

# The international context of the Portuguese Carnation Revolution

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"A Europa connosco" summit, which brought together European socialist and social democratic leaders in Porto. March 14, 1976. Photo: Historical Archive of the Socialist Party (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

The Portuguese transition to democracy must be analysed bearing in mind the international circumstances in which it took place. By the early 1970s, the Cold War had acquired a different shape. No longer were the two superpowers exclusively dominant in their sphere of influence and we might even say that their strength was diminishing. This allowed for the ascendance of other powers, within the two blocs, that did not directly question the authority of each superpower, but rather contributed to make the plurality within each bloc more visible. In the Western bloc, the United States was particularly weakened by the disclosure of its intervention in the Chilean coup of September 1973, its retreat from Vietnam and the Watergate affair. All these issues somewhat limited Washington's ability to act, as it came under tight scrutiny from Congress. This created the opportunity for the establishment of a degree of autonomy within the Western alliance, which was visible in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

At the same time, the two blocs were on the verge of finally reaching an agreement within the framework of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). This

would be an historical moment as, for the first time in Cold War rivalry, an agreement regarding the inviolability of frontiers and non-interference in internal affairs would be signed by the thirty-five countries that attended the Conference between July 1973 and August 1975. [1] In this article, we will analyse how this international context influenced the Western Allies' response to the Portuguese revolution and transition to democracy.

## Bipolar détente vs. West German *Ostpolitik*

The main purpose of the policy of détente followed by the United States since the mid-1960s was the stabilization of the Cold War, by establishing closer contacts, not only with the Soviet Union, but also with the People's Republic of China. It was a policy "limited in its aims, seeking stability and crisis management", trying "to accommodate the Soviet Union in Europe in the hope of enlisting its help for a favorable settlement in Vietnam". [2] However, the U.S.-Soviet détente was also the "recognition of the relative, not absolute, decline of U.S. power and the growth of multipolarity", i.e., the recognition that Europe and Japan were "recover[ing] their strength". [3]

In this sense, not only was the United States aware of its diminishing influence over Western Europe, it would also interpret any other policy that sought to overcome rather than crystallize the status quo as a threat. As Del Pero put it, to the Nixon (and Kissinger) administration, "opening a dialogue with the Soviet archenemy was not a way to transcend the Cold War, but an attempt to manage and even preserve it". [4] Therefore, there would be very little comprehension of any initiative or attempt to overcome Cold War bipolarity, especially if it came from one of the United States' most important allies in Europe. Nonetheless, that was exactly the case with *Ostpolitik*, the policy towards Eastern Europe followed by West Germany after 1969. This policy was understood by Washington as a challenge to U.S. leadership in Europe that reflected Bonn's growing autonomy and leadership in the Old Continent. [5]

Henry Kissinger and the Nixon Administration were suspicious of the independent path followed by Bonn's Social-Liberal government. Even though the success of *Ostpolitik* was due mainly to the fact that "both the world powers and many of the European states had a special interest in reducing East-West tensions", there is no doubt that the White House considered the West German initiatives "disruptive". [6] After the initial success of *Ostpolitik* and, in an attempt to rehabilitate its image in the European capitals, Washington tried to become closer to its allies. However, the early 1970s were very sensitive in terms of U.S. foreign policy. The Chilean coup of 1973, the Yom Kippur War and defeat in Vietnam, along with the Watergate affair, were critical events in the international image of the Western superpower and aggravated relations between the two sides of the Atlantic. [7]

In Bonn, the political situation changed with the election of Willy Brandt, leader of the West German Social-Democratic Party (SPD), as Chancellor in the autumn of 1969. This shift was especially felt in FRG foreign policy. Quoting Walter Scheel, Minister for Foreign Affairs between 1969 and 1974, the new government's *Ostpolitik* purpose was "altering the [Cold War] status quo by recognizing that same status quo". [8] This meant that the Federal

Republic was now willing to recognize the bipolar status quo, and this was achieved in a series of agreements with some key countries of Eastern Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Soviet Union, and the German Democratic Republic), through which Bonn tried to obtain a normalization of relations with the Soviet bloc and solve the problem of the German Eastern border. [9]

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Aware of the significance of this initiative, Bonn sought to assure its loyalty to its Western allies. Indeed, a very important part of the SPD-FDP government's *Ostpolitik* policy was the reinforcement of Western integration, assuring Bonn's commitment to the Western Allies. This was to be achieved through the enlargement of the European Economic Community (EEC) - with the accession of Great Britain, Ireland, and Denmark in 1973 - and through the political strengthening of the EEC. [10] Another dimension of this political and institutional reinforcement of the European Communities was the FRG's support for the liberalizing efforts of the Spanish and Portuguese dictatorships. [11]

## Portugal, the U.S. and West Germany: from dictatorship to revolution

In fact, relations between the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany and Portugal, and the Iberian Peninsula as a whole, during the final years of its right-wing dictatorship is one of the main elements that explain the different approaches to the Portuguese revolution.

Both Washington and Bonn were close allies of the Portuguese dictatorship, favouring the regime's strong anticommunism over its authoritarian stance. However, after the disappointment of the failed liberalization period led to the replacement of António de Oliveira Salazar by Marcelo Caetano in 1968, the West German SPD decided at last to become closer to the Portuguese opposition. [12] This was mainly achieved by the establishment of contacts with the Portuguese Socialists, led by Mário Soares.

From 1970 onwards, the Portuguese Socialist Action party (*Ação Socialista Portuguesa* or ASP) held frequent and direct meetings with representatives of the SPD and, most importantly, of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. In 1972, the ASP was admitted to the Socialist International, making it the only non-communist Portuguese opposition group to obtain international recognition. With this recognition came direct access to many other Western European leaders, men such as Olof Palme, Bruno Kreisky, François Mitterrand and Anker Jorgensen, who would be fundamental during the events of the post-revolution reality in Portugal in 1974-1976, as many would reach positions of leadership in their

governments in that period. [13] On the other hand, the United States had little contact with the Portuguese opposition and there had been a reinforcement of the bilateral cooperation since 1971, when Marcelo Caetano and Richard Nixon reached a new agreement on U.S. presence in the Azores (Lajes Airfield).

Therefore, the United States was caught by surprise by the events of 25 April 1974 in Lisbon, whereas the West German leadership was being briefed by Mario Soares himself on the proximity of a coup led by middle-rank military officers - despite Soares' assurance that it would take at least two months to come about. [14]

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What followed over the next 24 months is well known: the Portuguese dictatorship fell with barely any resistance and there was an explosion of political actors, each with a particular strategy to deal with the country's international future. The growing tension in Portugal between the extreme left - both civil and military - and the anti-communist tendencies, reached its peak in the Hot Summer of 1975. [15] This was also the most important moment in terms of the weight of the international context on the Portuguese situation.

## The Portuguese Revolution

As already mentioned, a change in leadership within any member nation of the Atlantic Alliance, and even within the Warsaw Pact, could significantly affect relations between East and West. This was because of the unique dynamics of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. During the East-West conflict, the ideological, strategic, political and economic aspects of the competition were so interconnected that it was difficult to distinguish between domestic and international concerns. There was no guarantee that the demise of an authoritarian state would not also entail shifting alliances in the broader strategic landscape.

The presence of the Communists in the provisional governments was the first alarm signal in the Western capitals. However, the United States and the Western Europeans developed different approaches to it. Washington sought to isolate the Portuguese revolution - applying Kissinger's so-called "vaccine theory" - while the Europeans' position was committed to supporting democratization against both the Soviet party and a majority of the praetorian party. This was true for most of 1974 and the early months of 1975, but eventually Washington's position would change - and the elections for the Constituent Assembly were fundamental to that change. [16]

After April 1975, the Western powers - with the U.S. now more aligned with the European

vision of the situation in Portugal - demonstrated that only recognition of the electoral results for the Constituent Assembly, elected on 25 April 1975, would be accepted as a clear sign of democratic development in Portugal. In fact, these elections made clear the true political tendency, with the anti-communist, moderate parties (PS, PPD and CDS) winning more than 70% of the vote, while the Portuguese Communist Party secured a mere 12%.



Portraits of Salazar and Caetano on the floor at the headquarters of PIDE-DGS, the overthrown regime's political police force. Lisbon, morning of 26 April 1974. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

Yet, although unarguable, the outcome of the elections would bear no practical results due to the ratification of the Armed Forces Movement (AFM)-Parties Pact. On the contrary, antagonism between the moderate forces increased, especially between the PS, the indisputable winner of the elections; several sectors of the AFM; and the revolutionary forces, amongst them the PCP and left-wing extremists from the Armed Forces. For instance, the events of 1 May 1975, the *República* case, reflecting the attempt to gain total control of the media by the Communist Left, or the ensuing resignation of PS and PPD ministers from their offices in July of 1975, exposed the worsening of the internal situation in Portugal. [17]

Intense diplomatic efforts were put in motion, with Helmut Schmidt and Willy Brandt playing a crucial part in mobilizing their European partners, engaging the support of the U.S., and even exerting a restraining influence over the Soviet Union's encouragement of the Portuguese Communist Party. The stances of the Western countries during the Helsinki Summit in late July and early August 1975 are just one example of the collaboration effort carried out in favour of the establishment of a democratic, pluralist regime in Portugal. The signing of the Final Act of the CSCE on 1 August 1975 was the most important moment of

the détente. Gathered in Helsinki, NATO and Warsaw Pact member states signed the concluding document that would regulate future relations between the two blocs, assuring, most importantly, respect for territorial integrity; the definition of borders; economic and scientific cooperation; and respect for human rights, including freedom of emigration and reunification of families divided by international borders, etc. [18] However, the Portuguese situation was not far from the minds of the Western leaders and assertive pressure was brought to bear on the Soviet Union, including direct pressure on the Soviet Communist Party Secretary-General, Leonid Brezhnev, as well as on the Portuguese authorities during the meetings in Finland.

Meanwhile, although the desired results were slow in arriving, the informal dimension was reinforced with the creation of the "Friendship and Solidarity Committee for Portuguese Democracy and Socialism", comprising the main Social Democratic leaders of the Socialist International, and headed by Willy Brandt. The "Portugal Committee" represented an initiative of unconditional support to the PS that also worked as a lobby with the formal actors in the European countries and the two superpowers.

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Internally, the situation in Portugal underwent several developments that proved decisive to the unravelling of its situation toward the end of August 1975, though their impact would have been lesser without this ample front of international support to the moderate forces. After the presentation of the Document of the Nine [19] in August 1975, assuming the existence of a moderate wing of the AFM represented by Melo Antunes, among others, the conditions were created for a different evolution of the Portuguese political reality. The unanimous support of Western Europe ensured by the creation of the Portugal Committee, the PS now began to demand the withdrawal of Vasco Gonçalves and the overthrow of the government. When this took place, following the AFM Assembly at Tancos in September 1975, the ground was ripe for a change in the pace of the revolution in Portugal. Despite this, the political tension in Portugal would persist until the failed military coup of 25 November 1975. After this day, the moderate forces in the parties and the military were able to slowly but surely pave the way for the establishment of a pluralist and parliamentary democracy in Portugal. The following months brought stability to Portugal, in politics as well as to the economy, severely aggravated by the political events since April 1974. [20]

## Conclusion

Due to the characteristics of the international system, any change in the political regime in Portugal would have been a cause for concern from its allies. If we bear in mind that the Portuguese transition brought a right-wing dictatorship to an end, replacing it with the uncertainty of a revolutionary process instigated by communist and extreme-left political tendencies, Portugal did indeed become a problem for the Western Allies. In that sense, one cannot understand the Portuguese process of transition to democracy without considering the international repercussions and how these influenced the evolution of the Portuguese situation.

The Portuguese revolutionary process was deeply marked by international interference from the United States as well as the Federal Republic of Germany, which led the European approach to the situation in Lisbon. Although very different until mid-1975, the two sides of the Atlantic eventually came together in the strategy of supporting the moderate, anti-communist political forces, at the same time as they pressed the (more radical) authorities in Portugal and the Soviet Union to assure the transition into a pluralist, Western-style, democratic regime.

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- 15 — Translator’s note: the author refers to the so-called “Verão Quente” when, after the clearly left-leaning Fifth Provisional Government took office, a vast, anti-communist, popular mobilization took place in the centre and north of Portugal, encouraged by moderate, right-wing and extreme right-wing sectors, which besieged, assaulted and set fire to the headquarters of the PCP and other left-wing organisations, bringing Portugal to the brink of civil war.
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- 19 — Translator’s note: the Group of Nine consisted of MFA officers of moderate tendencies. They were the authors of a document intended to clarify political and ideological positions among the military.
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