

Are times-a-changing for Portuguese foreign policy?

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In the present context, it would be premature to risk providing a straightforward prediction of what Portugal's political developments in the coming months will entail. At this point, in a pre-electoral timeframe ignited by Prime Minister José Sócrates' resignation on March 23rd and aggravated by his subsequent formal request for an EU/IMF financial bailout, any future predictions are naturally very much up in the air.

But with legislative elections already scheduled for June 5th, it is only a matter of time until the two major parties – ruling Socialist Party (PS) and main opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD) – effectively and publicly present their respective electoral programs, supposedly enlightening the voters as to their intended agenda for the country. Still, it is rather safe to say that, among every possible issue in contention, foreign policy in particular will not constitute a sticking point.

Indeed, ever since the return to democracy Portugal has steadily pursued its external priorities, with almost no meaningful change occurring whenever the usual rotations of government took place. Traditionally structured around a trilateral axis – namely European integration, transatlantic relations and Lusophone ties with Portuguese-speaking countries – Portuguese foreign policy has consistently had an extremely strong internal backing over the years, which in turn allowed it to resist the fast-paced evolution of the surrounding

international context and adapt to new geostrategic realities. True, the European vector quickly took on a predominant role that became difficult to disguise, occasionally absorbing much needed political focus and diplomatic resources, with a subsequent impact on the remaining 'pillars'. But still, when it came down to official discourse and rhetoric, the above-mentioned priorities retained their fair share of formal recognition.

This is not to say that other geographic target areas were not looked upon with greater interest by the Sócrates government during the last six years. The Maghreb region, for example, proved to be a destination of considerable interest for both expanding Portuguese investments and burgeoning political contacts, working under the logic of diversifying the country's relations with its neighborhood and thus promoting greater economic exchanges. The drive to elevate this region to an eventual fourth pillar of Portuguese foreign policy was in that sense clear.¹ For their part, Southern African countries also began to be looked upon with a renowned interest by Portuguese officials.²

1 See Diogo Noivo, "Portugal and the Maghreb: Latest phase of a new possible foreign policy axis" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 6, April 2010), pp. 4-5.

2 "Luís Amado considera África Austral como a região mais importante para Portugal" (*Lusa*, 3 February 2010). See also Paulo Gorjão, "Portugal and South Africa: matching words with deeds" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 10, August 2010), p. 1.



But for what it was worth, even when considering such 'branching-out' approaches, internal disagreements over Portuguese foreign policy were hardly noticeable. An unofficial consensus between the country's two major parties conveniently acknowledged the need to push for new and expanded markets for Portuguese products while building upon pre-established affinities or issues of common interest.

In that order, without dwelling on the merits of these previous options, the outlook for any impending cabinet in terms of foreign policy appears nothing but already pre-set and predetermined. However, no analysis of this context would be complete without taking into account three important factors. First, the current international spotlight that has been focused on Portugal undoubtedly represents a timely issue that should not be taken lightly. The length of the process that culminated in an official request for the European Financial Stabilization Mechanism (EFSM) assistance significantly damaged Portugal's external credibility, with subsequent reflections on the country's own foreign policy soon to be expected in some form. One cannot exactly state that any successful external agenda is suddenly out of reach but for the time being, any diplomatic endeavor that might arise in the future, will inevitably be overshadowed and painfully constrained by the present economic and financial debacle.

On the other hand, a second factor regards an overwhelming international stage that requires Portuguese attendance and focus. Indeed, after a long campaign, Portugal is now in the first year of its hard-fought non-permanent membership at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with all the international exposure associated to such a coveted

position. Naturally, political wrangles back at home do not directly affect the work done in New York but they undoubtedly add greater pressure on any new governmental team to gain some pace and take control of this process as the responsibilities inherent to such a podium require a mandatory and permanent follow-up to every matter brought to the attention of the UNSC.³

Finally, a third consideration is also in order when it comes to the future holder of the Foreign Affairs brief. Although the Portuguese diplomatic corps is professional enough to handle any transition of its leadership, any new Foreign Minister is bound to imprint his own dynamic and priorities, in consonance with his respective party orientations. In that sense, the choice of an adequate and capable dignitary is not without its significance as that person will most likely shape Portuguese foreign policy in a decisive, albeit discreet, manner for years to come. Take the example of current incumbent Luís Amado who has distinctively set a pattern of guardedness and sobriety in the conduction of Portuguese affairs around the world. Any other successor from a different political color will have to inevitably work with this immediate legacy while tightening his grasp over the daily affairs of the Foreign Affairs Ministry. Any other successor from a different political color – and one should not discard the Social Democratic Center (CDS) party so easily in these calculations as it constitutes a natural coalition party for the PSD – will have to inevitably work with this immediate legacy while tightening his grasp over the daily affairs of the Foreign Affairs Ministry.

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³ For example, Portugal currently chairs the UNSC Libya sanctions committee which in light of the ongoing NATO air campaign, undoubtedly grants Portuguese diplomacy a high-profile status among its international peers.



Notwithstanding these factors, whoever wins the upcoming elections will inevitably have their work cut out for them. Not only have Portuguese priorities been clearly and completely drawn by now but they have also already received widespread support from both the PS and PSD, thus providing a sense of stability and certainty to the country's ongoing external action. But if changes are truly to be expected, they will most probably be reduced to slight tone corrections regarding specific policies previously followed while accompanied by a greater political focus on a number of selected partners. For example, under a PSD government a reinforcement of transatlantic ties with the US would certainly not come as a surprise, as it would only follow inclinations very much in evidence when former PSD President and current EU Commission President José Manuel Durão Barroso was Prime Minister in 2003-2005. Still, with either PSD or the PS in power, one will definitely witness a diversification of relations with different international actors, both in accordance to the new global shifts in power and because of a need to 'sell' Portugal in new potential markets abroad. Moreover, the recent turmoil in the Maghreb region will most likely demand attention, in order to protect Portuguese interests and nurture the country's yet-to-be consolidated fourth pillar.⁴

Be that as it may, the accuracy of any predictive exercise is contingent on the presentation of both parties' respective electoral programs, with their proposals for this particular area sufficiently developed and dully introduced to the general audience. Hence, an amount of caution is in order when considering these issues. Nevertheless, if the past decades are any indication, a certain degree of assurance regarding a minimum/high level of coherency and consistency in Portugal's foreign policy – whatever the winning party –, is undoubtedly already in the cards. Expecting that Portuguese foreign policy's overall direction remains on course after the

upcoming elections is therefore easily classified as an unsurprising and anticipated contingency in the present unraveling political scenario.

⁴ See Diogo Noivo, "Portugal and the Maghreb: time to renew the vows" *IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 16, February 2011), pp. 4-6.

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