

Why does Spain not have a policy for Latin America?

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>> During its EU presidency, Spain intends to bring Latin America back to the forefront of the EU foreign affairs agenda. Spain is seen as both a European and an Iberoamerican country, and in the words of the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, Latin America is ‘the natural field of action for our foreign policy’. Since the region is not a priority for the EU, Latin America offers an excellent platform for Spain to develop an independent policy and influence the European agenda. But just as with the previous Spanish administration, the current government has failed to translate rhetoric into substance. The region accounts for more than one third of Spain’s cooperation actions and one fourth of its investments. Paradoxically, given that Spain thinks of Latin America as something of its own, it exerts little influence over the European agenda in the region. Spain has also failed to take on a liaison role between Europe and Latin America. The Spanish government did not seize the opportunities presented to it, instead choosing to continue to focus on political debates dealing with countries that do not even figure on Spain’s list of priorities. This can be explained by a number of reasons.

IBERO-AMERICAN IDENTITY

‘I believe in a vocationally Iberoamerican policy that promotes democratic consolidation, progress and the regional institutionalisation of the Community of Iberoamerican countries,’ said Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in September 2008. However, instead of developing a policy aimed at accomplishing these goals, the Prime Minister’s government has followed his predecessor’s tradition of identifying Spain with the region. The government has envisaged a ‘Plan for Africa’, as well

HIGHLIGHTS

- Like the previous administration, the current Spanish government has failed to articulate a policy towards Latin America which focuses on cooperation and investment.
- If Cuba and Venezuela used to be points of controversy between the two main political parties in Spain, the problem has now extended to Bolivia, Ecuador and Honduras.
- The rivalry between Spain and Brazil has undermined the impact of Spain’s actions in the region.
- During the Spanish presidency of the EU, Prime Minister Zapatero’s government will have the opportunity – likely to be its last chance – to translate the vague affinity with Latin America into a policy that goes beyond Iberoamerican rhetoric.

»»»»» as a 'Plan for Asia'; both commendable signs of the 'globalising and Europeanising' side of the foreign policy it pursues. But it lacks a strategy regarding its main partner outside Europe, Latin America.

In the first place, Spain does not have a Plan for Latin America because Spain thinks of itself as being part of the region. For historical and cultural reasons, Spain's relationship with Latin America is more sentimental than rational. This idea of being part of a group existing in the Spanish historical memory has been an obstacle to the creation of a policy towards this area. Indeed, Iberoamerica was built by Spain. Back in 1991, it was Felipe González who created the Iberoamerican idea by organising annual summits.

The almost twenty years that have passed since then have not been enough to create a shared identity. No Latin American citizen would say that he or she feels 'Iberoamerican', but would think of Spain as a European country. The lack of a collective identity beyond historical baggage can be observed in the vague definition of the Iberoamerican Community: is it a cultural club, a development fund, a forum for political agreement or simply an international platform for Spain? In the meantime, the Iberoamerican General Secretariat (SEGIB), established in 2005 by the present government, monitors and prepares summits from Madrid.

Spain's constant reference to Latin America is not due to the place it occupies in foreign policy, but rather to Spain's self-perception as an Iberoamerican power. Spain tends to define its foreign policy in consensus with some Iberoamerican countries, and to understand Latin America's problems as though they were its own. Much more than an external priority; Latin America has as much weight in domestic politics as it does in foreign politics. During the Franco years, this idea resulted in the post-colonial concept of Hispanidad and, after the transition to democracy it gave way to the idea of a united 'Iberoamerica'. Both are terms used exclusively by Spaniards to refer to an identity that is seriously questioned on the other side of the Atlantic.

SPAIN HAS NOT TAKEN ON A LINKING ROLE

In the second place, since Latin America is perceived as part of its own political game, Spain does not act as an intermediary between Europe and Latin America, nor does it build bridges between contestant parties in Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, or Venezuela. Like that of the previous administration, Zapatero's Latin American policy has a purely ideological basis.

Since 2004 Spain's influence on the EU's Latin America policy has waned. This can partly be explained by the EU's enlargement, which has reduced Spain's room for manoeuvre in EU foreign policy. However, another reason is the government's (lack of) action. It was not Spain but Portugal that sponsored the strategic partnership between the EU and Brazil in 2007. Despite its integration rhetoric, Spain has failed to advance negotiations between the EU and the Andean Community of Nations, or between the EU and MERCOSUR. Given the weaknesses of both processes, it is likely that only bilateral agreements will be signed. Even Zapatero's notable initiative of creating a European-Latin American-Caribbean Foundation was a unilateral proposal, which made debates in the EU and the Iberoamerican Community difficult.

This lack of political distance has been reflected in Spain's reactions to a number of countries with left-wing governments. If Cuba and Venezuela were once matters of controversy between the two main political parties, the problem now also extends to Spain's relations with Bolivia, Ecuador and Honduras. The government did not measure its ties with these countries from a state perspective, but from a socialist one, which hampered the development of a critical commitment policy and joint EU action.

Cuba. Spain's influence on the EU's policy towards Latin America is not as significant as generally believed, but it is undoubtedly the key to understanding the constant ups-and-downs in European-Cuban relations during the past fifteen years. One legacy of Zapatero's government will be the change

from ‘conditioned engagement’ to ‘unconditioned engagement’ in the EU policy towards the region. It is a zero-sum situation: if, during the first half of 2010, Moratinos is able to get rid of the EU Common Position on Cuba, which José María Aznar promoted in 1996, everything will be as it was before. This would open up the possibility of a bilateral cooperation agreement once again. But even without the Common Position, it is unlikely that the different views of EU member states and the immobility of the Cuban regime will result, in the short term, in the cooperation agreement the Spanish government hopes for. Instead of liaising between the EU and Cuba, Spain continues to impose its policy on the rest of the member states.

Honduras. Something similar happened when Moratinos urged, from Venezuela, the immediate return of President-elect Manuel Zelaya and announced, without prior consultation with the member states, that the EU was going to withdraw their

ambassadors from the country, following the footsteps of the United States. While it was right to state that an unjustifiable coup had occurred in Honduras, Moratinos’ hasty declaration did not help to build bridges. If Spain had considered defining a common position, in the spirit of the

Process of San Jose of the 1980s – when Germany and France helped to bring about peace in Central America – the EU could have exercised some influence to solve the political conflict in Honduras. This would have enabled Spain to avoid getting caught up in the division between the two hemispheres which occurred when it supported the bloc led by Brazil and Venezuela which did not recognise the elections of 30 November 2009, rather than that led by the United States, which decided to recognise the elections. During the Summit in Estoril, which was held at the same time, the Iberoamerican Community demonstrated once again

that it was a deliberative forum incapable of acting jointly when political crises such as that of Honduras arise.

Venezuela. The EU does not have a policy towards Venezuela, partly because Spain has a very volatile relationship with the Hugo Chávez government, which can be understood by looking at Spain’s domestic policy, which is marked by polarisation between the PSOE and the PP. While the previous Spanish government supported the short-lived coup in Venezuela – an action which did not prevent Aznar and Chávez from meeting on several occasions – the current government chose to form an alliance with Venezuela in order to keep communication channels open, refraining from criticising the concentration of power, corruption, and the growing abuse of human rights. In addition to any possible ideological affinities, this is the result of Spain’s economic-energy interests and the (erroneous) perception of a trade-off between presence and criticism. In a different political context, something similar governs Spain’s relationships with Bolivia and Ecuador, where political polarisation threatens democracy.

At the start of his term in office, the Prime Minister promised ‘to consolidate democracy’ across Latin America. This goal sits uneasily with the formulation favoured by Foreign Affairs Minister Moratinos, that ‘sovereign equality should be the key to relations with Ibero-American countries’. Canada’s policy towards Cuba and Venezuela proves that economic and democratic commitments are perfectly compatible. Not even the political tensions between the United States and Venezuela during the Bush administration damaged their smooth-running economic relations. Acting as a ‘bridge’ or intermediary requires a certain degree of impartiality, in addition to the ability to develop a basis of trust on which to initiate a dialogue.

RIVALRY WITH BRAZIL

Thirdly, the rivalry between Spain and Brazil has undermined the impact of Spain’s action in the region. Although Brazil is the largest Latin



Spain should re-think its concept of Iberoamerica and its relationship with Brazil through a Plan for Latin America

»»»»» American recipient of Spanish investments, Mexico remains Spain's strategic ally, as it is the region's main Spanish-speaking country. 'Making summits less Spain-dominated – as Celestino del Arenal puts it – and increasing their impact require, above all, a stronger commitment from Brazil.'

During Lula's last term in office, Brazil assumed an important leadership role in South America that has expanded to Central America and the Caribbean after Brazil's intervention in Haiti and Honduras. Like Zapatero's government, Brazil emphasises presence over criticism in its relations with Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras and Venezuela. However, neither this political consensus, nor the new power struggle between Brazil (on the rise) and Mexico (in decline) has had a visible impact on Spanish policies.

In this case, political affinities are not important either. It was José María Aznar who strengthened relations with Brazil through a bilateral strategic alliance signed in 2003 which, until now, has lacked both visibility and substantial content. Zapatero's government has not taken advantage of its political affinities with President Lula to forge a bilateral alliance with the aim of bringing stability to South America, launching joint proposals, and developing common positions on the global stage. The crisis in Honduras offered an excellent opportunity to join forces with Brazil and transform this shared vision into a more active role, instead of delegating the mediatory role to the United States and the Organisation of American States.

The rivalry between Madrid and Rio de Janeiro in their bid to host the 2016 Olympics symbolised relations between Spain and Brazil: both competing to become the eighth economy in the world; fighting for greater economic presence in Latin America, and playing key roles in different collective spaces (Brazil in UNASUR and Spain in the Iberoamerican Community). This rivalry has undermined a more credible push towards the EU–MERCOSUR partnership agreement that Spain hopes to resume during its EU presidency during the first six months of 2010. A structured dialogue between Brazil and Spain could help re-launch this project and create others.

DIVERGING INTERESTS

Furthermore, a series of conflicts of interest between the Iberoamerican and European spaces are hampering relations. During Zapatero's administration, a debate began between 'Latin Americanists', who think of the region as a global partner, and 'Iberoamericanists', who advocate community vision. Looking towards the future, the former try to raise Latin America's status within the EU priorities list and replace the traditional north-south prism, following Zapatero's view that 'together, Europe and Latin America are a great power, founded on the values of international order.'

As part of this new perspective, the government suggests globalising Euro-Latin American summits, whose inter-regional approach no longer corresponds to the largely bilateral nature of the relationship. Using these summits to reach positions in relation to the international agenda makes much more sense than asking heads of state and government to sign regional programmes of little relevance, bilateral agreements or launching another grand declaration on a long list of topics, which would be impossible to translate into specific initiatives.

Along the same lines, the 'Latin Americanists' also advocate the idea of coordinating the three Ibero-American, Euro-Latin American and Inter-American spaces. But before initiating joint efforts with the United States and the EU, Spain would have to decide which carries greater weight: its Iberoamerican or its European identity? While it is true that Spain is the only European country with strong cultural, demographic and economic bonds with Latin America – bonds it must preserve – it is also true that Spain is a member state of the EU, which determines its foreign policy and actions and demands further engagement in other regions and countries in the world.

Spain's two identities come into conflict when the Common Agricultural Policy is offset against the free trade negotiations between the EU and Latin American partner countries. As it conducts more than 60 per cent of its trade with the EU (as oppo-

sed to 5 per cent with Latin America), Spain wishes to maintain agricultural subsidies. But this is incompatible with a partnership agreement with MERCOSUR. A similar example is that of the 'banana conflict', in which Spain defended its farmers against the interests of Latin America.

For all that, Spain's goals and priorities in its relationship with Latin America are somewhat unclear: sometimes preserving Iberoamerican interests (and its own economic interests) collides with European democratic principles; the Iberoamerican identity with the EU's migration policy; defending the common agricultural policy with the will to sign a partnership agreement with MERCOSUR; and promoting integration with the bilateral treatment that both Spain and the EU give to Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela. A balance between these interests through an Iberoamerican or Latin American strategy must still be found.

THE LAST CHANCE

In his six years in office, Zapatero has managed to achieve two things within the EU: securing an about-turn to a European policy of unconditioned engagement towards Cuba, and creating an inter-regional foundation. At the bilateral level, aid for development cooperation earmarked for Latin America has doubled, making Spain the main donor in the region along with the United States. Although the region still accounts for 37.5 per cent of funding, this figure has declined from the 50 per cent of Spanish it received in 2003; new aid has focused more on the poorer countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In the political arena, the creation of SEGIB is worth mentioning, as well as the signing of strategic partnership agreements with Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Peru. Economic relations are currently less favourable: Spanish investments fell by half between 2004 and 2008 compared with the previous four years, during which period remittances and trade also fell.

Considering the great potential Latin America offers to Spain, the outcome is rather mixed. The polarisation between government and opposition

has been the main impediment to a state policy towards Latin America. In a country as polarised as Spain, any suggestion or criticism is construed as part of the domestic political struggle. Aside from the opposition's unconstructive attitude, the government has also been unable to 'regain consensus', as Zapatero promised in his inaugural speech. The internal controversy surrounding the theory and the practice of shared political values has prevented Spain from taking on joint commitments. It is difficult to understand why there is a 'democratic clause' in Mercosur, but not in the Iberoamerican Community. If Iberoamerica is founded on common values, why isn't there an Iberoamerican Charter of Human Rights?

During the Spanish EU presidency, Zapatero's government will have the opportunity – most likely its last – to translate the vague affinity with Latin America into a policy that goes beyond Iberoamerican rhetoric. Ideally 'globalists' will prevail over 'Iberoamericanists': perceiving Latin America as an external partner, rather than as Spanish property, would help Spain develop a state policy and occupy a more significant place in the European-Latin American agenda. This would imply an in-depth review of the concept of Iberoamerica and its relationship with Brazil.

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