

The reform of the Portuguese diplomatic network

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The reform of any diplomatic network is an endless task and the situation in Portugal is no exception. A diplomatic network should be like a living body, constantly changing in order to better reflect the country's national interests. In the last few years, the Minister for Foreign Affairs (MFA), Luís Amado, has spoken about the necessary reform of the Portuguese diplomatic network. In his view, Portugal had too many embassies in the European Union, and too few in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.¹ Amado thinks that the diplomatic network does not match the current hierarchy of Portuguese foreign policy priorities. If Sub-Saharan Africa – and Southern Africa in particular – is the main priority of Portugal's diplomacy, how is it possible that Portugal has only 17 embassies in Africa? The same is true with regard to the Middle East. If Portugal seeks to deepen its diplomatic relations with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, how is it possible that Portugal has only three embassies – Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia – in the Middle East? Finally, if more attention must be paid to Asia, bearing in mind that the most powerful economies and increasingly relevant countries are no longer in Europe, but in Asia, then why is it that Portugal has only a few embassies – China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, Thailand, and Timor Leste – in the entire region?

Under normal circumstances, Portugal would balance the excess of diplomatic representation in the EU with new embassies in Africa, in the Middle East and in Asia. However, budget constraints compel the government to

shutdown embassies in Europe and elsewhere. The MFA has no other choice: Luís Amado needs to cut costs in the Portuguese diplomatic network in the European Union in order to transfer the sum saved to open new diplomatic posts elsewhere.

The adjustment of the Portuguese diplomatic network should follow three main criteria.² First, the existence of significant Portuguese communities in specific countries should be taken into account. Among other goals, embassies provide a wide array of services to their national citizens. Therefore, Portugal must have diplomatic representations in all those countries where there exists a significant community of Portuguese expatriates.

Second, the diplomatic grid should be adjusted following economic criteria. Portugal should have diplomatic representations in the countries of its main economic partners. Portugal must have embassies in those countries that are currently its main exporting markets, or which are target countries for expanding Portuguese exports in the forthcoming years. The same is true regarding Portugal's current main foreign investors, or target countries to become strategic investors. If Portugal wishes to attract investments from the sovereign funds of the Persian Gulf, then the establishment of diplomatic posts in the region is of vital importance.

Last but not least, the main political and strategic goals

1 "Portugal poderá fechar embaixadas na Europa" (*Lusa*, 14 October 2010).

2 Obviously, other criteria could be taken into account. For example, Portugal should be attentive to the number of foreign embassies present in countries where it wishes to expand, because a country where there are fewer embassies is more likely to value more greatly those formalized diplomatic relations.



of the Portuguese foreign policy should be echoed in the diplomatic grid. Portugal's foreign policy is structured along three main pillars. The first one concerns Transatlantic relations, mainly with the US and Brazil. The second pillar covers diplomatic relations with the African Portuguese-speaking countries. The third one is centered in Europe. Inevitably, the core of the Portuguese diplomatic network should be constructed around this structure. However, due to several political and strategic reasons, Portugal might wish to explore and deepen diplomatic relations with countries of growing importance elsewhere, and the diplomatic network should be adjusted accordingly.

One should emphasize that reciprocity should not be a requirement. The management of the Portuguese diplomatic grid should not follow a tit for tat approach. Portugal should open diplomatic posts if it is relevant to its foreign policy, without requiring an equal approach.

It is in Europe that Portugal has too many embassies. Thus, the majority of the embassies to be shut down must be in Europe. Following the criteria described above, the three Baltic embassies of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia could be closed. In the Balkans, the same could happen with the embassies in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. In Central and Eastern Europe, the embassies in Bulgaria and Ukraine could also be shut down, and the same is true regarding the embassies in Cyprus and Malta in the Mediterranean. Although not that many, Portugal could also close embassies in other geographic locations. In South America, the embassies in Peru and Uruguay could be closed. In Africa, the embassy in Kenya could also be shut down. Taken together, Portugal could shut down 14 embassies.

On the other hand, Portugal could open new diplomatic posts in Africa, for example in Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, and Namibia; in Southeast Asia it could do so in Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam; in the Middle East, the list of new diplomatic posts could include Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and Syria.

Portugal also does not have a tradition of appointing roving ambassadors. However, the MFA should do so. For example, Amado could appoint roving ambassadors to the Baltic States, the Balkans, Central Asia, and Central America. Instead of following the countries in the regions above from a nearby embassy, the roving ambassadors would be based in Lisbon, but fully devoted to the countries assigned to them.

The diplomatic readjustment should have been decided already in 2009.³ However, since it was not then a priority, decisions were delayed. Meanwhile, the financial crisis that hit Portugal in 2010 led the government to present an austere state budget. Thus, in 2011, the MFA will see its budget cut by €33 million. Inevitably, the discussion around the readjustment of the Portuguese diplomatic network has resurfaced once again. This time Portugal should not miss this window of opportunity to reform its diplomatic network in order to better reflect its national interests and the realignment of economic and political power in the world.

³ "Médio Oriente: embaixadas decididas até fim do ano" (*Portugal Diário*, 20 April 2009).

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