. M. Gomes, *op. cit.*; J. V. Mirones, *op. cit.*). Some

interviewees believe that a new strategic concept that clearly reaffirms the importance of the Atlantic and the South, in general, in a true 360° approach by NATO, could be the turning point in the current status quo (F. Azevedo, *op. cit.*; J. V. Mirones, *op. cit.*).

The Atlantic Alliance has internal problems due to lack of cohesion and the degradation of the transatlantic relationship, which deteriorated even further during Donald Trump's US presidency. This is compounded by the fact that many elites are virtually illiterate in matters of defence and security, especially with regards to their maritime aspects. These factors have contributed to make the SNF less attractive (F. M. Gomes, email interview, 21 January 2021; M. R. Freire, email interview, 18 January 2021).

Finally, some measures were proposed to mitigate the effects of this lack of attractiveness and increase the number of contributions to the SNF. One possible measure would be to adjust the way operations are planned to include specialised (and more complex) activities and to integrate the different areas of military operations, as this would maximize the benefits of participating for Allies (C. A. Lopes, *op. cit.*). Another measure refers to the need to adapt the capabilities that will be allocated in a more flexible way to include less robust (and therefore less costly) assets (J. M. Gomes, *op. cit.*). A third measure would be to create a more flexible model of resource allocation. This could involve, for example, creating a SNF in which the ships would not have to remain together at all times, that is, the ships would meet only for major exercises, after which they would return to their respective bases, while still being deployable at short notice. This would be less costly and would not significantly affect the capabilities of contributing countries. However, the downside of this option is that the force's ability to respond quickly to unexpected events (crises or conflicts) would decrease (A. S. Correia, *op. cit.*).

Based on the above analysis, by reinforcing its maritime posture, NATO acknowledges the need to restructure its SNF to make them more capable and credible, and able to deal with the threats that are likely to emerge at the geopolitical level. These forces must be reinforced with modern naval capabilities and appropriate combat capabilities, must be capable of performing the full range of military tasks, and be deployable in high-intensity missions. Finally, these naval forces must have high standards of training and preparedness, be able to respond rapidly, not only during ongoing peacetime operations, but especially in the event of crises and conflicts.

For this to happen, SNF' lack of attractiveness must be addressed and overcome. This will only be achieved by changing the strategic focus of policy makers and by solving the internal problems of the Atlantic Alliance, which the new strategic concept should address. If this is done, the SNF may return to the level of excellence they have been known for in the past.

4. Impact for Portugal

This chapter addresses how the NATO's reinforced maritime posture and subsequent restructuring of the SNF will affect Portugal, based exclusively on the content analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the experts mentioned above.

4.1. Political awareness

As most Allies continue to find it difficult to generate naval capabilities for the SNF, the interviewees were asked if they believe that Portugal's policy makers are aware of the importance of the Alliance's reinforced maritime posture and of member nations' contributions to the SNF.

The answers were divided into two main groups: those who simply stated that this awareness does not exist (A. R. Rodrigues, *op. cit.*; F. M. Gomes, *op. cit.*), and the majority, who agree that it does exist, but that political awareness does not necessarily mean more investment in capabilities, as other areas of governance tend to be given priority, which invariably leads to increasingly smaller defence budgets (A. S. Correia, *op. cit.*; F. Azevedo, *op. cit.*; J. P. Cunha, *op. cit.*; M. R. Freire, *op. cit.*; M. R. Mendes, *op. cit.*; N. L. Pires, *op. cit.*).

4.2. Allocation of resources to SNF

As Ocean Patrol Vessels (OPV) are assets that can be deployed in current missions, including low intensity operations, the interviewees were asked if they agreed that NATO should accept these vessels as contributions to SNF and, if so, what type of vessel would be the most useful addition to their capabilities.

The interviewees had different opinions regarding this issue. Some stated that OPV should not be accepted by the Atlantic Alliance as a contribution to the SNF (F. Azevedo, *op. cit.*; J. P. Cunha, *op. cit.*), while others argued that this is not only possible but desirable (A. S. Correia, *op. cit.*; F. M. Gomes, *op. cit.*; M. R. Mendes, *op. cit.*), and some felt that it should only be done as a last resort and only in low intensity missions (J. M. Gomes, *op. cit.*; J. V. Mirones, *op. cit.*). Some interviewees argued that allocating these vessels to SNF may be inevitable in the future due to scarcity of resources (N. L. Pires, *op. cit.*) and that these forces' new concept of operations already includes OPV as units that can be used in maritime security operations (MSO), as long as they have essential command and control (C2) capabilities.

As for what would be required to prepare OPV for deployment in a SNF, there were several proposals: integrating them into the naval force's C2 networks (A. R. Rodrigues, *op. cit.*; A. S. Correia, *op. cit.*; F. M. Gomes, *op. cit.*; M. R. Mendes, *op. cit.*) or providing them with underway replenishment capabilities (M. R. Mendes, *op. cit.*); and substantially increasing their self-defence and combat capabilities (F. Azevedo, *op. cit.*; N. L. Pires, *op. cit.*).

4.3. Gulf of Guinea

Several NATO members have expressed concern over the instability in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG), and this is especially worrying for Southern European countries (Portugal in particular), as a large part of their energy is supplied by that region. Thus, the interviewees were asked if they agreed that, by participating more in the Atlantic Alliance's maritime operations, Portugal could influence NATO to be more involved and present in that area.

Most interviewees stated that NATO's interest in the GoG region is currently very low (or even non-existent) (A. R. Rodrigues, *op. cit.*; A. S. Correia, *op. cit.*; J. M. Gomes, *op. cit.*; J. P. Cunha, *op. cit.*; M. R. Freire, *op. cit.*). This is due to NATO's difficulty in gaining political

support in the South Atlantic (A. R. Rodrigues, op. cit.), as well as to the fact that this region is not a priority when compared to other more complex and interesting areas (J. M. Gomes, op. cit.; J. P. Cunha, op. cit.). NATO has focused its efforts on countering the threat posed by the Russian Federation and by the conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Therefore, apart from establishing a Hub for the South, it has not shown much interest in the problems that come from the South (A. S. Correia, op. cit.).

However, some interviewees disagreed. Specifically, they argued that, if NATO wished to reinforce its maritime posture to become a relevant player in the global chessboard, it would have to extend its operations “out of area”, and this would include the GoG (F. M. Gomes, op. cit.). Moreover, NATO is constantly adapting and there is a growing consensus that it should pay closer attention to the geostrategic environment beyond the SACEUR AOR (F. Azevedo, op. cit.). Thus, the Atlantic Alliance should focus increasingly more on its southern flank, even if some Member States would prefer that the organization not be too visibly involved in the region. However, NATO’s presence in the GoG may change if (and when) military forces from other global adversaries or competitors become a regular presence in those waters (N. L. Pires, op. cit.).

On the other hand, several interviewees disagreed that increasing the Portuguese contributions to SNF would lead to an increased NATO presence in the GoG (A. S. Correia, op. cit.; J. M. Gomes, op. cit. Mirones, op. cit.). However, some believe that Portugal should define its own areas of strategic interest, which include the GoG (A. R. Rodrigues, op. cit.; F. Azevedo, op. cit.; M. R. Freire, op. cit.).

4.4. Critical capabilities

NATO has acknowledged that it must enhance its nuclear naval combat capabilities. To that end, it has identified a set of critical capabilities that enable it to: protect sea lines of communication; establish robust aircraft carrier groups and amphibious forces; increase anti-submarine warfare (ASW); counter hybrid threats in the maritime environment; suitable air and anti-missile defence; and counter cyber threats in the maritime environment. The interviewees were asked to reflect on how to reinforce these capabilities, i.e., which capabilities should Portugal develop that could also be useful to NATO.

Some interviewees stated that Portugal should look at its (vast) area of interest and choose capabilities that enable it to effectively control those areas. In other words, they believe that Portugal should safeguard its interests and focus on enhancing its ability to operate in the Atlantic, and that this should be a priority, given the country’s geography (A. R. Rodrigues, op. cit. S. Correia, op. cit.; J. M. Gomes, op. cit.; N. L. Pires, op. cit.), but especially because if NATO wishes to reinforce its maritime posture, it will surely ask its Atlantic allies to use their capabilities to patrol this important maritime area (A. S. Correia, op. cit.).

Given Portugal’s geography and its relations with several African countries, it requires expeditionary forces, which in turn require appropriate capabilities, such as a multipurpose logistics ship that can also be used to deploy forces (A. S. Correia, op. cit.; J. M. Gomes, op. cit.; J. P. Cunha, op. cit.) and a replenishment tanker to sustain these forces at sea (A. R. Rodrigues, op. cit. S. Correia, op. cit.; J. M. Gomes, op. cit.; J. V. Mirones, op. cit.; M. R.

Mendes, op. cit.). While these are strategic options for Portugal, they also help strengthen the Alliance's maritime posture.

Several interviewees stated that Portugal should focus on maintaining the capabilities it already has, such as ASW, and reactivate others that it used to have and lost (such as the mine warfare capability) (A. S. Correia, op. cit.; J. V. Mirones, op. cit.; M. R. Mendes, op. cit.; N. L. Pires, op. cit.).

Another essential task is protecting critical maritime infrastructures, such as the submarine cables that cross the maritime areas under national sovereignty and jurisdiction. Some interviewees added that this will require detection and information-sharing capabilities such as networked autonomous vehicles, satellites, stronger cyber defence capabilities and new communication and high speed data transmission technologies (F. Azevedo, op. cit.; N. L. Pires, op. cit.).

However, some interviewees also stated that the priority should be to ensure interoperability in information sharing. This will entail an investment in effective command, control, communications and intelligence systems (F. Azevedo, op. cit.; F. M. Gomes, op. cit.; J. V. Mirones, op. cit.).

4.5. Capability planning

The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is the main process through which NATO identifies, develops and builds the capabilities it requires, both current and future. Given the current scarcity of resources and the fact that critical vessels are nearing the end of their service life, the interviewees were asked how Portugal should invest in building capabilities in the future: as defined in the NDPP, in order to fulfil its responsibilities as a member of the Alliance; or according to a plan based on the national goal of building a navy capable of operating autonomously.

The interviewees' opinions were clearly divided. Some considered that national capabilities can only be built according to national needs (F. Azevedo, op. cit.; J. M. Gomes, op. cit.; N. L. Pires, op. cit.), and that Portugal should focus on its strategic interests. These interviewees argued that the national priorities should always be respected, although they believe that they should include, whenever possible, the capabilities required by NATO.

On the other hand, some interviewees stated that the national capabilities should be developed according to Portugal's responsibilities to the Alliance, but that the national priorities and responsibilities should also be safeguarded (J. V. Mirones, op. cit.; M. R. Freire, op. cit.). One interviewee added that the key to successful force generation is combining the national needs with those of the Alliance (F. M. Gomes, op. cit.).

Another interviewee (A. S. Correia, op. cit.) preferred to approach the issue from two distinct perspectives: safety and security. To ensure freedom of navigation in its areas of responsibility, Portugal should be self-sufficient in terms of safety. With regard to security, the efforts should be coordinated with the allies (as suggested by J. V. Mirones and M. R. Freire).

Finally, one interviewee (J. P. Cunha) mentioned that Portugal has consistently failed to meet the requirements of the NDPP. As a result, its surface and sub-surface ocean capabilities have deteriorated, which not only represents a significant loss for the navy in the short term,

but has an impact for the country, as the existence of an individual autonomous capability capable of mapping the national strategic interests may be at stake.

4.6. Support infrastructures

If Portugal wishes to provide an effective contribution to the Atlantic Alliance's maritime posture, it must define its priorities in terms of support infrastructures. The interviewees were asked about what type of infrastructures (training and assessment, naval maintenance and repair, or logistical support at sea) Portugal should develop in order to contribute in a more consistent manner to the Alliance's maritime forces.

Several interviewees mentioned that the *Arsenal do Alfeite* (AA) is a critical infrastructure if Portugal wishes to be able to repair its own ships (A. R. Rodrigues, op. cit. S. Correia, op. cit.; F. M. Gomes, op. cit.; J. M. Gomes, op. cit.; J. V. Mirones, op. cit.). Therefore, this shipyard must be reactivated because, and this seems to have been forgotten, an AA that meets the navy's needs – by providing a way to repair the fleet, but also for the access it provides to new technologies used in current vessels – is one of the basic pillars for establishing a cluster of Portuguese shipbuilding and ship repair companies capable of competing with other shipyards (J. M. Gomes, op. cit.). One interviewee added that the priority should be to rebuild a suitable ship maintenance and repair system, and that the AA will be decisive for this, because without ships there can be no maritime posture, either nationally or within NATO (F. M. Gomes, op. cit.).

Some interviewees stated that Portugal's capabilities should include training and assessment (A. S. Correia, op. cit.; N. L. Pires, op. cit.), ship maintenance and repair and logistical support to naval units, in order to contribute to a stronger NATO maritime posture, and because this is inevitable due to Portugal's geography and history as a maritime country (F. Azevedo, op. cit.; M. R. Freire, op. cit.; N. L. Pires, op. cit.).

4.7. Challenges and opportunities

NATO's reinforced maritime posture poses several challenges and opportunities to its Member States. The interviewees were asked what they believed would be the most significant challenges and opportunities for Portugal.

Some interviewees stated that the greatest challenge will be to ensure that Portugal's naval capabilities remain interoperable with those of the allied forces, particularly US forces (A. R. Rodrigues, op. cit.; F. Azevedo, op. cit.; J. M. Gomes, op. cit.).

For another group of interviewees, the greatest challenge will be to maintain the required levels of investment in defence in the near future (M. R. Mendes, op. cit.). This investment will be essential to renew Portugal's anti-submarine capabilities, as well as to ensure that it is capable of monitoring the maritime areas (and submarine cables) in its area of responsibility (N. L. Pires, op. cit.).

Some interviewees argued that the main challenge will be combining the national interests with those of the Atlantic Alliance, while ensuring good order at sea in the areas under national sovereignty / jurisdiction (F. M. Gomes, op. cit.; M. R. Freire, op. cit.), as this

is the best way to protect Portugal's political, strategic and economic interests from external competitors (F. M. Gomes, op. cit.).

Portugal must put the oceans clearly on the agenda (A. S. Correia, op. cit.; M. R. Freire, op. cit.). To do so, it must contribute actively to their security, which presents both an opportunity and a challenge due to the financial effort required (M. R. Freire, op. cit.).

Some interviewees stated that renewing and maintaining the current combatant platforms is both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity for Portugal. It is a challenge because it will require a judicious allocation of available resources (F. Azevedo, op. cit.; M. R. Freire, op. cit.), and it is also an opportunity because it will boost the efforts to discover innovative and unique solutions (F. Azevedo).

The interviewees agreed on several issues. Most believe that Portugal's political decision makers understand the importance of NATO's reinforced maritime posture (however, this does not mean there will be more investment in capabilities) and of the AA, which several interviewees described as a critical infrastructure that must be reactivated if Portugal wishes to be able to repair of its fleet autonomously. They also agreed with regard to the critical capabilities that Portugal should have in this area. However, the interviewees' opinions were divided on other issues, such as the possibility of assigning OPV to SNF. Some argued that these vessels should be accepted by the Atlantic Alliance, whereas others believed that this would not only be possible but desirable, and others stated that while it could be done, it should be a last resort. The respondents also disagreed with regard to capability planning (national priorities vs. NATO's). Some interviewees believe that the national interests should be the priority, while others argue that Portugal's responsibilities as a member of NATO take precedence. The (present and future) interest of the Atlantic Alliance in the GoG region was another issue which divided interviewees' opinions. Despite this, they generally agreed that increasing Portugal's contributions to SNF will not necessarily mean that NATO will be more involved in the region.

5. Conclusions

Over recent years, there have been significant changes in the global geostrategic environment, mainly due to the rise of China as a challenging power and to the increasing assertiveness of a Russia attempting to regain the relevance it used to have as the Soviet Union. These changes have influenced NATO's decision to strengthen its maritime posture.

To that end, NATO will restructure its standing maritime forces, in order to reinforce them with appropriate naval and combat capabilities, high standards of training and preparedness, and make them deployable in the full range of military operations, including high-intensity missions. However, this poses important challenges that must overcome if NATO truly wishes to reinforce its maritime posture: the lack of attractiveness and efficiency of the SNF.

Portugal must be prepared to contribute to the Atlantic Alliance's reinforced maritime posture. To determine what exactly this implies, interviews were conducted with experts from different areas, who were asked what they believed would be the impact for Portugal of NATO's decision to strengthen its maritime posture and restructure the SNF.

The interviewees agreed that Portugal's policymakers understand the importance of this decision. However, this has not translated into concrete investment. On the other hand, increasing Portugal's contributions does not necessarily mean that NATO will be more involved in the areas of strategic interest to Portugal, such as the GoG.

With regard to the allocation of resources to SNF, assigning OPV may be a possibility, but this will depend on NATO accepting those vessels as a valid contribution. The new concept of operations for SNF already includes OPV, as long as they can conduct MSO and are equipped with essential command and control and self-defence capabilities.

Portugal should give priority to critical capabilities that enable it to protect its interests and reinforce them so they can operate in the Atlantic, especially as NATO will likely ask its Atlantic allies to monitor this important maritime area.

The national objectives should be given priority when planning capabilities. Nevertheless, whenever possible, those capabilities should align with NATO's objectives.

Furthermore, the *Arsenal do Alfeite* is considered a critical support infrastructure that could enable Portugal to repair its own fleet, because one cannot have a maritime posture without ships.

Portugal is now facing two main challenges, which are interconnected because both require an appropriate investment in the near future: ensuring good order at sea in the maritime areas under national sovereignty and jurisdiction; and protecting them from external competitors; and procuring new capabilities (a logistics multipurpose ship and a fleet replenishment tanker), as well as modernising existent naval combat platforms.

These challenges can also present opportunities. If Portugal allocates its resources judiciously and discovers innovative and unique solutions, it will be able to maintain good order at sea in its maritime areas and ensure its naval units are interoperable with NATO capabilities (and the US', in particular).

If these challenges are overcome and these opportunities exploited, Portugal will be able to provide a significant contribution to NATO's maritime posture, as set out in the national defence white papers, which affirm the country's desire to play an active role in the alliances of which it is a member, especially NATO. If this does not happen, the national capabilities will be useless to the Atlantic Alliance and will simply be ignored.

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