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Spain and Latin America: a Forking Bridge



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Vital, strategic and permanent are some of the adjectives Spanish diplomacy has used during the last decades to describe its relationship with Latin America. This region is considered to be the third axis of Spain's foreign policy, after Europe and the Mediterranean. The importance of this relationship is not only explained by the historical and cultural bonds Spain shares with the American subcontinent, but by two relevant aspects: Spain's international weight gained through its relationship with Latin America¹, and Latin America's importance for Spain's economy².

With respect to the first issue, it must be remembered that during its first years in the European Community, Spain presented its special relationship with Latin America as a sort of 'dowry' before its new partners³. José María Aznar has tried to do something similar during his last year in office by using his influence on Latin America as a facilitating tool for a rapprochement with the United States.

In any case, it is a complex relationship that we shall analyse by focusing on three main policy areas: the participation of Spain in the EU, the Ibero-American community and bilateral relations. This analysis shall be done considering the consequences of Aznar aligning himself with Bush's foreign policy.

As for the impact Spain's accession to the EU has on its relationship with Latin America, it should be underlined Aznar's continuity with his socialist predecessor, for he –just like Felipe González– tried to include Spain's policy priorities towards the region on the EU agenda, thereby both obtaining some undisputable yet limited⁴ achievements.

Under Aznar's government, EU's relations with Latin America reached their highest rhetorical point when, at the first EU–Latin America Summit (Rio de Janeiro, 1999), it was agreed to establish a 'strategic partnership' grounded in issues such as trade liberalization, democratic

¹ It is necessary to point out that many of the first important actions taken by democratic Spain on foreign policy took place during the peace processes in Central America. Parallel to this, Spain was leaving behind for the first time in decades its role as object of international relations and was becoming subject of them.

² From this standpoint, the importance of Latin America in the process of transforming Spain into a global power is undeniable, for the main Spanish companies (Telefónica, BBVA, BSCH, Repsol, etc.) become transnational through their strong investment in South-American economies.

³ Within the European Political Cooperation mechanism, Spain assumed it was participating with its own 'capital': the privilege relations with Latin America. In this respect, see: Barbé, Esther: 'EPC: The Upgrading of Spanish foreign policy' in *Democratic Spain: Reshaping external relations in a changing world*. Gillespie, Richard; Rodrigo, Fernando y Story, Jonathan (Eds.). Routledge, London, 1995.

⁴ As for the limitations encountered by Spain to turn its relationship with Latin America into a priority for the EU or, at least, to increase the importance given by its European partners to the region, see: Kennedy, Paul. 'Spain' in: *The foreign policies of EU Member States*. Manners, Ian and Whitman, Richard G (Eds.). Manchester University Press, 2000.

consolidation, and agreement on common positions on matters of global interest. The ambitious statement was commensurate with the new strategy for the region drawn up five years earlier by the European Commission, whose main objective was to anticipate and counterbalance the project of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)⁵.

However, in Rio it was already clear that the EU rapprochement with Latin America was running into the ground. The latter was evident from the difficulties encountered in obtaining the negotiation mandate with Mercosur, which had been approved just one week prior to the Summit. It should be added that the EU –together with Spain– had steered its attention towards the East already in 1999. Two years later, the September 11 attacks took place, thereby placing the international focus on security issues and Islamic countries. Consequently, Latin America has virtually fallen off the map of European interests.

Yet, the setbacks to move forward to the bi-regional 'strategic partnership' have not prevented the signing of two association agreements with Mexico and Chile⁶, the latter being signed in the second EU–Latin America Summit (Madrid, 2002), during the Spanish presidency of the European Council. Apart from Chile, only Colombia, which was seeking the FARC to be included in the EU's terrorist list; and Mexico, which hosted the third EU–Latin America Summit, obtained gains. The other Latin American countries and regional groupings (Andean Community, Central America and Mercosur) only obtained minor benefits⁷ and the promise to negotiate or conclude future trade agreements at the end of the current WTO round.

On its part, Spain came out partly right as the agreement with Chile allow it to put on a brave face and, at the same time, achieved one of its national objectives– to include in the Madrid Commitment (the final document of the Summit), a reference to the decision of the signatory countries of combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

In this final document, both Latin Americans and Europeans rejected all measures of unilateral character and with extraterritorial effect, thereby clearly referring to the United States post-Sept. 11 policies. Such rejection was not later ratified by Spain, which backed up US unilateralism. This is the reason why Latin American countries lost their interest in Spain, which promotes itself as the gateway to acceding to the EU⁸, as well as their hope for the EU to become an alternative to the 'Northern colossus'.

It is necessary to highlight that belonging to the EU has provided Spain with useful alibi – at least formally– for justifying measures of national interest damaging Latin American countries. Two examples of this are the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the restriction on the entry of immigrants. The latter has been applied against citizens from Ecuador and Colombia (the two countries with more immigrants in Spain) during Aznar's term of office, and might undermine Spain's 'soft power' in Latin America, where it is looked unfavourably the fact that Spain forgets that hundreds of thousands of Spanish citizens were welcomed in those lands when fleeing war and hunger.

The Ibero-American dimension of Spain's foreign policy is expressed in the Ibero-American Summits of Heads of State and Government, which are held annually since 1991. On this

⁵ See: Sanahuja, José Antonio. 'Contigo en la distancia: los lazos con la Unión Europea tras la Cumbre de Madrid' in *Vanguardia Dossier* 4, March 2003.

⁶ The agreement with Chile is considered to be one of the most advanced signed by the EU, for it even embraces such 'sensitive' products from the trade point of view as wine.

⁷ The main interest for these regional blocs was to open the door to trading with the EU. In exchange, though, they only obtained cooperation agreements in the education field, such as the setting-up of the Alban programme consisting of high-level postgraduate scholarships, enhancing the ALFA programme of higher education, and strengthening the @LIS, a new programme on Information Society for Latin America. In this regard, see: Soriano, Juan Pablo, 'América Latina: entre la esperanza y la desilusión'; in: *España y la política exterior de la UE: entre las prioridades españolas y los desafíos del contexto internacional*. Barbé, Esther (Ed); Quaderns de Treball no 40 in Institut Universitari d'Estudis Europeus, Bellaterra, 2002.

⁸ The idea of Spain helping open the door to the EU is still accepted in Latin America, as it was worded by the Chilean President Ricardo Lagos during his visit to the Spanish senate in June 2001: "Spanish America wants to be placed in the world and in Europe through Spain".

forum, which was initially a mechanism for dialogue and multilateral agreement, Spain has exerted hegemonic leadership⁹ since 1997, when it started using these meetings for seeking – and actually finding – support for its particular problems. Before that year, the mechanism had gone through a weakening period mainly owing to a dearth of substantial content.

The politicization of the Ibero–American Summits' agenda, which can be put down to Aznar's government, may have positive effects in that it arouses Latin American countries' interest in this forum, before which they can submit their own worries and problems¹⁰.

However, this forum also shows a bitter aspect for Spanish diplomacy, as it was seen in the Bávaro Summit (Dominican Republic, 2002), when 19 Latin American countries signed a separate document from the final declaration in which they reproached Spain and Portugal for Common Agricultural Policy's protectionism.

Another success for Spanish diplomacy is the institutional reform of the Summits mechanism, which virtually constitutes a new foundation¹¹. Spain managed to get approved, during the Santa Cruz de la Sierra Summit (Bolivia, 2003), the setting-up of an Ibero–American General Secretariat based in Spain, and obtained Latin American countries' promise of tackling immigration problems in the source countries.

As for bilateral relations, the outcome of Aznar's eight years in office shows greater contrasts. The main achievement is Brazil, a country with which Spain was for some years ago seeking to establish a closer relationship. The latter was finally accomplished last year, when Lula and Aznar signed a bilateral strategic association agreement. Furthermore, there has been some progress with Colombia, whose government has relied on Spain's good offices to include in the EU's terrorist list the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN). In his farewell trip to Latin America as Prime Minister, Aznar fully supported President Alvaro Uribe's security policy despite strong criticism received for constant violations of human rights when he visited the Commission and the European Parliament three weeks earlier. Before that, though, Aznar had struck a deal to sell to Colombia 46 AMX–30 tanks.

The relationship with Central America has been extremely favourable. This has been clearly shown in both Aznar's presence and support in the summits on the integration process in this region, and the fact that around 1,200 soldiers from Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic are participating under Spanish command in the occupation of Iraq.

As for Argentina, the relationship worsened in the wake of the economic crisis underwent by this country since 2001, during which Spanish companies were accused of neo-colonialism. The current President of Argentina, Nestor Kirchner, strongly (and publicly) wrestled with Spanish companies providing public services. Yet, the situation seemed to calm down during his last visit to Spain, when Mr. Kirchner made up with Aznar, and obtained the promise of further investments. In exchange, Spanish companies have started to be allowed to gradually set the tariffs of public services.

In his speech before the US Congress on 4 February 2004, Aznar stated: "We have built a very close relationship among our nations, which has an Ibero–American dimension. Ibero–America is a key continent for my country. Spain is the second largest investor in the region after the United States. Over the last decades, Ibero–American nations have made a tremendous effort to consolidate democratic regimes and free market economies. Hence also our interest in strengthening the relations between Europe and Ibero–America. The Atlantic relationship shall

⁹ The term was borrowed by Celestino del Arenal from Raúl Sanhueza to use it in the text 'La política española hacia América Latina en 2002', published in *Anuario Elcano 2002-2003*, Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid. Retrieved from: <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/publicacionesinsti.asp>

¹⁰ Malamud, Carlos and Mallo, Tomás. "La XIII Cumbre Iberoamericana de Santa Cruz de la Sierra: algunos pasos significativos en la consolidación del sistema iberoamericano", Analysis by the Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid, 2003. Retrieved from: <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org>.

¹¹ Arenal, Celestino. *op. cit.*

not be complete until including the American continent as a whole. In the medium and long run, our common commitment must be the creation of a real community of values and common interests, including a large free trade area. Spain is ready to work for it". This quote is relevant since it refers to what we consider to be the most important change in Spain's foreign policy during the eight years of People's Party's government– the alliance with the US, an issue that has already began to impinge on the relations with various Latin American countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico and Chile.

Regarding Cuba, since Aznar came to power, Spain's policy towards Cuba has completely changed, and the strategy of cooperation and pressure –which was followed by Felipe González– was substituted by a harassment strategy, which brought bilateral relations to a serious crisis overcome after Spain rectified in 1998. Yet, over the last year Spain – together with the whole EU– has taken a tougher line against Castro due to the imprisonment of dozens of opponents as well as the execution of three people who were trying to flee the island after hijacking a vessel. The latter has worsened the relationship, so much so that Aznar himself has publicly made his wish that Castro's regime comes to an end.

The ties with Venezuela were affected after US and Spain's ambassadors to Caracas met the interim President, Pedro Carmona Estanga, during the short and failed coup against Chávez in April 2002. This is a perfect example of alignment with US policy, which has fuelled reproaches and attacks, so much so that Chávez went so far as to remind Aznar that Fernando VII's time is over. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that prior to those clashes, Aznar managed to persuade Chávez's government to help extradite to Spain alleged members of ETA.

Mexico and Chile, albeit the latter to a lesser degree, were annoyed at Aznar's lobbying for the vote of both countries within the United Nations Security Council to approve a favourable resolution to the war on Iraq. As for Mexico, Aznar's visit to Fox was categorically condemned both by the ruling party and by opposition parties, which described it as an unacceptable interference¹². The outcome of this action showed the real limits of Spain's influence over two of the most important countries in the region, and bore witness to Aznar's failure at using Latin America as a bridge for bringing closer Spain and the United States.

In order to assess the medium-term results of the new Spanish policy, it shall be necessary to wait until Aznar's successor ratifies or not the alignment policy with the US. It is clear that Latin America continues to be a region of strategic interest for Spain and vice versa, despite the fact that none of them currently features high on the other's agenda. In any case, and with a view of Spain increasing its value for the region, it would seem more advisable that Spain insists on becoming the gateway to the European continent –offering a European alternative to the United States–, instead of playing at using its influence on Latin America to win the approval of the US. Latin American countries do not seem willing to accept Spain benefiting at their expense.

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¹² It is necessary to highlight that both leaders had until then had an excellent relationship, as well as a close cooperation both in the EU-Latin America and in the Ibero-American fields. Besides, Aznar had received Fox's support regarding ETA members living in Mexico.

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