

Spain's Diminished Policy in the Mediterranean

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»» Spain has been losing influence in the Mediterranean. Nicolas Sarkozy's re-shaping of the EU–Mediterranean policy framework according to French preferences in a revamped Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) poured water on an already dampened Spanish spirit. While the Felipe González administration was able to introduce a number of key initiatives during the early 1990s (the Barcelona Process, the Madrid peace conference and the 5+5 dialogue), the José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero government has not been able to establish itself as a leader in the Mediterranean. The withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq in 2004 has re-established a largely positive image of Spain in the Southern Mediterranean. In terms of concrete policy, however, the Zapatero government has yet to show visionary leadership – something sorely needed in this region beset by historic conflict, economic weakness and political oppression.

The Alliance of Civilisations (AoC), Zapatero's major initiative aimed at fostering intercultural understanding between the West and the Arab world, was picked up by the UN and supported by a wide range of governments. But it remains low profile with few clear results. Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos argued that the endorsement of the AoC by many governments was in itself an indicator of its success. This is a rather unconvincing measure, however. It remains doubtful to what extent the AoC's aim of using intercultural dialogue to prevent terrorism can be achieved through an initiative that mainly reinforces ties between authoritarian governments whose very actions are among the main causes of radicalisation. What appears to have been one of the Alliance's implicit purposes – positioning Zapatero on the international map – has largely remained unfulfilled.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spain's weight and presence in the southern Mediterranean has declined in recent years.
- In the Arab world, the Zapatero government has failed to adopt more reform-oriented and progressive policies than its predecessors.
- Spain continues to give undue priority to its own short term national interests and the more superficial aspects of its image in the Mediterranean, over and above visionary and forward-looking strategic thinking.

»»»»» Focusing on trade, narrowly defined security concerns and non-interventionist diplomacy, Spain's approach in the Mediterranean has failed to put into practice the kind of over-arching normative multilateralism so ardently evoked by Zapatero in countless speeches. There have been a number of detours into the normative terrain, including a substantial increase in Spain's development budget. Overall, however, Spain has been among the major driving forces of the EU's return to old-fashioned, realist security approaches and the proliferation of narrowly defensive and exclusionary policies in the Mediterranean. The Barcelona process was based on the post-modern idea of aspiring to turn the Mediterranean into an area of cooperative security, stability and shared prosperity. Designed to move the focus of relations between Europe and North Africa away from the most sensitive (but also most urgent) political areas, the Union for the Mediterranean has institutionalised lowered expectations.

The trend towards securitisation and a stronger prioritisation of national interests evident in EU member states' policies towards the Mediterranean has been especially apparent in Spanish perspectives. Spain has been an active promoter of its political and economic interests across the Mediterranean. Through the Union for the Mediterranean and the promotion of trade and investment between the two shores under its EU presidency, Spain hopes to boost its economy, which has been more adversely affected by the economic crisis than other EU member states.

Morocco is Spain's top priority. This special relationship is reflected in Spain's successful lobbying to grant Morocco an 'advanced status' in its relations with the EU (due for its first evaluation in an EU–Morocco summit under the Spanish EU presidency). Relations with Algeria have been dominated by economic concerns, notably energy, and have experienced a number of tensions due to Madrid's position of so-called 'active neutrality' in the Western Sahara conflict. Spain depends more heavily than other EU member states on Algerian (and to a lesser degree,

Libyan) gas imports. Roughly one-third of Spanish energy supplies come from the Middle East and North Africa.

Spain's interests in Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon are largely embedded in their respective roles in the Middle East peace process and other conflicts in the region. Spain is still mostly active in the Eastern Mediterranean through multilateral channels. The increasing Spanish role in multilateral peacekeeping efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean, via the presence of Spanish troops under the mandate of UNIFIL in Lebanon, has been noted positively. Turkey has occupied an increasingly important position among Spain's Mediterranean partners, and the Zapatero government has been a strong advocate of Turkey's EU membership.

Compared to other EU member states, Spain is known for its soft stance towards redressing the autocratic status quo in the Mediterranean. The Spanish government maintains excellent relations with the region's worst dictators, earning it increasing criticism from within and beyond Spanish borders. The government's largely uncritical pro-Moroccan posture regarding the Western Sahara issue has been the subject of numerous demonstrations and parliamentary hearings in the Spanish Congress. Most recently, the case of Saharawi rights activist Aminatou Haidar displayed the unsustainability of Spain's approach towards the Western Sahara issue, and Moroccan authoritarianism in general.

Spanish relations with Ben Ali's dictatorial regime in Tunisia, the region's most overlooked dictatorship, are regularly qualified as 'excellent'. Tunisia aspires to an upgrade of relations with the EU similar to Morocco's 'advanced status'. As the Swedish EU presidency emphasised the country's terrible democracy and human rights record, Tunisia chose to await the – likely more convivial – Spanish presidency to proceed with negotiations. Unlike most of his European homologues, Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos attended Colonel Gaddafi's 2009 military parade in Libya to celebrate the dictator's 40 years in

power. The declared objective in Spain's General Human Rights Plan that 'The promotion of human rights across the world is a priority objective of the Government that transcends all governmental actions' remains empty rhetoric in the Mediterranean. This has been one of the main sources of criticism from other EU member states against the Zapatero government, and a major dent in its international 'progressive' reputation.

During the Spanish EU presidency in the first half of 2010, Spain will declare the Mediterranean one of its many priorities. The Spanish presi-

dency wants to breathe new life into the Union for the Mediterranean, put its legal and institutional structure into place, and crown this with the celebration of an EU-Mediterranean summit in Barcelona in June 2010, at which the first approved projects on infrastructure, education and employment will be re-launched. On the bilateral level, the

revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plans with several Southern partners is due in 2010.

Several Southern Mediterranean ENP countries have requested an upgrade of relations with the EU similar to Morocco's statut avancé. Among them is Egypt, for whose request the Zapatero government has already signalled its support; an EU-Egypt summit will be held under the Spanish Presidency. The Spanish Presidency also aims to close an EU framework agreement with Libya and an Energy Partnership with Algeria; improve the Association Agreement with Tunisia; and hold a summit under the 5+5 Mediterranean security dialogue. In addition to these significant commitments, Spain has also

vowed to work – in close cooperation with the US government – towards a revitalisation of the Middle East peace process.

UNDERLYING CAUSES, COMPETING INTERESTS

In a number of instances, the Spanish government has spoken out against human rights violations, most recently against Morocco in the case of Aminatou Haidar. These examples are few, however, and consequently attract far less public attention than the many cases where the Spanish government has declined to stand up for human rights. Spain's incoherent normative policies may be partly rooted in the narrow conception of human rights protection that underlies Spanish external action. Zapatero often speaks about human rights, but never about democracy. The government seeks to strengthen the UN Human Rights Council, but refuses to meet with dissidents or discuss the need for systemic democratic transformation in its partner countries. When Tunisian dictator Ben Ali recently got himself 're-elected' in an entirely rigged poll in which political opposition was fiercely oppressed, the Spanish government refrained from comment.

Asked about the reasons for this Spanish silence, a senior ministry official replied that Spain was 'focusing on human rights' instead. This extremely narrow understanding of human rights protection ignores the institutional causes that allow human rights violations. As such, it is at odds with the notion of human security that the Spanish government proclaims elsewhere. The Zapatero government promotes women's and children's rights and opposes the death penalty, but fails to promote a political environment in the southern Mediterranean that would empower citizens to protect themselves against state abuses and render human rights protection by outside actors unnecessary. Crucially, Spanish policy in the region suggests that the Spanish government lacks a coherent, sustainable long-term vision for the Mediterranean.

Spain's approach in the Mediterranean has failed to put into practice the kind of over-arching normative multilateralism so ardently evoked by Zapatero

»»»»» Due to closer political and economic ties and differing foreign policy traditions, the southern European EU member states have long pursued a more unadulterated interest-based policy in the Mediterranean than northern EU member states. Although Spanish diplomacy has 'Europeanised' significantly in both structure and state of mind over the last decade, out-dated concepts such as the narrow-minded focus on Spanish national interests suggest that Spanish foreign policy is still not perceived as fully 'European' by its partners. Paradoxically, and to the regret of many human rights activists in the Maghreb, the relatively recent experience of the Spanish transition, which enjoyed substantial support from abroad, appears not to have meaningfully fostered Spain's vocation to strengthen democratic transitions in its immediate neighbourhood.

The particularly strong link of foreign policy to domestic developments in Spain has significantly influenced the government's foreign policy. In addition, the strong influence of political parties and the marked ideological polarisation of the Spanish political landscape between the social-democrat PSOE and the conservative PP have played an important role through the large number of political appointments in foreign ministry top positions and in shaping the political debate in Spain.

Institutionally, Spain has a head start on most EU foreign ministries in terms of closeness of relations and experience in the Mediterranean, and has a number of civil servants specialising in this area. However, limited coordination among different divisions and insufficient personnel capacities hinder strategic policy planning and underline the need for a reform of the Spanish Foreign Service.

One notable feature of Spanish Mediterranean policy is its tendency to brand initiatives with a Spanish label. In countless Spanish policy documents and top diplomats' statements, the emphasis on Spanish protagonism in the Mediterranean often appears to prevail over serious reflections on finding sustainable solutions to the region's pro-

blems. Some ascribe the Spanish urge to position itself thus to an abiding inferiority complex relative to France. Others ascribe it to the Zapatero government's need to produce a meaningful foreign policy legacy by the end of its second term. The establishment of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean in Barcelona, for example, was no doubt a success for Spanish diplomacy. However, the way this success has been over-emphasised in diplomats' public statements suggests that its location is more important than both the Secretariat itself and the substantial work it will be carrying out.

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

Its turn in the rotating EU presidency gives the so far inward-looking Spanish government a unique opportunity to become a more significant player in terms of EU foreign policy. In the Mediterranean Spain must focus more on substance, less on branding. It must show that it can deal with complex interdependences and put into practice the effective multilateralism it has promised to promote. Crucially, it must prioritise EU consensus and unity in the face of huge regional challenges and post-Lisbon internal governance confusions. If the Spanish EU presidency were to pass up this opportunity by putting its own interests first, this would be a tragedy for Europe, and a historic embarrassment for Zapatero.

The Spanish government can do the Mediterranean (and thereby Spanish interests) some good and at the same time finish the Spanish EU presidency with its head held high. Spanish influence in the Mediterranean should not be overestimated. Spain has declared that it will prioritise an injection of new impetus to the Middle East peace process during its presidency, but this issue will not be solved by Spanish or EU initiatives. Moratinos' considerable personal experience notwithstanding, Spain should avoid infecting the young, fragile UfM with an improbable peace initiative. Rather it should focus on consolidating Spain's recently improved relationship with the US, and be ready to assist and

foster consensus among EU member states if the opportunity arises.

Relations with Morocco are a potential area of mutual interest for Spain and the EU. The Spanish EU presidency should use its privileged position to fill the 'advanced status' with meaning. The current policy of interwoven dependencies in Spain's bilateral relations with Morocco is in principle a forward-looking (although not infallible) policy to tie Morocco to Europe. By making the *statut avancé* into a new model of integration with the South, Spain would be able to show sceptical northern EU member states that the south of the Mediterranean is not a lost cause and that integration, short of EU membership, can still provide a successful model.

However, Spain must make sure that the EU's approach towards Morocco is balanced and in line with basic European values and commitments both in terms of discourse and practice. A promotion of substantial economic and social reforms in Morocco without equally painful systemic reforms in the political sphere might be favourable for immediate Spanish trade and security interests. In the mid-term, however, such a policy damages key European security interests in the region by ignoring the risk of radicalisation generated by political oppression. The case of Aminatou Haidar is only the most recent example of the unsustainability of the largely uncritical pro-Moroccan Spanish stance towards the Western Sahara issue and shows how these policies will increasingly backfire as integration advances. This also includes the consideration of alternative interlocutors in the region, as Northern Africa is preparing for a wave of 'successions' with no clear outcome. The comfortable tacit alliance with the old generation of authoritarian rulers will thus soon be over either way. On top of this, the precedent of the Moroccan *statut avancé* will determine the future of the European Neighbourhood Policy. In order to avoid making a mockery of the ENP's conditionality rationale – and thereby its credibility – the EU must make the *statut avancé* into a framework for meaningful political reform rather than a mere symbolic diplomatic decoration.

Other areas where Spain could play a positive role and add value to sustainable EU policy-making in the Mediterranean include:

- taking advantage of positive Spanish-Turkish relations by giving new impetus to Turkey's EU membership aspirations;
- strengthening the focus on the underlying causes of migratory pressures in EU migration policies;
- lobbying among EU member states to use the integrative and peace-making potential of economic liberalisation in the Mediterranean via enhanced trade liberalisation in agriculture and services and increased mobility of workers and students;
- and backing and actively strengthening the newly created EU institutions in order to foster EU consensus and strengthen effective multilateralism in the Mediterranean.

If Spain poses more obstacles to the original reform-oriented commitments of the Barcelona Process its foreign policy reputation amongst other EU governments will continue to suffer and its potential as a catalyst of change in the Mediterranean remain unfulfilled.

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