

ATLANTIC — CENTRE —

POLICY BRIEF **ISSUE 05** | OCTOBER | 2020

**A vision for the Atlantic Centre:
Building up resilience and cooperative security
for a more secure ocean for all**

Nuno Lemos Pires¹, Bruno Cardoso Reis² Licínia Simão³

The Atlantic Centre (AC) is grounded on a whole-of-the-Atlantic approach with the aim of benefiting every single country bordering the Atlantic. North to South, East to West, from South Africa to Canada, from Norway to Argentina. Those living alongside the coastlines of the Atlantic have always been affected by what happens in this vast ocean. Problems can easily travel thousands of kilometres across the sea, from air pollution to plastic waste, from illegal drugs to weapons.

Ever since the Atlantic was fully mapped and emerged centuries ago as the key component in the first global network of trade and communication, communities across of the Atlantic have

¹ Defence Policy Deputy Director, Brigadier-general of the Portuguese Army, Professor at the Military Academy and Interim-coordinator of the Atlantic Centre.

² Deputy Director at the Centre for International Studies, ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon and advisor the Portuguese MoD.

³ Professor at the School of Economics and Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, and advisor the Portuguese MoD.

become increasingly connected for good or ill. Today, we share many similar languages, values, concerns, threats, challenges, but also opportunities. These threats and the opportunities to cooperate in addressing them are the most important dimensions for the AC. The overall mission of the AC is to carry out research on these threats and problems, to develop shared solutions, to encourage dialogue and to develop defence capacity building to enhance security in the common space of the Atlantic.

We are not naïve. We are aware that not all is well in the Atlantic. We realize there are major differences between Atlantic states in terms of their relative level of wealth, military capabilities or threat perception. However, Atlantic states are by definition very much affected, in their security and prosperity, by whatever affects the Atlantic Ocean. All kinds of environmental damage affecting sea life and fisheries provide very good examples in this regard. So is climate change and related extreme weather events, to which our Atlantic coastlines remain vulnerable. Last, but not least, piracy, maritime terrorism as well as organized crime engaged in illegal trafficking of people, weapons and narcotics are further examples of how maritime security today is more than ever affected by transnational threats that do not respect any borders. The differences between us should not hold us back from working together on shared problems and shared solutions.

In order to achieve that main goal and aiming to become an International Organisation open to all Atlantic states, the AC activities are structured around three main tiers.

The first tier is the “think tank” level. We aim to foster seminars, workshops, international conferences and to develop policy papers, research projects, and strategic documents that can shape more integrated security policies⁴. The AC aims to become a platform for reflect about our common Atlantic space, dedicated to the production and dissemination of knowledge and to support the development of public policies that improve maritime security broadly

⁴ See, for instance, the publication from our first international seminar:
https://www.idn.gov.pt/pt/publicacoes/idncadernos/Documents/Texto%20integral/idncadernos_38.pdf

understood across the Atlantic. The AC aims to change perceptions in the way problems are addressed, and solutions are identified: “from us to them” to “from us to us”.

The second tier is a platform for dialogue between countries and regional organisations as well as non-governmental institutions, discussing security issues among each other, sharing best practices, identifying common challenges and key-shared priorities for cooperative action. There is no limit to the topics on the table, from border disputes, to threats to fisheries and other natural resources like oil and gas, to other criminal activities at sea. This tier aims to promote open and frank discussions around questions that can divide us inasmuch as they can unite us. Hopefully this will allow to dispel misperceptions, but also to identify shared concerns and cooperative responses.

The third tier comprises the most operational manifestation of the AC, dealing with defence capacity building. At this tier, the infrastructure being built in Terceira Island (Azores) will be capable to train ship crews, costal guards, air, sea and land personal dealing with security issues, from land to sea and in international waters (including surveillance and maritime domain awareness). Dealing with the five domains of operations (land-sea-air-space-cyber) and their impact in the security of the Atlantic will provide opportunities to learn, train and exchange best practices and doctrines. Different partner countries can supply a broad range of training opportunities: from internal law specialisation to on-the-job training in coastal ships, ports security activities, surveillance, maritime domain awareness, and even maintaining and sustaining vessels and equipment. As soon as public health and travel restrictions due to the COVID-10 pandemic allow for, the AC will organise its first training course in Terceira Island (Azores), to deal with security issues in the Gulf of Guinea, hopefully in the Spring of 2021. Others will follow in line with the priorities for cooperation agreed upon between the partner countries. In the meantime, we have proceeded with our activities by means of the second AC Seminar, on 16 October 2020, organized around an issue made tragically topical by the pandemic: “Multidimensional responses to complex emergencies in the Atlantic”⁵.

⁵ See detailed program in: <https://www.defesa.gov.pt/pt/pdefesa/ac/events/II-Seminar-AC/>

The AC aims to play a new role in promoting security and defence in the Atlantic that is complementary to that of other actors, actively eschewing unnecessary duplication of structures and resources. Our vision for the AC is one of action supplementing and maximising what is already being done bilaterally and multilaterally, with the purpose of achieving a multiplier effect.

The final aim of establishing the AC as an International Organisation comes as an expression of the ambition to have a Centre of equal partners for equal partners, with no privileged geographies. The distinction that will matter most will be the willingness to join and to contribute to the building of resilience across the Atlantic through a holistic approach to cooperative security. Nations that choose to be active participants of the Centre will benefit from the solid institutional framework of an International Organisation. The main infrastructure for the AC is already under construction⁶ in Terceira Island (Azores), with work expected to be concluded during 2021, and will be complemented by a permanent Office in Lisbon.

PORTUGAL AS A FACILITATOR OF ATLANTIC SECURITY DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

The main guiding document of Portuguese defence strategy, the Strategic Concept of National Defence, clearly states “the national interests [are] derived from Portugal’s status as a European and Atlantic democracy”⁷. It is a fact that Portugal helped map and make the Atlantic Ocean as we know it. In addition, the Atlantic has had a central role in Portuguese foreign and defence policy throughout history; this is an experience Portugal shares with many other Atlantic states. Today, Portugal is not only a continental Western European state with a very significant Atlantic coastline. Portugal is defined in geostrategic terms by a triangle with

⁶ Watch the video in: <https://www.defesa.gov.pt/pt/pdefesa/ac/about/Paginas/default.aspx>

⁷ Available here:

https://www.defesa.gov.pt/pt/comunicacao/documentos/Lists/PDEFINTER_DocumentoLookupList/20_Strategic-Concept-of-National-Defence.pdf

poles in its European territory and the archipelagos of the Azores and Madeira, including the vast maritime areas in between these three poles at the centre of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Portuguese Strategic Concept of National Defence cited above lists the following priorities in terms of Portugal's national interests: "to affirm its presence in the world, [and] consolidate its insertion in a network of alliances", in particular "NATO, the EU and the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP)". Another priority is to promote the welfare of sizeable Portuguese migrant communities living in Atlantic countries from the USA to Venezuela, from Brazil to Angola, by engaging in friendly relations with host countries. The Portuguese National Strategic Concept is also very clear that the country is obliged by its Constitution to "contribute to the promotion of international peace and security" via the UN system.

Portugal is and has, indeed, been very intrinsically committed to the principles of the UN Charter, as well as to cooperative security. This also means a strong commitment to various regional or inter-regional multilateral organisations, namely the EU and NATO with partners in Europe and North America, but also a growing attention to the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries and the Ibero-American Community with partners in the Americas and Africa.

Portugal has sought to make an active contribution to the security of global commons, and to engage in defence capacity building and other forms of cooperation with partners, in particular in Africa. It has also been strongly committed to inter-regional security dialogue namely in the context of the EU-African Union partnership.

The USA and Guinea-Bissau, both countries with which Portugal has historically strong and friendly relations, are very different in their level of prosperity or their threat perceptions. Portugal is a Western state but with deep cultural and historic connections with the Americas and with Africa. Portugal is not a great power, but it is a country but with a global vocation. It is, therefore, no difficult for Portugal, a country firmly rooted in Europe but with strong

connections to Africa and the Americas, to understand that there are important differences between different Atlantic states. This makes the work of facilitating dialogue and cooperation across the Atlantic, if not simple, then at least less complicated.

Portugal strongly believes that in a fast-changing world, resulting in several new challenges and transnational risks and threats that are increasingly prominent, it is vital for all states bordering the Atlantic to find ways to engage constructively with each other. The Atlantic Centre aims to reflect both this reality and this aim. One of the central goals of the AC is, precisely, to become a forum for a regular exchange of views regarding the main security challenges in the Atlantic Ocean. This means that Portugal, as its founding host, is well aware that there is no perfect or automatic alignment of threat perceptions or defence and security priorities between the many different Atlantic states. This is only to be expected. However, this fact makes it even more imperative to engage in a regular security dialogue among as many Atlantic states as possible that will help dispel misconceptions, identify areas of common interest and possibilities of effective cooperation.

Portugal started the AC as a joint venture open to all Atlantic states willing to join and to play an active and constructive role in setting its agenda. This was the spirit behind the first international seminar that took place in Lisbon, in November 2019. We asked: Do we need an Atlantic Centre? The response from experts and senior officials alike was for the most part a positive one.

Given our “whole-of-the-Atlantic approach” the ideal vision for the Centre would be to help bind all 66 Atlantic countries. Again, we are not naïve. We are currently working with more than 15 “like-minded” Atlantic nations on a Memorandum of Understanding⁸ (MoU) that we hope will be signed by these and possibly other Atlantic nations during a ceremony in Terceira Island (Azores) in the Spring of 2021, which we hope will coincide with the first training course on maritime security. It would be utopian to start with 66, but the door remains open to all the Atlantic States willing to commit and cooperate.

⁸ Join the works in: <https://atlanticcentremou.defesa.gov.pt/Pages/home.aspx>

We also aim to invite all relevant and willing regional security organisations from the Americas, Africa and Europe to participate and contribute. In order to do this, we will ask again for the active involvement of states with different perspectives from different regions of the Atlantic. In that spirit, coinciding with the Portuguese presidency of the European Union during the second semester of 2021, Portugal will use the inaugural event of the AC to make visible to other EU member states and EU institutions the vital importance of maritime security in the Atlantic as well as the role the AC can play in this regard.

BRINGING DIFFERENT NEEDS AND VISIONS TOGETHER FOR A MORE SECURE ATLANTIC FOR ALL

Throughout this first year, the many interactions between the Portuguese Ministry of Defence and a wide range of Atlantic partners have evidenced a significant overlap in the security assessment across the Atlantic. There is a growing understanding that cooperative solutions are required, if a more effective response is to be found.

The most significant challenges currently being faced in the Atlantic include, as mentioned, the toxic combination of transnational criminal activities, radicalisation and terrorism, great power competition and resource depletion.

Communities throughout Africa are being devastated by drought but also by intensive fishing, making survival through traditional activities, like herding or fishing, impossible. This creates additional incentives for piracy, for involvement in drug trafficking and other illicit and criminal activities, as well as for radicalisation and violence. Addressing the human impacts of insecurity and developing community-based strategies to increase resilience would provide a significant contribution to stability in Africa and for the Atlantic as a whole.

Uncertainty and insecurity are also on the rise at sea, due to the well-known problem of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, which affects trade routes between Africa and Europe as well as the Americas. However, growing competition between Atlantic and non-Atlantic powers,

expected to further increase with the opening up of the Arctic route, is also taking a toll in maritime dynamics. Transparency and confidence building measures will therefore be critical to avoid incidents and to establish procedures and mechanisms of consultation that will ensure the security of information of natural resources and of people, both at sea and alongside the coastline.

Technological developments will determine to a large extent the capabilities available to monitor the Atlantic and to keep it safe. Therefore, technological novelties and the output that result from them should be made available to countries across the Atlantic. This is not just a matter of equity but of pragmatism, the Atlantic Ocean is too big for any one power, no matter how advanced or powerful, to effectively secure alone.

The AC alone will not be able to address such a complex set of security challenges. Nevertheless, we are convinced that efforts aimed at sustaining truly cooperative security, based on a joint agenda and the result of shared discussion and research, are urgently needed, especially in the maritime security domain. Building capacity to address the issues that are relevant for each Atlantic partner, can be an important contribution to keeping the Atlantic as an area of peace and security, in itself an indispensable precondition for investment, trade, development and prosperity.

Portugal is fortunate to share a number of *fora* with many Atlantic countries. The large majority, like Portugal, are not great powers and understand how valuable peace, stability and cooperation can become in a very turbulent world. If a significant number of Atlantic states join the Atlantic Centre, it can gradually become an important voice in addressing the most pressing shared security concerns that affect the whole of the region.

This is the vision that has animated our initial efforts and that has gradually brought others on board as well. The AC is on the move. It started as a Portuguese initiative, but it very much aims to become a fully-fledge partnership of like-minded states across the whole of the

Atlantic. As with any good partnership, it will be what its partners want it to be, but we believe it is in our reach and that together we truly can build OUR Atlantic Centre.