

Is foreign policy an issue in Brazil's presidential elections?

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As a chapter in Brazil's political history gradually comes to an end, with the bowing – for the time being, at least – of über popular President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, the leading candidates to his succession vie for the public's attention and votes in the final stages of the presidential campaign. Still, given the publicly proclaimed similarities in José Serra and Dilma Rousseff's proposed agendas, distinguishing between both frontrunners basically comes down to determining "who endorses who" – with notorious benefit to Dilma's side at this stage.

In that sense, the debate over key political issues has been taken over by a bland public misconception that often ignores relevant political differences between both candidates, choosing instead to focus on their character, personality and capacities – as probably happens in any presidential election. However, when it comes to foreign policy – despite civil society's preference for social and internal topics – it is possible to ascertain that the so-called 'policy uniformity' does not truly exist in this particular area.

For her part, Dilma has already announced her wish to follow in Lula's footsteps on the international scene i.e. reforming world forums, building closer ties with Africa and promoting 'alternatives' like IBSA or BRIC, as well as following through with established strategic partnerships, for example with France. "Continuity" is therefore the keyword here. Under closer scrutiny, the same can

be said regarding the topic of human rights and, by default, the murky relationship with Iran.

Indeed, by claiming to continue to push for an active Brazilian role in Middle Eastern politics, Dilma has highlighted her pragmatic view of Brazil's positioning in the world – decisively influenced by Marco Aurélio Garcia, Lula da Silva's foreign relations adviser and the chief architect of her own political program – already exemplified when she declared that "foreign policy should be conducted with the head, and not with the liver". To that end, skillfully ignoring 'sensitive' human rights situations – Cuba and the last electoral process in Iran are the most frequently cited examples – while pursuing a soft-power approach that ultimately yields some concrete results, appears to be the course of action that Brazilian diplomacy will take in case Dilma wins. Again, not exactly a striking contrast with her predecessor.

Regarding Brazil's own backyard, Dilma has also consistently emphasized the need to develop and reinforce existing regional structures like UNASUR, and specially Mercosul. The latter, as a vehicle for viable trade agreements between the region and several preponderant commercial players – the EU, for example – is seen as the safest bet to achieve desirable results in this area, and will ultimately confirm Brazil's growing status in world trade and in the surrounding region by association.



José Serra on the other hand, the candidate opposing Lula's anointed political heiress, often finds himself in the difficult position of seeking space within the electoral debate that does not conflict with the previous administration's policies. Foreign policy is thus considered an occasional exception where he has tried to distance himself from some of Lula's choices – while at the same time not denying the recent boost to Brazilian influence in the world – and criticized Dilma's over-willingness to follow in the same steps.

This criticism is primarily aimed at the relationship with Iran, as Brazil's diplomatic ventures this past summer have received both praise and censure for the apparent legitimacy they carried, when working with a dubious and internationally controversial regime. Serra went as far as to declare that it is not possible to “continuously compliment dictators from every corner of the world, who are or may become an ally of the ruling party” in Brazil. Furthermore, he also pointed out the lack of results or political progress in Cuba when taking in consideration the excellent official relations between Castro's regime and the Lula administration.

South America is another area where Serra is particularly incisive. While his pick for Vice President Índio da Costa explicitly reminded the public of the alleged ties between Dilma's Workers Party (PT) with Colombia's leftist narco-guerrilla FARC, Serra has vocally expressed his opposition to Hugo Chávez's daunting influence as a source of instability in the entire region, and called at-

tention to the lack of Brazilian influence in preventing the latest breakdown in Colombian-Venezuelan relations – in short, considering that resources wasted in the Middle East should be allocated closer to home. The need for a hard-line stance regarding Bolivia – the main exporter of cocaine to Brazil – and the openness to circumvent Mercosul in trade talks when necessary also seem to indicate a different tone when approaching the southern continent, if he becomes the next President.

Ultimately, regardless of whether Serra or Dilma win Planalto Palace, one must always bear in mind the natural entanglements of politics and the constraints of every heavily disputed campaign: Brazil is no exception, and it is impossible to guarantee that each and every proposed orientation for Brazil's 'new' foreign policy agenda will be translated into official guidelines and shape the country's stance in the world. There is always the possibility that these proposals will be quietly shelved and carefully dropped in the name of the realistic daily needs and means of government.

Nonetheless, the fact is that Brazil's foreign policy has gained substantial gravitas during Lula's two terms at the helm of the country. Consequently, any candidate's intended plans for the country's policy abroad should be given some much needed focus and dignified attention. As Brazil goes to vote on October 3rd, it will not only seek a new leader but also a new face and voice to present to the world, a person who will inevitably and decisively shape the country's agenda for years to come.

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