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Lion's Tail or Mouse's Head?: Aznar's Atlantist Bet



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2003 was a difficult year for European efforts in the realm of foreign policy and also for the Trans-Atlantic relationship. During the Iraq crisis, Europe divided itself in two, one side in favour of the United States, and the other against, eliminating all possibility of speaking with a single voice in the first great conflict of the post Cold War world that did not involve its own backyard. The division among Europeans in foreign policy issues is not rare; however, it is unusual that such disagreement is so loudly voiced on an issue that the United States considers "vital" and, even more so, that the pro-American side is led by Spain.

Beyond whatever the future holds for the "Trans-Atlantic family" as a whole after Iraq, it is worth examining, in light of what had been Spain's European policy since her adhesion to the European Community in 1986, the possible consequences of developing a closer relationship with the United States, even in spite of her relations with her European partners, particularly France and Germany. What perhaps started only as a flirtation with the hyper power, that intended to differentiate the new conservative government's policy from that of its socialist predecessor, today is an unconditional relationship, based above all on the friendship that Bush and Aznar have established, to which Spain's relationships with the rest of her European partners, her relations with the Mediterranean and Latin America, the domestic foreign policy consensus and public opinion in Spain are second to. It is a real change in Spain's European policy, whose full implications are yet to be seen.

Spain rebels

Spain lived through the end of the Cold War shrouded by Europe, willing to contribute to its construction with the most profound Europeanism, particularly in the area of foreign policy. That was Felipe González's socialist government's *modus operandi*: a Spain that defended its interests within that greater and more complex thing that was Europe, but that also wanted to contribute to make of it a more important actor in the international scenario, in the understanding that such a strategy would also help Spain project itself abroad. It was, in other terms, a positive-sum game. Within Europe, Spain quickly learned how to play the European game, allying itself with the most powerful member states, France and Germany, to advance its interests, figuring tacitly as one of the Great powers without actually being one, and became an important ally for the Franco-German axis, which was going through one of its best stages.

With the arrival of José María Aznar, Spain started to change her attitude within the EU. Aznar's disagreements with the French and German leaders in different issues, considered vital for the new government, were many. Apparently, Spain was not willing to live under the aegis of the Franco-German axis anymore, and wanted to emancipate. At the same time, Europe was about to change, perhaps in detriment of Spain's position that, according to some, would again become part of the periphery after the enlargement to the east, and the Franco-German axis was lacking its previous vigour. Aznar's interpretation was that he had to look for other partners that would

strengthen Spain's role in the "new Europe", even if this endangered his relationship with France and Germany. If when Spain entered the EC it was said that "it had come of age",¹ in the clash between Aznar and the Franco-German axis one cannot help but think of some sort of mid-life crisis, like those that lead many to leave their life-long spouse for a twenty-something secretary, or, even better, of a late adolescence crisis during which opposing the elders is a matter of principle. Therefore, the change of Spain's relations with Europe, specifically with France and Germany, has been one of form, but also of content, or maybe it is a case in which form is content.

Then 9-11 and Iraq took centre stage, a new watershed that today seems equivalent to the end of the Cold War. After the overwhelming declarations of solidarity with the United States after the terrorist attacks, there came the bitter discussions au tour Iraq. Given the clash between France and Germany, who traditionally have represented the "European position", and the United States, it is not strange that the British readied their "special relationship" to appear as Washington's unconditional allies, even if that meant going against their European partners. What did surprise everyone was that Aznar's Spain found a place for herself in that Anglo-Saxon family portrait. It was some sort of political and diplomatic somersault that intended to take advantage of an alleged "window of opportunity" that would allow Spain to develop her own "special relationship" with the Americans. It was, indeed, a very personal interpretation of the Spanish president according to which his country must rub elbows with the hegemon at any price.

Transfers and projections: Aznar assigns himself the leading role

The unprecedented outreach to George W. Bush's Washington is clearly a personal decision of Spain's president that, moreover, goes against tradition, Spain's interests and Spanish public opinion. In a previous text,² I had avoided explaining the reasons behind Aznar's rapprochement with Washington by saying that "his position is inexplicable without turning to Freud". Today I still believe there is some truth in what I said then; however, it is also true that there is some coherence in the Spanish president's strategy, although that, of course, does not necessarily mean it is adequate or that it is going to bear fruit as expected.³

Aznar had begun approaching the United States since the beginning of his mandate in 1996, based on an alleged community of interests and values.⁴ The definite change of course in that direction was ordered once Aznar had an absolute majority in Parliament and, therefore, could shape Spain's foreign policy at will. He did not need to consult with the opposition and get to the traditional foreign policy consensus that had preceded Spain's external actions during the socialist government. Moreover, the rapprochement with Washington seemed to help appease three of his personal demons, as he transferred them to Spain: terrorism; being considered a Great power within Europe; and being recognized as a world leader of great importance.⁵

After 9-11, Aznar concluded that Bush's obsession with terrorism coincided with his own, and that such a coincidence opened a window of opportunity to approach the hegemon and thus try to look for a better international role for his country, turning it into a Great power overnight, perhaps

¹ See C. Alonso Zaldivar y M. Castells, *España, fin de siglo*, Madrid, Alianza, 1992, p. 233, as quoted by Esther Barbé, *La política europea de España*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1999, p. 16.

² Érika Ruiz Sandoval, "La discordia trasatlántica: ¿fabricación o realidad?", en Rafael Fernández de Castro (coord.), *En la frontera del imperio (México en el Mundo 2003)*, México, Ariel, 2003, pp. 57-69.

³ Andrés Ortega, "La coherencia del giro de Aznar", *El País*, February 15, 2004, p. 11.

⁴ The change of position regarding Cuba is illustrative in this sense, as well as the search for American support to advance Spanish interests within NATO.

⁵ According to Aznar's own interpretation, perhaps the other two historical problems of Spain, democracy and modernization, had been solved or his leeway in those areas was not enough to make changes. Therefore, it was time to take care of his country's international projection. (E. Barbé, *op. cit.*, p. 20).

believing literally that proverb that says "it does not matter who you are, but who you know".⁶ Trapped by a simplistic historical revisionism and a personal rancour against the French, he decided to switch Spain's foreign policy strategic axis, naturally based in Europe since the end of the dictatorship, to centre it in Washington.⁷ The other classical objectives of Spain's foreign relations, the Mediterranean and Latin America, were also subordinated to the new priority.

Aligning himself unconditionally with Bush in Iraq,⁸ Aznar wanted to be the fisherman that gained the most from that turbulent river. But since all foreign policy is, above all, domestic politics, with the change of course Aznar also wanted to win over the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), the main opposition party, clearly against the war in Iraq, in the belief that France would in the end support Bush, and that would leave the PSOE alone and against the "European consensus".⁹

Even when this did not happen, against wind and tide, in Spain and abroad, Aznar did not budge. First, he lobbied his own public opinion using the argument of the perils that weapons of mass destruction in Iraq entailed, and then changed for the one about the need to fight international terrorism in all its forms. But he did not manage to convince the Spaniards, who had shown their opposition to war as never before. Likewise, he offered Bush to make use of the so-called influence Spain has over Chile and Mexico, also non-permanent members of the Security Council at the time, to convince them of supporting the American position. Like was the case with his own public opinion, he only managed to alienate them.

But nothing mattered. Aznar was already a part of Bush's circle and felt he had finally put Spain in better company than that of her European partners, France and Germany, to whom she would always be inferior. Now he shared with Tony Blair, the one that enjoyed the "special relationship" of yore, the hyper power's attention and could perhaps use his new alliance to improve Spain's position within the European Union. Even today, when Iraq is still burning and even Bush and Blair have had some explaining to do to their own Congresses on the weapons of mass destruction fiasco, Aznar has not moved an inch from his initial position and feels the change of course in Spain's foreign policy has been a success that will make him be remembered as a great national hero.

Better to be a mouse's head than a lion's tail

That's how a popular proverb goes. And maybe it has something of truth in it. Beyond what happens with Mr. Aznar, it is fit asking what will be the repercussions of his decision in the medium and long terms. The pertinent question might not be what does Spain gain, something difficult to gauge as of now –even for Aznar's administration, so prone to measure everything in terms of "efficacy" and "benefits"—but what does Spain lose. By asking the second question instead, it is easier to see how risky his bet was.

The effort made by Aznar's Spain to appear as Washington's unconditional ally was not rhetorical or reactive; on the contrary, it was proactive and led to evident initiatives, epitome of which was the president's participation in the Azores Summit. It is difficult to evaluate what was the degree of convergence or divergence between the EU and Spain during the Trans-Atlantic crisis prior to Iraq's invasion, or what has been the level of coherence and coordination between European and

⁶ If before there was talk about Spain being the "fragment of a superpower", by allying herself with Washington and separating herself from Europe, she becomes a fragment... of what? (The original phrase belongs to Francesc Granell. See the discussion in this regard in E. Barbé, *op. cit.*, p. 18).

⁷ Soledad Gallego-Díaz, "Historia de un presidente satisfecho", *El País*, January 26, 2004, p. 16.

⁸ With Bush's Washington, there is no other type of alliances.

⁹ Assuming a proactive position, instead of a reactive one, is, in and of itself, a sort of preventive war within diplomacy and domestic politics for Aznar. Miguel González describes the PSOE case in "Esto se nos ha ido de las manos", *El País*, March 11, 2003, p. 20.

Spanish policy, because, to begin with, what Europe and what European policy? The agreement of minimum common denominators reached within the CFSP framework can hardly be considered a "European policy" on Iraq or on the broader issue of the Trans-Atlantic relationship. However, by leading the pro-American side and promoting the Letter of the Eight, Aznar clearly boycotted any principle of agreement among the Europeans, placing himself as a relevant actor, but evidently against the European position, even if the latter was not sufficiently forceful or clear enough. It was hardly an elegant way of showing his contempt for the French and German leadership, and of defying it. It only gave the world too much information about the family disagreements in Europe, thus affecting Spain's credibility, first, and Europe's, second. Instead of contributing his leadership within the Union, until a consensus was reached, Aznar was willing to do anything for Bush, including some lobbying, with the afore-mentioned results.

On another note, the unprecedented rapprochement with the United States is a personal decision of the incumbent and not a policy based on a consensus reached by the different political forces that, even worse, pretends to lead a society that is primarily anti-American. Thus, it seems that this policy does not have much chance of surviving, even if Aznar's Partido Popular wins the next elections. It is very hard to alter the course of a foreign policy without having a previous national debate, and such an effort may thus backfire.

Moreover, just as Spain's new foreign policy is based on Aznar's personal style, the US proximity to Spain is also based on the utterly particular way of thinking and acting of George W. Bush, who has privileged his country's relationships with those whose leaders have "chemistry" with him, leaving aside nonsensical things such as the national interest.¹⁰ Besides, also because foreign policy is above all domestic politics, it may well be the case that Bush believes his closeness to Aznar will win him votes among the Latino population of the United States, which would only reinforce the temporary and short-termed character of the rapprochement.¹¹

But the biggest problem lies not in Aznar's looking for a way to improve the relations between his country and the United States, but in his doing so by going against Europe, and even the Mediterranean¹² and Latin America. The Bush-Aznar alliance has supposed a hard blow on

¹⁰ See Miguel González, "El presidente tiene una visión", *El País*, March 10, 2003, p. 20. One must remember Bush came to the White House without much knowledge of foreign policy and saying that Mexico—the only thing he knew beyond his own state of Texas—and her president, Vicente Fox, were his country's most important relationship. Given Fox's reluctance to support him in his war against Iraq, Bush has found himself other "friends". Aznar and Bush coincide in that they are both messianic presidents, men of "mission" and "vision", belonging to conservative parties, and Bush feels comfortable with him. Nonetheless, having a "special relationship" with the United States implies competing with the rest of the world. The relationship that traditionally is described as such is the one between Americans and British; however, today there are more than twenty countries that assume they have such type of relationship with the United States, and, given the list, believing it is just not enough. See Alan Knight, "US-Mexican Relations, c. 1900-c. 1945: A Special Relationship?", manuscript presented at the CMS-COMEXI-ITAM Workshop "Closeness and Asymmetry: The Anglo-American and Mexican-American 'Special Relationships'", St. Antony's College, Oxford, Feb 9-10, 2004, notes 32 and 33.

¹¹ Aznar seems to believe it too and I think they are both misunderstanding the complexity of ethnic politics in the United States. To begin with, Latinos call themselves like that, against the term *Hispanic* that was used before in the ethnic categories of the US census, because they consider it implies the Spanish colonial oppression of which their countries of origin were victims. Thus, the relationship between Latinos and their "mother country" is really one of antagonism and it seems difficult that the rapprochement between Washington and Madrid yields benefits for either party, be it in terms of votes for the republicans or sales of Spanish products among the Latino population in the US.

¹² American mediation to solve the crisis of Perejil with Morocco does not seem to be the beginning of a new and better stage in Spain's relationship with that country, or something that contributed to smooth things out with France.

Spain's Europeanist image within Europe, and has translated into the reduction of her leeway and relative importance in the Community. To make things worse, this change of perception takes place at a delicate moment, just months before the enlargement, when all equilibriums are in flux.

The consequences are starting to reveal themselves, not only with the negative of the Great powers to modify within the European Constitution the number of votes to follow what was agreed upon in Nice, as Spain and Poland were demanding, but also with the summit convoked during the third week of February among the British, German and French leaders, the three Great, to which Aznar was not invited, despite his nascent "special relationship" with Washington.¹³ If Aznar thought he would be the one to make Europe more of an "Atlantist"¹⁴ or that his Atlanticism would gain him points in Europe, he seems to have been mistaken, with the added problem that the affaire with the United States can be short-lived, since it depends on imponderables such as the "chemistry" between Rajoy and Bush, if they are to win their respective elections. Instead, Europe would have been a safer bet, since Spain's destiny, whether Mr. Aznar likes it or not, is linked to the European project. So far, Aznar's Spain has bet to be the tail of the American lion instead of the head of the European mouse. The search for a "special relationship" at any price, when what lies between Spain and the United States, besides an ocean, is a great asymmetry and few coincidences beyond the friendship between their present leaders, might be a futile effort with grave consequences for a middle power that has become one, above all, thanks to the fact that it belongs to the European Union.

¹³ Ricardo Estarriol, "Austria y España, contra el tripartito de Berlín", *La Vanguardia*, February 22, 2004, p. 12.

¹⁴ It is interesting in this sense, to look at his speech before the US Congress, in which he clearly positions himself as Europe's spokesman vis-à-vis the United States (4-02-2004, as reproduced by *El País*).