The 640th Anniversary of the Treaty of Windsor

The Anglo-Portuguese Alliance is usually considered the oldest continuously active alliance in the world, dating from the 14th century and still recognized today. Our former Chairman presented this brief summary of the main events and milestones in the history of the alliance at the Estoril Political Forum Summer School on 2 June 2026.

By Edward J. Godfrey

The origins of the Treaty of Windsor were in the Treaty of Tagilde, 1372, the first agreement of friendship between Portugal and England, signed by D. Fernando of Portugal and John of Gaunt, third son of King Edward III, in support of John's ambitions to become King of Castile. This was followed by the Treaty of London, 1373, signed by D Fernando and Edward III.

D. Fernando died in 1383 without a male heir. His daughter, Beatrice, was married to Juan I of Castile. The Portuguese court feared that Portugal would be absorbed into Castile if Juan's claim to the Portuguese throne succeeded. A rival claimant emerged in the form of João, Master of Aviz, who was proclaimed King of Portugal in 1385. This led to a Castilian invasion and the decisive battle at Aljubarrota on 14 August 1385 where the Portuguese forces of D. João, assisted by English longbow men, secured Portugal's independence from the Kingdom of Castile. This victory confirmed the accession of D. João I, founder of the house of Aviz, to the Portuguese throne.

During the Portuguese succession crisis of 1383-85, a number of English soldiers and military advisers came to Portugal and brought valuable experience from English campaigns in France. The Portuguese commander, Nuno Alvarez Pereira, was familiar with victories such as at the battles of Crécy and Poitiers. To commemorate the victory, D. João founded the Monastery at Batalha where he, his queen, Philippa of Lancaster and their son, Henry the Navigator, are buried.

The Treaty of Windsor was signed on 9 May 1386 during the reigns of King Richard II and D. João I and is the key foundation document of the alliance between the Kingdoms of Portugal and England. It promised "perpetual friendships, unions, and alliances".

This alliance was strengthened due to the marriage of D. João and Philippa of Lancaster, daughter of John of Gaunt, in 1387. The marriage cemented the alliance politically and culturally. It helped transform the alliance from a diplomatic treaty into a dynastic and personal partnership between the two royal houses. Phillipa and D. João had several distinguished children who became known collectively as the Illustrious Generation (*a Inclita Geração*), Henry the Navigator being one of them.

A key feature of the alliance has always been the maintenance of trading links. During the 15th and 16th centuries, English merchants gained privileges in Portuguese ports. Portuguese wine, salt, and spices became important exports to England.

During the years 1580 to 1640, Portugal lost its independence when Felipe II of Spain became Felipe I of Portugal, later succeeded by Felipe II and III. These were difficult and confusing years for the alliance as Portugal remained legally a separate kingdom but shared the same monarch as Spain. Trade between England and Portugal continued. But England also targeted Spanish shipping.

England supported D. Antonio, Prior of Crato, pretender to the Portuguese throne, who sought refuge in England in 1581. In 1589, Sir Francis Drake led an expedition intended to restore him to the Portuguese throne but it failed, as did an English invasion of the Azores.

In 1587, Drake raided the Algarve coast and occupied Sagres. A year later the Spanish Armada assembled in the Tagus, including Portuguese galleons and merchant vessels, and set sail with the intention of escorting the army of Alexander Farnese from the Netherlands to England. This never happened as the armada was split up in the English Channel due to the tactics of the English fleet and bad weather. By 1603 English merchants were engaged in trade with Spain and Portugal and in 1642, just after the restoration of D. João IV to the throne, an Anglo-Portuguese Peace and Commerce Treaty was signed. The English merchants were given a charter and allowed a Consul.

Portugal's need for a strong ally against Spain after 1640 eventually led to the marriage of Catherine of Braganza, daughter of D. Joao IV, to King Charles II in 1662. Portugal feared the risk of invasion, Charles II needed money. Portugal provided a dowry including Bombay and Tangier, £300.000 in cash and goods, as well as trading privileges with the Portuguese empire. The marriage opened Portuguese markets to English manufactured goods and expanded British commercial influence in Portugal and its Empire. And, of course, it reinforced the ancient alliance.

The Methuen Treaty of 1703 was a trade agreement signed during the War of the Spanish Succession, which strengthened Portugal's alliance with England against France and Spain. Portugal agreed to admit English woollen textiles with very low or no tariffs. England agreed to give Portuguese wines preferential treatment, taxing them less heavily than French wines.

The Peninsular War in the early years of the 19th century was a most important period of military co-operation. Britain defended Portugal against Napoleon's three invasions. Sir Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington led the Anglo-Portuguese forces, Portuguese and British troops fighting together against the French armies. Nevertheless, the first invasion forced the Royal Family to flee to Brazil with the support of the British Navy. In gratitude, the Prince Regent signed a royal charter, opening Brazilian ports, previously limited to Portuguese vessels, to ships from countries that remained in peace and harmony with the Crown. This was reinforced by treaties of friendship and alliance, also known as the Strangford Treaties, which were very much to Britain's commercial advantage.

Today we can still see evidence of military co-operation in the Lines of Torres Vedras, the three lines of forts and other features of military engineering stretching between the Atlantic coast and the Tagus. Ordered by Wellesley in 1809, the lines were designed to protect Lisbon from a French invasion while preserving a secure rear base for British and Portuguese forces. Thousands of Portuguese labourers worked on the project, supervised by British and Portuguese engineers. When Marshal André Masséna reached the lines in October 1810 he judged them too hard to assault and eventually retreated from Portugal.

Testing times for the alliance came in 1890 with the British Ultimatum, which demanded that Portugal withdraw forces from territory in central Africa claimed by Britain. Portugal was forced to abandon ambitions to connect Angola and Mozambique across central Africa. Many Portuguese saw this as a national humiliation and betrayal by Britain. There were far-reaching consequences as the crown became increasingly unpopular, with a corresponding growth of republicanism.

Portugal entered the First World War in support of Britain and the alliance. Particular reasons were to strengthen the fragile republic and secure recognition of Portugal's claims to Angola and

Mozambique after the war. In the Second World War Portugal remained officially neutral under António de Oliveira Salazar, but the alliance still mattered. Britain respected Portuguese neutrality, which became more collaborative as the war progressed.

In 1943 Britain invoked the alliance and obtained permission to build military airfields in the Azores, especially at Lajes field. This greatly improved anti-submarine warfare and helped turn the Battle of the Atlantic decisively against Nazi Germany. The alliance was again invoked by Britain at the time of the Falklands War in 1982, when Lajes field provided a vital stepping stone between Britain and the South Atlantic. Today the alliance is less about military obligations and more about diplomacy, defence cooperation through NATO, trade, technology, education, and cultural ties.

State visits with associated ceremonial events engender feelings of goodwill and friendship. These visits do not happen by chance. The alliance is always invoked on such occasions. King Edward VII visited Portugal in 1903 in order to reinforce the alliance at a time of growing international tension in Europe, repair relations after the Ultimatum and show support for the Portuguese monarchy under pressure from republicans and growing political instability.

Queen Elizabeth II visited Portugal in 1957 in order to celebrate and reinforce the alliance at a time of increasing Cold War tension, emphasise common membership of NATO and maintain diplomatic and cordial relations with the Salazar regime. The Queen made another visit in 1985, this time to support democratic Portugal, its integration into Europe and imminent membership of the EEC in 1986. As usual, NATO and Atlantic co-operation were high priorities.

President Antonio Ramalhao Eanes made a state visit to the UK in November 1978 in order to reinforce the alliance after Portugal's transition to democracy, to strengthen NATO co-operation and develop economic and political ties in a new political era. Similarly, the state visit of President Mario Soares to the UK in April 1993 not only celebrated the alliance but marked Portugal's consolidation of democracy and entry into the EEC. The visit marked Soares's personal importance in post-1974 Portugal and the high respect he had gained in Britain and other Western capitals.

And so, we come to the present, when the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh are visiting Portugal to commemorate the 640th anniversary of the Treaty of Windsor and, at the same time, are highlighting modern co-operation between the two countries in areas such as education, technology, youth opportunities, sports inclusion and community engagement. In short, Prince Edward's visit is a diplomatic and commemorative mission celebrating more than six centuries of Anglo-Portuguese friendship, whilst promoting UK-Portugal co-operation.

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Edward Godfrey retired as chairman of the Society in August 2026, having served in that position from 2017. He remains a member of the governing Council. A retired chartered accountant, he first came to Portugal in 1973 and has a particular interest in economic and social aspects of Anglo-Portuguese relations, as well as the history of St. George's Church and the British Cemetery, Lisbon. He has been a regular speaker at events organized by the Institute for Political Studies of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa such as the Winston Churchill Memorial Dinners held at the Estoril Political Forum and the Atlantic Conferences in Madeira.