

Atlantic Centre Report n.3

ATLANTIC — CENTRE —



Great Power Competition in the Atlantic

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Great Power Competition in the Atlantic

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SUMMARY

List of contributors	3
Preface	9
<i>Helena Carreiras</i>	
Introduction.....	10
<i>Francisco Proença Garcia and Rita Costa</i>	
The Challenging Geopolitical Framework in the Atlantic Ocean.	
A Portuguese Perspective	18
<i>Sónia Ribeiro and Aldino Campos</i>	
Competition Among Major Economic Powers In The Atlantic:	
A Brazilian Perspective On Defence	30
<i>Enio Moreira Azzí</i>	
Submarine Cables Across the Atlantic:	
Geopolitics and Security of a Critical Infrastructure.....	57
<i>Rafael García Pérez</i>	
The arctic and the north atlantic: from cooperation to conflict?	83
<i>Andreas Østhagen</i>	
Atlantic Africa’s Maritime security partnership.....	101
<i>Luka Knol</i>	
Great Power Competition In The Atlantic – Implications	
For Maritime Security In The Gulf Of Guinea Region	124
<i>Lt Cdr Kofi Amponsah Duodu</i>	
<i>Stephanie Oserna Schandorf</i>	
<i>Dr. Alberta Sagoe</i>	
Atlantic Africa: United States, Europe, China, Russia.....	147
<i>Pr. Rachid EL Houdaigui</i>	
Conclusions – A prospective Look on Atlantic Politics	159
<i>Licinia Simão</i>	

THE CHALLENGING GEOPOLITICAL FRAMEWORK IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN. A PORTUGUESE PERSPECTIVE

Sónia Ribeiro and Aldino Campos ⁷

ABSTRACT

The Atlantic Ocean is a distinctive expanse within the global hydrosphere, encompassing an approximate area of 106,500,000 km², which accounts for nearly 20% of the Earth's surface. In the realm of international relations, it serves as the operational theatre for 65 sovereign states. Additionally, through its six principal maritime gateways, it accommodates non-Atlantic countries pursuing resources and other interests, further fuelled by the growing demand for minerals and raw materials driven by the energy transition.

The paper delves into the geopolitical challenges that the Atlantic basin encounters in two critical dimensions: the ongoing processes linked to maritime boundary claims and the escalating demand for minerals and raw materials. It assesses the prospective long-term risks to Europe, emanating from both social and security concerns, along with the potential for regional instability. Furthermore, it contemplates the imminent challenges that Portugal will face within this evolving geopolitical framework in the Atlantic.

Keywords: Marine resources, Marine Spatial Analysis, Seabed Authority, Continental Shelf

1. SETTING THE SCENE -THE GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE AND CONTENTS OF THE ATLANTIC

The Atlantic Ocean holds a distinct position within the global hydrosphere, bearing the historical significance and weight of events that unfolded during the 20th century. While the nature of threats and challenges has evolved, their contemporary significance remains paramount. Adopting the internationally recognised limits⁸, based on the publication IHO-S23 (IHO 1953; Flanders Marine Institute 2018), this

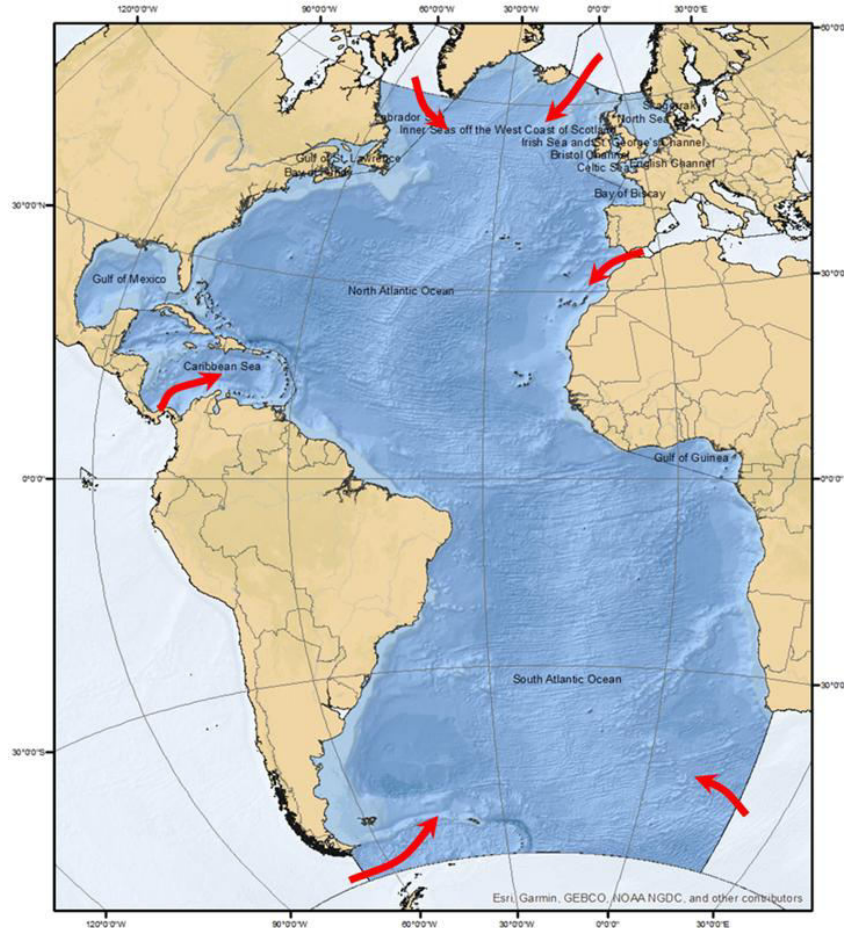
⁷ CIEP/UCP

⁸ **On the North:** A line joining position 60°00'N – 64°10'W, on the coast of Labrador in Canada eastward, along the parallel of 60°N, to the southwestern coast of Greenland at position 60°00'N – 44°50'W; thence from this position northeastward, along the southern and eastern coasts of Greenland, to Cape Edward Holm (67°51'N – 32°11'W), on the southeastern coast of Greenland; thence a line joining Kap Edward Holm southeastward to Bjargtangar (65°30'N - 24°32'W), the western extremity of Iceland; thence from Bjargtangar southeastward, along the western and southern coasts of Iceland, to Stokksnes (64°14'N - 14°58'W), on the eastern coast of Iceland; thence a line joining Stokksnes southeastward to the north most extremity of Fugløy (62°21'N - 6°15'W), in the Faeroe Islands; thence a line joining the north most extremity of Fugløy to Muckle Flugga (60°51'N – 0°53'W), the northern most point in the Shetland Islands; and thence from Muckle Flugga eastward, along the parallel of 60°51'N, to the southwestern coast of Norway at position 60°51'N – 4°40'E.

On the East: From position 60°51'N – 4°40'E, on the southwestern coast of Norway southward, along the coasts of Norway and Sweden, to position 57°45'N – 11°45'E, on the southwestern coast of Sweden; thence a line joining this position westward, along the parallel of 57°45'N, to Skagen Lighthouse W (57°45'N - 10°36'E), the northern extremity of Jylland, in Denmark; thence from Skagen Lighthouse W southward, along the coasts of Europe, to Cape Trafalgar (36°11'N - 6°02'W), on the southern coast of Spain; thence a line joining Cabo Trafalgar southward to Cape Espartel (35°48'N - 5°55'W), in Morocco; and thence from Cape

expansive hydrographic basin encompasses an approximate area of 106,500,000 km², representing nearly 20% of the Earth's surface (Figure 1).

Figure 1- Geographic domain of the Atlantic Ocean, according to the International Hydrographic Organization.



In the realm of international relations, this hydrographic basin serves as the operational arena for 65 sovereign states. These states not only engage directly with the Atlantic but also interact with each other through its vast expanse. Additionally, there exist six primary maritime entry points (illustrated in Figure 1 with red arrows) that enable non-Atlantic countries to pursue resources and other interests within this expansive region. These entry points include two in the northern region (the GIUK⁹ gap located to the

Espartel southward, along the western coast of Africa, to Cape Agulhas (34°50'S - 20°00'E), the southern extremity of Africa; and thence from Cape Agulhas southward, along the meridian of 20°E, to the parallel of 60°00'S.

On the West: From position 60°00'S - 67°16'W northward, along the meridian of 67°16'W, to Cape Horn (55°59'S - 67°16'W), the southern extremity of Cape Horn, the southern island of Tierra del Fuego; thence from Cape Horn northward, along the southern and eastern coasts of Tierra del Fuego, to Cape Espirito Santo (52°39'S - 68°37'W); thence a line joining Cape Espirito Santo northeastward, across the eastern entrance of Strait Magallanes, to Point Dungeness (52°24'S - 68°26'W); thence from Point Dungeness northward, along the eastern coast of South America, to Punta Rasa del Cabo San Antonio (36°17'S - 56°47'W), in Argentina; thence from Punta Rasa del Cabo San Antonio, a line northeastward to Punta del Este (34°58'S - 54°57'W), in Uruguay; thence from Punta del Este northeastward, along the coast of South America, to the Equator, on the northern coast of Brazil, northward, along the eastern coasts of the American continents, to position 60°00'N - 64°10'W, on the coast of Labrador in Canada.

On the South: From the meridian of 20°E westward, along the parallel of 60°00'S, to the meridian of 67°16'W.

⁹ Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom Gap.

northeast and the Labrador Sea located to the northwest), one from the Mediterranean Sea, one from the Panama Canal, and two in the southern region (one to the west between Cape Horn and Antarctica and the other to the east

The Atlantic is flanked by two of the world's most intricate regions. To the north lies the Arctic Ocean, which presents a myriad of geopolitical challenges, primarily driven by climate change and the pursuit of resources (Guy and Lasserre 2016). In the south, we find Antarctica, often regarded as the Earth's final frontier, where the preservation of this continent is currently another pressing challenge (Joyner 2011, 97–101).

The regional actors in the Atlantic are categorised into three regional groups, as defined by the United Nations¹⁰ (Rivlin 1992). These groups tend to form their own arrangements to pursue regional political objectives, not only at the UN level but also in more closely aligned arrangements that serve their interests, particularly in the realms of commerce and trade (Mahon and Fanning 2019; Van der Donckt 1999). Nevertheless, the Atlantic Ocean is also a theatre for a wide range of geopolitical instabilities, with specific cases spanning from the southernmost to the northernmost latitudes .

Among the various agendas that can be brought forward for discussion, including security, environmental protection, fisheries management, migration, and resources, it is often challenging to identify common ground when it comes to existing national policies. Unless a region is united by a shared political principle, differences in national policies concerning marine pollution or fisheries within the same region or ocean basin can result in heightened vulnerability for the marine environment. Simultaneously, it may entail a greater internal political cost for states that uphold more stringent standards. While not always straightforward to attain, striving for regional consensus on critical issues like these is imperative (Sissenwine and Symes 2007).

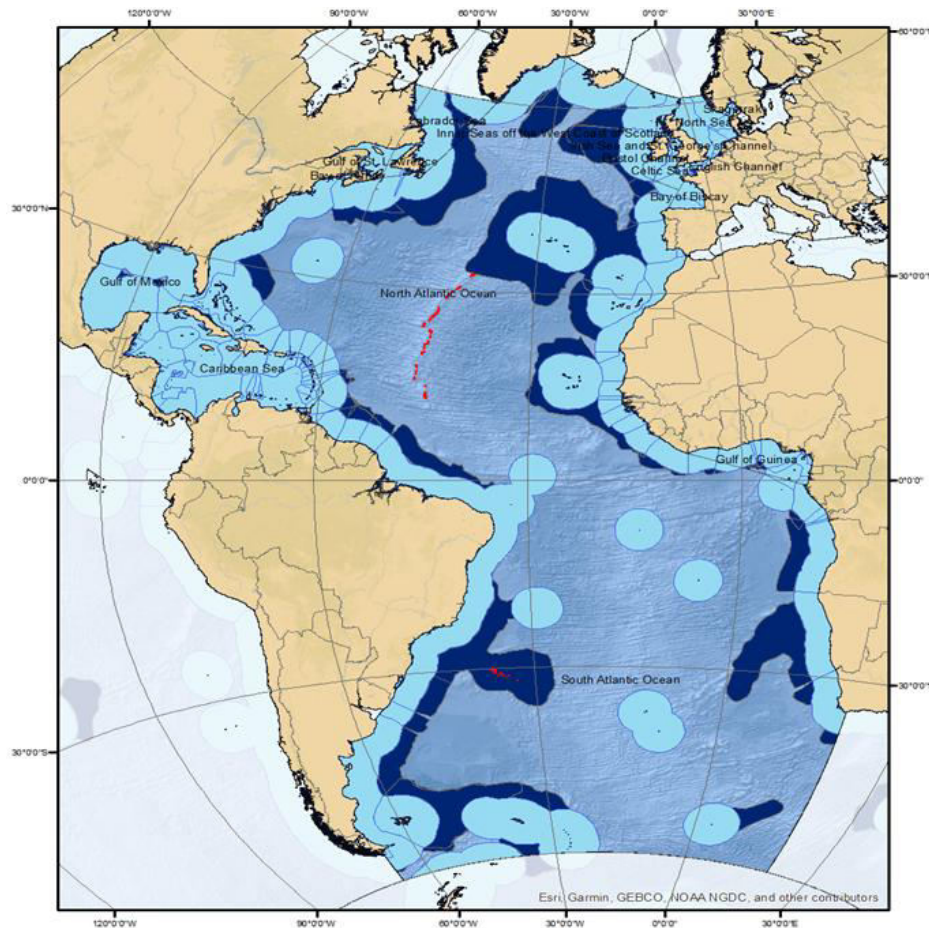
To sum up this introductory section, it's crucial to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various maritime geopolitical risks within this oceanic basin, with particular focus on potential territorial claims, either by regional coastal states or external non-Atlantic powers seeking access to resources in the area. As per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), all maritime zones except the continental shelf can be established by coastal states. These zones primarily include the territorial sea (12 nautical miles), the contiguous zone (24 nautical miles), and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ - 200 nautical miles). The Continental Shelf, extending from the 200 nautical miles mark measured from the baselines, is subject to consideration by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf¹¹ (CLCS) as described in detail in the following section. Beyond the outer limits of all continental shelves, whether extended or not¹², lies the Area, also known as a common heritage of humankind. Figure 2 shows the Atlantic Ocean and the corresponding maritime domains as per UNCLOS, where the Area is represented as a hill shaded region.

¹⁰ Western Europe and North America (WEOG), Africa (AG), and South America and the Caribbean (GRULAC).

¹¹ United Nations body established under the UNCLOS.

¹² Only up to 200 Nautical Miles.

Figure 2 – Maritime domains in the Atlantic based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Light blue represents EEZ, dark blue represents extended continental shelves and red polygons represent the areas assigned by the International Seabed Authority in the Atlantic. Maritime zone data from Marine Regions (Flanders Marine Institute 2019)



2. THE PURSUIT OF ATLANTIC RESOURCES

a. The Extended Continental Shelves in the Atlantic

As of today, 34 Atlantic coastal states have submitted their national claims to the CLCS to delineate the outer limit of their continental shelf beyond the 200 nautical mile mark. In total, there are 36 submissions¹³ with some states presenting multiple submissions (referred to as partial submissions) and several states jointly submitting a single claim (known as joint submission). Among these submissions, 12 have received recommendations, encompassing 11 distinct submissions (Figure 3 in green), 25 states still await consideration of their 21 submissions, or await the establishment of their respective subcommissions (Figure 3 in dark blue). This prolonged process has persisted for over two decades, beginning with the Russian Federation’s initial project submission in the Arctic region in 2001. On a global scale, a total of 93 projects have been submitted to the CLCS, with no particular regional prioritisation evident in the

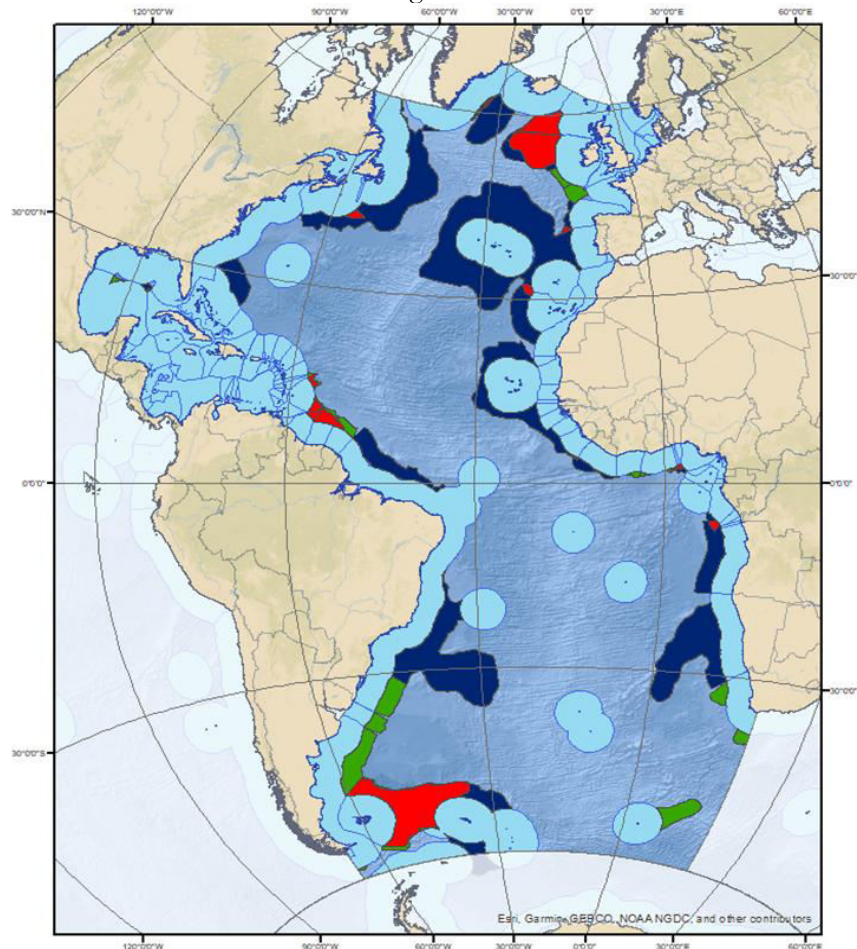
¹³ https://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/commission_submissions.htm

processing of these submissions. This implies that for Atlantic-related claims, coastal states will need to adhere to the sequence in which they were originally submitted to the commission, meaning that it may still take several decades for the entire process to reach completion.

b. Potential Disputes and Overlaps

During the preparation of their submissions, coastal states maximise their claims in all potential areas without regard to potential overlaps with adjacent or opposite countries. Ultimately, the Commission only provides recommendations for the outer limits of these submissions, as outlined in Article 76 of the UNCLOS. Any overlapping claims, unless considered disputes under the Rules of Procedure (RoP) of the Commission¹⁴, must be resolved by the coastal states that are affected (Kunoy 2012). Currently, there are 20 coastal states in the Atlantic whose submissions overlap (Figure 3 in red). Some of these submissions are pending consideration as their respective subcommissions are established, while other face objections from neighbouring states regarding their consideration.

Figure 3 – Submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. In green are those for which recommendations have been already issued, in red those that overlap with each other, and in dark blue those that are still under consideration or waiting for their turn for consideration.



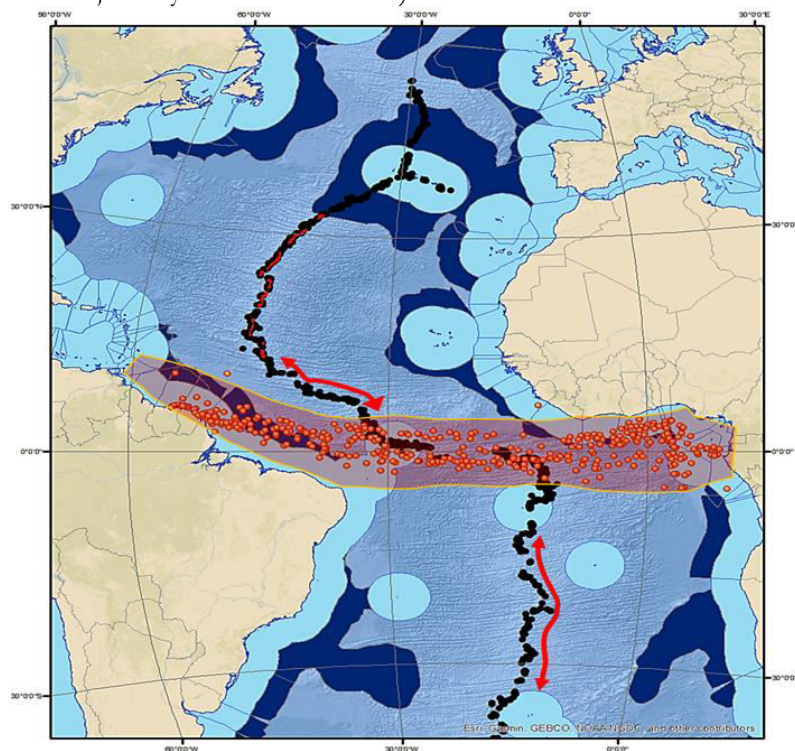
¹⁴ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N08/309/23/PDF/N0830923.pdf?OpenElement>

c. The Emergence of Potential New Non-Atlantic Actors and the Strengthening of Great Powers in the Region

The primary challenge in the potential pursuit of seabed resources lies within the region known as “the Area”. This region (represented in hill shading in Figure 3) is accessible to any State worldwide, whether they belong to the Atlantic domain or not, and whether they are coastal, shelf or landlocked. Engaging in such activities is contingent upon the International Seabed Authority (ISA), and therefore, it is crucial to identify potential areas of interest in advance. By compiling all the polygons granted for exploration by the ISA¹⁵ (Figure 4 in red, along the Middle Atlantic Ridge in the southern extension of the continental shelf of Portugal-Azores), the resulting area, while still substantial, will progressively decrease if we designate the middle Atlantic ridge (marked in Figure 4 as black dots, corresponding to significant seismic activity along the Atlantic ridge) as the most promising location for deep-sea mining (Zalik 2021; 2018).

Moreover, if we elevate, in accordance with Article 149 of the UNCLOS, the humanistic aspect concerning the remembrance of the Middle Passage, which pertains to the enslaved African people who endured transatlantic journeys (Turner et al. 2020), we may encounter an increasing demand for specific areas of significance (Figure 4 represented as shaded polygons and burial site markers along the equator line).

Figure 4 - Portion of the Atlantic basin, showing areas marked as both EEZ and Extended Continental Shelves (highlighted in light and dark blue, respectively) and the areas designated for exploration by the ISA (indicated in red, spanning from the southern Azores to the latitude of Cape Verde). The shaded band represents the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trades, with dots marking the locations of burial sites along the route of this journey across the Atlantic).

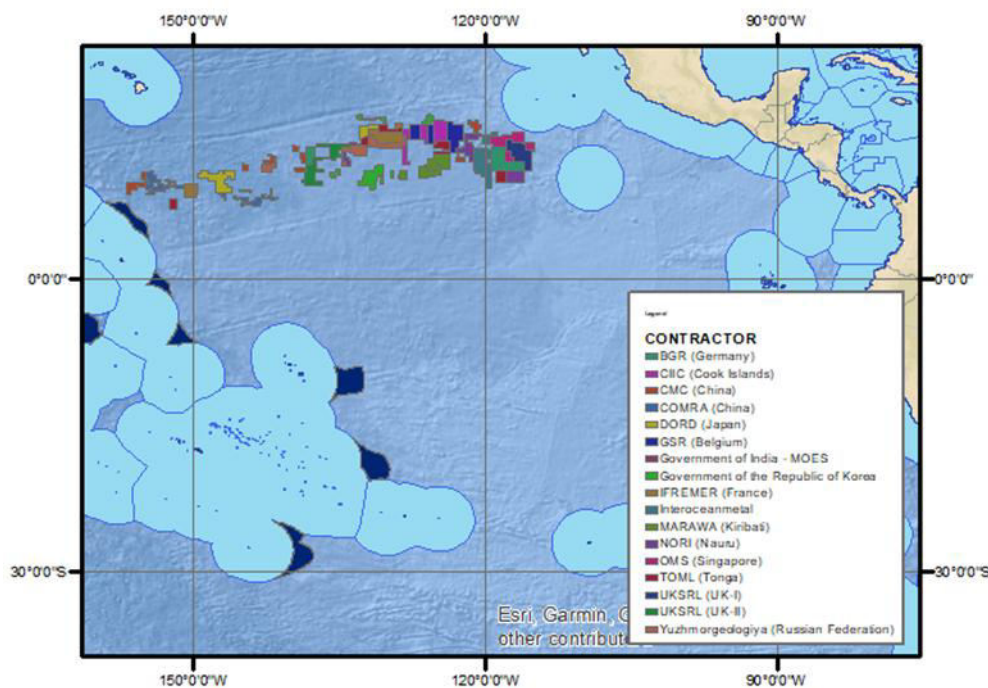


¹⁵ <https://www.isa.org.im/exploration-contracts>

Another factor to consider is the practical impact arising from the adoption of the “High Sea Treaty”, often referred to as BBNJ (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction). This treaty¹⁶ (United Nations General Assembly 2017) is expected to exert a substantial influence on the deep-sea mining process, assuming that the provisions of the treaty, particularly those related to the seabed, will extend to the established sections of the special regime of marine protected areas (MPAs).

Looking at the current demand for research in the Pacific Ocean (Farran 2022, 177), and extrapolating it to the Atlantic reality, it becomes evident that the potential for states beyond the Atlantic region will like grow in the future. The high demand for new minerals, driven by the urgent shift towards a green economy, will require increased access to raw materials to support exponential growth, particularly in the automobile industry (Antrim 2005).

Figure 5 - Map of the exploration areas allocated within the Clarion Clipperton Zone for the extraction of Polymetallic Nodules



d. The Current Status in the Atlantic and the Challenges it Faces

Currently, only 3 states have made requests to the ISA to explore areas beyond national jurisdiction in the Atlantic (Figure 4). These are Poland¹⁷, France¹⁸, and the Russian Federation¹⁹.

The current configuration in the Atlantic presents several challenges. The first pertains to the evolving geopolitical landscape that is emerging in the region. We are witnessing the involvement of new, non-

¹⁶ Today, this can only be addressed through an Intergovernmental Conference for the development of an international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, focusing on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

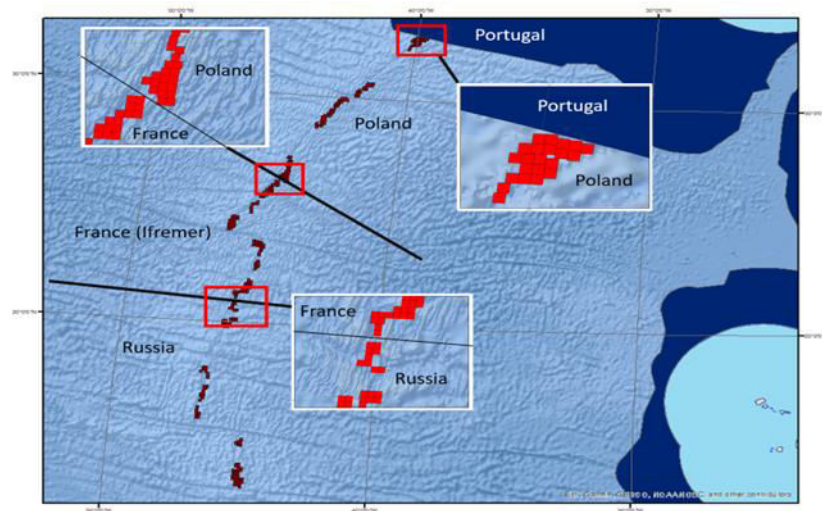
¹⁷ At a distance of 235 metres from the southern boundary of the Portuguese extended continental shelf (Azores)

¹⁸ IFREMER (Institut Français de Recherche pour l'Exploitation de la Mer)

¹⁹ At the latitude of Cape Verde

traditional actors in this part of the world, with countries like Poland, a traditional continental State, now playing a major role in seabed mineral activities. Furthermore, the proximity of these exploration areas to various jurisdictions (235 meters north of Portugal and 5 kilometres south of France’s concession) poses a practical challenge in terms of effective monitoring by neighbouring states (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – Present-day areas assigned by the International Seabed Authority for exploration in the Atlantic. Three states can be identified in the northern hemisphere: Poland, France, and Russia.



The second challenge lies in the logistical requirements of these distant players who need a certain level of proximity to shore in order to engage in these activities. For example, the Russian Federation’s concessions in the Atlantic (Figure 6) are located more than 8,000 km away from their territory, requiring the search for logistical support in the region, which could potentially be sought in areas northeast of Latin America or western Africa.

A third challenge involves the diminishing available areas for exploration, particularly in the middle Atlantic region. As can be observed from Figure 4, there are two major areas of potential interest for mineral activities (red arrows). Special attention should be directed towards the southernmost area, as it would entail closer proximity closer to the surrounding coastal states for logistical support. This could require a significant financial/diplomatic investment, which in turn may bring about a shift in the political balance in the region.

Another challenge worth noting is the heightened mineral demand driven by the energy transition. In this context, it is highly anticipated that non-traditional Atlantic players may enter this endeavour. Upon closer examination of all global players submitting requests to the ISA, it becomes evident that remote states are potential candidates for such activity. Among these, in addition to those already engaged in Atlantic activities, are the Republic of Korea, the People’s Republic of China, India, and Germany.

A significant challenge that must be considered, and one with a substantial impact on Europe in the coming decades, stems from the analysis mentioned above. The ongoing decarbonisation of the global economy, as part of the efforts to attain the primary objectives outlined in the Paris Agreement – COP21 (Christoff 2016), could potentially disrupt economies heavily reliant on oil production. Unless effective

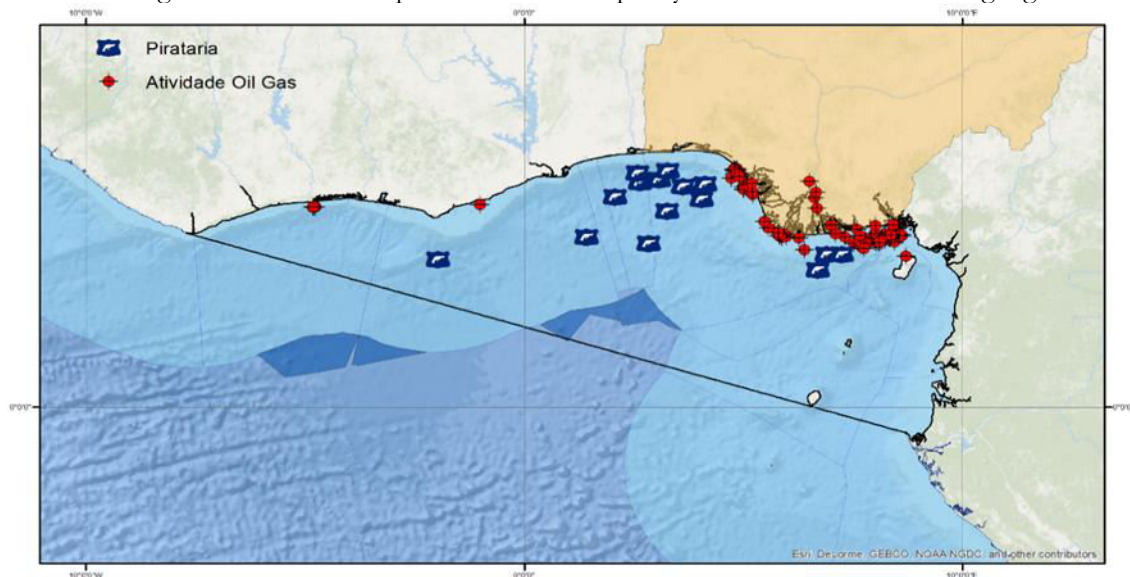
measures are implemented, as we will explore in the following section, the long-term consequences could be dire, particularly in terms of increased migration to the European region.

3. MIGRATION PRESSURE ARISING FROM THE DECARBONISATION OF THE ECONOMY

This challenge, which has the potential to affect Portugal in the years ahead, pertains to the adaptation of the economic model as a consequence of the energy transition, which could render oil and gas resources as assets of diminishing value. The implications stemming from this issue may give rise to concerns in both the social and security sectors. To illustrate this analysis, the Gulf of Guinea region will be employed as a reference benchmark since it serves as an intriguing case study due to its multifaceted nature (Figure 7).

Using Nigeria as an example for the regional case study, several key points can be highlighted to frame the study: Nigeria is situated in the Gulf of Guinea and shares its borders with Benin to the west and Cameroon to the east. Along its 850-km-long coastline, one can discern one of the extensive oil operations in the region (see red markers in Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Gulf of Guinea region with Nigeria highlighted (orange). The locations of oil exploration activities in the region and instances reported as maritime piracy within the area are also highlighted.



This activity, primarily driven by oil exports, accounts for approximately 40% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and provides the Nigerian government with roughly 80% of its revenue. Nigeria is also noteworthy in terms of population growth. With a current population of 200 million, it holds the world's highest fertility rate, currently standing at 5.4, projecting a population of 400 million inhabitants by

2050, which will position Nigeria as the third most populous country globally, trailing only behind India and China²⁰.

In the waters surrounding Nigeria, there exists an illicit maritime activity - maritime piracy – which imposes constraints on the economic development of this already fragile region. When we consider the combination of several factors, including (1) exponential population growth, (2) heavy reliance on oil exports, and (3) instability in regional maritime security, there is a legitimate concern that the national GDP will experience a significant decline due to the growing decrease in oil demand, which could lead to a considerably lower per capita value due to the population increase. When all these factors are taken into account, it raises the potential for regional instability, which may manifest as an upsurge in piracy or increased migration flows to Europe on a larger scale.

4. CLOSING REMARKS

The Atlantic Ocean serves as the backdrop for a wide array of geopolitical instabilities and risks spanning from the southernmost to the northernmost latitudes, which are being amplified by various factors, including ongoing maritime boundary disputes and the pursuit of mineral and other essential raw materials required for the energy transition.

The first stems from the ongoing competition over potential maritime claiming areas in the Atlantic, involving both regional coastal states and external non-Atlantic powers vying for access to the region's resources. The process of defining the outer limits of the continental shelf beyond the 200 nautical miles mark in the Atlantic is expected to span several decades due to the involvement of 34 Atlantic coastal states that have submitted their national claims to the CLCS. This situation introduces a risk of heightened tensions in the Atlantic, as 20 coastal states in the region have overlapping submissions that are awaiting analysis and consideration. Additionally, some submissions have faced objection from neighbouring states, further complicating the matter.

The Area, accessible to any state worldwide, whether within or outside the Atlantic domain, be it coastal, shelf, or landlocked states, remains a significant challenge in the Atlantic geopolitical landscape. While currently only three states (Poland, France, and the Russian Federation) have made requests to the ISA for exploration in areas beyond national jurisdiction in the Atlantic, this situation already signifies the emergence of a complex and challenging geopolitical framework in the Atlantic region. This trend is expected to gain strength as the available areas for exploration diminish, particularly along the Middle Atlantic Ridge in the southern extension of the continental shelf near Portugal-Azores. Furthermore, if we elevate the humanistic aspect of memorising the Middle Passage concerning the enslaved African people who crossed the Atlantic, this area will become even more restricted. Another factor to be taken into account is the potential practical impact arising from the adoption of the BBNJ treaty, which could

²⁰ <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/MostUsed/>

significantly affect the deep-sea mining process, especially if the provisions related to the seabed under the established sections of the special regime of marine protected areas (MPA) also extend to the seafloor.

Non-traditional actors in the Atlantic are now assuming significant roles in seabed mineral activities, positioning themselves in proximity to various areas of jurisdiction, reshaping economic relations and introducing new safety and environmental challenges. The evolution of these dynamics within a context of geopolitical volatility raises new questions and adds an element of unpredictability to an already unstable system. Moreover, these long-distance participants require logistical support onshore to facilitate their engagement in such activities, implying the search for logistical support in the region, potentially in the northeastern regions of Latin America or western Africa, which also carries the potential to shift regional power balances by introducing new political and economic players and forging new alliances.

The second primary exerting pressure on the geopolitical equilibrium in the Atlantic is the energy transition. As the demand for minerals, driven by the energy transition, continues to grow, there is a strong likelihood that non-traditional Atlantic players, namely remote states (e.g. Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China, India, and Germany) may enter this arena.

A significant challenge that must be considered, and one with substantial implications for Europe in the coming decades, stems from the fact that the energy transition may disrupt economies heavily reliant on oil production, triggering social unrest and political instability, particularly in African countries that depend on oil revenues, with long-term consequences that could be catastrophic for the European region.

This process of adapting the economic model during the energy transition has the potential to generate unrest in both social and security domains, particularly in regions like the Gulf of Guinea, where the convergence of three factors – exponential population growth, heavy reliance on oil exports, and instability in regional maritime security – could culminate in pronounced regional instability, which might manifest through heightened piracy activities or increased migration flows to Europe on a larger scale.

As one of the prominent maritime nations in the Atlantic, and with strengthened economic, political, and social ties to countries on both the northern and southern shores of the Atlantic, Portugal is poised to play a significant role in shaping the future geopolitical balance of the Atlantic. Despite its resource and capability limitations, Portugal should proactively explore alternative and innovative solutions to contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability in the Atlantic basin in the coming decades.

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