

# Foreign Influence on International Military Students – Focus on the Portuguese Armed Forces

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## Abstract

This piece addresses various aspects related to influences exerted on international military students, as part of their training and education, considering that, depending on a variety of factors, all this can have repercussions on the Armed Forces and, more broadly speaking, on their States of origin. International military cooperation is tied to Defense Diplomacy and to countries' soft power.

This article highlights the Portuguese Armed Forces via two exclusive interviews with General (Ret.) Valença Pinto, Chairman of EuroDefense Portugal, and Commodore João Silva Pereira, Director of the Portuguese Armed Forces' Military Intelligence and Security Center.

**Keywords:** defense diplomacy; foreign influence; international military education and training; Portuguese Armed Forces; soft power

## Introduction

On top of bibliographical research, this piece is based on exclusive interviews with two experts:

- **General (Ret.) Valença Pinto** - Chairman of EuroDefense Portugal and former Portuguese Armed Forces' Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff\*.

- **Commodore João Silva Pereira** – Director of the Portuguese Armed Forces' Military Intelligence and Security Center\*\*.

The defense of territorial integrity, national sovereignty and, indeed, the political regime in existence in a given State are tied to the armed forces. Somehow, said forces are also linked to issues involving ontological security and national identity. For these reasons, influences on the armed forces can have repercussions on all the previously mentioned aspects; it is especially relevant to pay attention to the military's top brass and to those who could end up holding such positions. The subject matter of this piece is of considerable interest to States' institutions that both send and welcome military students from abroad.

## International military education and training

The Armed Forces of a given country can be influenced by several bodies from foreign states, within a number of contexts. In this regard, we have an influencing state and a target state (Meierding, Sigman April 8, 2021). Among others, training and education comprise the influence activities that this piece underscores.

For example, training is one of the activities enabling the United States to wield influence over the security

sector in Africa (Meierding, Sigman April 8, 2021). This activity changes trainees' thought process so that it lines up with the U.S.'s preferences (Joyce August 14, 2022). Military partners that have been influenced with prolonged effects over time, relative to what they think and want, require less monitoring and motivation to bring about U.S. interests (Joyce August 14, 2022). China's military education programs enable it to hold sway over various parts of the world, especially in Central and South Asia, the Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America (Dettmer December 8, 2021 / Oudenaren, Fisher Winter 2016, p. 110). In this context, the purpose of College of Defense Studies courses is to lead foreign students to understand and respect China (Oudenaren, Fisher Winter 2016, p. 113). With some adaptations, Chinese military academies have adopted a number of key aspects of U.S. models and practices (Oudenaren, Fisher Winter 2016, p. 114).

Generally speaking, the armed forces of nearly every country in the world, whether regarded as democracies or dictatorships, often come in contact with one another, including within the context of training / education (Blair June 2012, p. 9 / *Introduction: Influencing Dictatorships to Become Democracies*). Under these circumstances, servicemen and -women from democratic states can encourage the armed forces of countries with dictatorial regimes to back the transition to democracy (Blair June 2012, p. 9 / *Introduction: Influencing Dictatorships to Become Democracies*). For this influence to have positive effects, it could take some time while including personal contacts and friendly relations among military personnel (Blair June 2012, p. 10 / *Introduction: Influencing Dictatorships to Become Democracies* / Jeffery March 2013). There are even specific programs aimed at influencing the armed forces of other countries in relation to the benefits of democracy, while stating what can be done to have a democratic system of government (Blair June 2012, p. 10).

A few countries often send to foreign military educational institutions brilliant people who, upon returning home, are well set to take up leading positions in their armed forces (Blair June 2012, p. 11). However, according to Joyce (April 1, 2022), chiefly at individual level, when such service personnel return to their countries of origin, the influence of training abroad, as concerns liberal norms and human rights, can be mitigated or even neutralized by cohesion relative to the military unit to which they belong and by the sense of accomplishing missions.

Joshua Kurlantzick (June 8, 2016) considers that the U.S. Department of Defense should monitor the alumni's careers, in order to assist U.S. Embassies in finding out which troops from other countries they can develop relations with, according to the positions they hold. The U.S. Secretary of Defense was tasked with developing and maintaining a database with records of foreign troops or civilians from the corresponding Defense Ministries who received military education or training in the U.S. (*Public Law 106-280-Oct. 6, 2000*). Remaining in contact with the alumni makes it possible to undertake continuing education activities (*Department of Defense Strategic Evaluation International Professional Military Education* July 5, 2022).

The Polish Naval Academy also wishes to maintain contacts with its foreign graduates, located in various parts of the world, working in a number of sectors of their societies (*Foreign Students*).

In the fields of training and education, this ability to influence foreign military personnel, future leaders, is of interest to several countries, such as China (Oudenaren, Fisher Winter 2016, p. 109). Regarding the Sino-American competition, some experts point out that the prestige, as a qualitative advantage of military education in the U.S., calls for continuous work so as not to start diminishing (Oudenaren, Fisher Winter 2016, p. 116). Currently, in said country, a few private schools with military training programs, due to their ties to China, warrant particular attention from the U.S. Government, given the influences to which future American military leaders are subject (Razdan February 11, 2023).

Obviously, U.S. public educational institutions also influence foreign military students. In the late 1980s, the Los Angeles Times revealed that, in keeping with a congressional report, the purpose of educating foreign young cadets at West Point is not only to foster good will, but also to enable these future military leaders to get to know the U.S.'s ideals (Hendricks April 2, 1989). According to a Thai cadet, in the future, foreign graduates from West Point tend to improve their countries' relations with the U.S. (Hendricks April 2, 1989). This type of influence is also noticeable at institutions from other parts of the world: the Polish Naval Academy states that many of its foreign students from the 1980s and 1990s regard Poland as a

second home and are a sort of Polish ambassadors (*Foreign Students*).

In the associative domain, the object of European Air Force Academies (EUAFA) is, among others, the academic exchange of cadets and instructors (*European Military Academies' Association*). The EUAFA comprises the following members: Austria; Belgium; Bulgaria; Czech Republic; Denmark; Finland; France; Germany; Greece; Hungary; Ireland; Italy; Netherlands; Norway; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Spain; Sweden; Switzerland; Turkey; United Kingdom (*European Military Academies' Association*).

Within the context of the European Union, with involvement from its member-states, there is a mobility program for young military students, teachers and instructors known as Military Erasmus, which seeks to create a common security and defense culture (*European Initiative for the Exchange of Young Officers Inspired by Erasmus*).

### **Defense Diplomacy and military soft power**

In the international sphere, defense diplomacy serves to promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation and to develop training and education at military schools and academies (Drab March 2018), as instruments of soft power (Jalili November / December 2015, p. 59 / Matissek, Reno November 2022, p. 16 / Nantulya July 2023, p. 19 / Oudenaren, Fisher Winter 2016, p. 109). Because this type of power takes several years to be consolidated, its results are not immediately achieved (Atkinson April 1, 2014, p. 62), but its effects are profound and have a lasting effect on foreign societies (Omelicheva, et alii Spring 2017, p. 129).

Military relations between the United Kingdom and Pakistan are looked at as representative of the Armed Forces' use of soft power, most notably the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst (Hunter September 30, 2020). The British Army's values and standards are also present at the Pakistan Military Academy (Hunter September 30, 2020).

Defense diplomacy is designed to influence the partners' position and, in this respect, the defense attaché is noteworthy (Drab March 2018). Taking this into consideration, on November 16, 2022, in the U.S., a group of around 20 defense attachés from several countries visited the Training Support Group and the Eastern Army National Aviation Training Site's Aviation Maintenance Instructional Building, at Fort Indiantown Gap (Pennsylvania) (Hall November 18, 2022).

A House of Commons / Defence Sub-Committee document acknowledges that the U.K.'s network of defense attachés contributes toward this country's influence worldwide (*Defence Diplomacy: A Softer Side of UK Defence* May 23, 2023, p. 14). According to Simon Higgins, the defense attaché's role is related to both the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office (*What Is the Role of a Defence Attaché?* April 26, 2022).

In 2019, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy believes that the duties of the defense attaché are complex, they are constantly evolving and need to combine the following areas: diplomacy, economics, public relations and strategy (*Orientation Course for Defence Officials*).

Colonel James Walker (February 9, 1998, p. 2) envisages international military education and training as a U.S. foreign policy instrument in the 21st century. In general, for a country welcoming trainees, foreign military training can be an important part of foreign policy in the long term (Jeffery March 2013), and, in particular, a significant segment of U.S. Security Cooperation relationships (*International Military Training & Education Programs*). Concerning the State that sends its military personnel, said training type corresponds, first of all, to an aspect of foreign policy and, secondly, to a defense policy instrument (Scharpf November 2022, p. 37). International cooperation between higher-education establishments can also be viewed as knowledge diplomacy (Knight October 11, 2022).

In principle, international military training entails risks for both the host country and the one sending trainees (Perraton 2020, p.263). Civil or military higher-education institutions of various countries could be infiltrated by foreign spies posing as students. For instance, according to the Federal Bureau of

Investigation (FBI), foreign intelligence services are interested in gathering information at U.S. universities, with the aim of gaining military advantages, among others, and, to such end, said services turn to foreign students and visiting professors (*Foreign Intelligence Entities' Recruitment Plans Target Cleared Academia* April 2021 / *Higher Education and National Security: The Targeting of Sensitive, Proprietary and Classified Information on Campuses of Higher Education* April 2011, p.1). Universities are under obligation to protect their information and, to achieve such protection, they can rely on the FBI's backing (*Higher Education and National Security: The Targeting of Sensitive, Proprietary and Classified Information on Campuses of Higher Education* April 2011, p.10).

### **Portuguese Armed Forces**

With regard to the Portuguese Armed Forces (PAF), in an exclusive interview, General (Ret.) Valença Pinto, Chairman of EuroDefense Portugal and the Portuguese Armed Forces' former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, considers that, broadly speaking, international military training and education are highly relevant, especially as part of alliances. According to said General, these training and education activities enable exchanging information, experiences and mutual knowledge, as well as developing interoperability. This interviewee maintains that, to prevent negative impacts, in terms of foreign influence stemming from the education and training given to Portuguese military personnel abroad, destinations need to be diversified as well as thoroughly and carefully selected. General Valença Pinto reveals that the aforementioned military personnel are adequately prepared to remain alert and be resilient with regard to activities involving harmful influence wielded at the teaching / training establishments hosting them.



**FORÇAS ARMADAS  
PORTUGAL**

1. Portuguese Armed Forces symbol

General Valença Pinto believes that the international appeal of Portuguese military teaching / training institutions, in relation to foreign students, is mainly rooted in the generalized acknowledgment of the PAF's standards of excellence, as concerns contents, discipline, professionalism and demanding nature. In terms of reputation, this interviewee also points out the PAF's exemplary performance in missions abroad. General Valença Pinto points out the following principles and values that the PAF convey to foreign military personnel when these train / study in Portugal: discipline in military training, a strong sense of unity, cohesion and proximity among the various ranks.

According to the Chairman of EuroDefense Portugal, military cooperation and training programs are part of Portugal's Foreign Policy and, as such, there needs to be coordination in relation to their objectives and to controlling how they are enforced. To this end, General Valença Pinto states that Portuguese-speaking countries have to be regarded as a priority, but not exclusive, while highlighting the need for a proper understanding of those countries' specificities, diversity in the geopolitical and cultural spheres, as well as the differences in equipment and organization standards.

## **The Portuguese Armed Forces' Military Intelligence and Security Center**

In an exclusive interview, Commodore João Silva Pereira, Director of the Portuguese Armed Forces' Military Intelligence and Security Center, reveals that this Center remains attentive to the possible entry, in Portugal, of foreign students posing as civilians who are actually undercover military personnel collaborating with the military intelligence services of their countries, while they serve as spies at Portuguese civilian universities. According to this interviewee, the PAF, under the corresponding legal framework, adopt the necessary measures to safeguard military security and, hence, national security.

As concerns counterintelligence measures relative to foreign military personnel attending Portuguese military teaching / educational establishments, the Director of the Military Intelligence and Security Center mentions that, in keeping with the law, certain activities are undertaken.

Do the Portuguese Armed Forces prepare military personnel who are sent to teaching / training programs abroad, so that they are impervious to possible negative foreign influences? According to Commodore João Silva Pereira, all Portuguese military personnel deployed abroad fulfill a Readiness Plan that includes, among various aspects, raising awareness to identifying and reacting to possible threatening individuals.

## **Conclusion**

Generally speaking, in the international sphere, the armed forces of practically every country in the world often forge bilateral or multilateral relations, as occurs under military education and training. This way, there are States that send and welcome from abroad international military students, among which there are some who, at the time, already display high quality and, later on, end up holding top military positions in their countries of origin and in international organizations.

The educational / training institutions abroad that welcome said students could wield upon them a variety of influences, as concerns, for instance, principles, values and, broadly speaking, political and ideological aspects. Depending on one's perspective, these influences can be regarded as positive or negative and their effects can last over time, to a greater or lesser extent, according to a variety of factors, such as the type of relation that the alumni formally or informally maintain with the institution where they were international students. The influences in question can come across several obstacles: preparation, which, at their institutions of origin, international military students had in order to identify and withstand influence attempts abroad; cohesion in relation to the military units to which they belong; and the sense of accomplishing missions. Even so, the State needs to remain attentive to possible negative influences being successful relative to military personnel that have already taken up or will occupy leading positions in the armed forces. These influences are related to aspects of crucial importance to the State, such as defending territorial integrity, national sovereignty, the political regime in existence, ontological security and national identity.

International military education and training are linked to States' foreign policy and, as part of this, defense diplomacy takes on particular relevance, most notably the defense attaché. Military academies can be viewed as soft power instruments.

Portugal's foreign policy includes diverse countries, though, in what concerns military cooperation and training programs, Portuguese-speaking countries warrant particular attention. The PAF are aware of possible positive and negative aspects stemming from international military education and training and, as such, prepare their military personnel accordingly. In relation to negative aspects, we need to highlight the role of the Portuguese Armed Forces' Military Intelligence and Security Center, especially in terms of counterintelligence.

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\*\*This interview was conducted, via email, on June 26, 2023.

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