

DOSSIÊ

TRANSIÇÃO HEGEMÔNICA E SEGURANÇA AFRICANA: CINCO LIÇÕES DOS ESTUDOS DE SEGURANÇA PÓS COLONIAIS

*HEGEMONIC TRANSITION
AND AFRICAN SECURITY:
FIVE LESSONS FROM
POSTCOLONIAL
SECURITY STUDIES*

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on five interrelated lessons concerning war, defence, and state-building in the postcolonial South. Centring on African security, it explores how the current global hegemonic transition demands renewed attention to state capacity, military structure, and national security paradigms. Emphasising the relevance of the regionalized irregular proxy warfare, it critiques dominant liberal approaches and argues for historically grounded, interdisciplinary research. The article calls for strategic partnerships that prioritise autonomy, institutional strengthening, and social inclusion as essential for sustainable security in the postcolonial world.

Keywords: African security; State-building; Regionalized irregular proxy warfare; Hegemonic transition; Postcolonial security studie.

RESUMO

Este artigo reflete sobre cinco lições relacionadas acerca da guerra, da defesa e da construção do Estado no Sul pós-colonial. Com foco na segurança africana, explora como a atual transição hegemônica global exige uma atenção renovada à capacidade estatal, à estrutura militar e aos paradigmas de segurança nacional. Ao enfatizar a relevância das guerras proxy irregulares regionalizadas, critica as abordagens neoliberais dominantes e defende uma pesquisa interdisciplinar ancorada historicamente. O artigo propõe parcerias estratégicas que priorizem a autonomia, o fortalecimento institucional e a inclusão social como elementos essenciais para a segurança no mundo pós-colonial em um cenário de instabilidade global.

Palavras-chave: Segurança africana; Construção do Estado; Guerra proxy irregular regionalizada; Transição Hegemônica; Estudos Pós-coloniais de Segurança.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years of research on Africa Security have produced some lessons which I would like to organize in order to help understand the current context of hegemonic transition and its impacts to African security and defence. It is becoming increasingly evident that we are approaching a central war; what remains undefined are the alliances and the scenarios in which it will unfold. This is a daunting prospect for a generation—particularly in Brazil—that has only ever heard of a central war as a distant historical or geopolitical event. Perhaps this explains our persistent reluctance to study a phenomenon that has accompanied humanity since its very origins: the large-scale intentional political violence, named war. As much as threats to the security of human needs are significant, the insecurities generated by the threat or occurrence of war are inevitable. These will only be mitigated if we, like the Prussian General Carl Von Clausewitz in the early 19th century, seek to understand the coming war in its complexity through sustained research efforts on past and present warfare. The effort will necessarily be imperfect, but it may serve to reduce the social costs associated with war. The strategist should not ask whether war will happen, but rather when and how.

Bringing this reality to Brazilian defence priorities, such as peace, security and stability of its strategic environment (or surroundings), including the South Atlantic Ocean and Atlantic Africa, any prospect of future warfare needs to be aware of what research has been finding through security, defence and strategic analysis of these regions. In this article, I present five lessons aimed at organising my reflections and share some of the conclusions drawn from years of research on the phenomenon of war in Africa, in light of the growing signs that a hegemonic transition is now underway. This is a reflective essay that offers a synthesis of the most relevant findings from research on African security developed in Brazil, discussed in light of postcolonial perspectives in Security Studies, within the broader context of a global hegemonic transition marked by uncertainty.

The article is structured as follows. The next section offers a brief overview of the current global hegemonic transition and its implications for security analysis. This is followed by five lessons drawn from an evolving postcolonial perspective of security studies. Lesson one examines the role of science and research in the field of strategic, defence, and security studies, mainly to understand the problem of war and state in the postcolonial world, including Africa. Lesson two discusses the importance of the military definition in African armed conflicts. Lesson three focuses on the challenges of the national army formation. Lesson four explores the nature and limitations of defence policies and national security frameworks across African states. Lesson five reflects on the strategic bargaining opportunities that arise for African actors during periods of systemic transition. I conclude by advocating for more grounded,

autonomous and bottom-up approaches to the study of war and security in Africa, from a Brazilian perspective.

THE CURRENT GLOBAL HEGEMONIC TRANSITION

We live in a new international moment in which old and new alliances are being tested to their limits, including in positions regarding warfare. This is fundamentally related to a moment of hegemonic transition. There are many studies describing, measuring, and interpreting hegemonic transitions since the 1970s. Most of them agree, even scholars from both the balance-of-power and power transition traditions, that hegemonic transitions are more violent, at least for the Great Powers, than other periods of international politics (Gilpin, 1981; Kugler; Tams, 2006).

Since the late 1990s, we have known that the United States would become more violent, and paradoxically more expansionist, as it lost relative power. From Georgia to Syria, from Crimea to Ukraine, it became evident that other great powers would respond to this military expansionism with much less tolerance than expected by both doves and hawks (Mearsheimer, 2014). John Mearsheimer is brilliant in his ability to grasp the political-military power of great powers, and the conditions for war among them. However, as non-great powers (and regular people), either by choice or limitation, are unlikely to affect the correlation of forces that will shape the future wars defining multipolarity, I am more interested in what remains for the rest. That includes the possibilities of direct bargaining that may arise, the alliances in which we might become entangled—or disrupt—and the various unpredictable spillovers. Beyond that, studying Mearsheimer is essential for understanding the global context (Mearsheimer, 2023).

But what of the various regional contexts and the transversal axes of international—and intersocietal—relations? Paulo Visentini gives a much broader meaning to the current hegemonic transition by presenting different levels of relations that also incorporate the challenges faced by smaller powers in their regional environments (Visentini, 2022). How will great powers act toward regional powers and their neighbours? How will social forces be constituted and mobilise different agendas across societies and countries of the geopolitical South? For the periphery, scenarios are far from optimistic. Even without a central war, violence and instability remain constant realities of the colonial and neocolonial historical periods (Shubin, 2008). With the onset of a central war, these disputes become progressively more intense, and more clearly demarcated zones of influence are sought.

The violent race that culminated in the First Great War, which devastated Europe and parts of Asia and Africa, was initiated at the Berlin Conference of 1885. Yet Berlin was only possible due to the crisis of the hegemonic power of that time, the British Empire, which, from the 1870s on, became willing to accept far higher and more traumatic costs

of war, such as killing white civilian settlers in Africa at the turn of the 20th century. One need only look to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the British inauguration of concentration camps to see this pattern (Hobsawm, 1989; Thompson, 2005; Paton, 2000). But long before torturing Afrikaners, British imperialism was already burning down Black, Brown, Yellow and White bodies that crossed the path of its capital-driven locomotive of progress. Blood and gold, as Marx already warned (Marx, 1996; Lora, 2021). Two global hegemonies gave Britain more than enough time to use brute force in an attempt to preserve its world order. It would not be safe to assume the United States will not do the same.

Even before a central war takes place, the South Atlantic will hold strategic relevance in both global and local war scenarios. In addition, it may become a probable destination for the overflow of armed conflicts that continue to unfold, or may yet erupt, in South America and Africa, the two sister islands of the South Atlantic. As researchers in security and defence studies, it is our responsibility to contribute to understanding these undesirable futures (Pereira, 2010; Cepik; Ferreira, 2013; Fantappiè, 2023; Moraes, 2017).

When it comes to war in Africa, knowledge remains scarce, both inside and outside Brazil. Major databases contain serious errors. Mainstream media promotes selective and inconsistent campaigns, shaped by the economic interests of advertisers and subscribers, usually in crisis events. Analysts evaluate through inadequate and often stereotyped lenses. States fund research in a very limited way. All part of a distance-proximity paradox in which western societies, media and sciences often try to reduce their mammoth distance from Africa's social realities through stressing essentialist, particularist and reductionist representations of the continent (Castellano da Silva, 2022). This situation becomes even more critical considering that Africa is partly framed as part of Brazil's so-called strategic environment, at least since the publication of the *Política Nacional de Defesa* in 2005, which first defined the South Atlantic African coast as part of this concept (Brasil, 2005).

Nonetheless, successive generations of academic work regarding Africa, specially at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), and its extensive network of partners, especially through the insertion of its alumni and research associated in various research centres in Brazil and abroad, have been central in building a field of African Studies in Brazil committed to understand critical worldviews about and from Africa. This tradition recognises the agency African actors have in any international political process, including in their cooperation with strategic partners such as Brazil. Empirical research with analytical depth on inter-African international relations and between African states and extra-regional actors has, in terms of scale and consistency, reached unprecedented levels in Brazil through the leadership of this centre. It deserves to be highlighted, especially as it emerged from outside Brazil's traditional scientific hubs (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Brasília).

This achievement required a herculean effort of institutional construction within the Brazilian university system, guided by leading scholars such as Paulo Visentini, Luiz Dario Teixeira, and Analúcia Danilevicz Pereira. These scholars were protagonists in establishing at UFRGS, in Porto Alegre, the Brazilian Centre for Strategy and International Relations (NERINT), in 1999; the Brazil–South Africa Studies Center (CESUL), in 2005; the Brazilian Centre for African Studies (CEBRAFRICA) in 2010; and the Brazilian Journal of African Studies, in 2016. This same epistemic community, supported by key institutional Brazilian and international partners, was recently recognised by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), of the Brazilian Ministry of Education, and by the Brazilian Ministry of Defence as qualified to develop a comprehensive mapping of the dynamics, structures, and processes of security and defence across the African continent funded by the Pró-Defesa programme.

The research project, titled Security and Defence in Africa: Characteristics, Changes, and Impacts on Brazil’s Strategic Environment, aims to understand the key security and defence structures, characteristics, and policies of the African continent, assessing their implications for Brazil’s strategic environment, and identifying scenarios for potential Brazilian action. This project is the first funded by the Pró-Defesa programme fully dedicated to African dynamics in security and defence, and involves a specialised, multidisciplinary, and international research network. One of its key initiatives is the proposed creation of the AFRICANET – African Studies Network on Security and Defence (Castellano da Silva, 2024).

This is, at once, an effort to understand Africa’s condition and position in a transforming international system, as well as a contribution to ensure that any Brazilian engagement in this context is, at the very least, respectful of the monumental role African societies have played in the historical formation of what we now know as Brazil. But before this research initiative produces results, I will gather some lessons on war in Africa that can be organized from previous works that may allow new discoveries to happen.

LESSON ONE: SCIENCE, WAR AND STATE

The first lesson concerns the importance of science and research in the fields of knowledge that address the challenge of war and violence—namely, Strategic Studies, Defence Studies, and Security Studies. The lesson here lies in studying armed conflicts in the South in all of its complexity—without neglecting the deep-rooted causes of these conflicts, or the potential for structural solutions that are often rendered invisible. This requires us to overcome the limitations of the dominant quantitative literature, particularly from the United States, which frequently fails to account for historical contexts beyond its own (Collier; Sambanis, 2005). This literature is impaired by the

misrepresentation and disinformation perpetuated by sensationalist and commercially driven journalism, which systematically ignores the deeper and contradictory dimensions of the conflictual social processes experienced across the South (Heck, 1980). The causes of armed conflict are generally far more profound than these perspectives suggest. They are rooted in a historically updated revisitation of the challenges inherited and reconstructed through colonial and neocolonial enterprises (Nkrumah, 1965).

Third World Security Studies have long shown that the root causes of insecurity in the South are directly linked to the weakness of the dominant political organisation in the modern international system: the national state (Ayoob, 1995; Azar; Moon, 1988; Thomas, 1987; Buzan, 1991). That is, insecurity stems from the lack of a minimally capable state able to perform the most basic public functions considered essential in an ideally postcolonial international order. This is, of course, a normative ideal. In practice, few societies emerged from decolonisation having inherited—or conquered—the privilege of possessing a truly capable national state. The vast majority have instead remained subjected to structural pressures that reproduce a neocolonial architecture of permanent dependency.

Yet the capacity of these states to take strategic decisions depends on their ability to understand their defence and security environments. Today's threats in the African continent demand serious research and critical interpretation, especially for those observing from outside. Much is said in military and strategic studies about the European, Chinese, Japanese, American, or even South American ways of warfare. But what about the African way? The contemporary African way of warfare is not necessarily the result of autonomous strategic decisions or philosophies of war. Rather, it emerges mostly under structural constraints. And this mode is largely absent from the literature. It is a mode characterised by regionalized irregular proxy warfare (Castellano da Silva, 2022).

Irregular, proxy, and regionalised war involves the asymmetrical use of force and operational complexity, as is often the case in contexts where the state and armed forces are underdeveloped (IISS, 2005). At the same time, warfare in Africa frequently contains a strong proxy element, involving regional, international, and local rivalries. These rivalries have a significant interstate dimension, which is frequently overlooked by mainstream analyses (Loveman, 2002). Moreover, such wars are clearly regionalised. One of their defining features is the transborder flow of threats, which requires equally regional responses. African wars are of high lethality and recurrence, often described as irregular precisely because they revolve around the struggle to obtain or control territories where the national state faces structural difficulties in exercising authority.

As literature developed decades ago already argues, states in the Third World encounter profound obstacles in cultivating the software side of security—namely, their ability to formulate and implement strategic decisions in the fields of security and defence

(Azar; Moon, 1988). It is a matter of state capacity: the ability to govern, to make decisions, and to deter open violence as a political alternative. This is precisely what the literature on Third World security and defence has long pointed out: even when threats are recognisable, responses are undermined not only by material constraints (e.g. lack of military capabilities), but more fundamentally by the inability to take long-term, sustainable strategic decisions.

This software dimension of security is about constructing the state itself, its legitimacy, territorial and political integration, and its long-term political capacity. And this capacity must be anchored not in the fleeting interests of isolated elites or regimes, but in broader societal legitimacy. The failure to achieve this is intimately connected to the deeper, permissive causes of armed conflict, which are manifested in more objective challenges: economic underdevelopment, national and cultural fragmentation, erosion of rights, and political manipulation by private interests. Without such a state, it is difficult to imagine any political actor able to deliver effective and autonomous responses to these enduring challenges of warfare in Africa. This has already been argued and documented in the literature. What we must do now is recover and re-engage with these foundational bodies of knowledge—and commit to a science that is grounded in its social reality. Reviving this agenda is an essential part of a serious postcolonial current in Security Studies (Bilgin, 2010; Barkawi; Laffey, 2006; Biswas, 2012).

LESSON TWO: MILITARY DEFINITION

Every student of classical and modern strategy knows this: the military resolution of internal armed conflicts is a minimal and necessary condition for the construction of the modern state. Yet, this is far from self-evident when studying the security and defence challenges across the African continent.

Clearly, the modern state—first sovereign, then national—is a social construct (Giddens, 1985; Tilly, 1992; Anderson, 1983). In the modern era, the sovereign national state was consolidated alongside capitalism and became universalised, regardless of its legitimacy. Colonialism was one of the primary instruments of this project. After its imposition during the colonial enterprise, all postcolonial societies were expected to adopt this model. Since then, the national state has persisted, even as a potential vehicle for resistance against the very powers that created it—the West. The modern national state has prevailed as the normative standard of the international system (Holsti, 2004) and the very institution that has become the recognised path to dignity for many colonised peoples.

Because the core of the modern national state is the aim to control over coercive means, in postcolonial countries marked by internal fractures, the importance of the monopoly on legitimate violence is central (Weber, 1978). Historical precedents have shown

such internal divisions being resolved through military definition of internal conflicts. This was the case in Brazil during the first half of the 19th century, as well as in other postcolonial states that at least managed to reduce internal armed violence. Not only should African states, governments, and societies understand this, but so too should international institutions, which must recognise this.

Here, military definition is not understood as mere annihilation or extermination, but as a structural condition. It is the realisation of Clausewitz's trinity: government, people, and army—an integration necessary to control the costs of war and to ensure that only one entity holds the legitimate authority to wage large-scale coercion (Clausewitz, 2008). This effort is not restricted to established regimes. Military definition can be achieved by insurgent governments, peoples, or armies. But should they come to power and desire stability, they too must achieve such a definition. This internal deterrence is rarely addressed in International Relations or Political Science, which often treat Weber's definition of the state as description rather than normative aspiration. But the assumption of a sovereign, unitary, and immutable state has long been refuted by historical sociology (Tilly, 1992; Giddens, 1985; Herbst, 2000; Halliday, 1994; Hobson, 2000), what helps the understanding of the variety political trajectories of the colonial and neocolonial states.

The challenge of the military indefinability is shaped by historical-structural conditions (notably colonialism and neocolonialism), international neoliberal pressures, and the incapacity of the state, especially its illegitimacy. A growing body of research demonstrates the limits of formal ceasefires and negotiated settlements that lack a military resolution on the ground—one capable of effectively deterring armed groups from reigniting violence against political arrangements reached collectively by those who had better control over the means of coercion before, during, and after the war. For example, studies show that in nearly 40% of cases where no military resolution occurred, civil war resumes within a decade (Collier; Sambanis, 2005). Civil wars that end in outright military victory are two to three times less likely to recur, as one side is sufficiently deterred from restarting armed conflict (Toft, 2010; Wagner, 1993; Regan, 2002).

Still, I must reiterate: military definition is not simplistic. It must be organised alongside peacebuilding initiatives and capacity-building efforts. Many western scholars understand this, and have developed a substantial literature on security sector reform (SSR) and state-building—with Monica Toft's work worthy of mention (Toft, 2010). However, what is often absent in these works is the recognition that such processes need not be superficial, pulverized or imposed or implemented solely by external actors. Rather, they must be led—and owned—by the state itself. The central objective of these processes must remain clear: to disarm enemies and build credible internal and external deterrence.

There is also relevant research produced in the South, although it rarely receives broader recognition due to the hierarchies of power in international science, including linguistic barriers. In my Master's research, I tested a hypothesis derived from Charles Tilly's classical thesis that war generates structural incentives for state formation—a pattern historically observed in Europe (Tilly, 1992). I applied this to the African context, particularly to the postcolonial state that most deeply experienced the war–state–building dilemma: the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The empirical study, later published in Brazil and Angola (Castellano da Silva, 2012), identified that a positive relationship between war and state–building depends on several necessary conditions: the type of war experienced; the strategies used by domestic elites and their international allies to finance and wage it; the type and duration of state reforms adopted in response; and, most crucially, the nature of the conflict's resolution. In postcolonial Congo, these conditions were rarely unmet, especially during the attempted negotiated resolution of the Second Congo War, the so-called African World War. That process relied on merely formal peace agreements, distributing the state structure among rival armed groups, including the national army, which remains incapable of exerting effective coercive authority over two decades later (Castellano da Silva, Martins, 2013).

This case study was further complemented by a comparative analysis of conflict resolution processes in the DRC, Angola (1994 and 2002), and Mozambique. The findings, co-authored and published in 2013 (Castellano da Silva et al., 2013), show that peace agreements based on deep power-sharing within state structures tend to produce fragmented armed forces, incapable of internal or external deterrence. Angola remains the most important and exemplary control case on the continent: despite facing one of Africa's largest regional wars, it managed to stabilise its territory through a combination of negotiation, inclusion, and capacity-building. Unfortunately, the same cannot yet be said of the DRC or even Mozambique, where military power-sharing since the 1990s has resulted in ongoing fragmentation of security forces.

During my doctoral research, I examined state capacities in Southern Africa, focusing on historical transformations in the regional system (Castellano da Silva, 2017). A key component involved analysing coercive, capital, and legitimacy capacities among regional powers. Military definition of internal conflict was closely tied to defence and security policies that strengthened national armed forces—especially in cases like Angola and Zimbabwe in the 1980s and early 1990s. Conversely, countries that pursued the downsizing or political neutralisation of their security apparatuses have faced difficulties not only in ending internal conflict but also in developing autonomous and assertive foreign and security policies.

To sum up, no meaningful autonomy in domestic and international relations can be achieved in the South without increased state capacity, the first of them

territorial integrity and domestic pacification. Military definition, of course, is only a partial victory. Further state capabilities and inclusive political strategies must be implemented according to each society's context. But without a credible threat of retaliation, no armed actor will disarm. Unless African states are content with their enemies remaining armed, they must seriously consider ensuring—on their own terms—the military definition of their internal conflicts.

LESSON THREE: NATIONAL ARMY

Clausewitzian military definition rests upon a fundamental social base: the national army. This institution has been the primary mechanism through which the poorest sectors of the population are socialised and integrated into a national identity. It constitutes the minimum foundation for the continuity of the national state, as long as it lasts, and the core instrument for building state capacity is the armed forces, particularly the army. The national army assumes responsibility for territorial integrity and internal protection, while also integrating a substantial portion of the population into the state bureaucracy.

Recent comparative studies have reinforced this. When states decide to invest in building capable armed forces, the process is complex and conditioned by critical variables. Among them, the design and implementation of Security Sector Reform (SSR) and military modernisation programmes are particularly relevant. For instance, comparative analysis of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone SSR programmes reveals that broad power-sharing arrangements often fail when insurgent forces are insufficiently demobilised before being integrated into national armies. Additionally, the nature of international donor engagement—whether they align with the recipient state's strategic vision—determines the success or failure of such reforms. A major recurring issue is the absence of long-term leadership and coordination among donors, which undermines sustainable institutional development (Levy, 2020).

However, the national army as state capacity is bureaucratised and professionalised. It cannot be subjected to the interference of politics or engage in politics itself. Otherwise, it risks becoming a tool of political regimes rather than of the state. Armed forces must be treated with dignity and guided by their core mission: territorial integrity, deterrence, and the protection of life. If politics enters the barracks, let it be with a capital "P"—a deep scientific engagement with national and international political dilemmas, especially those rooted in postcolonial complexity. But this must not be the politics of parties and transient governments, which reduce defence policy to the security of regimes rather than that of society (Hutchful; Bathily, 1998).

This is the essence of a true national army—distinct from traditional postcolonial militaries. The literature on Third World defence and security since the 1980s has long

identified the risk of militaries becoming mere instruments of regime protection. The solution is to professionalise the armed forces so they can serve democratic national integration while honouring ancestral traditions and the plural values of their societies (Clapham, 1985).

This Politics with a capital “P” implies that militaries themselves must become spaces of knowledge and critical thinking. Strategic and security studies should be cultivated within the armed forces—provided they are grounded in science and research. A key element of this intellectual recovery involves returning to foundational military theorists such as Clausewitz. He insisted on the interdependence between government, army, and people. This triad is not a justification for military subservience to political regimes; rather, it defines the military as a bureaucratic arm of the state tasked with defending the population and ensuring territorial integrity (Castellano da Silva; Martins, 2013).

LESSON FOUR: DEFENCE POLICIES AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Societies in the South carry the trauma of national security. Most have experienced, in their recent past, authoritarian regimes in which security and military forces persecuted, tortured, and killed fellow citizens in the name of this supposedly superior collective interest. However, elaborating this trauma is necessary to overcome it. As Sigmund Freud taught, working through trauma (*Durcharbeiten*) requires facing it, narrating it, and displacing its effects through conscious reflection (Freud, 1957). Thus, the concept of national security must be revisited, not discarded.

Defence exists to serve what is collectively defined as national priorities for security. There is no coherent national defence policy without a minimally clear, plural, and representative concept of national security. Nonetheless, national security has rarely existed in the South, what often existed was regime security. While some may argue that there can be no true national security, as the notion of the national is discursively constructed, it remains true that constitutive political processes, such as the drafting of a national constitution, can also give rise to an operational definition of national security.

Nevertheless, for a security policy to be truly national in postcolonial societies, it must be anchored in an understanding of pressing national challenges. This is not easily achieved in societies marked by deep material and symbolic colonial legacies, especially where self-criticism is an unknown virtue—particularly among dominant elites embedded in a neocolonial state. Still, societies can regenerate themselves, and those that underwent profound processes of national liberation or revolutionary transformation tend to create conditions for breaking neocolonial dependencies (Cardoso; Faletto, 1970). These are rare and often short-lived revolutionary cases, but they matter (Visentini, 2012).

It was precisely post-revolutionary governments that succeeded in justifying the reconstruction of state capacities in favour of national—or plurinational—priorities. In Africa, examples such as Angola, South Africa and Rwanda stand out. This may be because liberation or revolutionary movements, regardless of ideological affiliation, form regimes concerned with surviving international pressures and colonial legacies (Halliday, 1999). Yet such regimes are also vulnerable to elite capture, capable of deviating from the national project idealised during the liberation struggle, something observable across generations in countries like Brazil.

Other postcolonial states, now great powers, such as the United States, China, and India, have deepened their national security strategies and improved their capacities based on clearly defined priorities (Finkelstein, 1999; Bolt; Gray, 2007). This should not be seen as heresy. These powers ground their defence policies in national security strategies, which in turn shape their military doctrines and deployments.

Reconceiving postcolonial national security requires acknowledging the precolonial, colonial, and neocolonial pasts that shaped the national, a category riddled with contradictions, injustices, and violence (Mbembe, 2019). Rebuilding what is national in postcolonial societies demands offering protection to those never protected and eliminating state-perpetrated genocide as a conceivable policy. Security must be redefined not as mere coercive control but as a comprehensive agenda for prosperity and social well-being. This, however, is an especially arduous task in the South that requires a new paradigm for national security in the postcolonial world.

Encouragingly, movements to rethink national security strategies are underway in Brazil (Lima et al, 2020) and in several African states (Fabrycy, 2020; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022). Yet no national security policy—no matter how inclusive—can be sustained without economic viability. Without a political economy committed to covering the cost of transformation, no policy will endure. Technical cooperation projects must be integrated into long-term, large-scale national strategies. Thus, financial resources matter. Still, politics and political economy matter more.

A revised concept of national security must express a social ethos—what a society collectively defines as existential threats. It must enable diverse political, economic, and social forces to coalesce around shared commitments. While rooted in the constitutional order, it should be flexible enough to respond to global, regional, national, and local transformations.

LESSON FIVE: BARGAIN TIME!

The era of bargaining has arrived. Coalitions are being formed, and skilled negotiators now have the chance to secure deals and extract benefits. But this must be done wisely.

Patrons must also perceive that they are receiving something of value in return. That is why we better understand our limits—what we can give and what we can accept—as well as what our prospective partners can offer and are willing to concede. Negotiators follow these rules by heart. The fifth lesson addresses hegemonic transition more directly, particularly in relation to funding opportunities and the potential for strategic partnerships amid the increasing likelihood of war.

We are currently living through a rare window of opportunity in international relations, defined by the global hegemonic transition: who will lead the international system next? Will it be the United States, China, or some alternative configuration? In this brief interregnum, both the ascending and declining empires—as well as all others positioning themselves in the margins of this contest—tend to invest more in cultivating friendships. These actors seek to enhance their power and legitimacy through alliances. Cooperation becomes the very foundation for hegemony (re)building. It is, therefore, a time of risky bets, but also a time when such bets can pay off when new strategic partners may be willing to engage in cooperative initiatives that increase mutual autonomy and capacity for development.

Take, for instance, Brazil. It was on the eve of World War II that the Brazil–United States bargain began to yield its most consistent and transformative results, particularly in the context of Getúlio Vargas’s first administration, which negotiated the foundations for Brazilian industrialisation through strategic alignment with Washington (Fonseca, 1997). Even more significant was the hegemonic transition process after the Second World War, when the perceived threat of the Soviet Union justified the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe and large-scale development initiatives in East Asia. These included the rise, under tight Western oversight, of Japan, South Korea, and even Communist China (Arrighi, 1997).

We should not, however, be naive. New justifications for interstate cooperation often emerge in the shadow of war. The far right is on the rise, and its political project will not be inclusive or just. Central war typically results from the recklessness of an overly ambitious rising power, the desperation of a disgruntled declining power, or the combination of both. War is often the outcome of the declining power’s own choice—especially when it perceives itself as humiliated and having lost prestige (Gilpin, 1981). The actions of Donald Trump, for instance, have created fertile ground for justifying conflict, whether directed at a designated scapegoat or triggered by provocation. Alongside the tangible preparations for war (often tested in the periphery), the process of legitimising hegemonic warfare or great-power competition tends to demand maximum social mobilisation—leaving the political landscape wide open to totalitarian tendencies.

Trump is in tune with the current era. His gimmickry appeals to the ignorant, creating a community of shared stupidity (Vale, 2024). We must remember that wilful ignorance

is also a mode of mobilisation for totalitarian politics. Hannah Arendt identified three core elements of totalitarian regimes: bureaucracy, expansionism, and racism (Arendt, 1973). In our time, stupidity has become the operational logic of algorithmic distribution on social media. It is no coincidence that some of the most influential digital platforms—along with their senior stakeholders, such as Elon Musk—have aligned themselves with this neo-fascist political project. As crude as the terminology may seem, it is necessary to start calling things by their name.

One of the latest episodes in Trump's theatre of gimmickry, which even affected Brazilian political discourse at the highest levels, targeted South Africa. The first signal of discontent with the country's autonomist foreign policy emerged on 7 February 2025—less than three weeks into Trump's presidency—when he signed an executive order halting all US aid to South Africa. The decision cited the country's policy of land expropriation without compensation and South Africa's genocide case against Israel (SABC NEWS, 2025). Simultaneously, Trump announced a programme to promote the resettlement of so-called Afrikaner refugees, allegedly escaping state-sponsored, race-based discrimination.

On 14 March 2025, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared South African Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool *persona non grata*, citing a political statement and referring to him as a “race-baiting politician” who “hates America and President Donald Trump” (The Conversation, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). The crisis deepened on 12 May with the first arrival of so-called white South African refugees under this policy. In response, the South African government not only condemned the action but also followed through with a high-level state visit by President Cyril Ramaphosa to Washington between 19 and 22 May. Although this visit may have been previously planned, it clearly gained urgency. The dramatic and chaotic meeting in the White House Oval Office was emblematic of South Africa's active effort to preserve its international bargaining power.

Yet, more important than the financial flows themselves is understanding where those resources are going. The scramble for international cooperation with Africa and Latin America must be directed toward public policies that explicitly aim at liberation from the neocolonial condition (Nkrumah, 1965). Regional powers shaped by colonial legacies—naturally constrained—face structural limitations in sustaining autonomous foreign policies or consistent balancing behaviour in the long term (Castellano da Silva, 2016; 2017; Schweller, 2006). For structural change to occur, priority must be given to leveraging this window of opportunity to support state making. Strategic alliances must aim to strengthen state-building efforts—that is the kind of partnership worth pursuing.

State making centred on emancipation from colonial and neocolonial experiments should be prioritised, as it represents the only viable foundation for re-legitimising

the state in the South. Future struggles will surely come, but this is the opportunity for postcolonial projects to flourish—even as part of a broader macro-historical transformation or dismantling of global capitalism. Nonetheless, state-building requires a national economic base, which cannot be dismissed. As thinkers such as Amílcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, and Frantz Fanon have emphasised, national liberation must be grounded in a state apparatus capable of carrying out economic and political transformation (Cabral, 1979; Nkrumah, 1965; Fanon, 1961).

A major challenge to this effort lies in the persistent need to build a national centre of economic decision, an idea central to the work of Celso Furtado. For Furtado, true national autonomy demands that economic decisions be made domestically, not externally (Furtado, 2009). The greatest adversary to this project is the prevailing neoliberal international economic order, which structurally sustains the neocolonial state. A significant share of resources in this transitional moment should be directed toward a new paradigm of national security for the postcolonial world—one that links qualified defence policy to multidimensional security and inclusive social development, aimed at overcoming the miseries produced by coloniality and postcoloniality.

Although multilateral international cooperation may have lost momentum, transitional periods such as this create new justifications for investment in state-building capacities. They may even foster greater receptivity to non-neoliberal economic policies. Major powers engaged in hegemonic competition will require deeper strategic partnerships—including military commitments—and they will have to pay the corresponding price. Funding, privileges, and even temporary dependent development may become available if we negotiate wisely (Amin, 1976).

CONCLUSIONS

I would like to conclude by returning to the five lessons presented throughout this essay, reframing them around what I believe must become a new paradigm of postcolonial national security. In a time marked by overlapping crises, deepening asymmetries, and structural instability in the international system, security policies in the South must move beyond imported doctrines and ambiguous formulations. They must be grounded in historical consciousness, regional specificities, and popular demands, and assessed through more grounded, autonomous and bottom-up approaches to the study of war and security.

The challenge of regionalized irregular proxy warfare in Africa and elsewhere is often obscured by the vague and widely misused concept of hybrid warfare. In fact, what is now called hybrid war has always been the norm in the South. War in these regions is rarely symmetrical or conventional. Rather, it has often been the battleground for regime survival and transformation, making the study of revolutions and mass

mobilisation movements essential—not as an isolated phenomena, but as integral parts of broader patterns of authoritarianism, state-making, and international conflict.

In this context, the strategic involvement of states like Brazil in international security matters cannot be limited to participation in peacekeeping missions. Brazil bears a particular responsibility in relation to the South Atlantic, not only because of its geographic location and historical ties, but also due to its political weight and potential role as a regional security provider. There are viable paths toward mutual support and strengthening state institutions—ranging from support for cooperatives to military education and professionalisation. However, this requires detailed analysis and long-term planning. Paradoxically, investing in these processes may be the most cost-effective way to ensure regional security and protect Brazilian interests in the South Atlantic.

Where the state is weak or discredited, we tend to see the decay of material capital and the unchecked growth of speculative financial capital. This is the dialectic of neoliberalism, the final stage of neocolonialism. And yet, strategies for rebuilding state capacity are neither obvious nor inexpensive. Even when the vision is sound, implementation often falters under economic, social, and political pressures. Resistance to structural transformation is loud, well-organised, and deeply entrenched. In this scenario, international solidarity is not an option—it is a necessity.

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Submissão em 27 de setembro de 2024

Aceito em 20 de março de 2025