



Article

The National Interest in Portuguese Foreign Policy During the Leadership of Marcello Caetano (1968-1974)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to provide an idea of the concept of national interest, and at the same time, to examine the options that the Salazar regime faces when defining the Portuguese national interest. The types of national interest addressed here are defined by Hans Morgenthau and Michael Roskin, who understand that a country that does not adequately define its interests leaves its foreign policy without structure and consequently is uncompetitive in the international arena. Therefore, to avoid an *ad hoc* approach to the execution of Portuguese foreign policy, Marcello Caetano continued the foundations of Portuguese foreign policy that were defined by Salazar that the Estado Novo would execute until the coup d'état of 25th of April of 1974.

KEYWORDS

Estado Novo; national interest; International Relations; Portugal; Portuguese foreign policy

Introduction

The concept of national interest has long served as a cornerstone of realist thought in international relations, providing a framework for states to prioritize survival, security, and prosperity amid global anarchy, and is central to the formulation of effective foreign policies, functioning as the backbone that guides a state's decisions on the global stage.

Portuguese foreign policy during the leadership of Marcello Caetano (1968-1974) reflects a period of crisis and resistance of the Estado Novo regime in the face of internal and external transformations. In a global context marked by the Cold War, decolonization, and the consolidation of international norms of self-determination, "Portugal is a state that, like others, has always justified its foreign policy based on what it considered to be the best defense of its interests" (Monteiro, 2019, p. 107), depending on its will or conditioned by circumstances from the moment. In view of Monteiro's quote, all states, regardless of their size and according to their capacity, are obliged to build the foundations of the edifice that will support their respective foreign policy, a view which is shared by Henry Kissinger (2012) and Franco Nogueira (2000a), two theorists of the realist paradigm (Tavares, 2020; Tavares, 2023a).

This article examines how Caetano, who succeeded Salazar in 1968 following the latter's incapacitating stroke, navigated the evolving international landscape while maintaining continuity with

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Salazarist principles of Portuguese foreign policy. Despite mounting pressures from decolonization movements, Cold War dynamics, and domestic unrest, Caetano's foreign policy avoided fundamental restructuring, adhering to the foundational interests established under Salazar until the Carnation Revolution of 25th of April of 1974.

Based on the ideas of Hans J. Morgenthau (1948, 1952, 1962), considered the father of the realist school of International Relations, and the theoretical work developed by Michael Roskin (1994), we will define Portuguese state national interest in four categories: based on their importance, vital and non-vital interests are distinguished; based on the duration of permanent and temporary interests; based on specificity which distinguishes between general and specific interests; and lastly, based on compatibility, interests can be complementary or conflicting. The hypothesis is based on the premise that a state that does not have a strategic concept based on its respective national interest, which reflects the values and interests of its society, then its foreign policy will be guided, in an unstructured and disorganized way, subordinated to the interests of the great powers, instead of being rational and assertive, in a defensive posture in relation to other states.

Drawing on Morgenthau's and Roskin's typologies, this study argues that Caetano's continuity ensured short-term regime survival but ultimately contributed to the Estado Novo's collapse by failing to adapt to shifting global realities. The analysis proceeds by conceptualizing national interest, outlining Salazar's foundational policies, detailing Caetano's leadership context, and evaluating key foreign policy domains.

This article begins by addressing the topic, firstly, by stating the concept of national interest, a fundamental concept of the realist school of International Relations. It divides and defines the levels of national interest of the states that operate within the international system. The second point exposes the centrality of national interest within Portuguese foreign policy, as defined by António de Oliveira Salazar, the architect of the Estado Novo's foreign policy, in addition to the due historical framework, fundamental to understanding the political choices of Marcello Caetano, as President of the Council of Ministers, between 1968 and 1974, who are the political decision makers (Tavares, 2020; 2023). Third, we intend to elaborate a synthesis on the national interest during the Caetano's government in the theoretical framework developed by Roskin (1994).

The theoretical and conceptual framework of the concept of national interest

The concept of national interest has been used by statesmen, politicians and academics, since the founding the nation-states to describe the aspiration and goals of sovereign entities in the international system. It is "the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to other sovereign states comprising the external environment" (Neuchterlein, 1976, p. 247). According to Mendes (2022), it was introduced into the political lexicon from the 16th century onwards, with the development of the Nation-State and nationalism, after the Peace of Westphalia. Since then, the national interest has been a more effective guide to foreign policy (Navari, 2016).

Within the realistic school of International Relations, Machiavelli predicted the emergence of national interest as the fundamental principle that will dictate relations between states, in two important ways, with his understanding being that the decision-maker must know when to exercise his power, as well as when he should not exercise it. Machiavelli argues that the decision maker can have fantastic and righteous moral objectives, but without sufficient power, he does not have the ability to achieve them (Maquiavel, 1972). Two other sources of realist school who contributed to the concept of national interest is Cardinal Richelieu's vision of *Raison d'Etat* (Richelieu, 2008; Rehman, 2019) and Clausewitz (2020), known for his work, *Da Guerra*, where he argues that war was nothing more than the continuation of politics, with the aim of giving greater unity to the global concept of war.

According to Morgenthau (1948), every state is motivated by its needs to survive and prosper, which dictates the basis of a state's national interest. To safeguard their interests, state policymakers must rationally weigh the pros and cons of going to war and should only embark on armed conflict if the purpose serves the national interest. In *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau (1948), states that the national interest:

in terms of power (...) provides the link between reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood. It sets politics as an autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres, such as economics (understood in terms of interest defined as wealth), ethics, aesthetics, or religion. Without such a concept a theory of politics, international or domestic, would be altogether impossible, for without it we could not distinguish between political and non-political facts, nor could we bring at least a measure of systematic order to the political sphere.

(Morgenthau, 1948, p. 5)

To Morgenthau (1948, p. 7), "its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all. The idea of interest is indeed of the essence of politics and is unaffected by the circumstances of time and place" (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 7). In other words, Morgenthau (1948) understands national interest as the essence of foreign policy, just like Franco Nogueira (2000a), who advocates national interest as the epicentre of any decision made by the decision maker.

Therefore, the type of national interest that determines the political action of a state, in each period of History, depends on the political and cultural context in which the foreign policy of a state is conceived. Every foreign policy of a sovereign state is defined in accordance with the needs and desires of a state in relation to the national interests of other states inside of the international system, since the state is the only actor in International Relations, in accordance with the realistic paradigm of International Relations. Michael Roskin (1994) adds that the definition of national interest is essential to limit the number of high-risk adventures that a state may be able to undertake. It is the understanding of both authors that there are two types of importance of national interest, vital and secondary.

For Morgenthau, the vital importance of the national interest of a sovereign state foreign policy is based on the pursuit of its survival or the guarantee of security of its identity, whether physical, political or cultural (Morgenthau, 1948), in other words, seeks to maintain its territorial integrity, its political and economic system, and the protection of its nation's values, which make up the national interest of a state, because they are essential for its survival, since a State for defending or protecting its interests is available to resort to war in order to guarantee or strengthen its security. Security is considered a vital interest of a state (*idem*). To preserve vital interests, which includes the survival of the state inside of international system, there can be no hesitation in going to war, because all states must defend their interests at any cost. We can consider Portuguese collaborative neutrality during the Second World War as an attitude that meets the defence of Portuguese vital interests, as was the case in the Colonial War, where Portugal reacted to separatist movements in defence of the country's territorial integrity (Tavares, 2023b).

The secondary interests are those determined by circumstances or by the need to guarantee vital interests, which are conditioned by a series of factors such as political decision-makers, public opinion, the interests of internal groups, and political and moral customs, about the variable objectives they would like to see accomplished, but for which they are not willing to go to war. However, these are interests that can evolve into vital ones, in the minds of political decision-makers, according to circumstances (Roskin, 1994), for example, the protection of citizens abroad and the guarantee of diplomatic immunities for diplomatic personnel.

Furthermore, Morgenthau distinguishes, in terms of duration, between temporary and permanent. Permanent interests refer to the relatively constant long-term interests of the state. These are subject to very slow changes. Temporary interests are the interests of a state that are considered vital to the national good in each set of circumstances. In this sense, they can diverge from both primary and permanent interests. Variable interests are largely determined by public opinion, sector interests, party politics, and political and moral customs.

According to Roskin (1994), there is still a distinction in terms of specificity, the national interest, which is subdivided into general interests and specific interests. The first consist of positive conditions that apply in several specific fields, such as the economy, trade and relations between states, that is, we

talk about purposes such as maintaining world peace or arms control being in the general interest of any state. The latter are the logical developments of general interests and are defined in terms of time and space.

As for its compatibility, it is subdivided into complementary interests and conflicting interests. The former refer to those interests that, although not identical, can form the basis of agreement on some specific issues, while the latter include interests that are neither complementary nor identical. However, this classification is not absolute, since complementary interests can, over time, become conflicting interests, and vice versa.

The Portuguese national interest in Portuguese foreign policy during Marcello Caetano's government

In the Portuguese context, the Estado Novo's national interest was overwhelmingly vital: the indivisibility of the pluricontinental territory. Salazar viewed the Portuguese colonies as extensions of the metropole, integral to Portugal's identity, economy, and great-power status. This definition aligned with Morgenthau's vital interests but clashed with Roskin's emphasis on adaptability, as global decolonization norms rendered colonial retention increasingly peripheral to most states' calculations.

During Salazar's government (1933-1968), the Portuguese national interest was shaped by three fundamental pillars:

- **Preservation of the Colonial Empire:** The maintenance of the African colonies (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, among others) was seen as essential for Portugal's national identity and geopolitical relevance. Salazar argued that the empire was a natural extension of the Portuguese state, rejecting international pressures for decolonization.
- **Strategic Neutrality:** During World War II and the Cold War, Portugal adopted a stance of pragmatic neutrality, balancing relations with Western powers (such as the United Kingdom and the United States) and maintaining national sovereignty. NATO membership in 1949 reflected this strategy, ensuring protection from external threats without compromising autonomy.
- **Internal Stability:** The regime prioritized the consolidation of internal power, promoting a nationalist and corporatist ideology that legitimized foreign policy as an extension of the domestic order.

Until his removal from power, Salazar faced significant dilemmas in executing this vision. Growing international pressure for decolonization, especially after the independence of Asian colonies such as India, which annexed Goa in 1961, challenged the imperial narrative. Furthermore, Portugal's diplomatic isolation in international forums, such as the United Nations, required cautious diplomacy to maintain strategic allies.

Before Marcello Caetano accepted the invitation of the President of the Portuguese Republic to succeed Salazar in leading the Estado Novo government, after the accident that incapacitated the latter from being able to govern, the international situation remains the same. Despite that Admiral Américo Thomaz, as President of the Portuguese Republic, imposed as a condition that the guidelines of Portuguese foreign policy defined by Salazar are to maintain, with special attention to those related to Portuguese overseas policy, conditions that Caetano accepted when he took office (Nogueira, 2000a).

However, the President of the Republic warned Marcello Caetano that if the regime's policy direction was not maintained, the armed forces would be forced to intervene (Barroso, 2012; Caetano, 1974). Therefore, in a logic of renewal in continuity, Caetano maintains the structure inherited from the previous government, with ministers like Franco Nogueira, except for the portfolios directly related to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. As Martinho (2016, p. 409) notes, "this choice can be understood as a precaution insofar as it avoided hurting sensibilities, or as the conviction of the need to remain in policy" by Salazar.

If for Salazar, the Portuguese national interest, based on the survival of the state in the midst of international anarchy, determines that "Portuguese foreign policy must reconcile its historical-geographical relations with the rapprochement of Western Europe and the USA, without changing the

regime and Portuguese interests in response to the threat of communism, in which United States aid would be indispensable against Soviet Russia” (Tavares, 2023b, p. 182), with Marcello Caetano the same line of thought of Portuguese foreign policy was maintained, under the surveillance of Admiral Américo Thomaz, who assumed himself as “a kind of representative of the ultras and a spokesperson for the high commands of the Armed Forces who did not admit any retreat in the fight against “terrorism” (Pereira, 2022, p. 249).

With the arrival of Marcello Caetano to power, “the Portuguese political system highlights a clear division between two options in terms of foreign policy, on the one hand the imperial-continuist option, on the other the European-reformist option” (Mendes, 2013, p. 118). At the same time, the colonial problem represented the Gordian knot of Salazar’s legacy in Portuguese foreign policy, since the overseas issue conditioned Portuguese national interest, which in turn determined the path of Portuguese foreign policy during Marcelism. Until it broke, it would be very difficult to expand its range of foreign policy’s options and carve out a space for an autonomous political project for Portugal.

The Portuguese Colonial War in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, which began in the 1960s, consumed significant resources. It is estimated that about 40% of the national budget – approximately 1.5 billion escudos per year – was allocated to military campaigns, compromising investments in infrastructure, health and education (Alexandre, 2000). The Portuguese economy, still predominantly agrarian and with an incipient industry, faced stagnation, with rising inflation (20% in 1973) and an increase in the cost of living.

Because that, Caetano sought to initiate a different policy from that followed by Salazar, so he sought to improve relations with NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), EEC (European Economic Community) and United Nations, to improve multilateral approach. But soon Estado Novo under Marcello Caetano continues to prefer bilateral approaches, and Caetano met with President Richard Nixon in the United States and held summits with Spain and Brazil to improve cooperative relations, especially with the United States.

Inside of Portuguese foreign policy, the Portuguese colonial question was marked by the search for military option imposed by the President of the Republic that was rejected through negotiations and the granting of independence to overseas provinces. Significant changes in the official discourse allowed the emphasis to be placed on progressive autonomy and which very tenuously subdued a tendency to accept white independence (Alves, 2024).

According to Amaral (1996, p. 26), Marcelo Caetano argued that he could not “hand over overseas territories into the hands of liberation movements or “terrorists” controlled by Communist States with ambitions in Africa. But at the same time, I knew that I would have to guide these territories towards progressive autonomy, which would lead to self-governance, and, ultimately, independence, although this last part had never been confirmed by him”. Despite the difficulties, Portugal had gone to war in a relatively favourable domestic and external context, “both from the point of view of normative legitimacy and from a strategic-military point of view. After more than ten years, this context had changed radically. Whether internationally or internally, the three fronts of the war in Africa had less and less support” (Mendes, 2020).

The defence of Ultramar remains the central axis in Portuguese foreign policy during the 1960s and 1970s (Caetano, 1972; 1971; 1970; 1968). It adapted and improved depending on the scenarios, regions and environments in which the mechanism could be used. Some essential objectives, strategic goals and tactical means of action could result from this basic guideline, such as collaboration with other departments of the Portuguese public administration to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of the defence effort of the Portuguese Armed Forces and to obtain, maintain or preserve sources of supply of certain equipment, both of a military nature and means of air transport, of combating logistical, financial and material support for anti-Portuguese movements, preventing the emergence or worsening of conflicts with countries with neighbouring territories, non-permission of deliberations or condemnations by international organizations with practical or field execution and the preservation of the maintenance and development of economic and financial relations with the most advanced countries on all continents. The pursuit of these objectives implied an intense diplomatic activity of clarification

and argumentation in international organizations and other collective forums, in bilateral contacts with other states and always with the political, economic, financial, social and cultural circles of the respective countries, but also being always close to the media. These clarifications aimed to show the realities of the Portuguese Overseas Provinces in the political, economic and social domain.

Caetano also had to deal with an issue that had been carried over from the previous government: the definitive approval of the Cabora Bassa project, whose construction would not only absorb substantial budgetary resources, but would also tie it to certain geopolitical conceptions of Salazar, namely the presence in Africa for a period undetermined of time and the alliance with the white regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa. In his memoirs, Caetano (1974) confesses that the work didn't excite him too much and that he even hesitated about continuing. But, since an option for retreat could not fail to produce a demobilizing psychological impact, he resigned himself to endorsing the project.

The alliances with the white regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa it was essential to guarantee the maintenance of the Portuguese military presence on the African continent, as well as to preserve Portuguese sovereignty over Angola and Mozambique. The importance of this alliance materialized in the ALCORA Exercise, which was the formalization of informal agreements on military cooperation between the local Portuguese, South African, and Rhodesian military commands that had been in place since the mid-1960s. Alcora was kept secret and referred to as an 'exercise', not an alliance or treaty, mainly due to the pressure of the Portuguese government, that feared the external and internal political issues that would be raised if it appeared openly to be associated with the *apartheid* regime of South Africa and the minority rule in Rhodesia, in contradiction to the official Portuguese doctrine of the existence of racial equality in Angola and Mozambique (Telo, 1996).

The internal and external context was favourable to Portugal during the Salazar era because the country had joined European Free Trade Association (EFTA), being beneficial for the imposition of free trade, the relationship with Spain was stable as both had regimes with ideologies and values similar. At the same time, Portugal's presence in NATO was advantageous for its relationship with the United States, using the Lajes base in Azores, as a negotiating asset, with special attention during the Yom Kippur War, in 1973. The Portuguese contribution was fundamental in unlocking US military aid for the Overseas War. However, this help would not arrive in time, because Marcello Caetano's government would be deposed with the coup d'état of 25th of April of 1974 (Pereira, 2022).

The execution of Portuguese foreign policy under Caetano, despite the restrictions imposed by the President of the Portuguese Republic, remained assertive and conditioned by domestic politics (Severiano Teixeira, 1987), however, Caetano tried to follow a different path, without calling the political regime into question, with no success. It sought to introduce changes in the wake of its renewal in continuity with a new overseas discourse, aimed at the construction of «new Brazils» (Caetano, 1974), but hardliners wing represents by the President of Republic opposed any reformist attempt in Portuguese foreign policy by Marcello Caetano. For all intents and purposes, the Portuguese national interest, remained in its essence, during Marcello Caetano's government, as imposed by Admiral Américo Thomaz, who act as a keeper of Portugal's national interest, as defined by Salazar.

Portuguese national interest during Marcello Caetano's government

In relation to Portugal's national interest during Marcello Caetano's administration, we can organize the types of national interest, following Roskin's model (1994), as shown below. Regarding its importance, we have two types of components, vital and secondary. An example of the vital component of Portuguese national interest is based on the premise of defending the territorial integrity of metropolitan Portugal, as well as ensuring the maintenance of Portuguese sovereignty over colonial territories, thus demonstrating the continued choice of the Atlantic strategy option, in the wake of the logic of continuity with Salazar's policy, to the detriment of the European option presented with the new European economic integration project, sponsored by the United States (Tavares, 2023b). We can consider an example of the secondary component of Portuguese national interest, the protection of the Portuguese diaspora, a consideration like what happened during Salazar's government (*idem*).

As for its duration, we have two types of components, temporary and permanent. An example of the temporary component of Portuguese national interest is the formalization of ALCORA Exercise with South Africa, which aimed to establish a secret political-military alliance between Portugal, Rhodesia, and South Africa, that had as its purpose the defeat of subversion in region of Southern Africa. An example of the permanent component is the establishment of relationships with several states with aligned interests, namely the maintenance of Portugal's key relations with France, Germany and the United States, in the Euro-Atlantic space, and in the region of Southern African, the deepening relations with Rhodesia and South Africa's governments.

As for its specificities, there are two variants, the general and the specific. An example of the first is NATO, due to the importance of relations between Portugal and the United States. An example of the second is the Portuguese contribution to the security of the Euro-Atlantic space, with the Azores agreement, like what already came from Salazar's government (Tavares, 2023b).

As for their compatibilities, there are two categories, complementary and conflicting. An example of the first category could be the development of relations between Portugal and Morocco. We can consider as an example of the second category, the negotiations for Portuguese accession to the European Common Market.

Conclusion

Alexandre According Nogueira (2000b), since the medieval times of absolute monarchy, Portugal was already a state with a foreign policy, based on the Portuguese national interest, which serves as a guide for the respective policymakers in the international system. Because until the 15th century, "Portugal's external relations developed within the framework of the Iberian Peninsula, between five political units, all of them more or less of the same size and potential" (Severiano Teixeira, 2010, p. 51), whose relationship evolved after the unification of Spain under the Catholic Monarchs, who "convert the Iberian Peninsula into two units of unequal size and potential" (Severiano Teixeira, 2010, p. 51), the Kingdom of Portugal and the Kingdom of Spain. With the emergence of Spain as unified state, the peninsular balance of the past was succeeded by a "geopolitical imbalance, which forces Portugal to seek compensation for this imbalance" (Severiano Teixeira, 2010, p. 52), which contributed to Infante D. Henrique's enterprise, the Discoveries.

Since then, Portugal as nation-state "has lived under a constant attempt to balance, between continental pressure from Spain and the search for maritime compensation in the Atlantic" (Severiano Teixeira, 2010, p. 52). This kind of geopolitical framework marked Portuguese foreign policy in such a way that even after the end of the Constitutional Monarchy, the republican revolution of 5th of October of 1910, and the military coup of 28th of May of 1926, we noticed that there was no profound rupture on the foundations of Portuguese foreign policy, but rather a continuity of them, with the respective adaptations based on the constraints and political decision-makers that emerged over time (Monteiro, 2019, pp. 107-108).

We found that Marcello Caetano was forced to maintain the strategic platform based on the protection of Portuguese national interest, previously defined by António de Oliveira Salazar, as imposed by Admiral Américo Thomaz, the then President of the Republic, who acted as a guardian of Salazar' foreign policy, from a perspective of traditional continuity of the vectors of Portuguese foreign policy, in which it reflects the values and interests of the Portuguese nation (Nogueira, 2000a), and at the same time, from a logic of continuity of the Estado Novo's foreign policy. This platform is supported by the interconnection of the various national public policies, which define the national interest on which the foreign policy conducted by the government led by Marcello Caetano will be based.

Salazar's foreign policy always sought to defend Portuguese interests in the world, without putting Portugal's position in the Western world at risk, whether during the interwar world order or post-Second World War (Tavares, 2023a; 2023b). Marcello Caetano's foreign policy was no different, he sought to avoid calling into question the *status quo* of the Portuguese position in the Euro-Atlantic space, and at same time, manage the Colonial Question in international system. For all intents and

purposes, Marcello Caetano was a President of the Council under tutelage of President of Republic in the matter of Portuguese foreign policy affairs (Pereira, 2022).

The Portuguese experience illustrates the risks of a foreign policy based on rigid ideological premises. As Robert Gilpin (1981) suggests, states that resist structural changes in the international system face crises of legitimacy and power. In the case of Portugal, the crisis culminated in the overthrow of the regime and abrupt decolonization, with lasting impacts for the country and its former colonies.

The Portuguese case contributes to debates in International Relations on the definition of national interest in transitional and continuity contexts like the case of Estado Novo. The rigidity of the Estado Novo contrasts with examples of states that adapted their foreign policies, such as the United Kingdom, which negotiated decolonization gradually. In addition, the study highlights the interaction between internal factors (economic crisis, military discontent) and external factors (international pressure), a central theme in Waltz's (1979) systemic theories.

In the process of Portugal's opening to Europe, it was possible to verify the preponderant role of the Azores in the international acceptance of the Portuguese state and its option to maintain the Western alignment. Portugal under Marcello Caetano maintained economic and military cooperation with Western Europe within the limits of Portuguese sovereignty, within the scope of the Euro-Atlantic bloc led by the United States, in a logic of continuity of Salazar's foreign policy imposed by Admiral Américo Thomaz, seeking, within these limits, proceed with the opening of an active dialogue in the European Common Market, despite the political reservations of the ultramarine wing of the regime and the threat of Soviet imperialism (Pereira, 2022).

The purpose of the foreign policy of any sovereign state is to ensure the goals defined in accordance with the national interest, using available means, since "it can and should only be decided and conducted on the assumption of the supremacy of national interests over those of all others" (Nogueira, 2000b, p. 339). Hence, all foreign policy must reflect the nation's values and serve as a guide for policy makers to act appropriately, considering the strategic interests and priorities of the state in the international system, at the same time, for decision makers avoid making decisions based on the topic of the day, always seeking to think in the medium and long term, like the case of Marcello Caetano's government, until the coup d'état of 25th of April of 1974.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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