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In his first investiture speech as Prime Minister delivered on 3 May 1996, José María Aznar referred to the need of 'intensifying in defence of Spain's interests our direct presence, and *through the European Union*¹, in the Asian Pacific Rim, primarily in the economic and trade fields'. This was the first time in Spanish democratic history that a Prime Minister alluded, at the investiture session, to Asia-Pacific as an important region for Spain's influence abroad. Never before had it been made the wish, not even in a rhetorical manner, of embarking on what Ion de la Riva has described as the 'return to the Pacific'².

Yet, over the 6th Legislature (1996-2000), the ruling People's Party hardly changed the course of its foreign action on Asia-Pacific; for it could not (nor did it perhaps try to) transform its declared interest in this region into a real change of content in the political and economic domains. Neither bilaterally nor through the EU as it had announced was there made significant progress appropriate to what the new discourse suggested.

However, in his second investiture speech in March 2000, José María Aznar insisted again that 'the process of internationalisation of our economy shall not be deemed complete until we achieve a greater presence and involvement in all domains in the Asian Pacific Rim'. And, immediately afterwards, he added: 'This will be one of the goals of foreign policy for this term of office'. Two clear messages emerged from this statement. First, Spain had to make an effort to attain a greater involvement in Asia-Pacific in accordance to the economic weight of this region, which gathers 56% of world population and 25% of the world Gross National Product (GNP). Second, the Prime Minister seemed resolved to turn Asia-Pacific into one of the central issues of Spain's foreign policy.

This time, though, the rhetorical determination to pass the 'always postponed matter pending'³, was finally coupled with the undertaking of a number of measures and actions conducive to lessening the blatant absence of Spain from the region having greater demographic and economic growth in the world. The cause of Spain's qualitative leap forward into this region is to be found in the four-year action plan commissioned by the Prime Minister after the closing of the meeting of Spanish ambassadors to Asia-Pacific held in Manila in June 2000. Such commission resulted in the drawing up of the 'Asia-Pacific Draft Plan 2000-2002'⁴ (from now on, 'the Plan'), which was presented by the Minister of Economy, Rodrigo Rato. The latter undoubtedly reflects the profound economic nature underpinning Government's interest in this vast region of the world.

The Plan contributes, for the first time, to establish some goals in the political, economic, development and cultural domains. Moreover, the Plan spells out, in a detailed manner, a set of strategies, instruments and actions through which the abovementioned goals are to be accomplished. Yet, the Plan does not provide a specific budgetary heading to achieve the

¹ Italics by the autor.

² De la Riva, Ion (2002): «Retorno a la cuenca del Pacífico» in *Política Exterior*, Vol. XVI, Num. 85.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ This is the first biannual phase of the Plan.

described goals. This led some people to challenge the Plan's ability for Spain to face the challenges and opportunities in such a wide region. But, beyond that criticism, the truth is that the very publication of the Plan has been useful for an increasing number of Spanish firms to focus their attention on Asian markets. In addition to that, thanks to the Plan, some goals having widespread repercussions to improve the influence of Spain on Asia-Pacific have been attained. In this respect, 'Casa Asia' (Asia House) was opened in Barcelona in 2002, which is to become the main forum for the understanding and rapprochement between Spain and Asia. Furthermore, as foreseen in the Plan, a Spaniard, the ambassador Delfín Colomé, has been appointed as Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). In addition to that, the first official Bachelor degree in East Asian Studies has been recognized and a new 'Instituto Cervantes' (an organisation similar to the 'British Council') will soon be opened in Beijing...

After the necessary explanation on the turn towards Asia-Pacific made by the Government in its foreign policy, we should now examine the role played by Spain within the European institutions in relation to this region of the planet.

The European Union has multiple mechanisms for dialogue with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, the EU cooperates with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) since 1980, keeps a dialogue process with SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and is involved in the recent ASEM process (Asia-Europe Meetings). The fact that Spain has not had, until the Plan came out, a more or less defined strategy makes our scrutiny on the role of Spain in Europe with regard to Asia-Pacific focus on the activities carried out from the publication of the Plan onwards.

In this respect, the Presidency of the EU Council during the first semester of 2002 afforded Spanish diplomacy a unique opportunity to pledge, before its European partners, its commitment to the Pacific Rim. And, judging by what happened, it does not seem that Aznar's government missed such opportunity. Thus, Spain was extremely active and promoted a considerable number of initiatives, particularly in the framework of the ASEM process⁵, which is one of the main channels for dialogue (despite its informal nature) between the EU and Asia.

This way, Spain promoted and hosted a Ministerial Conference for Cooperation on the Management of Migratory Flows between Europe and Asia in Lanzarote on 4-5 April 2002. This conference issued the Lanzarote Declaration. Organising this conference was part of the Plan, which reveals the Plan's impact on the development of the new Spanish strategy towards Asia-Pacific.

Spain also hosted the Fourth ASEM Meeting of Foreign Ministers, which was held in Madrid on 6-7 June 2002. Moreover, the Spanish Government promoted other initiatives in the framework of the ASEM process. Thus, a meeting between directors-general of migration was co-sponsored by Spain and China. Furthermore, the "ASEM Anti-terrorism Seminar" was co-sponsored by Spain, China, Germany, Denmark and Japan. Finally, the "Workshop on the Future of Employment and the Quality of Labour" was also co-sponsored by Spain, Ireland, China and Germany.

Besides, Spain headed an EU delegation to the meeting "Intersessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures", which was held in the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF⁶) in Hanoi in April 2002. In addition to that, Spain co-chaired the Tokyo Donors Conference in January 2002 as well as the meetings of the Afghan Reconstruction Steering Group.

All these activities reflect that, at least during the rotating Presidency, the Spanish Government showed an outstanding ability to set the European agenda as far as political relations between

⁵ The interregional ASEM process, whose first meeting was held in Bangkok in 1996, gathers the 15 EU Member States and 10 Asian countries: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Japan and Korea.

⁶ The ARF was set up in the framework of ASEAN in 1994 and is the only multilateral forum for official consultation on security issues in Asia-Pacific.

the EU and Asia are concerned. Nevertheless, such activism is in line with the commitment made by all governments during Council Presidencies to act as driving forces shaping Community policy-making.

Yet, regarding economic and trade presence in Asia-Pacific, Spain has not been able to bridge the gap with its EU partners. We must remember, though, that this was the main argument causing the turn towards Asia-Pacific. Thus, in 2001 Spanish exports to Asia were still far away from the European average: 6% versus 13.1%. These figures have hardly changed in the last few years⁷, which calls into question the Plan's effectiveness to make Spain reach EU levels in the economic and trade fields.

In sum, it is indisputable that Aznar's Governments have tried hard, not only in a rhetorical but in a political manner, to add on an 'Asian dimension' to Spain's foreign policy through the Draft Plan Asia-Pacific. The role played by Spain within the EU regarding this region has been mostly limited to the Spanish Presidency in 2002, when our country did play a relative leading role and was the architect of a number of initiatives and conferences allowing for closer ties between the EU and Asia. However, in the economic and trade domains, Spain continues showing a considerable gap with regard to EU Member States. That is why accomplishing the economic goals set for this multifaceted region of the world shall demand, in the future, a "continuous and renewed effort"⁸.

⁷ For more information, please see: Bustelo, Pablo (2003): «El comercio exterior de España con Asia Oriental: tendencias adversas» (<http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/327.asp>) in *Real Instituto Elcano de Estudios Internacionales y Estratégicos*.

⁸ Avello Díez del Corral, Arturo (2004): *Informe de seguimiento del Plan Marco Asia-Pacífico 2000-2004*. Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, p. 17