

STRATEGIC-MILITARY MEASURES THAT PORTUGAL CAN ADOPT TO ENHANCE THE RELEVANCE OF ITS SOVEREIGN TERRITORY FOR NATO AND THE EU¹

CONTRIBUTOS ESTRATÉGICO-MILITARES PARA A RELEVÂNCIA DO ESPAÇO DE SOBERANIA PORTUGUÊS NO QUADRO DA OTAN E DA EU

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Abstract

This paper explores the strategic and military relevance of Portugal's sovereign territory within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

The study employed the following tools and methods: a deductive approach, a qualitative methodology and a case study design. Data were collected from interviews and documentary sources, and subsequently processed using strategic analysis tools.

The findings show that Portugal plays an important role in countering major threats to NATO and the EU within its sovereign territory by performing the following strategic functions: surveillance and control of the Atlantic; enhancing enablement and military mobility; providing strategic depth and national engagement; countering hybrid threats; building resilience; combating terrorism and organised crime, and; mitigating the effects of climate change.

While the national military strategy in this area is suitable in terms of objectives and acceptable in terms of methods, gaps were identified in terms of feasibility, as the resources needed for full implementation are insufficient. To enhance the military and strategic relevance of its sovereign territory, Portugal must enhance and modernise its Armed Forces; strengthen its presence and surveillance in the Atlantic, develop and upgrade its strategic infrastructure; invest in cyber defence and resilience against hybrid threats, and; participate in international missions, projects and cooperation initiatives.

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Keywords: Portugal's Sovereign Territory; Portugal's Military Strategy; Portuguese Armed Forces; Strategic Relevance; Euro-Atlantic Security.

Resumo

O presente trabalho analisa a relevância estratégico-militar do espaço de soberania português, em particular, para a Organização do Tratado do Atlântico Norte (OTAN) e para a União Europeia (UE).

A metodologia de investigação incluiu os seguintes processos e técnicas: abordagem dedutiva, metodologia qualitativa e estudo de caso. Os dados foram recolhidos através da análise documental e entrevistas, recorrendo-se a ferramentas de análise estratégica para o seu tratamento.

Dos resultados obtidos releva o contributo do espaço de soberania português para a mitigação das principais ameaças para a OTAN e UE, através das seguintes funcionalidades: vigilância e monitorização do Atlântico; enablement e mobilidade militar; profundidade estratégica e envolvimento nacional; combate às ameaças híbridas; promoção da resiliência; combate ao terrorismo e crime organizado; e mitigação das alterações climáticas.

Da análise da estratégia militar nacional neste âmbito, resulta a sua adequabilidade geral quanto aos fins, aceitabilidade quanto aos métodos, mas insuficiência de meios quanto à exequibilidade. Os principais contributos estratégico-militares para uma maior relevância do espaço de soberania português envolvem: reforço e modernização da Forças Armadas; reforço da presença e vigilância no Atlântico; desenvolvimento e requalificação de infraestruturas estratégicas; ciberdefesa e resiliência contra ameaças híbridas; e participação ativa em missões, projetos e cooperação internacional.

Palavras-chave: Espaço de Soberania Português; Estratégia Militar Portuguesa; Forças Armadas Portuguesas; Relevância Estratégica; Segurança Euro-atlântica.

1. Introduction

The strategic environment has changed significantly in recent years (National Defence Strategic Concept Review Council [CRCEDN], 2023, p.5). This evolution is evident not only in “shared threats”², but also in conflict dynamics such as Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China’s ongoing military modernisation or growing uncertainties regarding the cohesion of the Atlantic Alliance. The era defined by the Global War on Terrorism has transitioned into a renewed focus on traditional power politics, where state power has re-emerged as a dominant force in shaping the global geopolitical order.

Alongside these changes, a new generation of increasingly sophisticated threats have emerged that pose technical, tactical and even ethical challenges: the use of Artificial

² Most of which are transnational threats and risks (Borges, 2024, p.19).

Intelligence (AI); the increasingly widespread use of unmanned systems; the dissemination of weapons of mass destruction with greater range, lethality and precision; hybrid threats and the malicious exploitation of new disruptive technologies. To counter these risks, countries must strengthen their resilience and protect critical infrastructure.

In response to this evolving landscape, Portugal's main alliances – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) – have updated their security and defence policies. NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept in June 2022, while the EU approved the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in March of the same year.

Portugal's National Defence strategic documents³ are over a decade old and need to be updated to reflect the new geostrategic environment (CRCEDN, 2023, p. 2). Like any Grand Strategy document, the revised CEDN (and its future versions) should be organised by ends, ways and means and outline key threats to the national interests. As in previous iterations, the geographical layout of the national territory (defined by the strategic triangle formed by mainland Portugal and the Madeira and Azores archipelagos) should remain central to the updated CEDN.

The Atlantic location and triangular geography of the national territory have always played a strategic role in Portugal's geopolitical relevance, be it by providing a corridor to send rapid reinforcements to Europe, strategic depth in the event of an attack and logistical support for military operations in Europe and Africa. Other contributions include ensuring maritime security, conducting air-sea surveillance and supporting and monitoring intercontinental communications.

This study will explore how Portugal can enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory in the current strategic landscape.

Exploring this topic is important for several reasons: historically, the Portuguese territory has been strategically relevant to both NATO and the EU, albeit for different reasons, making it essential to evaluate its current role; the national strategic papers may require updating, particularly in the military and strategic domain; no recent studies have specifically addressed this area, and; finally, this study aims to contribute to the recognition of military strategy as a field of academic inquiry.

This study explores the strategic and military importance of **Portugal's sovereign territory**. To ensure the study remains focused, the scope of the topic was delimited by temporal, spatial and thematic boundaries.

Temporal scope: from 2013 to the present (2025). This period was selected because the CEDN, one of the most relevant documents for this study, was implemented in 2013. Moreover, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent adaptations that NATO and the EU have been forced to make in response have changed the strategic environment in such a way that the present was deemed an appropriate endpoint for the analysis.

³ The Strategic Concept for National Defence (CEDN) adopted in 2013 and the Military Strategic Concept (CEM), the Armed Forces' Missions (MIFA) and the System of Forces (SF) adopted in 2014 are particularly relevant for this study.

Geographical scope: the triangle formed by mainland Portugal and the Madeira and Azores archipelagos, the inter-territorial spaces and the regions of the air and sea over which Portugal holds responsibility or sovereignty.

Thematic scope: the study analyses a topic within the field of military strategy, exploring it from the perspective of Portugal's military capabilities. Therefore, the literature review will focus on relevant unclassified national and international publications, articles and strategy papers.

As establishing clear objectives is essential to maintain scientific rigour, a **General Objective (GO)** was set for the study: to propose strategic-military measures that Portugal can adopt to enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory for NATO and the EU.

The GO was then broken down into more actionable components or **Specific Objectives (SO)**:

– **SO1:** To analyse the strategic advantages that Portugal's sovereign territory provides NATO and the EU.

– **SO2:** To assess whether Portugal currently has the strategic and military capacity to defend its sovereign territory and meet its international commitments.

The study is guided by the following **Research Question:** *What military-strategic measures can Portugal adopt to enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory for NATO and the EU?*

This article is organised into five chapters. The chapter after this introduction presents the theoretical and conceptual framework. Next, the methodology and research methods are outlined, the data is analysed and the findings are discussed. The fifth and final chapter contains the study's conclusions.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

This article explores a topic within *Crisis and Armed Conflict Studies*, complemented by concepts from the areas of *Military Operations and Military Techniques and Technologies*. While the study focuses on the subarea of *Military Strategy*, it includes subareas and concepts that intersect with its axiomatic system.

2.1. State-of-the-art and literature review

2.1.1. Theoretical framework

To establish a solid theoretical and conceptual foundation, the next section will discuss the scope and object of military strategy as subfield within crises and armed conflict studies.

In terms of scope, military strategy is subordinate to *Grand Strategy* and policymaking. It also guides operational and tactical decisions regarding the use of military force (Escorrega, 2013, p. 239). Military strategy encompasses three dimensions: an operational dimension (the employment and deployment of capabilities), a genetic dimension (the generation and creation of new capabilities) and a structural dimension (the composition, organisation and coordination of capabilities). In strategic theory, these dimensions are referred to as the disciplines or sub-strategies of military strategy (Ribeiro, 2009, p. 33).

The object of military strategy is the military instrument, that is, the Armed Forces (AAFF). According to Santos, the AAFF represent the military dimension of a nation's strategic power. They are one of the vectors that allow a state to project its influence and are the ultimate guarantor of state authority (2012, pp. 18-19).

Having situated the topic within its academic field, the next step is to identify the most pertinent concepts. Although several framing concepts (see Appendix A) were used in the analysis, the study focuses on three key concepts: *national military strategy*, *Portugal's sovereign territory* and *strategic relevance*.

While the concept of **national military strategy** (as well as its scope and object) has already been explored above, the national strategy documents relevant to this study should be examined in further detail.

The key national strategic documents for this study are the CEDN approved in 2013 and the resulting military-strategic papers, which were adopted in 2014. These documents define the missions, organisation and capabilities of Portugal's military forces, including the CEM, the MIFA, the SF and the Force Structure (DIF). To complement the research, strategic directives from the individual branches of the AAFF and the General Staff of the Armed Forces (EMGFA) will also be analysed.

The structure, content and objectives of Portugal's current national military-strategic framework have been explored from different analytical perspectives in various publications and research papers. One of the most relevant works is a book coordinated by Andrade, Santos, & Correia (2019), which offers an in-depth analysis of how military capabilities are developed within the national military planning cycle. Other notable contributions include several studies conducted at the IUM, which address: strategic planning in national defence and the national military-strategic planning model (Loureiro, 2023); the structure, content and relevance of the current military strategic concept (Cruz, 2023); and the influence of high-intensity conflicts on the national military strategy (Jacinto, 2023).

Several authors and articles have explored the relevance of the national defence and military strategic concepts through the lens of the Ukraine invasion and its strategic consequences. These works include General Pinto Ramalho's critical reflections on the current CEDN (Ramalho, 2023) and Major General Vieira Borges' analysis of the impact of the war in Ukraine on the national AAFF and the challenges it poses (Borges, 2024).

The term "**sovereign territory**" refers to the land, sea and air within a National Territory (NT) where a state holds exclusive jurisdiction and acknowledges no higher external authority.

In Portugal, the AAFF's are deployed in the sovereign territory to carry out surveillance and control operations such as inspection, air policing and ground surveillance of areas under national sovereignty and jurisdiction, in missions to uphold sovereignty, enforce the rule of law and defend the national interests (Council of Chiefs of Staff [CCEM], 2014a, p.4). However, the MIFA 2014 specifies that these operations are limited to areas related to "security, environmental preservation and protection, and crime prevention" (CCEM, 2014a, p. 4), which is somewhat restrictive.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, Portugal's sovereign territory is defined as the strategic region encompassing the NT (mainland Portugal, the Azores and Madeira), the inter-territorial spaces and the air and maritime zones under national responsibility or sovereignty.

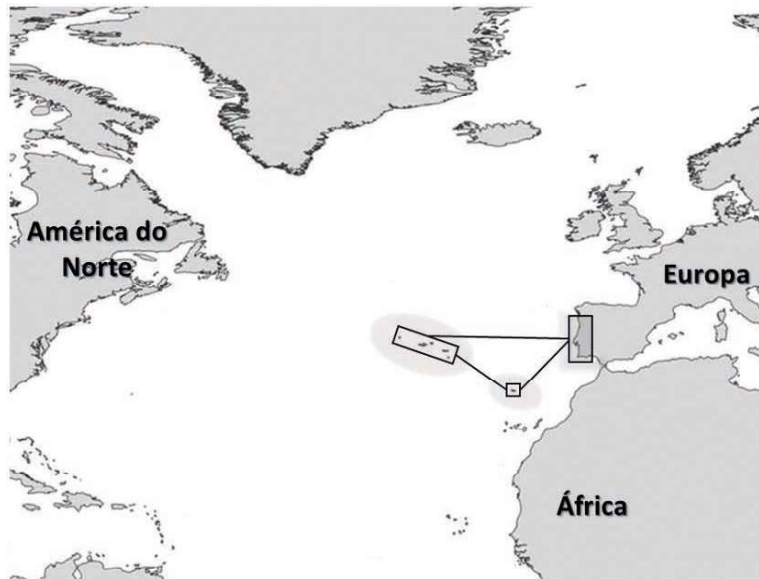


Figure 1 – The strategic centrality of Portugal's sovereign territory

Source: Adapted from Escorrega (2010).
[North America | Europe | Africa]

This definition is similar to the description of the *Strategic Spaces of Permanent National Interest* (EEINP)⁴ provided in the MIFA2014. Nonetheless, it was deemed appropriate for this study because it includes the key dimensions analysed here: territorial, strategic and legal dimensions.

Several authors have explored the concept, particularly in the fields of geopolitics and international law. Among those, the following are especially pertinent to this analysis: Leal (2007) conducts a geopolitical and geostrategic analysis of Portugal; Fernandes (2014) examines the relevance of Portugal's strategic triangle within contemporary Atlantic geopolitics, and; Gomes (2022, p.138) describes the strategic functions of the Azores throughout history.

Despite being a few decades old, the works of Commander Virgílio de Carvalho are indispensable to this study. His books, *"Cumprir agora Portugal"* (1987) and *"A Importância do Mar para Portugal"* (1995), discuss the value of Portugal's geostrategic position (or "geofactor") for various countries and international organisations, including NATO.

⁴ See definition in Appendix A.

In this area of study, **strategic relevance** refers to Portugal's relative importance (or that of its specific dimensions) within the global strategic environment. To explore this concept, two terms introduced by Adriano Moreira are particularly valuable: *functional power* and *service sovereignty*.

Functional power, a concept particularly relevant to smaller states, comes from a country's critical assets, "such as a strategic geographic location, rare minerals or energy resources like oil, which are essential to the functioning of international systems, granting their holder the capacity to influence or disrupt those systems" (Moreira, 1999, p. 438). These features give such states an external influence that is disproportionate to their other forms of National Power. *Service sovereignty*, on the other hand, refers to "a redefined concept of sovereignty where legitimacy is tied to solidarity, whether at the domestic or transnational level"⁵.

Factors such as a country's strategic geographical position (and the advantages it offers) or the ability to provide services to the international community can increase its strategic relevance for organisations like NATO or the EU, provided the nation has the domestic capacity to leverage those strengths.

Few works or scholars have addressed this concept directly. One particularly noteworthy study by Manen, Wijk, Dick, and Sweijs (2022) defines, characterises and quantifies the concept, applying it to the case of the Netherlands. Their model interprets strategic relevance as a country's influence within the international system, as well as the scope and nature of its relationships with other states or organisations. In the study, relevance is assessed in four domains: military, economic, political and judicial. Of particular interest to this study is their assessment of the military dimension, which they define as the "measurement of a state's military coercive capabilities" (Manen et al., 2022, p. 9). In other words, a country's strategic relevance depends on its ability to wage war and protect its allies (Manen et al., 2022, p. 11).

2.1.2. NATO and EU strategic papers

2.1.2.1. NATO

Since its inception, NATO has continuously adapted to evolving security challenges, regularly updating its strategic documents. In the last decade, particularly since Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Alliance has revised its plans and structures to strengthen its deterrence and collective defence capabilities.

In 2020, NATO adopted the **Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area** (DDA), which establishes a new framework for Allies to counter, deter and defend against key threats, namely from Russia and terrorist groups (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO], 2024a). The DDA is structured around five pillars: 1) 360-degree defence of Alliance territory; 2) integration of national defence plans into NATO planning; 3) continuous surveillance across all domains to deter potential aggressors; 4) reinforcement

⁵ I.e. a state whose contributions are deemed valuable to the international community due to the quality and importance of the services it provides.

of forces, organised by geographical area, readiness and scale; and 5) operational-strategic flexibility and multi-domain operations throughout NATO's area of responsibility (Covington, 2023).

In 2021, NATO introduced two important documents that build upon the DDA framework: the NATO 2030 Agenda and the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept.

The **NATO 2030 Agenda** is a strategic roadmap designed to strengthen the Alliance and prepare it for future challenges. The document laid the groundwork for the 2022 Strategic Concept, introducing initiatives such as increasing political consultation and coordination, strengthening deterrence and defence, building collective and national resilience and maintaining the Alliance's technological edge (NATO, 2021).

The **NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept** aims to maintain and develop the Alliance's decisive military advantage by providing a framework for building military capabilities in five critical areas: cognitive superiority, layered resilience, influence and power projection, cross-domain command and integrated multi-domain defence (NATO, 2023a).

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO adopted its **2022 Strategic Concept**, which identifies the most significant threats and challenges for the Alliance. The document prioritises three core tasks: deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management and cooperative security. It also emphasises the need for national and collective resilience, warning that strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies (e.g. in critical infrastructure, supply chains and energy) can become security risks (NATO, 2022).

Within the framework of the DDA concept, two initiatives have been instrumental in supporting NATO's strategic-military adaptations, both structurally and operationally: the new force model and the DDA family of plans.

The new force model replaces the NATO Response Force with a three-tiered system of readiness for forces and introduces the Allied Reaction Force (ARF) (Deni, 2024). The DDA family of plans integrates national and collective defence plans, including: regional plans (see Figure 1) and strategic plans for individual domains (air, land, maritime, special operations forces, cyber and space) (Covington, 2023).



Figure 2 – Regions covered by NATO regional defence plans and command structure

Source: Monaghan et al. (2024).

2.1.3 European Union

The strategic documents in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) contain several instruments and mechanisms that call for Portugal to take on a more active role in this area. These include the Strategic Compass, the Maritime Security Strategy, the EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence and the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030.

Adopted in March 2022, the **Strategic Compass** is roadmap for a stronger EU security and defence. Its main objective is to increase the Union's autonomy, capacities and ability to respond to security threats (European Union [EU], 2022, pp. 11-12).

The **Maritime Security Strategy** provides a framework to protect the EU's maritime interests. Updated in 2023⁶, it provides a comprehensive assessment of threats and challenges, which include: 1) *geopolitical disputes*, competition for natural resources and threats to freedom of navigation; 2) *climate change and marine pollution*; 3) *hybrid and cyber threats*; and 4) *evolving threats* such as terrorism, piracy, trafficking in human beings, trafficking of arms and narcotics, and illegal fishing (EU, 2023a, pp. 7–9).

The **EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence** adopted in March 2023 is a plan to strengthen the resilience of the EU's space assets and develop its ability to respond to space threats. The strategy's main goals include: 1) protecting critical space infrastructure; 2) strengthening EU resilience and strategic autonomy; 3) responding to space threats; and 4) deepening cooperation with international partners (EU, 2023b).

⁶ The strategy was originally launched in 2014.

The *White Paper on European Defence – Readiness 2030*, published in March 2025, sets out a strategy to strengthen the EU’s defence capabilities, making it more autonomous and resilient. The document’s primary objectives include: 1) enhancing military capabilities⁷; 2) increasing support for Ukraine; 3) strengthening the European defence industry; 4) increasing joint defence investments; 5) improving Europe’s preparedness for worst-case scenarios; and 6) reinforcing strategic partnerships. Associated with this document is the *ReArm Europe Plan*, which introduces new financial instruments and resources for EU Member States to stimulate investment in pan-European defence capabilities (EU, 2025a, pp. 1-2).

2.2. Analytical framework

Having provided the necessary context, the model that guided the analysis is presented Table 1.

Table 1 – Analytical framework

RESEARCH OBJECT	Portugal’s sovereign territory, analysed in terms of its strategic and military relevance.				
METHODOLOGY	Reasoning: deductive; Strategy: qualitative; Research design: case study.				
GENERAL OBJECTIVE	To propose military-strategic measures that Portugal can adopt to enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory for NATO and the EU.				
RESEARCH QUESTION	What military-strategic measures can Portugal adopt to enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory for NATO and the EU?				
SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES	SUBSIDIARY QUESTIONS	KEY CONCEPTS	DIMENSIONS	INDICATORS	DATA COLLECTION AND PROCESSING TECHNIQUES
SO1. To analyse the strategic advantages that Portugal’s sovereign territory provides NATO and the EU.	SQ1. What are the strategic advantages that Portugal’s sovereign territory provides NATO and the EU?	Portugal’s Sovereign Territory	Geographic; Strategic	Geostrategic factors; Strategic functions.	Literature review (treaties, strategic concepts); expert interviews (national specialists).
		Portugal’s Strategic Relevance	Strategic-military	Interests; Threats.	

⁷ In seven priority areas/capability areas: air and missile defence; artillery systems; ammunition and missiles; drones and counter-drone systems; military mobility; advanced technologies (AI, quantum, cyber & electronic warfare); strategic infrastructure (airlift, refuelling, maritime and space capabilities) (UE, 2025a, pp. 6-7).

[Cont.]

SO2. To assess whether Portugal currently has the strategic and military capacity to defend its sovereign territory and meet its international commitments.	SQ2. Are Portugal's AAFP capable of defending its sovereign territory and meet its international commitments?	National Military Strategy	Genetic; Structural; Operational.	Suitability (in terms of objectives/ends); Acceptability (in terms of methods/ways); Feasibility (in terms of resources/means).	Literature review (treaties, strategic concepts); expert interviews (national specialists).
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3. Methodology and method

This chapter outlines the methodology and methods used in the study.

3.1. Methodology

A **deductive reasoning approach** was employed, beginning with an established theoretical framework – the general theory of strategy – to investigate a specific reality: the strategic-military characteristics of Portugal's sovereign territory that make it strategically relevant for NATO and the EU. As the research objective and question would have required overly broad hypotheses, this step was omitted.

Given the comprehensive nature of the study, the *research strategy* relied exclusively on **qualitative methods**. The **case study** design was chosen for its empirical and descriptive qualities. The data collected and analysed focus on a single unit of observation: Portugal's sovereign territory.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Participants

Interviews were conducted with experts (scholars and senior officials from organisations with strategic planning responsibilities) and national decision makers. In total, fourteen entities participated in the study (see Appendix B).

3.2.2. Procedure

The research followed a phased methodological approach. The investigation began with a review of monographic literature and national and international strategic documents. Simultaneously, interviews were conducted with the selected participants, after which the collected data was analysed. Finally, conclusions and research proposals were developed, which also served to validate the chosen methodological approach.

3.2.3. Data collection tool(s)

In addition to the literature review, the main data collection tool consisted of **semi-structured qualitative interviews** with a predefined script. The interviews were held either out in person or online.

3.2.4. Técnica(s) de tratamento dos dados

After summarising the insights obtained from the literature review and interviews (categorised by indicator), strategic planning tools were applied, including the **ends-ways-means**⁸ analysis and “strategy tests”, to evaluate the **suitability, feasibility and acceptability**⁹ of proposals (Ribeiro, 2009, p. 27). The dimensions and indicators are based on the literature on strategy, particularly regarding the generation, organisation and deployment of resources to achieve defined objectives.

4. Discussion of findings

4.1. The strategic importance of Portugal’s sovereign territory to NATO and the EU

As previously highlighted, the strategic value of Portugal’s sovereign territory has long been recognised. The country’s ability to perform strategic functions to defend allied interests and “engage with other geopolitical regions through multilateral platforms” (J. Palmeira, email interview, 31 March 2025) has allowed Portugal to leverage its functional power on the global stage.

In addition to its critical airport infrastructure and vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), Portugal’s unique geostrategic position at the intersection of the North Atlantic, Western Mediterranean and South Atlantic gives the country an important role in mitigating threats to Euro-Atlantic security.

To examine what this role entails, the next section will analyse the national interests and strategic relevance of the national sovereign territory in mitigating the security threats and challenges NATO and the EU¹⁰ are facing. These threats can be grouped into four categories: 1) military aggression and geopolitical conflicts; 2) hybrid and cyber threats; 3) terrorism and organised crime; and 4) climate change and humanitarian crises.

4.1.1. Military aggression and geopolitical conflicts

Both NATO and the EU identify Russia’s military aggression against Europe as the foremost threat to European security. In this context, Portugal plays a critical role in several strategic areas.

Surveillance and control of the Atlantic. In the DDA, vigilance activities are considered a cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic defence and deterrence, particularly in keeping a close watch over Russian surface, subsurface and air assets (Allied Maritime Command, 2024). Portugal’s strategic location in the Atlantic positions the country as a key player in surveilling critical international sea lanes and monitoring strategic airspace. These contributions provide

⁸ The Ends-Ways-Means model was developed by Arthur Lykke in his work on military strategy (Lykke, 2001).

⁹ See definitions in Appendix A.

¹⁰ Despite its recent efforts to defend the European security order and build its defence capabilities, the EU recognises that NATO remains the foundation of collective defence for its members. As a result, in most instances, the EU adopts and complements the strategies defined by the Atlantic Alliance (EU, 2022, p. 2).

deterrence in the Atlantic and help “deter hybrid threats, including hostile submarine activity, organised crime and illicit trafficking” (J.M. Sousa, email interview, 28 March 2025).

Moreover, Portugal can increase its prestige, influence and strategic advantages by fulfilling its responsibilities in monitoring and protecting sea and air traffic in the Atlantic, namely, by performing search and rescue operations, controlling air traffic and ensuring maritime security (Escorrega, 2010, p. 14).

Enablement and military mobility. NATO defines enablement¹¹ as the activities that underpin military planning and set the conditions for the reinforcement and sustainment of forces in peacetime, crisis or conflict (2025a). In response to Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, and recognising that enablement and logistics are central to military operations, NATO has established an operational command¹² dedicated to ensuring the swift, large-scale deployment of Alliance forces when needed (Sollfrank & Boeke, 2024, p. 16). A key aspect of enablement is the Reinforcement and Sustainment Network (RSN), a network of ports, airports and mobility corridors leading to potential deployment areas (Sollfrank & Boeke, 2024, p. 16).

In this regard, the support of member states is crucial to ensure that forces can effectively enter, transit, reach and operate across Alliance territory with the necessary supporting structures and assets (NATO, 2025a). In addition to having airports, ports and military bases¹³ located at the three vertices of the national strategic triangle, “Portugal’s geographic position is ideal for the reception, sustainment and transit of allied forces, making it a key contributor to the Alliance’s military mobility” (P.J. Mateus, video interview, 20 February 2025).

Strategic depth and national engagement. The strategic importance of Portugal’s sovereign territory is not only tied to the strategic depth it offers but also to the active role played by Portuguese combat forces in the DDA family of plans.

Portugal’s sovereign territory provides strategic depth for operations in Central and Eastern Europe, acting as “a secure rear area for NATO and the EU” (J.M. Sousa, op. cit.).

Portugal’s national defence plans are integrated with NATO’s regional strategies under the DDA framework, which ensures that Portugal’s military forces are ready to undertake tasks and missions that engage the full range of their capabilities. The nature, location and level of involvement of the AAFF in all three readiness tiers and/or in the ARF will depend on negotiated commitments related to collective defence, both within and outside Portugal’s sovereign territory.

4.1.2. Hybrid threats

Hybrid threats consistently rank among the top security challenges for both NATO and the EU, with the two organisations cooperating closely in the efforts to counter them (NATO,

¹¹ The equivalent term in EU documentation is “military mobility”, which refers to activities that facilitate and enable force reinforcement (Sollfrank & Boeke, 2024, p. 12).

¹² The Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC).

¹³ Such as the Lisbon Naval Base, the Port of Sines, the Lajes Air Base in the Azores, Manoeuvre Aerodrome No. 3 in Porto Santo or the Santa Margarida Military Camp.

2024b). However, while there is an increasing number of tools to counter hybrid threats collectively, the primary responsibility for countering these threats lies with each individual Member State (EU, 2025b).

Portugal's sovereign territory can play a strategic role, not only in countering hybrid threats but also in building resilience against them.

Countering hybrid threats across domains. Due to its strategic position, critical infrastructure and responsibilities within the international organisations to which it belongs, Portugal has an important role in countering hybrid threats, particularly in the maritime, cyber and space domains.

Portugal holds jurisdiction over approximately half of the EU's marine waters, as well as a vast expanse of the marine soil and subsoil in the Northeast Atlantic, which makes its sovereign territory strategically relevant to the EU, but also gives Portugal added responsibilities in the areas of ocean governance and security, especially those related to the protection of the marine environment from hybrid threats (Council of Ministers Resolution [RCM] No. 68/2021, 6 May 2021).

About 10% of the world's international submarine cables (see Figure 2) – which are crucial for the resilience of global telecommunications networks – pass through Portuguese waters. Portugal plays an important role in monitoring and protecting these infrastructures¹⁴, as well as in promoting international initiatives to improve their security (Barros & Bernardino, 2025, p. 1).

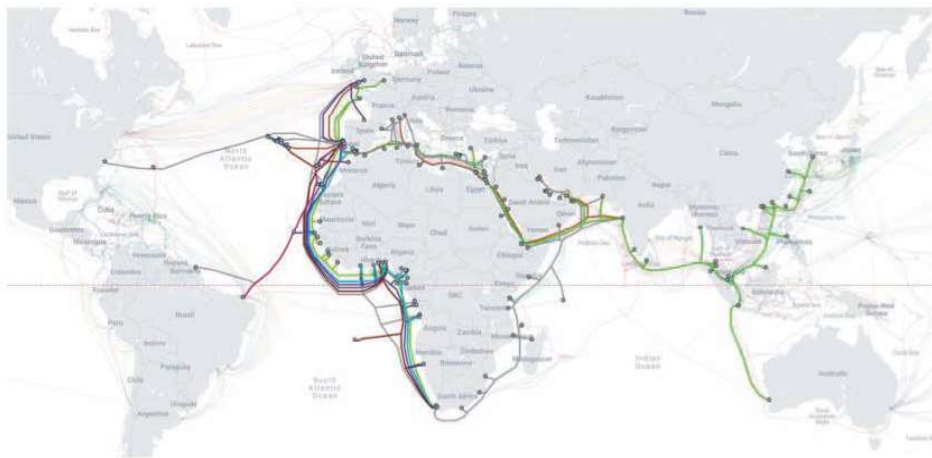


Figure 3 – Submarine cables connecting Portugal to the world

Source: Radovcic & Rendek (2024).

¹⁴ The main causes of disruption to submarine cables include: natural disasters; human activities (e.g. trawling or anchoring of vessels); equipment failures, and; cyberattacks (Barros & Bernardino, 2025, p. 2).

Cyberattacks and cybercrime are on the rise across Europe, both in volume and complexity, and are expected to continue to increase (EU, 2024). These threats degrade critical infrastructure, interfere with government services, extract intelligence, steal intellectual property and impede military activities (NATO, 2022, p. 5).

In Portugal, as in much of Europe, the number of cyberattacks has surged alarmingly over the past three years. This includes not only cybercrime but also targeted attacks on critical national infrastructure that disrupt key sectors such as energy, transportation and healthcare (Ledo, 2024). Given the growing risk of cyberattacks targeting submarine cables, international organisations with headquarters in the NT¹⁵, economic groups or state agencies, Portugal must take an active role in national and international efforts to address these threats.

NATO (2022, p. 5) and the EU (2023b) recognise the strategic nature of space and are aware that strategic competitors and potential adversaries are investing in technologies that could degrade member states' space capabilities and restrict their access and freedom to operate in space, compromising their defence and security.

Over the last decade, Portugal has expanded its presence in the space sector, investing on technological development and innovation and creating infrastructures to support the aerospace sector. Its Atlantic location (and that of the Azores) offers an ideal setting for the installation of observation and measurement facilities "in a spectrum that is not reachable or replicable in any other country, which represents an effective comparative advantage" (Portuguese Space Agency [AEP], 2018, p. 9). Moreover, the unique geostrategic position of the Azores archipelago makes it an excellent site for launching satellites, namely from the Santa Maria spaceport, a key infrastructure for Europe's future in space (AEP, 2024).

Building resilience. In its strategic concept, NATO recognises that ensuring national and collective resilience is critical to the Alliance's deterrence and defence (2022, p. 7)¹⁶. To build resilience, each member state must re-evaluate its own vulnerabilities and develop robust mechanisms to withstand a major shock, such as a natural disaster, critical infrastructure failure, or a hybrid or armed attack, based on the principle that individual countries' efforts to enhance resilience also make the Alliance collectively stronger (NATO, 2024c).

For NATO, effective resilience encompasses the whole of society and requires the full range of military and civilian capabilities, engaging both the public and private sectors (2023b). Due to its location, Portugal's sovereign territory is vulnerable to various risks and threats to national and European security – including hybrid threats (e.g. cyberattacks and disruptions to submarine cables), terrorism and natural disasters (e.g., floods, wildfires and earthquakes) –, particularly in the energy, transport, digital and space sectors. By promoting civil-military cooperation, Portugal both enhances its own resilience and strengthens its position within NATO and the EU.

¹⁵ E.g. the European Maritime Security Agency, the European Space Agency (ESA) Satellite Tracking Station, the NATO Joint Analysis & Lessons Learned Centre (JALC), the NATO Communications and Information Academy (NCIA), or the Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO).

¹⁶ A principle echoed in the EU's Strategic Compass (EU, 2022, p. 27).

4.1.3. Terrorism and organised crime

NATO (2024d, p. 2) and the EU (2022, p. 11) identify terrorism and organised crime as major threats to international security and have focused their efforts on Europe's southern neighbourhood. The instability in this region, which undermines Euro-Atlantic security, and Portugal's strategic location and international commitments give the country an important role in protecting Europe's southwestern flank.

Protecting Europe's western border. According to the latest Internal Security Report (RASI 2024), in 2024, international Islamist terrorism continued to pose a significant threat to Portugal's immediate neighbourhood, as well as to the national interests abroad (Internal Security System, 2025, p. 27). The report also states that Portugal's NT remains strategically valuable to transnational criminal organisations, serving as both a base for criminal activities and as a fallback area (2025, p. 31).

The location of its sovereign territory and vast maritime borders give Portugal a crucial role in defending the EU's external borders. Its responsibilities include border surveillance and control, monitoring, detecting and tracking illicit trafficking in the waters and airspace under national jurisdiction, and protecting trade routes.

Within NATO, Portugal plays an important role in the 360-degree deterrence and defence approach through the NATO Hub for the South initiative, which aims to increase the Alliance's understanding of the regional dynamics of North Africa, the Middle East, the Sahel, sub-Saharan and adjacent areas, focusing on conflict prevention, the fight against terrorism and socio-economic development (NATO, n.d.).

4.1.4. Climate change

NATO's strategic concept recognises climate change as a "defining challenge of our time" that can exacerbate conflicts, state fragility and geopolitical competition, also affecting the way Armed Forces operate (2022, p. 6). The Alliance is particularly concerned about its southern neighbourhood, where the effects of climate change¹⁷ have intensified conflicts and triggered mass displacements of people, with direct consequences for Euro-Atlantic security (2024d, p. 24).

Similarly, the EU views climate change not only as a threat in itself but also as a risk multiplier that amplifies social, economic and political instability and conflict in fragile countries, with direct implications for global and regional security (2022, p. 26).

Due to its strategic location and geographic features, Portugal can contribute significantly to collective efforts to combat and adapt to climate change.

Mitigating the effects of climate change. Portugal's geographic features make it one of the most vulnerable European countries to the effects of climate change, which include coastal erosion, drought, wildfires, marine litter on beaches and major incidents involving hazardous materials (Portuguese Environment Agency [APA] 2024a, pp. 15-16).

¹⁷ Such as water shortages and its impact on food production and social stability (2024d, p. 24).

However, the country's vast coastline, unique biogeographical position and scientific expertise also mean that Portugal has added responsibilities within the international organisations to which it belongs. It must actively contribute to climate action, environmental protection and restoration and marine biodiversity conservation, while also rallying the international community to seek global solutions (RCM No. 68/2021, p. 32).

The National Energy and Climate Plan 2030 (NECP 2030) confirms that Portugal has taken on a leading role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and investing in renewable energy sources (APA, 2024b, p. 4). This commitment has put the country at the forefront of climate action, both in Europe and worldwide (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2025).

4.2. Portugal's strategic and military capacity to meet its international commitments - suitability, acceptability and feasibility analysis

Most¹⁸ of the documents that define Portugal's military strategy were approved in 2014, making it necessary to evaluate Portugal's current strategic and military capacity. This was done by applying a strategic analysis tool, the *ends-ways-means*¹⁹ framework, and by performing "strategy tests" to evaluate suitability, feasibility and acceptability.

Suitability (in terms of objectives/ends). The analysis of documentary sources and the insights from interviews revealed that Portugal's military strategy is largely suited to its objectives. Nonetheless, it must be regularly updated to reflect the evolving geopolitical landscape and increasingly complex threats.

The scenarios and objectives outlined in the CEM align with the strategic priorities defined by NATO and the EU regarding collective defence and cooperative security. However, the national strategy papers focus exclusively on threats to Portugal's sovereign territory, whereas NATO and EU documents explicitly identify Russia as the most significant threat to European security and place greater emphasis on countering hybrid threats in areas such as space, cyberspace, the deep sea or the information environment.

Despite this, as J.N. Fonseca notes, Portugal's military strategy is overall well-suited to the current challenges and "aligns with NATO and EU values and requirements" (op. cit.).

Acceptability (in terms of methods/ways). The methods employed by the AAF in their operations and missions, which allow them to achieve the military objectives outlined in the national strategy, are supported by national legislation and align with NATO and EU doctrine.

However, NATO's military operations planning and design is increasingly based on a multi-domain approach, which is not mentioned in any of Portugal's military strategy papers. As N.L. Pires emphasises, "we must adopt an increasingly multi-domain approach to force organisation, generation and deployment; they cannot be addressed separately" (face-to-face interview, 19 February 2025).

¹⁸ But not all. Since 2014, the EMGA and the AAF branches have issued updated guidelines and directives to refine and adapt the national military strategies in response to internal and external changes in the geopolitical landscape.

¹⁹ While this article does not present the full analysis due to space limitations, the current strategic-military documentation clearly outlines the threats, ends (strategic military objectives), methods (military doctrine, including missions and operations concepts) and means (military structures, forces and capabilities).

Apart from cyber defence, Portugal’s strategic papers do not identify any strategic-military actions and/or missions aimed at countering hybrid threats. Therefore, the documentation should be updated to address this gap.

Feasibility (in terms of resources/means). The documentary sources and interview insights revealed resource gaps in three critical areas: funding, human resources and equipment/capabilities.

The gaps in financial resources can be resolved by increasing investments in defence. While the Military Programming Law provides a framework for upgrading military capabilities, its implementation is hindered by several challenges²⁰. New legislation should be drafted to allocate the funding required to address these critical capability gaps (Ribeiro, 2025). To respond to growing pressure to address new global threats, and given its responsibilities as a NATO member, Portugal has committed to significantly increasing its defence budget (E.M. Ferrão, email interview, 10 April 2025).

The AAFF have faced challenges in terms of human resources for several years. Between 2015 and 2024, the number of military personnel decreased by approximately 25% (see Table 2), leaving current staffing levels “far below operational requirements” (Decree-Law No. 64/2024, 30 September). Since mission effectiveness depends on adequate staff numbers, the “difficulties in retaining and recruiting qualified personnel severely compromise the operational capacity and sustainability of the AAFF” (J.M. Sousa, op. cit.).

Table 2 – AAFF personnel from 2015 to 2024

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Officers	6829	6783	6835	7030	6793	6843	6787	6684	6673	6714
Sergeants	11016	10442	10146	9856	9834	9553	9300	9270	9208	9115
Other ranks	14003	13137	11607	11449	10286	9732	9547	8569	7957	7829
TOTAL ²¹	31848	30362	28588	28335	26913	26128	25634	24523	23838	23658

Source: (DGRDN, email, 29 April 2025).

The documentary sources and interview insights revealed several limitations in terms of feasibility, mostly related to the need to modernise, enhance and develop resources and/or capabilities to monitor and deter threats, as well as to protect the infrastructure located within Portugal’s sovereign territory, making it more resilient.

Table 3 outlines the main capability and resource gaps identified in the comparative analysis of the documentary sources and interview insights²².

²⁰ Such as complex procurement procedures, supply chain disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine or delays in budget allocation (Directorate-General for National Defence Resources [DGRDN], 2023, p. 8).

²¹ The data includes the total number of military personnel in the career staff (both active-duty and reserve personnel) and personnel serving under volunteer and contract arrangements. Personnel currently in basic training are not included.

²² All email interviews and audio recordings of video and phone interviews are archived by the author and available for consultation. However, due to space constraints, they are not transcribed in this article.

Table 3 – Capability/equipment gaps and needs

NEEDS	CAPABILITY/EQUIPMENT GAPS
Modernising or enhancing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Command and Control (C2) capabilities to improve interoperability and multi-domain integration, both nationally and with allied forces; - Protection and survival capabilities to build resilience and ensure freedom of action; - Integrated capabilities for immediate defence of the archipelagos; - Naval and air assets to enhance the anti-submarine warfare capability and counter increasing hostile submarine activity; - Capabilities related to maritime and air surveillance and inspection, aerial policing and ground surveillance to improve Portugal’s situational awareness of its sovereign territory; - Air and anti-aircraft defence systems; - Coordination with the Security Forces and Services (FSS), focusing on counter-terrorism, disaster response and critical infrastructure protection.
Developing or upgrading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multi-domain architecture, including space and cyber capabilities; - Developing emerging technologies, such as AI and autonomous systems, to adapt to hybrid warfare; - Activities that enable civilian participation in territorial defence; - Upgrading strategic civilian and military infrastructure to build resilience and ensure enablement and military mobility, facilitating the rapid deployment of allied forces in the NT, when required.

4.3. Strategic-military measures that Portugal can adopt to enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory for NATO and the EU

The insights obtained from the interviews with experts on the national strategic environment were analysed to *identify the strategic-military factors that enhance the relevance of Portugal’s sovereign territory for NATO and the EU (thus answering the research question)*. The following proposals, organised by focus area, can increase the strategic value of Portugal’s sovereign territory by making the national AAFP more effective in addressing strategic threats and challenges for NATO and the EU.

Enhancing and modernising the AAFP. The strategic relevance of Portugal’s sovereign territory depends on competent and balanced AAFP, which enable the country to: 1) defend Europe’s western borders (air, land and sea) and protect communication and energy routes and infrastructure; 2) meet its international commitments credibly; and 3) demonstrate the relevance of the NT for collective defence and security. In addition to improving, updating and expanding the capabilities and resources listed in Table 3, Portugal must ensure that its AAFP are “ready, flexible, interoperable and technologically innovative, capable of credibly executing their assigned missions” (EMGFA, 2023, p. 2).

Strengthening presence and surveillance in the Atlantic. The national military instrument plays a vital role in deterring and countering threats and challenges to Euro-Atlantic security (whether in the context of collective defence or cooperative security), mitigating global risks (such as climate change and emerging disruptive technologies), securing maritime and air transport and protecting communication and energy infrastructure. Consequently, enhancing military presence, protection and surveillance capabilities across

maritime²³, air²⁴ and land²⁵ domains is essential.

Developing and upgrading strategic infrastructure. By developing and upgrading strategic infrastructure such as military bases and fields, Portugal increases its relevance for NATO and the EU. Modernising such infrastructure, both on the mainland and the islands will: 1) enhance enablement and military mobility for NATO and the EU; 2) accelerate, expand and improve force projection in the Atlantic (and in deployment areas in Europe and North Africa); and 3) provide strategic depth for Europe, when required.

Key initiatives in this area include: establishing a NATO logistics hub in Portugal to ensure the enablement and sustainment of allied forces (P.J. Mateus, op. cit.); expanding and modernising national military infrastructures in strategic locations on the mainland and islands and promoting their use in joint operations (E.M. Ferrão, op. cit.); and creating high-capacity training centres for joint operations to ensure interoperability between national AAFP and allied forces (E.M. Ferrão, op. cit.).

Investing in cyber defence and resilience against hybrid threats. The increase in hybrid threats in various areas of Portugal's sovereign territory poses significant risks, not only to the country itself but also to NATO and the EU. Therefore, Portugal must focus on countering these threats and building national resilience, particularly in terms of critical infrastructure and information systems.

By developing early warning systems, strengthening cyber defence capabilities and implementing an integrated security model, Portugal will be able to manage emerging risks and ensure both internal and external stability (J.M. Sousa, op. cit.). Given its strategic location and critical infrastructure (such as data centres and submarine cable landing stations), Portugal has the potential to become a regional leader in cyber defence. Achieving this will require creating a strong cyber defence centre – working in collaboration with NATO and EU cybersecurity agencies – and dedicated cyber defence forces, partnering with leading technology companies to train cybersecurity experts (E.M. Ferrão, op. cit.).

Participating in international missions, projects and cooperation initiatives. The strategic relevance of Portugal's sovereign territory also depends on strengthening international cooperation and strategic alliances.

Portugal's participation in joint operations and military exercises led by NATO and the EU solidifies its reputation as a trusted and relevant partner in Euro-Atlantic security and defence. Furthermore, by strengthening ties with strategic allies and promoting cooperative security, especially in NATO's southern neighbourhood, Portugal will contribute to regional

²³ Modernising naval capabilities will provide more effective control over the Atlantic. Investing in autonomous systems will make it easier to detect and mitigate conventional and hybrid threats, while an increased naval presence will project power and protect national and allied strategic interests (J.M. Sousa, op. cit.).

²⁴ Modernising air capabilities will enhance presence and deterrence and improve air surveillance – for example, by expanding command-and-control (C2) radar coverage to the Azores and developing space capabilities, such as satellites for Atlantic surveillance (S. Pereira, face-to-face interview, 11 March 2025).

²⁵ Modernising land-based weapons systems will improve ground surveillance and the ability to defend the archipelagos and protect critical infrastructure; this includes weapons systems for air defence and radars for monitoring the airspace over the national territory and the Atlantic (E.M. Ferrão, op. cit.).

stability (e.g. by supporting stabilisation and crisis management operations, training partner forces and protecting critical trade routes).

Portugal can further enhance its relevance and reputation by spearheading new cooperative security and defence initiatives to combat terrorism, tackle illegal migration and protect critical infrastructure, particularly in the energy sector (E.M. Ferrão, op. cit.).

By participating in these initiatives and other international projects²⁶, Portugal enables allied interoperability and strengthens the national industrial and knowledge base. By “fostering closer partnerships between the defence sector, academia and industry to develop dual-use technological solutions”, Portugal not only “advances its scientific and industrial capabilities” but also “contributes to the EU’s strategic autonomy and modernises its AAFP” (J.N. Fonseca, op. cit.).

5. Conclusions

The strategic landscape has undergone substantial changes in recent years. However, the strategic triangle formed by Portugal’s sovereign territory continues to play an important role in Euro-Atlantic security, particularly in times of crises and instability. Given that both NATO and the EU recognise the need to strengthen Europe’s defence capabilities, Portugal must confirm its strategic and military relevance by fulfilling its collective responsibilities. In this context, the defence of its sovereign territory remains a non-negotiable commitment that Portugal must not overlook.

This study analysed Portugal’s sovereign territory to identify strategic and military measures that will enhance its relevance for NATO and the EU. The **methodological procedures** employed in the study included a deductive reasoning process, a qualitative research strategy and a case study research design. Data were collected from documentary sources and semi-structured qualitative interviews with national experts and decision makers. The data were analysed by conducting “strategy tests” to assess *suitability*, *feasibility* and *acceptability*.

Next, the **findings** are evaluated in relation to the research problem, objectives and questions.

SO1 focused on analysing the strategic advantages that Portugal’s sovereign territory provides NATO and the EU. This objective was achieved by answering SQ1: **What are the strategic advantages that Portugal’s sovereign territory provides NATO and the EU?**

The findings show that Portugal’s sovereign territory plays an important role in mitigating key threats and challenges for NATO and the EU in four domains: 1) military aggression and geopolitical conflicts; 2) hybrid and cyber threats; 3) terrorism and organised crime; 4) climate change and humanitarian crises.

²⁶ Such as the EU’s ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 or NATO’s Multinational Ammunition Warehousing Initiative (MAWI), Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS), Maritime Uncrewed Systems (MUS) and Command and Control Capability for Surface Based Air and Missile Defence for the Battalion and Brigade Level (SBAMD C2 Layer) (NATO, 2025b).

In countering military aggression, Portugal's sovereign territory performs three critical strategic functions for NATO and the EU: by ensuring **surveillance and control of the Atlantic**, Portugal aids in deterrence, protects maritime routes, monitors airspace and mitigates hybrid threats; through its airport infrastructure and military bases/fields, Portugal enhances **enablement and military mobility** by facilitating the sustainment, transit and projection of allied forces, and; Portugal **provides strategic depth** (due to being relatively distant from conflict zones in Central and Eastern Europe) **and national engagement** (exemplified by the participation of Portuguese combat forces under the DDA concept).

Due to its strategic location in the Atlantic and critical infrastructure, particularly in the maritime, cyber and space domains, Portugal can perform two important functions: **countering hybrid threats**; and, **building resilience** in sectors such as energy, transport, digital infrastructure and space, based on the principle that individual national efforts to build resilience collectively strengthen NATO and the EU.

Portugal's sovereign territory also plays a strategic role in **combating terrorism and organised crime**. Within the EU, Portugal helps protect the Union's external borders. In NATO, under the 360-degree approach to deterrence and defence and the NATO Hub for the South initiative, Portugal can contribute to conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and the socio-economic development of African nations.

The country's vast coastline, unique biogeographical position and scientific expertise make it an important player in **mitigating the effects of climate change**. Within the international organisations to which it belongs, Portugal participates in environmental protection mechanisms and initiatives while helping to mobilise the international community to pursue global solutions.

SO2 focused on assessing whether Portugal currently has the military-strategic capacity to defend its sovereign territory and meet its international commitments. This objective was achieved by answering SQ2: **Are Portugal's AAF capabilities capable of defending its sovereign territory and meet its international commitments?**

The study showed that Portugal's military strategy is **adequate in terms of objectives (ends)**, as it accurately reflects strategic challenges and international commitments, and **acceptable in terms of methods (ways)**, which are supported by appropriate legislation, consistent with international obligations and aligned with current NATO doctrine. However, in terms of **feasibility (resources/means)**, gaps were identified in three critical areas: financial resources, human resources and the equipment and capabilities needed to defend Portugal's sovereign territory (especially in certain domains), which can be addressed by investing in the defence sector.

Finally, the *GO* and *RQ* formulated to address the research problem focused on **identifying strategic-military measures that Portugal can adopt to enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory for NATO and the EU**.

The following strategic-military measures would improve the AAF capabilities Portugal requires to address key threats and challenges for NATO and the EU, thereby enhancing its strategic relevance.

Enhancing and modernising the AAFF will allow Portugal to protect Europe's western border more effectively, honour its international obligations and demonstrate the strategic value of its sovereign territory for collective defence and security. Meeting these objectives will require competent and balanced AAFF equipped with the necessary capabilities and resources.

Strengthening presence and surveillance in the Atlantic is essential to deter and counter threats to Euro-Atlantic security, mitigate global risks, monitor and protect sea and air traffic and safeguard communications and energy infrastructure. This will require a stronger military presence and force protection measures, as well as improved maritime, air and ground surveillance capabilities.

Developing and upgrading strategic infrastructure (such as military bases and fields) will enhance force enablement and military mobility, improve Europe's ability to project power and provide strategic depth. Portugal can enhance its strategic role in this area by hosting a NATO logistics hub in the NT, modernising military infrastructure and creating high-capacity training centres for joint operations.

Investing in cyber defence and resilience against hybrid threats, which pose significant risks to Portugal, NATO and the EU, is essential to counter these threats and strengthen the resilience of critical infrastructure and information systems. By developing early warning systems, enhancing cyber defence capabilities and implementing an integrated security framework, Portugal can mitigate emerging risks and ensure internal and external stability.

By **participating in international missions, projects and cooperation initiatives**, Portugal will enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory. These measures and initiatives include: *participating in joint operations and international military exercises*, as this will help solidify Portugal's reputation as a reliable and influential partner; promoting cooperative security, particularly in Europe's southern flank, and contributing to regional stability by protecting trade routes, training partner forces and combating transnational threats; by participating in these international initiatives, Portugal enables *allied interoperability* and strengthens its national industrial and knowledge base.

This study **advances knowledge in its field of study** in three ways: 1) by identifying the strategic functions of Portugal's sovereign territory in countering threats to NATO and the EU; 2) by assessing if Portugal's military strategy requires updating; and 3) by proposing strategic-military measures that Portugal can adopt to enhance the relevance of its sovereign territory for NATO and the EU.

The main **limitations/challenges** encountered during the study were related to data collection. Several planned interviews could not be conducted, including those with NATO and EU representatives, and alternative sources had to be used. Additionally, while the semi-structured qualitative interviews guided by a predefined script offered valuable insights, the heterogeneity of responses posed limitations in data processing and analysis, despite the depth provided by the open-ended questions.

Given the methodological choice to limit the investigation to a single topic and unclassified sources, the instability of the strategic environment and the evolving defence and security dynamics in Europe, **future studies** should focus on: 1) analysing the role of Portugal's operational theatres for Europe's collective defence, 2) identifying ways to enhance enablement and military mobility in the NT; and 3) assessing the geopolitical value of Portugal's sovereign territory for the US and China in the current landscape.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A — Key concepts

Acceptability – assesses if the methods chosen to implement a strategy are acceptable and if the desired outcomes can be achieved without excessive costs (Yarger, 2006, p. 70).

Suitability – assesses if a strategy is appropriate to achieve the desired objectives (Yarger, 2006, p. 70).

Threat – any event or action, either ongoing or foreseeable, that prevents an objective from being achieved and usually results in material damage or moral harm in various domains (e.g. military, economic, environmental). In the field of strategy, threats are usually the result of deliberate actions, that is, the sum of ability and intent (Escorrega, 2009).

Hybrid threats – usually refer to coordinated harmful activities that are planned and carried out with malign intent, such as undermining states and institutions, through a variety of means, including information manipulation, cyberattacks, economic influence or coercion, covert political manoeuvring, coercive diplomacy or threats of military force (EU, 2025b).

Military capability – a set of interdependent components (including doctrine, organisation, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, infrastructure and interoperability) that function synergistically and collectively enable the execution of operational tasks or achieve certain effects (CCEM, 2014b, p. 38).

Strategic Space of Permanent National Interest – the area covered by Portugal's national territory, from its northernmost point (Melgaço) to its southernmost point (Selvagens islands), and from its westernmost point (Flores island) to its easternmost point (Miranda do Douro). This area also includes the inter-territorial spaces and air space and waters under national sovereignty or jurisdiction (CCEM, 2014b, p. 12).

Strategy – the science and art of defining and prioritising objectives to achieve organisational goals by generating, organising and deploying tangible and intangible resources to achieve those objectives in a hostile or competitive environment (Couto, 2004, p. 215).

Feasibility – assesses whether a strategy can be successfully executed with the means or resources available (Yarger, 2006, p. 70).

Multidomain – NATO concept that involves the coordinated execution of military activities across all domains (maritime, land, air, space, and cyberspace), synchronised with non-military activities to create desired outcomes at the right time and place, through options that build advantages for allied forces while presenting dilemmas for adversaries (NATO, 2023c).

Resilience – national and/or collective capacity to prepare for, resist, respond to, and quickly recover from strategic shocks and disruptions across the full spectrum of threats (NATO, 2023b).

Risks – unintentional events with strategic consequences (CCEM, 2014, p. 8).

Cooperative security – an approach to security that focuses on conflict prevention and the desire to cooperate with potential adversaries, encouraging measures to prevent, mitigate, contain or resolve military threats that could escalate into war (Escorrega, 2009).

Appendix B — Interviewees

Table 4 – List of interviewees

	POSITION	NAME	FORMAT	DATE	SCRIPT
I1	Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (CEMGFA)	Gen José Nunes da Fonseca	Email	24Apr25	A
I2	Chief of Staff of the Navy (CEMA)	Adm Jorge Manuel Nobre de Sousa	Email	28Mar25	A
I3	Chief of Staff of the Army (CEME)	Gen Eduardo Manuel Mendes Ferrão	Email	10Apr25	A
I4	Military Representative (MILREP) to NATO and the EU	Air Mshl Paulo José Reis Mateus	Video	20Fev25	A
I5	Air Commander	Air Mshl Sérgio Pereira	Face-to-face	11Mar25	A
I6	Director-General for National Defence Policy (DGPDN)	Lt Gen Nuno Lemos Pires	Face-to-face	19Fev25	A
I7	Head of the Military Strategic Planning Division (DIPLAEM)	Air Cdre Fernando Leitão	Face-to-face	14Fev25	A
I8	Military Expert: Former CEMA	Adm António Silva Ribeiro (Ret)	Email	01Mar25	A
I9	Military Expert: Former CEME	Gen Pinto Ramalho (Ret)	Video	26Fev25	A
I10	Military Expert: University Professor	Maj Gen Vieira Borges (Res)	Email	19Fev25	A
I11	Military Expert: University Professor	Col Luis Bernardino (Res)	Email	20Mar25	B
I12	Civilian Expert: Diplomat	*	Phone	27Fev25	B
I13	Civilian Expert: University Professor	Professor António Telo	Face-to-face	07Mar25	B
I14	Civilian Expert: University Professor	Professor José Palmeira	Email	31Mar25	B

* - Requested to remain anonymous.