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An Offensive Realist Explanation for the Absence of War Between Portugal and Spain from 1479 to 1516

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Abstract: For most of the early twenty-first century, the rise of China has raised the question of whether a future war with the US is likely. Less than a decade ago, that question led to a wave of research that incorporated historical case studies back from the early modern period. One such case is the security competition between Portugal and Spain at the end of the fifteenth century. By adding this case, International Relations (IR) scholars broadened the empirical base from which to draw analogies for the current U.S.-China competition. Yet the Iberian case has been misrepresented and only superficially analysed. This article offers a deeper examination of the competition between Portugal and Spain from the settlement reached in the Treaty of Alcáçovas (1479) through the death of the Spanish King, Ferdinand the Catholic (1516), and the subsequent subordination of Spanish foreign policy to the Holy Roman Empire. Unlike other realists' accounts that rely on *ad hoc* explanations, this analysis remains firmly within the realist tradition by systematically comparing the strategies pursued by both powers with the optimal responses laid out in John J. Mearsheimer's offensive realism.

Keywords: revisionism, hostility, status quo, security competition, Mediterranean International System

Introduction

Since the early years of the twenty-first century, the international system is facing an intensifying security competition. A rising power, China, is increasingly seen as challenging U.S. global dominance. At the same time, the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity has heightened perceptions of instability among policy makers, the academy and the society in general. Scholars from different paradigms and schools are trying to find out answers to what could be the result of this security competition whose main actors are China and the U.S. (Toft 2025; Motin 2022b).

War is clearly on the horizon as a possibility, and the prospect of mass destruction has pushed scholars towards new research agendas. That is the case of realism, whose core

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concern is not to explain the causes of war or its absence, but the structure of the international system, its stability or instability, and state responses to systemic stimuli. War is just another tool of statecraft to be considered. Still, given our human nature (Kovačević 2025; Mearsheimer 2001, 2024), the destructive and horrific potential effects of a modern war have led some realist scholars to focus more explicitly on how great powers might manage competition short of war, and whether the probability of war can be minimized (Levy and Thompson 2010). This interest is rooted in power transition theories, which focus their attention on the likelihood of war by asking who might initiate it, when it might occur, and why – particularly in preventive or preemptive terms. The core idea is straightforward: a rising power challenges a dominant, hegemonic or declining power, and this confrontation may lead to war. Scholars such Allison (2018) and Feng (2013) have turned to early modern history to identify analogies that might illuminate the present U.S.-China competition.

One of the cases they examined is the security competition between Portugal and Spain at the end of the fifteenth century. The outcome of the Treaty of Tordesillas is considered a power transition by Allison (2018) or a co-domination agreement by Feng (2013). Yet a broader and deeper analysis of the case – extending the time frame and explicitly incorporating the main powers in the system – suggests a different interpretation, one that fits more neatly within the existing realist framework. In both Allison's and Feng's studies, the absence of war between Portugal and Spain after Tordesillas is largely taken for granted. They do not systematically examine the shifting distribution of power, the evolving pattern of the threats or opportunities, or the strategic responses of the actors involved. Historical research has pointed to multiple reasons why war did not occur, but from an IR perspective, the analytical frameworks employed often lack theoretical coherence (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016).[1] Among the various explanations, there is a limited perception of threat among key foreign policy decision-makers (Nogales Rincón 2013), domestic and structural constraints on the use of force (Allison 2018; Romero Portilla 2003), a cost-benefit calculations (Allison 2018; Herzog 2015; Hess 2010), the role of domestic group interests (Losada 2021) or the availability of alternative strategies (Humble Ferreira 2015).

This article revisits the case within a coherent offensive realist framework and asks a simple question: why did Portugal and Spain, engaged in intense security competition, avoid war between 1479 and 1516?

1 Meiser (2015) discussed the difficulty of analysing a non-event as the absence of war.

The Treaty of Alcáçovas and the Iberian Peninsula Security Competition

Observing the relations among the political powers within the Iberian Peninsula during the fifteenth century, the turning point was the settlement agreed after the Castilian Civil War of Succession: The Treaty of Alcáçovas (1479).[2] The agreement meant the recognition of a new Western European great power, establishing a new Iberian Peninsula status quo, and reshaping the European and Mediterranean distribution of power (Suárez Fernández 1995; Levy 1983). Portugal lost the chance to gain power by joining in a composite state with Castile (which instead united with Aragon), but it emerged from the conflict in a relatively strong economic position, though with a less favorable strategic posture (Pardal 2019).

From 1479 to King Ferdinand's death in 1516,[3] Portugal and Spain experienced repeated shifts in their relative power vis-à-vis one another. When viewed within the broader Mediterranean International System, the relative power of both Iberian powers experienced a remarkable increase, reaching a point where, around 1506, both were competing to lead a projected conquest of the Holy Land. Operating in a multipolar system, fear, threats, and shifting offensive and defensive alliances were constant features. War was used by both powers against others, including small political units, but not against each other.

2 A collateral agreement was signed, called The Tercerias de Moura, arranging the marriage of Prince Afonso (grandson of King Afonso V and son of John II of Portugal) and Infanta Isabella (daughter of the Catholic Monarchs). Both were to be raised together near the border between Portugal and Spain until they could wed. Resorting to this marriage agreement sought to serve as a guarantee of compliance.

3 The period analysed includes several prominent figures in Portugal and Spain. The War of Succession of Castile, initiated in 1475 and ended in 1479, was due to the succession to the throne of Castile after the death of King Henry IV (1454–1474). After his death, his daughter Juana (proclaimed heir in 1462) faced a dispute over her rights by her half-aunt, Isabella (half-sister of Henry IV). Isabella got married with Ferdinand (heir of the Kingdom of Aragon) in 1469 against the will of Henry IV. While Isabella enjoyed the backing of the Crown of Aragon and a portion of the Castilian nobility, her rival Juana was supported by opposing Castilian factions. Juana secured a crucial ally in 1475 through her marriage to King Afonso V of Portugal (1432–1481), which brought her the military and political support of the Portuguese crown. Isabella was fully recognized as the queen reigning until her death in 1504. Ferdinand II was the King of Aragon from 1479 until his death in 1516, and through his marriage to Isabella I, he was also the King of Castile from 1474 until Isabella's death. They were known as the Catholic Monarchs. After the death of Isabella I, the daughter of the Catholic Monarchs, Princess Juana, became the Queen of Castile and her husband Philip, son of the Emperor Maximilian I of the Holy Roman Empire, became king alongside his wife. As King Philip I of Castile, he tried to shift the kingdom's foreign policy adhering to the one from the Holy Roman Empire, mostly against the interests of the Kingdom of Aragon. But his sudden death in 1506, brought back Ferdinand as regent of Castile from 1507 until his death in 1516. In Portugal, after the death of King Afonso V in 1481, his son John II was immediately crowned, dying in 1495. He played a prominent role during the Castilian War of Succession showing a bitter relation towards the Spanish Monarchs. His son Prince Afonso, who was married in 1490 to the Infanta Isabella, died in 1491. Then, Manuel, who was the son of the Duke of Viseu (killed by John II) and have been educated by the Catholic Monarchs, became the heir and future King Manuel I of Portugal (from 1495 until he died in 1521).

This article seeks to explain that outcome using the most war-prone strand of realism: John J. Mearsheimer's offensive realism (2001). Following the introduction, the first section below sets out the theoretical framework. The second section briefly introduces the Mediterranean International System and its main actors and explains the starting point of the Portugal-Spain competition. The third section reconstructs in detail the security competition featured by both powers from 1479. The fourth section compares the actual responses [strategies] within their competition with the optimal portfolio identified by Mearsheimer (2001), followed by the conclusion.

Theory, Materials and Methods

This article analyzes the security competition between Portugal and Spain from 1479 to 1516. The empirical material includes documents from the chroniclers such as Diogo Pires (André 1992), Jerónimo Zurita (*Anales de la Corona de Aragón*), Marino Sanuto (*I Diarii*), Rui de Pina (*Crónica de D. João II*) and Santistéban (*Tratado de la succesión*), together with the studies carried out by Andrew Hess (2010), Francis Soyer (2007), Prestage (1914), Humble Ferreira (2020, 2015) and Malyn Newitt (2005), among others.

The theoretical framework used is the one labelled as offensive realism developed by John J. Mearsheimer (2001). This is the most explicitly war-prone variant of realism. It analyzes the behavior of ascending power confronting dominant, hegemonic or declining powers, while also considering the behavior of all major actors in the system. Survival is the fundamental goal, and states seek to secure it by increasing their relative power. Security is best assured through regional hegemony, while fear and uncertainty sharply constrain the number of feasible responses or strategies. Mearsheimer's framework specifies a broad set of strategic responses to systemic pressures, allowing us to look beyond the war or the absence of war dichotomy.

While revisionism, self-help, power maximization and aggressive intentions define the main actors of the international system, strategic thinking matters when it comes about taking certain decisions. Although temporary losses can be accepted, maintaining capabilities must drive the decision making and, where possible, expand capabilities over the long run. For achieving their goals, they use different types of strategies and responses. Recent realist work has added complexity to the analysis of those strategies by incorporating structural constraints, domestic politics, among other factors (Schweller 2009; Glaser 1994; Allison 2018; Mearsheimer 2001; Romero Portilla 2003; Losada 2021). Neoclassical realism, in particular, argues that systemic stimuli are filtered through domestic and ideational variables. Strategies and responses are thus shaped through internal political processes, not mechanically determined by structure alone (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Beyond the familiar internal and external balancing strategies, other tools include deception (Glaser 1994), reassuring signals (Gómez Martín 2015; Glosny 2012; Szászdi León-Borja and Rodriguéz López 2000; Suárez Fernández 1966), treaties and agreements (Gill-Tiney 2023; Lynch and Hoffman 2020; Allison 2018; Humble Ferreira 2015; Nogales

Rincón 2013; Gibler 2012; Glaser 1994),[4] soft balance directed at certain minor threats (Paul 2016) or strategic adjustments (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2009; Dueck 2006).

Mearsheimer's (2001) contribution builds on Waltz's (1979) structural realism and the balance-of-power tradition. It specifies an optimal range of strategies, underlining the centrality of fear, uncertainty, survival and the pursuit of hegemony, in a hostile environment of permanent security competition. It also highlights caution and the preservation of capabilities as core elements of strategic thinking. Mearsheimer's menu of strategies (2001) includes internal balancing, (military buildup) and external balancing (alliances) but embeds them in a broader portfolio. He distinguishes strategies to increase power, strategies to check the aggressors and strategies to avoid the threat.[5] This set of theoretical responses or strategies does not reduce outcomes to a binary choice between war or its absence. Therefore, without abandoning the exclusive systemic analysis, it is a proposal allowing us to explain the absence of war in a given dyad. To assess whether this range of strategies explains the Iberian case, we must compare actual responses to threats and opportunities with Mearsheimer's theoretical menu.

The first group includes strategies that seek to increase power: war, the threat of war (blackmail), bloodletting, and bait-and-bleed. In offensive realism, war is a viable option under two conditions: when it offers an opportunity to increase capabilities or improve security (war of opportunity), or when it is undertaken to forestall a future, more dangerous aggression (preventive war) (Mearsheimer 2001, 2024). Blackmail is a relatively cheap alternative to war, though difficult to execute. Great powers can sometimes use it because they are presumed to be more willing to fight, rather than submit to the threats of other great powers. This would have been the case of the Catholic Monarchs' threats to Portugal between 1493 and 1495. One concerning the Spanish willingness to use the force to conquer two footholds in the North of Africa that belong to the area assigned to Portugal, Melilla and Cazaza (Lorenzo, Gallego and Tejedor 1995), and other linked to a dynastic marriage alliance promoted from Spain with a foreign power that could justify a claim to the Portuguese throne (Soyer 2007; de la Torre y del Cerro and Suárez Fernández 1958). Bait-and-bleed involves encouraging rival powers to engage in a long and costly war against each other. Mearsheimer (2001) sees this as difficult to implement and potentially dangerous if one of the contenders emerges significantly stronger. A related, more limited variant is bloodletting: aiding one side in a war (usually indirectly) to prolong the conflict and weaken the adversary.

4 Likewise, although realism discusses the advantages and long-term longevity of treaties, those are strategies that can be argued to have seemed effective and beneficial, facilitating both powers to increase their relative power. They would have come to represent satisfaction along with commitment, even if temporary, over the rules of the game or over the territory in dispute.

5 Mearsheimer also develops the concept of strategy through imitation of successful practices and expands it to adjust it to offensive behavior, incorporating the idea of innovation. However, this strategy will not be incorporated in this article, because it is necessary to carry out a specific investigation into a complex process of imitation and innovation that occurred throughout the Mediterranean International System and that transcends the period and the actors of the analyzed competition.

The second group of strategies seeks to maintain the status quo by checking the aggressors: balancing by counterweight and balancing by buck-passing. With counterweight, state signals a clear willingness to contain an opponent and is prepared to bear the burden of deterrence or, if necessary, war. With buck-passing, another great power is sought to confront the aggressor while remaining on the sidelines, and the power that passes the load thus avoids the cost of a war if it were to happen. This balancing can be pursued through threats by diplomatic channels, showing the willingness to maintain the balance of power, even if it is using war. The tone is confrontational rather than conciliatory. This is a more subtle form of coercion than outright blackmail and fits, for example, the embassy of John II to the Catholic Monarchs in October 1481 (Faria 2021), as well as the decision to designate George of Lencastre as John II's successor to the throne of Portugal instead of Manuel, son of the Duke of Viseu (Soyer 2007; Aubin 1990; Suárez Fernández 1966, Münzer 1924; Zurita 1670).

Another means to check the aggressor is to create a defensive alliance – classic external balance. However, this type of balance is usually slow and inefficient because it is not clear who should bear each part of the weight of the alliance. The last two strategies to counterbalance are: increasing defensive military capabilities, used by both Portugal and Spain (Humble Ferreira 2015), or passing the burden of containment to others. Buck-passing requires cultivating reasonably good relations with the aggressor (or at least avoiding unnecessary provocation), while remaining cool with the bearer of the burden (so that the aggressor does not become suspicious, but also so that he does not get involved in war). At the same time, the buck-passer may quietly strengthen its own defenses, making itself a less attractive target,[6] as well as allowing the taker of the burden to increase its power so that he can better confront the aggressor.[7] Buck passing is particularly attractive when a power faces more than one rival but lacks the capacity to confront all of them simultaneously. By using this strategy, the number of threats can be reduced.

Finally, the third group comprises strategies that aim to avoid or delay the threat. For Mearsheimer (2001), this only makes sense if the aim is to buy time. By using those strategies, the power from which the threat comes is admitted, and the arms are lowered, allowing the threatening power to gain greater relative power at the expense of the power that uses them. The two such strategies are bandwagoning, that is, aligning with the threatening power hoping to obtain at least a small portion of future joint profits (as in certain marriages), and appeasement, whereby the threatening power is granted concessions to moderate its behavior and postpone conflict.

6 There is also no certainty that the burden taker will be defeated quickly. Maintaining a good defense is essential.

7 No evidence could be found regarding whether Portugal developed this strategy with France at any time during the period. However, it is not ruled out that it did so.

The Mediterranean International System

This article adopts the conception of international systems advanced by authors such as Motin (2022a) or Wilkinson (2018). Following Aron (2004, 1966) and Ruggie (1983) three elements are central. First, an international system consists of "political units that maintain regular relations among themselves and where all of them can be involved in a great war" (Aron 2004, 103). Second, "the behavior of each of them is a necessary element in the calculations of the others" (Ruggie 1983, 265). Third, anarchy – understood as the absence of a central authority – has been the common condition of the different international systems throughout history (Aron 1966). From Wilkinson (2018), we take the flexibility of labels for groupings of political units that maintain regular relations, as the importance of a recognizable structure or distribution of power, even though forms may vary. Wilkinson also relativizes the distinction between "central power" and "great power". This is related to the fact that, for Mearsheimer's offensive realism, the terms "great power" and "rising power" are not mutually exclusive in the terms in which they are defined. If a power is in the last stage of a bid for regional hegemony it may be accepted that the term "rising power" should not be used. In the period under study, however, this event was far from occurring. The struggle for European continental hegemony would unfold later. At least, it was not after 1519 that two great powers could be considered potential hegemonic powers in Western Europe (Kennedy 1987), and the situation became fully evident during the seventeenth century (Rodríguez Hernández 2016).

In line with these definitions and the actual pattern of relations during the period, this article uses the term Mediterranean International System to describe the system in which Spain and Portugal interacted between 1479 and 1516. This was a system in which Portugal's expansion along the African coast, into the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, extended its relations to distant actors from Western Europe. Yet during this phase of expansion, the country demonstrated that the Mediterranean occupied the central place in its foreign policy. Portugal appeared in the Indian Ocean facing the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, sought alliances in the Middle East, and had a clear Christian objective in mind: access to the Holy Land (Couto 2021).

Once Christopher Columbus's westward project was launched, Spain intensified exploration of the Atlantic route to the East Indies. However, the Mesoamerican system did not begin to show stable economic and political relations with the Mediterranean system until the time of Hernán Cortés (Motin 2022a), which lies beyond the period examined here. Spain's geographical position and behavior in these years show a marked intense interest in expanding its presence in the Mediterranean, directly confronting France and, to a lesser extent, the Ottoman Empire. The aim here is not to reclassify polarity or introduce new labels into the literature. Multipolarity was evident and the influence of the distribution of power could be expected to affect the multiple actors in the system. Therefore, in the following sections the focus is to identify the actors, besides Portugal and Spain, who were part of the system, their roles and interest. A distinction is drawn between those

powers with a clear hostile or revisionist will, and those that primarily sought to maintain their survival using status quo strategies.

The Centrality of the Mediterranean

The fifteenth century international system in which Spain and Portugal interacted is often seen as the precursor to the modern international system (Motin 2020; Levy 1983; Wright 1975). Its center of gravity was the Mediterranean, as contemporaries such as Santistéban (1503) understood. This centrality was evident in the behavior of powers as distant as England (Schulz 2018),[8] in the logic of the Italian wars, and in the strategic importance of the Italian Peninsula within the Mediterranean.[9] It was a space of constant interaction. This dynamic was taking place between the actors who were geographically around the Mediterranean Sea, as well as those further afield in Europe (England, the Netherlands or Central Europe) and even in the Middle East (Persia), and the Caucasus (Georgia), who were drawn into its politics (Korogodina 2024; Khomasuridze 2021; Mitchell and Piemontese 2013). Events such as the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the Spanish conquest of Granada in 1492 had system-wide repercussions, as did the appearance of Portugal in the Mediterranean arena via the Indian Ocean. The search for alliances with Indians or Persians against Egyptians or Ottomans demonstrates this, as do French or Venetian concerns over Portugal's challenge to their commercial interests – concerns strong enough that Venice considered an alliance with the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt to expel Portugal from the region.

The importance of this system has only partially been acknowledged. Motin (2020) comes close by describing it as a Euro-Mediterranean system that resembles what we might today call a regional subsystem. Other authors, such as Watts (2009), consider this period as the place of confrontation and polarization between France and Spain and their satellites, ignoring the role of Portugal. Modelski and Thompson (1988) describe a global system centered more on maritime routes linking a European power (Portugal) with Africa and the Indian Ocean. During this period the Mediterranean evolved from a sea dominated largely by Italian commercial republics and Mamluk power – actors that tended to employ status quo and delay strategies – to a system in which territorial control became more important. In this context, France, the Ottoman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, and Spain stood out while Portugal sought to carve out a role accessed mainly through the Indian Ocean.

8 The English interest stands out, among others, when founding the Levante Company in 1500 to manage Mediterranean trade.

9 The Spanish enterprise to occupy the Barbary and access the Levant passed through the control of Naples and Sicily (Devereux 2015). On the other hand, France was never able to project its power in the Mediterranean, highlighting its limited support for the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt despite the pressure received from French trading groups on its Mediterranean coast (Benedetti 2022; Couto 2021).

In this system, described in historical terms as a place of clash of civilizations (Dauverd 2014), the Papacy played a central role. Long regarded as a supranational institution tasked with maintaining order throughout the Christendom, its role as an actor in the system has been highlighted in recent decades. Both because of its partiality and because of its interest over material power, by the late fifteenth century, its behavior as an Italian power often outweighed its role as the head of an ecclesiastical empire (Watts 2009). This stands in contrast to Allison's (2018) interpretation of the Papacy as a neutral supranational arbiter capable of resolving conflicts among Christian powers. From a realist perspective, the Papacy's behavior fits an anarchic system. Papal bulls and alliances reveal a consistent pattern of self-interested action (Abulafia 2021; López de Coca Castañer 2018).

It is worth mentioning the consideration of the Mediterranean made by researchers such as Brummett (2007), highlighting the commercial space over the sacred or military space; Braudel (1949), emphasizing confrontation and cooperation, describing the actors as "complementary enemies" or Tracy (2011), in that it was a space where conflict and accommodation were common. All these definitions point to the search for greater power, as well as the interaction of actors who sometimes agreed on their objectives and sometimes did not.

Hostile or Revisionist Political Units

Several powers in the Mediterranean International System displayed clear revisionist or hostile intentions. The most important within the Western Europe was France who sought to expand its power into Italy, as demonstrated by its role in the Italian wars. It also expressed this hostility in its closest area, facing England and the Holy Roman Empire. At one point, it even considered the possibility of an alliance with the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt that would have pitted it against Portugal (Couto 2021) and began exploring the Atlantic route to the spice trade – an issue that years later would end up pitting it against Portugal in Brazil. Despite these ambitions, its role within the Mediterranean was modest, as illustrated by some disastrous campaigns such as that of Lesvos (Abulafia 2011).

On the East was the Ottoman Empire who, by 1480, showed its interest in the Western Mediterranean (Abulafia 2011). Although it did not support Granada in its war against Spain, it aided the North African Moors in the early sixteenth century. Whether real or exaggerated, Spanish elites always had the perception of a looming threat coming from the power of the Levant (Ladero Quesada 2019; Coleman 2003; Echevarria 1999; Meyerson 1991). However, the main victim of their hostility was Venice, as well as the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, whose end in 1517 would be in the hands of the Ottomans (Murphey 2004). A prominent role among the above-mentioned powers was enacted by the Holy Roman Empire. Despite its near-constant rivalry with France, the emperor agreed in April 1505 to help France to recover Naples from Spanish control (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1999). The revisionist tendency was fundamentally observed in its marriage alliances policy,

which sought to increase the number of political units within the great composite state of the Empire (Abe 2017).

Finally, England, considered a lesser power, and pending to resolve its confrontation with Scotland, began the period showing interest in developing the African Atlantic route where Portugal was already present (Attreed 2000). Later it allied with Spain in the war in Brittany and joined in several coalitions (Holy Leagues) to advance its interests. Although it may have been limited by its expulsion from the continental dispute against France and, in general terms, it did not make great progress, its interest in the Mediterranean was clearly showed by joining in some military campaigns with Spain and its growing commercial activity in the region (Schulz 2018; Currin 1996).

Political Units Using Status Quo Strategies

Among those who mainly used status quo strategies were the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, the Italian republics, and the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada. All sought external alliances to maintain the balance of power, surviving while searching for a more favorable moment to increase power. Granada, unable to secure effective aid from either the Ottomans or the Mamluks, fell to Spain on 2 January 1492. The Italian republics – Venice, Florence, Genoa, Milan –, with varying success, experimented with alliances with other greater powers. Whether against the Ottomans, France, or Portugal, these alliances were usually confined within Christendom. Although the alliance did not come to fruition, the case of Venice is particularly noteworthy when, given overlapping commercial interests, it considered to support militarily the Mamluk Sultanate in its conflict with Portugal (Hysell 2017).[10]

In the logic of offensive realism, the Mamluks present a classic case of a great power pursuing a status quo strategy, relying on external alliances in a bid to ensure its survival and manage the balance of power. Egyptian geographic position represented an economic and political prize for rising powers. While their control of Syria led the Egyptians into conflict with both the Ottomans and the Safavid (Persian) Empire, the Holy Land, also under Mamluk control, was a coveted objective for Christian powers, led during this period by the Portuguese and the Spanish (Couto 2021; Devereux 2020, 2015). This threat did not materialize in a Christian coalition; however, the Portuguese pushed the Mamluks by blocking the Red Sea, and their corsair activity, together with the Order of the Knights of Saint John in Rhodes, forcing the Mamluks to request help from the Ottomans. The Sultanate ended up falling on 20 January 1517 under the Ottoman power. Considering the Papacy as a political unit requires special pondering. During the fifteenth century, the Papacy's influence over Christian kingdoms led to an evident self-interest in the political control over specific spaces. Popes fostered coalitions that not only united Christianity

10 It is worth noting the idea developed by Hutto (2023) of creative diplomatic practices when great powers interfere in regional dynamics.

against Islam but rather deliberately fostered confrontation among the Christian powers, preserving papal leverage (Watts 2009).

1479 as the Starting Point of the Portuguese-Spanish Security Competition

Spanish-Portuguese relations in the fifteenth century must be carefully specified. Before 1479, competition existed primarily between Portugal and Castile. It was not until signing the Treaty of Alcáçovas that "Spain" was recognized as a new political unit, defined by a single foreign policy (Abe 2017; Kennedy 1987; Levy 1983). The birth of this entity, which fits with Koenigsberger (1978) concept of a composite state, marks the moment when it can be considered that a Spanish-Portuguese rivalry existed. Although a regional hegemony was a distant prospect for both powers between 1479 and 1516 each side steadily increased its relative power within the broader system (Motin 2022a). In this sense, when we refer to the security competition prior to 1479 we must differentiate between the Kingdom of Castile and the Kingdom of Aragon. While relations between Portugal and Aragon were generally peaceful, in part because they did not share a common border, relations between Portugal and Castile were often tense (Olivera Serrano 2018). Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, both attempted to influence each other's domestic politics. As Álvarez Palenzuela (2003) notes, their interaction frequently led to sharp confrontations, generating deep resentment and mutual suspicion difficult to overcome. Their relations were characterized by "the alternating cycles of armed conflicts with varying intensity and long periods of peace" (Nogales Rincón 2012, 122).

After the death of Ferdinand (1516), the Catholic Monarch, the regency of Charles I[11] cooled the level of Iberian competition. Charles was, above all Holy Roman Emperor (as Charles V) and prioritized imperial strategic interests. The pattern changed again once Philip II took the Spanish throne; Spanish foreign policy regained its autonomy, and the Iberian rivalry reemerged. When a favorable opportunity arose, Spain seized political control of its Portuguese neighbor via rapid diplomatic and military action executed by Philip II in 1580. Portugal eventually recovered full political independence through another war in 1668. The starting point, the Treaty of Alcáçovas, reveals several relevant aspects from an IR perspective. The Castilian Civil War of Succession (1475–1479) was essentially a military conflict where the balance of power within the Iberian Peninsula was to be settled. The threat posed by the dynastic union of Castile and Aragon prompted Portugal to enter the fray. The outcome would produce a new power in the Western Europe, whether a Castile-Aragon or Castile-Portugal composite state. The conflict had its most immediate extra-Iberian implications, such as the rupture of the traditional Castilian alliance with France (Suárez Fernández 1995).

11 Son of Philip I of Castile.

During the war, both contenders showed their preferences in forming alliances. On the Spanish side, Isabella and Ferdinand reached an ad hoc alliance with the Sultan of Fez to launch a joint attack on Ceuta (Montenegro Valentín and del Castillo Álvarez 1999; Rumeu de Armas 1992). On the Portuguese side, the trip that King Afonso made to France seeking its support in the war – ultimately unsuccessful – is well documented. Less is known about Portuguese contacts with the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, attributed to the Infante John, the future King John II (López de Coca Castañer 2018). Once the war was over, the dynastic union of the victorious Isabella and Ferdinand was acknowledged at the Treaty of Alcáçovas and the Tercerias de Moura and confirmed internationally by the papal bull *Aeterni regis* issued on 21 June 1481. Despite its defeat, Portugal extracted significant advantages from the newly recognized status quo (Pardal 2019). Although it could not prevent the emergence of a new great power along its lengthy long border, it did obtain from it the Spanish renunciation of the conquest of the Sultanate of Fez and gained at least a potential claim to future political control over Castile via the marriage of the Portuguese Crown Prince Afonso to the Infanta Isabella. Furthermore, Portugal also gave refuge to the defeated Queen of Castile, Juana, and wife of King Afonso V of Portugal. After the king's death on 28 August 1481, Juana – "the Excellent Lady"[12] – became a useful instrument of Portuguese foreign policy. Her dynastic rights could be invoked at various points to destabilize Spain, either through a claim to the Castilian throne or via a marriage alliance with another power hostile to its interests.

For its part, Spain emerged constrained in its projection over the Western Barbary. Although the new great power (Levy 1983) was not totally limited to its Atlantic capacity and maintained its status in the Mediterranean scenario, the agreement was not satisfactory. Dissatisfaction was evident on both sides almost immediately. On the Spanish side, there was a lukewarm approach regarding the replacement of Infanta Isabella by Infanta Juana – also daughter of the Catholic Monarchs – in the Tercerias de Moura, while from Portugal there was an interest to reopen broader and deeper issues, whose origin seems to be related to the control of Guinea trade route and its resources (Attreed 2000). Mutual distrust was evident (Suárez Fernández 1966).

Discussion: The Offensive Realist Strategies Used by Portugal and Spain

This section identifies a series of events between 1479 and 1516 that constitute threats or opportunities for Portugal and Spain. It then classifies the responses of Portugal and Spain using Mearsheimer's (2001) theoretical menu of strategies. The discussion is organized into four subsections: Portuguese responses to threats from Spain (P.T.X); Portuguese responses to opportunities arising from Spain (P.O.X); Spanish responses to threats from Portugal (E.T.X); and Spanish responses to opportunities arising from Portugal (E.O.X.).

12 After the war, Juana was known as "The Excellent Lady" by the Portuguese, "La Beltraneja" by supporters of Isabella because of rumours questioning her paternity.

Portuguese Responses to Threats from Spain

P.T.1. Anglo-Spanish Fleet to Guinea (1480–1482)

The construction of an Anglo-Spanish fleet which had to sail to Guinea is indirectly documented. John II of Portugal's response to the construction of an Anglo-Spanish fleet, reportedly armed at the request of the Duke of Medina Sidonia between 1481 and 1482,[13] was twofold. First, within the embassy sent by John II during October 1481 to the Catholic Monarchs a claim was included mentioning a breach of what was agreed regarding Spanish navigation to Guinea. This embassy also requested the dissolution of the Tercerias de Moura, along with formal recognition of Juana's – "The Excellent Lady" – Castilian rights. This amounted to an indirect diplomatic threat aimed at checking the aggressor through counterbalancing rhetoric. Second, within the embassy dispatched by John II to Edward VI between 30 January and 22 March 1482 (Faria 2021), three months after the one sent to the Catholic Monarchs, the English king was required not to send military support to the planned fleet and sought a renewal of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance. This was a clear attempt to reinforce a defensive alliance and thus counterbalance Spain. The fleet project then disappears from the sources.

P.T.2. War to Conquer the Kingdom of Granada (1482–1492)

In terms of Iberian Peninsula balance of power, the Spanish war to conquer Granada meant for Portugal the likelihood that the Spanish neighbor would increase its relative power (as happened). This possibility posed a threat to Portuguese interests that could end up affecting its own survival. Although the Portuguese attempt to secure a marriage alliance between Juana and Francis Phoebus of Navarre or the Infante Charles of France may be linked (Humble Ferreira 2020), yet given the length of the Granada war, three strategies stand out more clearly as responses to a significant but non-imminent threat. First, Portugal began a process to consolidate its position throughout Atlantic Africa by building the fortress of São Jorge da Mina (1482). This increased its defensive posture, allowing also to benefit the trade with the region and to access the Guinean gold. Second, it concluded a treaty-alliance with France between 1484 and 1485.[14] Third, it sought to improve Portuguese position in the Barbary through the failed project of building La Graciosa fortress (Soyer 2007). All three moves fit Mearsheimer's category of counterbalancing, by increasing defensive capabilities and promoting a defensive alliance with France. The development of the Atlantic route beyond Cape Bojador also allowed Portugal to increase its material capabilities (Modelski and Thompson 1988).

13 Although the Spanish sources are not clear about this event, it is known that, starting in 1481, the King of England requested a bull from the Papacy. This bull should allow England to sail over Guinea backdated to 1 November 1480 (Attreed 2000).

14 The content of the Treaty is not available. Although it is recognized as the Treaty of Commerce and Alliance, it is only known that it dealt with the piracy problems between France and Portugal (Faria 2021).

P.T.3. Spanish Offensive Alliance with England (1489)

The long-standing Anglo-Portuguese alliance would have been damaged by the Treaty of Medina del Campo in 1489. The decisive Spanish aid to English interests in Brittany and the linking of its alliance with specific interests located on the border with France could have relegated the Anglo-Portuguese to a secondary role (Currin 1996). In this context, the marriage of Prince Afonso of Portugal to Infanta Isabella of Spain took place. This marriage-alliance signaled accommodation to the status quo created in 1479 and amounted a Portuguese effort to avoid a growing threat by aligning with the stronger neighbor (Montes Romero-Camacho 2003). It can be interpreted as appeasement and, to some extent, bandwagoning. At that time, Portugal had recently failed in its attempt to secure a stronger foothold in Atlantic Barbary (La Graciosa, 1489) and had effectively acknowledged its inability to conquer Fez (Lima Cruz and Lázaro 2019). The subsequent death of Prince Afonso and the events that would occur between 1492 and 1495 underscore the importance of the Anglo-Spanish deeper collaboration, through the alliance against France, for the Portuguese position within the system. In this case, the alliance can be seen as a deviation with respect to theoretical strategies, inviting closer analysis and considering the intervention of domestic variables (Soyer 2007).

P.T.4. Capitulations of Santa Fe, Armada of Vizcaya, Treaty of Barcelona and Papacy Support to Spain (1492–1495)

The conquest of Granada on 2 January 1492 was quickly followed by the decision of the Catholic Monarchs to back Christopher Columbus's project (Capitulations of Santa Fe, 17 April 1492) and to increase their military capabilities in anticipation of a possible confrontation with Portugal (Armada of Vizcaya, 27 April 1492). According to that, Spain thus openly entertained war as a means to increase its power (Rumeu de Armas 1992). In early 1493, Spain sought French neutrality in the event of conflict with Portugal by signing the Treaty of Barcelona (Lesaffer 2006). That same year the Papacy signaled its preference for Spanish interests by supporting the rights of conquest on the other side of the Atlantic by issuing several bulls.[15] Portugal now faced multiple threats without potential allies and with several open disputes with Spain (Soyer 2007; Zurita 1670). Portuguese preeminence in the Atlantic was in doubt, its status would be relegated, as would its ability to increase

15 Once the discovery of the new lands was known, between April and September 1493, Spain requested the granting of new bulls of sovereignty over the recently discovered lands. In May, the bulls *Breve Inter caetera* (3 May), *Eximiae devotionis* (3 May) and bull minor *Inter caetera II (*4 May) were granted. But they were not completely satisfactory for Spain, so, around August, the Armada of Vizcaya was already deployed in the Strait of Gibraltar "…with the mission of blocking the maritime communication route between Portugal and Guinea-South Africa, should hostilities break out" (Rumeu de Armas 1992, 100). There is also a debate around the exact issuing date and sequence of the first three bulls. Vander Linden (1916) dates the brief *Inter caetera* in April, received on 17 May, and the minor bull *Inter caetera II* in June, while Davenport (1917) dates the *Eximiae devotionis* in July. This inconsistency of dates, their number and their successive modifications point to an open negotiation with the Papacy, whose support was crucial. Full papal support for Spanish claims ended with the bull *Dudum Siquidem* of 26 September 1493.

material capabilities. Furthermore, the succession to the throne could imply subordinating the foreign policy to Spanish interests if Manuel were crowned King of Portugal.[16]

Portugal responded with strategies aimed at checking the aggressor and buying time. It ordered the construction of a fleet in April 1493 (Szászdi León-Borja and Rodriguéz López 2000) and announced that George of Lencastre would succeed John II. Although the succession could mean a threat to Spanish interests, John II's final decision was subject to the internal Portuguese situation and the influence of numerous domestic actors (Soyer 2007). It could also be affected by the deployment of Spanish troops near the border and Spanish threats of war – clear efforts by Spain to increase power.[17]

Portugal also employed two appeasement strategies to buy time. First, it signed the Treaty of Tordesillas (7 June 1494) recognizing a new bilateral status quo. Although Lisbon had received threats from Spain to start a limited war over Melilla and Cazaza in North Africa that could have led to an imminent confrontation (de la Torre y del Cerro and Suárez Fernández 1958), the Portuguese were aware that Columbus had not reached yet the route to the East Indies, leaving room to accept an agreement like Tordesillas avoiding an immediate military conflict (Barata 1905). Second, the succession of John II was of more importance for the Catholic Monarchs. Although John II kept a clause leaving the door open in his last will to a change of mind at any time, the final decision recognizing Manuel as his successor showed a strategy of appeasement. It must be clarified that the final success of this strategy was not clear even in the medium term. Manuel's personal circumstances – his earlier protection by Queen Isabella and the assassination of his older brother Diogo, Duke of Viseu, by John II – meant that a strategy of increasing power at Spain's expense would take years to unfold, if at all. Taken together, Portugal's responses remain consistent with Mearsheimer's theoretical menu of strategies.

P.T.5. Non-Wedding of Manuel I with Infanta Isabella (1496)

The limited options that Portugal had to disregard Spanish demands during 1496 were evident along the process that culminated in the marriage between Manuel I and the Infanta Isabella, daughter of the Catholic Monarchs. The crucial Spanish demand was to expulse the Jews and Moors from Portugal, explicitly linked to the marriage negotia-

16 The preference shown by the Catholic Monarchs towards Manuel as a future king was reflected in a letter dated 28 December 1495 to the Spanish Ambassador in London. They expressed it clearly that they were sure of his obedience (Bergenroth 1862; Suárez Fernández 1966).

17 The Catholic Monarchs' threats of going to war and the disposal of Spanish troops next to the Portuguese border were described by Marino Sanuto (*I Diarii)* and Jerónimo Zurita *(Historia del rey Don Hernando el Catolico: de las empresas y ligas de Italia).*

tions.[18] If the request was not granted, the wedding would not take place and, once again, Portugal would be isolated and exposed to future pressure. Appeasement was chosen to avoid the threat. Although it can also be read as bandwagoning, the subsequent deaths of Isabella, 24 August 1498, and Miguel de Paz (the son of King Manuel I and Isabella), 20 June 1500, would suggest that time was bought. Two developments reinforce this interpretation. First, the guarantee obtained by Manuel from Spain in October 1500 – while he was proceeding to get married with another daughter of the Spanish monarchs, the Infanta Maria – to get access to the Mediterranean (Humble Ferreira 2015). Second, during an anti-Ottoman league formed in the context of the 1499–1503 Ottoman-Venetian War, Portugal did not finally join the allied fleet but instead attempted to seize Mers el-Kebir (1501) – a city in the North of Africa whose rights of conquest were granted to Spain by a Papal bull. In broad terms, while Portugal broadly achieved its survival and gained time as an independent power, only Manuel I knew if this outcome matched his ultimate intentions. Yet the short-term analysis of the strategies adopted cannot be conclusive. Therefore, no clear deviations from offensive realist logic are observed; however, it is suggested to carry out a detailed study of the domestic policy of Manuel I between 1496 and 1500. This will provide a better understanding of his intentions.[19]

P.T.6. Advances Along the Barbary (1503–1509)

Both Portugal and Spain expanded along the Barbary coast between 1503 and 1509. Reaching a new agreement in 1509 – the Sintra Convention of 1509 – precisely defined the status quo over said region and showed the willingness of both powers to cooperate. However, this appeasing attitude coexisted with reinforcement of fortresses on both sides of the Spanish-Portuguese border (Humble Ferreira 2015), a counterbalancing strategy that should be read to deter an upcoming attack. In a context where the timing and magnitude of the threat were uncertain, domestic factors may have played a larger role. Nevertheless, both the appeasement represented by the Sintra Convention and the defensive buildups fit Mearsheimer's strategies of counterbalancing and buying time.

P.T.7. Spanish Armada over Fez (1510–1511)

The fact that Portugal discovered the Spanish project to attack Fez, during the process of accumulating naval and land forces in different Spanish ports, resulted in a Portuguese

18 The references to the importance of this issue were referred by the Venetian Marino Sanuto at *I Diarii* (Venice, 1879), 1, col. 646 (Soyer 2007), the Italian Diogo Pires at C. A. André, *Um judeu no desterro: Diogo Pires e a memória de Portugal* (Coimbra, 1992), but also in Zurita (1670) or Prestage (1914). Furthermore, the sequence of dates also supports this idea. The marriage contract was drawn up on 30 November 1496, while Soyer (2007) dates the first reference to the expulsion order to 4 December 1496. Once most of the Jews and Moriscos had converted or left Portugal, the marriage took place.

19 Vasco da Gama arrived in Calcutta on 20 May 1498 (three months before the death of Isabella) and Manuel I only notified the news to the Catholic Monarchs one year later. This is an issue that clashes with some historians' conclusion of good family relations (Nogales Rincón 2013).

diplomatic response on 10 August 1510 (López de Coca Castañer 2018). However, no type of threat emerged from it, and Ferdinand the Catholic would insist by 24 December 1510 on the Spanish right to proceed with the conquest.[20] The reason why this enterprise did not take place along the Barbary assigned to Portugal must be found in the beginning of another war with France for the control of Italian territories (Devereux 2015). Portugal may have anticipated French intervention and, if so, it could be interpreted that the burden had been passed to France. It is also plausible that Portugal used its diplomacy with the Papacy to undermine Spanish plans, warning about the intentions of the Spanish naval force against Papacy desire to resist French pressures. Further research would be needed to determine whether Portugal tried to make France improve its power through trading with spices. The strategies to control the aggressor that Portuguese could have been taken, would aim to pass the burden to France and try to get Spain to divert its attention. More research is needed on the points cited above. However, under these assumptions there would not have been a deviation from the theoretical strategies.

P.T.8. Spanish Occupation of Navarre (1512–1516)

The decisive and quick occupation of Navarre in 1512, together with the questionable support of the Papacy, revealed the Spanish revisionism and assertiveness within the Iberian Peninsula. At a period when only the Portuguese power maintained its independence within the Peninsula, the threat to its security was evident. Looking at the Scottish position alongside France and against England, the option of a defensive alliance could have carried more negative than positive aspects. It is doubtful that France would have acted decisively in support of Portugal when it did not do so in the Scottish or Navarrese cases (Humble Ferreira 2015). In environment with clear signals, domestic variables theoretically played a limited role (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Despite not participating in the League of Cambrai, Manuel I continued cultivating his image within the Papacy as a defender of Christianity against the Egyptians and the Ottomans (Couto 2021). This strategy could have also provided a counterweight by seeking defensive alliances or, at least, papal neutrality. The only response observed was the Portuguese counterweight by continuously increasing its defensive capabilities (Humble Ferreira 2015). In conclusion, no deviations were observed with respect to the theoretical strategies of offensive realism.

20 See the letter from Manuel I of 10 August 1510, where he requested Spain not to intervene in the Portuguese zone of influence. Ferdinand complained in writing about Portuguese responsibility for the damage to the Spanish coast in a letter of 23 October 1510. On 24 December 1510, Ferdinand reiterated this complaint and at the same date sent a letter to Pedro Navarro indicating that, despite the disaster at Gelves, interest in the African venture remains. There is another letter to King Henry VIII of England requesting archers. A letter of 22 February 1511 indicates that Ferdinand himself or the Duke of Alba will travel to Naples for the Tunis and Barbary expedition, while a letter of 5 March explicitly states that the goal is the Barbary. In the letter that Ferdinand sent to the Count of Tendilla on 1 February 1511, he admitted that he had sent personal letters to the French king and other rulers urging them not to hinder the African venture and to cease their conflicts (Devereux 2015; Humble Ferreira 2015; Oliveira e Costa 2007).

Portuguese Responses to the Opportunities That Came from Spain

P.O.1. Position in the Sultanate of Fez (1486–1489)

Portugal's first opportunity to improve its position throughout the Barbary, under the terms of Alcáçovas, came between 1486 and 1489. Although the opportunity did not originate directly from Spain, it was linked to the broader settlement. The timing coincides with the Papacy's confirmation of Portuguese rights of conquest (Szászdi Nagy 1996). Once papal backing was secured, the strategy used was to increase its presence in the area through the construction of La Graciosa fort. This strategy was linked to the war that would allow Portuguese to increase its power in the region. However, the project was a failure that led to the siege of Ceuta and the drawing up of a renewable ten-year truce with Fez (Rodrigues Pereira 2020).

P.O.2. Projects Over the Levant (1496)

When Manuel I presented to the Papacy his first projects over the Levant, the Portuguese position in the Mediterranean was very weak, and the Indian Ocean route was only beginning to take shape. A fully developed oceanic route, combined with Mediterranean access, would have enabled Portugal to project power against the Mamluks from two directions. The opportunity arose from the Portuguese position of apparent subordination to or tutelage by Spain, at a time when Portugal was gaining time and trying to improve its position within the international system, seeking also for recognition of its status within the system.

P.O.3. Project Over the Spanish Barbary (1500–1501)

The marriage between Manuel I and the Infanta Maria in 1500 allowed Portugal to improve its position in the Mediterranean. This opportunity could have been exploited through the conquest of Mers el-Kebir in 1501. The use of war as a strategy to gain power is clear, but the attempt failed. Therefore, Portugal could not increase power at the expense of Spanish interests in the region.

P.O.4. Permanent Dissolution of the Spanish Composite State (1504–1506)

The death of Queen Isabella in 1504 entailed a new opportunity for Portugal to improve its power position within the Mediterranean International System. The Portuguese support to Philip I and the willingness to establish a matrimonial alliance with the Holy Roman Empire could have changed the configuration of the Iberian and Mediterranean balance of power (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1999). However, although the actors involved showed their interest in dismembering and putting to an end the Spanish composite state, this

outcome did not materialize.[21] Had war broken out, the Portuguese strategy that could be seen from its diplomatic activity was to bait-and-bleed or bloodletting, encouraging others to bear the costs while Portugal reaped the benefits. A more detailed examination of embassies involving Portugal, the Holy Empire, France and Philip I, as well as the content of the agreement of April 3, 1505 (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1999), would clarify this strategy.

Spanish Responses to Threats from Portugal

E.T.1. Juana's Marriage with a Foreign Power (1481–1483)

The Portuguese position regarding Juana – the Excellent Lady – as expressed in the October 1481 embassy and interest to establish a matrimonial alliance with France or Navarre, posed an obvious threat to Spain. Recognizing her Castilian rights could destabilize Spain internally and reshape the Western European balance of power, with France emerging as the main counterweight. The Spanish composite state itself was at stake. The strategy adopted by Spain was to ensure that none of the marriages took place by requiring the Papacy for a bull preventing Juana from leaving the convent (Humble Ferreira 2020). This strategy can be considered balancing through a defensive alliance with the Papacy, but can also be understood as appeasement strategy, buying time, when considered alongside contemporaneous concessions described below.

E.T.2. Tercerias y Braganza (1481–1484)

The request to dissolve the Tercerias did not imply, in itself, to overturn the core of what was agreed in Alcáçovas. Although important for Spain, the Catholic Monarchs ultimately agreed the Portuguese king's request using a probable appeasement strategy linked to the Juana and Guinea issues. A few days after dissolving the Tercerias, the sequence of events involving the House of Braganza unfolded (Ostlund 2010), risking the peace agreed at Alcáçovas. War between Spain and Portugal was highly likely (Rumeu de Armas 1992). The embassies between both powers during this period and the agreements reached should be analyzed in greater detail. In the absence of that analysis, the overall Spanish strategy appears to have leaned toward appeasement.

E.T.3. Portuguese Push toward Greater Control of Fez (1486–1489)

Portugal's renewed interest in occupying the northern coast of Africa, corresponding to the Barbary zone assigned in Alcáçovas and confirmed by a papal bull in 1496, posed a future threat to Spanish security in the Strait of Gibraltar. If successful, Portugal would flank Spain on both the west and the south. It would be worth investigating the impact that the attempted construction of La Graciosa fort had in Spain. However, at that time,

21 France, the Holy Roman Empire and Philip I intended to damage the Spanish position in Italy by 1505 (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1999).

Spain was consolidating an offensive alliance with England, with which it had a few years earlier shared an interest in Atlantic exploration beyond Cape Bojador. This can be interpreted as a balancing strategy aimed at offsetting Portugal's prospective presence south of the Strait.

E.T.4. Succession of George of Lencastre (1493–1495)

Portugal's succession question generated considerable uncertainty. John II's decision to designate George of Lencastre as his successor undermined Spanish expectations of eventually guiding Manuel I and thereby restraining Portuguese policy. Spain responded with a strategy clearly aimed at increasing power: diplomatic threats of war, likely combined with troop deployments along the border. This amounted to blackmail and fit Mearsheimer's strategies for power maximization short of war.

E.T.5. Attempted Conquest of Mers el-Kebir (1501)

Portugal's attempt to seize a Barbary territory assigned to Spain meant breaking what was agreed in Tordesillas. Portugal was determined to use force to increase its power at the expense of its Spanish neighbor. Yet no response was observed from Spain. This episode calls for further investigation. In theoretical terms, one would expect Spain to counterbalance, either through diplomatic threats or by strengthening defensive capabilities.

E.T.6. Permanent Dissolution of Spanish Composite State (1504–1506)

The threat of dismantling the Spanish composite state, returning to the status quo prior to 1479, reappeared after the death of Isabella and Philip I's control over Castile's foreign policy. Portuguese supported a marriage alliance with the heir of the Holy Roman Empire, while Philip maneuvered to transfer territories belonging to the Crown of Aragon to France (Rodríguez Rodríguez 1999). Technically, this scenario falls outside a straightforward Spain–Portugal dyad because the composite state itself was in question. Still, Ferdinand's response is important. However, it is worth analyzing the position taken by King Ferdinand. The option taken was a defensive alliance that involved bandwagoning to France. Had Philip I survived and left heirs, the Crown of Aragon would likely have become a political unit satellite of France. Here, leadership choices loom large.

Spanish Responses to the Opportunities That Came from Portugal

E.O.1. Portuguese Admission of Inability to Conquer Fez (1489)

Once Portugal failed to expand in Atlantic Barbary, concluded peace treaty with Fez, and acknowledged to the Papacy its inability to fulfill earlier papal grants (Rodrigues Pereira 2020; Soyer 2007), Spain found itself with the opportunity to cover the southern flank of

the Iberian Peninsula and control both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar. Although this response was not immediate, it did seek papal backing as part of a defensive alliance strategy directed against Portugal that, using the war against Fez, would allow it to increase power in 1510. Only the Fourth Italian War prevented this from materializing.

E.O.2. Death of John II, Manuel Becoming King and Expulsion of Jews and Moors from Portugal

When Manuel became king, Spanish hopes of influencing Portuguese policy were partially realized. The Catholic Monarchs were certain about their role in supervising and controlling the new Portuguese king's foreign policy. The first test of this tutelage would be the demand to expulse the Jews and Moors who were living in Portugal. Spain employed blackmail by explicitly linking this demand to Manuel's marriage with Infanta Isabella. Although it is necessary to continue investigating the terms of this blackmail, a priori Portugal would not have been threatened with war (see P.T.5. above).

Conclusion

This article has shown that, during the period analyzed, both Spain and Portugal behaved largely in accordance with the strategic toolbox of strategies set out by John J. Mearsheimer (2001). First, both aimed to secure survival; second, both sought to preserve their capabilities; and third, both looked for opportunities to increase their relative power and improve their position in the system to survive, sometimes at one another's expense and sometimes at the expense of other powers.

At several points, both powers were on the verge of war, yet war never occurred between them. The explanation offered in this article is straightforward: in each crisis, both sides found it more advantageous to rely on alternative strategies – threats, balancing, appeasement, buck-passing, and limited expansion – than to risk a full-scale war. Strategic calculations, not moral restraint, drove this restraint. The use of explicit threats to war was rare but significant, as in the succession crisis involving George of Lencastre, or between 1510 and 1511 and the intention of Spain to conquer Melilla and Cazaza. More commonly, both powers pursued military buildups. Offensive capabilities were expanded, as with the Spanish Armada of Vizcaya or the ordered Portuguese fleet of 1493, while defensive capabilities were strengthened through fortifications such as São Jorge da Mina, the La Graciosa project, and constant reinforcement of border defenses.

There was also the usual formation of implicit alliances by using the crucial role of the Papacy supporting one or another. That support was not like the offensive alliances (like those used against France) – directed toward the opponent to reduce its power by means of war – but as a source of deterrence. Appeasement was also used by both contenders during different periods due to the limited number of allies in the system, reduced capabilities, the risk of long-term survival or the preeminence of other strategic goals. The lat-

ter would be the risk of war after breaking the Tercerias de Moura at the same time Spain was preparing to initiate the war to conquer Granada.

A striking feature of the Iberian rivalry is the degree of strategic thinking displayed by both sides. Their behavior cannot be explained by personal animosities, family disputes, or individual sympathies, even though monarchs and dynastic ties played visible roles. At the systemic level, both Portugal and Spain acted as rational great powers navigating a hostile, anarchic environment. Only one episode appears to sit uneasily with a straightforward offensive realist interpretation: the Spanish offensive alliance with England in 1489. Understanding this case demands a deeper investigation into the diplomatic communications between England and Portugal. A lack of evidence, however, does not mean a response did not occur.

The central conclusion is that Portugal and Spain did not fight each other between 1479 and 1516 because both repeatedly found better options than war. They pursued a range of strategies – balancing, buck-passing, appeasement, limited expansion – that allowed them to compete for power and security without resorting to direct military confrontation. By analogy, the outcome of the current U.S.-China rivalry will depend on whether the available alternatives to war promise a better long-term return than the catastrophic risks of great-power conflict.

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