



Continuity of the Asian factor in Spanish foreign policy: beyond strategic links

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The last four years have shown that the Asia-Pacific region's importance to the European Union is now no longer merely commercial. The Asian continent has not only emerged as one of the main centres of world economic growth, with China, India and Japan leading the way, but these powers are also playing an increasingly important role in the structuring of regional security and, consequently, global security, thus strengthening their geopolitical position. The EU no longer sees Asia as a little brother, to the extent that both continents now view each other as global players who share a common interest in maintaining a stable international order and a commitment to effective multilateralism (Van der Geest, 2006).

Since 2004, the level of economic interdependence between the two regions has reached limits that would have been unthinkable in the past, with Asia now being the EU's main trade partner, ahead of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). Bilateral trade with China reached 254 billion in 2006, with India 46, and with the ASEAN¹ countries 127, for whom the EU is now the second most important trade partner. Japan, one of the world's economic centres, with an economy that represents 12% of the world total, is the fifth leading export market for the EU, only surpassed by USA, Switzerland, Russia and China², and is one of the main investors in Europe.

These data show that the Asian region exports much of its production to EU countries and maintains excellent trade relations with them; in particular with Germany, France, UK, Holland and, to a lesser extent, Spain. In turn, the EU is taking advantage of the technological divide with these countries –except Japan, for reasons already outlined– to export its technology and investments, as the region has made itself extremely attractive for these kinds of enterprises.

Nonetheless, despite this honeymoon period, these economic links are not without their drawbacks. Firstly, in order to be able to develop the scientific and technological cooperation required, the EU is pressing East Asian countries, and China in particular, to respect intellectual property rights, a delicate subject over recent years and one that is ever-present in the meetings held between the two regions, both under the auspices of the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Van der Geest, 2006).

Indeed, the tense standoff in the WTO between the EU and most of the region's countries shows how free trade is not something that benefits all sectors and countries equally, even being disagreements within the regions themselves. The mass importing of products from the Asian region has led to increased job relocations and disputes with certain countries over the last three years such as that seen in the textile sector in Spain in 2005. For many European manufacturers, opening up sectors such as textiles has led to the loss of thousands of jobs and this has been the case despite the fact that European governments have been aware since 1995 that the market was to be opened

in 2005. In short, this latest crisis was the result of a serious EU trade deficit, made worse by the state of the Chinese currency, the yuan, which was greatly undervalued. Both the EU and USA have been pressing over recent years for China to revalue its currency to thus compensate for their serious deficit with the Asian giant.

Likewise, one of the effects of the world's economic interdependency is the creation of inter-regional and multi-level cooperation processes within the framework of the so-called global governance. ASEM has become a tool to strengthen relations between both regions and discuss aspects of mutual interest, including trade and economics, but also in terms of political, cultural, educational or environmental issues. In the ASEM Summit in Hanoi in 2004, as well as adopting measures to strengthen economic ties between both regions and discussing free trade and their positions with regard to the WTO, the Declaration on Dialogue Among Cultures and Civilizations was approved, which, as we shall see later, was subsequently taken on by the Spanish Prime Minister³. In the latest meeting held in Helsinki in 2006, alongside the incorporation of five new states (Bulgaria, Romania, India, Pakistan and Mongolia), the Declaration on Climate Change was also approved, which stated that ASEM member states agreed to implement the Kyoto protocol and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. This is indication of ASEM's ability to act as a clearing house and to set an agenda, demonstrating its effectiveness as a forum, despite at times being paralysed by the interests of individual members.

However, Asia's potential as an area for economic development cannot hide another of the realities to be seen there: the massive challenges to regional and global security. The conflict between China and Taiwan, the nuclear problem in North Korea following its announcement a few months ago to enrich uranium, the latent face-off between India and Pakistan, the poor relations between Beijing and Tokyo or the recent political situation in Myanmar have made the zone volatile.

The EU, represented by its troika, participates in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) where, alongside Russia, USA, Canada and Australia, issues affecting Euro-Asian security are discussed. Although the forum is essentially about dialogue and the fact that the EU has not yet been able to institutionalise the initiative, recent meetings have looked at issues as difficult as terrorism, the delicate situation in Myanmar or the problem in the South China Sea. Faced with these problems, the EU has looked to use its experience in Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) or Preventive Diplomacy. Without doubt, an important change came in the proposal in 2007 to create a troika of three foreign ministers to take direct charge of those regional and international problems that affected security in the area. The fact that China, the EU, Russia and USA took part in an initiative of this kind means that the forum, despite its consultative nature, is working as a mechanism for cooperation in security issues.

The lines of action and aims of the current and previous government

Spain, well aware of the economic and geopolitical revaluing of the zone, decided to focus its foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific during Aznar's second mandate, in particular by first launching a Framework Plan 2000-2004 and then by creating Casa Asia, an institution that has helped introduce a whole series of initiatives for the development of an active foreign policy for Asia.

Since its being set up in 2003, the three administrations involved in the project –the Spanish foreign ministry, Barcelona city council and the Catalan government– have turned the headquarters in Barcelona into a centre for promoting projects and activities

linked to Asia in the economic, institutional, cultural and academic fields. With the expansion of the offices in Barcelona and the opening of Casa Asia Madrid, the PSOE government has continued and reinforced the previous lines of action to overcome the serious deficiencies in Spanish foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region.

Rodríguez Zapatero's government has not only consolidated this institutional initiative, but has also tried to expand on the Framework Plan with a Plan of Action 2005-2008. The Plan of Action included the aid contributed to help rebuild the area devastated by the tsunami in 2004, the campaign to rebuild Afghanistan, the opening of an Instituto Cervantes in Beijing, Tokyo and New Delhi, the incorporation of the Spanish sub-regional governments (Comunidades Autónomas) into the foreign policy in the region, or the creation of so-called Comprehensive Market Plans to strengthen trade relations with Japan, India and China. With regard to Afghanistan, Spain has an important presence in the Forward Support Base (FSB) in Herat and a Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Qala-i-Now. These activities, which began in 2005 under the auspices of the UN and NATO, form part of those carried out by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, this Plan of Action requires not only an important level of funding, but also the development of a real diplomatic corps and civil servants to counter what some reports have described as the "alarming lack of staff in the Asia-Pacific Office" (Esteban, 2007), the PSOE government has opened two new embassies in Afghanistan and New Zealand, as well as a number of consulates, such as Mumbai, and expanded the Spanish Defence Councils in the region.

According to the Plan, the Asian factor is one of the keys for Spain in order to "reinforce the country's international position as a medium-sized power with global interests"⁴. Thus, Zapatero's government has used certain mechanisms it had available from European institutions to drive its Asian policy. Spain has made important changes to its stance in ASEM with respect to the previous government under Aznar, promoting a European strategy with regard to Asia based on multilateral programmes (ASEM Declaration on Multilateralism 2004), reinforcing international human rights promotion and protection instruments, and supporting the actions of the IAEA and UN Resolution 1373.

The penultimate ASEM in Hanoi, 2004, heralded Zapatero's idea of creating an Alliance of Civilizations and, at the behest of Malaysia, the Declaration on Dialogues among Cultures and Civilizations was agreed on. At home, this initiative has been manifested in the continued support for Casa Asia, with the PSOE government organising the East-West Dialogue each year involving high-ranking officials from both continents.

Conclusions

In short, as we have seen, Rodríguez Zapatero's government has continued the previous line in terms of its interest in the Asia-Pacific area. The consolidation of Casa Asia in Spain, the approval of a Plan of Action 2005-2008 for Asia-Pacific or the opening of new Institutos Cervantes highlight a certain level of continuity between the two governments.

The real change can be seen in the creation of an Alliance of Civilizations to combat security problems in the international arena and terrorism in particular. In other words, the proposal presented by Zapatero in the 59th UN Assembly in 2004 was designed to

bring an end to terrorism via a great alliance between East and West able to fight with means other than the use of force. This represented a clear break with the preceding Aznar government and its support for the war in Iraq. Likewise, it also helped Zapatero find new allies in Asia in the fight against the US unilateralism of the Bush government, a former ally of the Partido Popular government.

However, beyond that achieved in the political arena, there is still reason to be cautious. Spain continues, year after year, to be one of the European partners with the largest trade deficit with Asia, which will represent an important challenge for the incoming government in 2008. Although Spain's trade deficit with the region is not much greater than that with other regions –EU and North America–, should the trend continue, it could turn into a real concern for future Spanish governments.

En el presente artículo, se tratará precisamente de la contribución de España a tales operaciones, situando el marco temporal en los últimos gobiernos: la época del gobierno de José María Aznar y del actual gabinete socialista. El objeto de este empeño es valorar la continuidad o cambio entre ambos periodos, con especial énfasis en estos últimos cuatro años.

Notes

¹ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is an organisation created in 1967 to fight the rise of communism, above all in Vietnam. Since the fall of the communist bloc, the association has expanded to include 10 states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

² Data taken from the European Commission website: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade>

³ http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/asem/asem_summits/asem5/08_asem_decl_cult.pdf

⁴ Plan de Acción Asia Pacífico 2005-2008: http://www.casaasia.es/documentos/plan_accion_asia2005.pdf

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