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Esther Barbé once described the Spanish foreign policy of the democratic period as a triangle whose superior vertex is the policy towards Europe and the other two are the policies towards the Mediterranean and Latin America, respectively, since both are important regions but definitely come second to Europe. With the victory of José María Aznar, in May 1996, one of the questions was if these priorities would remain intact or if the conservative administration would adopt a different approach regarding foreign policy. This article analyses the Euro-Mediterranean and bilateral relations, both equally important and that influence each other. The purpose is to answer two questions: first, whether the Mediterranean, after eight years of conservative government, is still a priority and, second, to what extent has this policy converged with the EU one.

The government of Felipe González and especially its performance during the last EU term Presidency in 1995 has been lauded for contributing decisively to the EU's Mediterranean Policy. In fact, the Euro-Mediterranean Conference and the Declaration of Barcelona are the founding stones of the Euro-Mediterranean process. Thus, this event culminated the efforts of Spanish diplomacy since the restoration of democracy to change a policy of "traditional friendship towards the Arab countries", full of rhetoric but empty of content, into a global policy that links the Spanish interests to the global challenges of Southern Europe and the rest of the Mediterranean region. Following this logic, besides trying to reinforce its bilateral relations, Spain took part in multilateral frameworks such as the 5+5 Group (Western Mediterranean) and collaborated with other European countries to generate new initiatives (e.g. the Hispano-Italian proposal of creating a Conference of Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean). Furthermore, the Spanish diplomacy as well as the Spanish commissioners Abel Matutes and Manuel Marín had a notable role in strengthening the EU's Mediterranean policy.

Then, it would be simple to argue that during the eight years of PP government, they have not reached the level of previous governments in this specific field. However, a rigorous comparison must take at least two supplementary factors into account: A) it is simpler to acquire prestige when initiating a process than when one is restricted by consolidated dynamics; B) The context of the first half of the nineties favoured optimism regarding the rapport between Europe and the Mediterranean. In fact, the Conference of Madrid in 1991, the agreements of Oslo in 1993 and those of Taba two years later, set a propitious framework for dialogue and understanding in the Mediterranean. On the contrary, during these past years the recrudescence of conflict in the Middle East and an increasing pessimism on the feasibility of a multilateral framework in the Mediterranean has affected the vitality of the Euro-Mediterranean process. Thus, both factors should be taken into account to analyse the Aznar's administration Mediterranean policy.

In the electoral program of 1996 the People's Party qualified the Mediterranean as a natural scenario of Spain. The first conservative Minister of Foreign Affairs was Abel Matutes, a personality engaged in the EU's Mediterranean Policy and with proven expertise in this area. In spite of these positive elements, the reform of the Ministry's structure indicated that the Mediterranean was to be downgraded among the external priorities. For example, the Northern Africa and the Middle East Cooperation Unit were merged with those of Asia and Africa, thus diluting the personality of the *Instituto de Cooperación con el Mundo Árabe (ICMA)* --currently *Instituto de Cooperación con el Mundo Árabe, el Mediterráneo y los Países en Desarrollo (ICMAMPD)*. Moreover, Aznar maintained a hostile position towards Morocco when he was the

opposition leader, criticizing some aspects of the Friendship and Good-Neighbourhood Agreement of 1991 and defending Ceuta and Melilla's 'Spanishness'. However, Aznar preserved the tradition of making his first official visit abroad to Rabat and did his best to transmit a political message based on Morocco being a priority and Spain's policy continuity. Hence, during the first four years of government there was some sort of continuity in Spain-Mediterranean relations, although with a lower profile, partially due to the reinforcement of other priorities (particularly Latin America) and also to an increasing disillusionment with the Euro-Mediterranean process after the fiasco of the Second Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Malta.

In the 2000 elections the People's Party won again, but now with an absolute majority and a new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Josep Piqué. As far as the Mediterranean policy was concerned, during this second legislature two significant episodes took place: in the bilateral field, the deterioration of the relations with Morocco, and in the multilateral one, the maintenance of Spain's engagement with the Euro-Mediterranean process, mainly during the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Valencia in April 2002.

Regarding the first episode, different misunderstandings and conflictive issues appeared in the horizon since the end of the nineties: everything started with the Spanish irritation vis-à-vis Morocco's attitude in the negotiation of the UE-Morocco fishing agreement of which Spain was the greatest beneficiary. Afterwards, other controversial issues were raised, such as Spain's position towards Western Saharan self-determination or Morocco's inefficient control of clandestine immigration and drug trafficking. The tension increased with the withdrawal of the Moroccan ambassador to Madrid, Abdeslam Baraka, in October 2001 and, later, with the dispute for the Perejil/Leyla islet in the summer of 2002. Although at the end of that year Hispano-Moroccan relations gradually improved, partially thanks to the pressure of external actors, the previous deterioration showed, first, a lack of a dense-enough network of shared interests and, second, the reconfiguration of Spain's alliances in the Magreb, through the reinforcement of its relation with Algeria.

As far as the Euro-Mediterranean policy was concerned, Spanish efforts, although they were not only made during its tenure of the EU Presidency, were particularly visible during that period. The Presidency tackled the Conference of Valencia as one of the most important activities of the semester and Spanish diplomats were determined to revitalise the process; this aim was complicated by the hostile context of the Palestinian conflict and the possibility of an attack against Iraq. It was precisely during Spain's Presidency that an agreement was reached on an Action Plan, which, among other elements, suggested the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly and a Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Civilizations. These new institutions, together with the failed plan to create a Euro-Mediterranean Bank of Development, had the same goal: creating auto-sufficient dynamics so that the Euro-Mediterranean process need not depend on the impulse of any presidency. Taking the adverse context into account and comparing the results of the Valencia's conference with previous conferences, it can be stated that Spain's image as a country committed to the Euro-Mediterranean process was reinforced. The efforts of the conservative executive were worthy but the compromise of the diplomatic staff was even more crucial.

Hence, a pondered balance of the Mediterranean policy during the eight years of government of José María Aznar shows positive aspects such as the Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Valencia as well as very negative ones, such as the severe deterioration of Hispano-Moroccan relations. It is now time to answer the two questions posed in the first paragraph. First, has the Mediterranean been a priority? The answer is yes, but only second to a new Atlantist dimension (which shapes all Spanish external priorities) as well as an emerging interest for Asia, especially in economic terms. Thus, Spain's Mediterranean policy is not more powerful today than it was eight years ago. The second question was to what extent Spain's policy towards the Mediterranean converged with the EU's. In the multilateral field there was a noticeable convergence during Spain's EU Presidency during the first semester of 2002. In the bilateral field, the synchronisation has been less significant, although there are some exceptions such as the parallel improvement of relations with Algeria. It should be finally pointed out that the Mediterranean, and especially the Magreb, had traditionally been a competitive arena for both Spain and France who tried to present themselves as these regions' privileged European partners. In this sense, the relations between *l'Élysée* and Aznar have been more tense than

normal and that has had effects on the North African policy of both countries and on the scarce coordination of their diplomacies. Good examples for that are what happened during the European Council of Seville of June 2002, where France rejected a Spanish proposal for fighting clandestine immigration that would have punished Morocco, or the crisis au tour the Perejil islet. In short, after eight years of conservative government it is quite urgent to reinforce Spain's Mediterranean policy concentrating on three basic points: maintenance of the multilateral compromise, re-establishment of a privileged relation with Morocco and, finally, avoidance of competition with France on this issue, as well as trying to unite efforts with her in order to face their common challenges.

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