

# The Unfulfilled Potential of Spain's Foreign Policy

Richard Youngs

»» The moment that any state assumes the presidency of the European Union (EU) calls for a stock-take of that country's foreign policy. In this series FRIDE's team of researchers offers such an overview of the recent evolution in Spain's foreign policy as the country begins its six month stint presiding over the Union. In what follows, we are not concerned with outlining the agenda of the Spanish presidency as such or making recommendations for its series of summits and meetings; several other institutes have done this. Rather our concern is with assessing where Spain stands in its key foreign policies at this important juncture for its diplomacy and, most crucially, with delving into what lies behind this current state of play.

It is well-known within and beyond Spain that a general feeling exists that since taking office in 2004 the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has under-performed in foreign policy. Many would say that it has dramatically pulled back from the kind of international engagement that might be expected of one of the EU's larger member states.

External judgements on Zapatero's foreign policy have been especially harsh. Arguably, rather too harsh. The Zapatero government has taken many important steps forward in foreign policy. Many of these steps have had admirable and progressive qualities from which the bigger member states could themselves usefully learn. And debates within Spain have, of course, become highly polarised, meaning that much domestic criticism has a lot to do with factors not strictly to do with foreign policy itself. This has militated against a clam and strategic debate over foreign policy issues.

With Spain having taken over the EU presidency, FRIDE's team of researchers offers a stock-take of Spanish foreign policy. Examining eight areas of Spain's external relations, we offer some guidelines for the improvement of the government's foreign policy.

»»»» Yet despite such caveats, the relative disappointment of Spanish foreign policy since 2004 remains a legitimate lens of analysis. We structure this collection of essays on eight dimensions of Spain's external relations around a common question: why is it that the current Spanish government has failed to fulfil its potential in foreign policy? We ask this question in relation to policies in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Russia, the Balkans, and in the cross-cutting areas of immigration and development policies.

We do not seek to make a party political point by interrogating this question. Rather, our aim is to offer some explanation of Spain's under-performance. Readers inside and outside Spain are likely to be familiar with the general feeling of Spain punching below its weight. Our goal here is not merely to replicate the standard critique but suggest some explanation for these trends. We offer eight very concise and accessible essays that do not provide extensive historical or descriptive background but focus on extracting the main reasons why the very positive potential Spain enjoys in many spheres of external relations remains so far from being fulfilled.

While a variety of different factors are needed to explain trends in each region or policy area, a number of common points emerge across all of our essays:

- Reactive, short-term thinking dominates in Spanish policy-making.
- Form prevails over substance. The aim of 'showing commitment' is often stronger than wanting to really make a difference on the ground.
- Many Spanish initiatives have been launched without significant follow-through being plan-

ned beforehand or the necessary capacity having been put in place.

- Within the Spanish government foreign policy suffers from a low weighting relative to other priorities, and much lower than it enjoys in many other member states.
- A compartmentalised way of deliberating on different interests still prevails. Spain has modernised its foreign policy in this sense less than many other EU member states.
- Domestic constraints have been greater in Spain than in many other member states. The government's room for manoeuvre has been limited by a highly fragmented and bitter party political environment. Ironically, beyond the extremely harsh rhetoric that has flown between the PSOE and PP in recent years, there are key dimensions of continuity in foreign policy across Spanish governments of different ideological persuasion.

Pervading these specific features are two more general and deeper explanatory factors for Spain's foreign policy caution.

First, to a domestic Spanish audience the 'Azores moment' – when prime minister José Maria Aznar appeared beside George Bush and Tony Blair in a pre-Iraq invasion summit – still resonates as a symbol of the negative consequences of international overstretch. It is understandable and perfectly logical that the Zapatero government wishes carefully to measure the scale of its foreign policy ambitions. Spanish politicians and diplomats might feel perfectly justified in arguing that as a medium-sized state it is better for Spain to focus selectively on its own areas of national interest. They might answer our analysis with the

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assertion that: better some degree of unfilled potential than immodest and unsustainable over-reach.

Such a position would have considerable merit and contain much healthy realism. However, our essays show that even measured in terms of such modest ambition, Spain could be doing a lot more. And what it is doing in foreign policy it could be doing qualitatively better. Having a moderate degree of ambition is entirely proper. But Spain cannot then also expect to be an agenda-setter at the international level – as its politicians often stake a claim to. Where the government aspires to be such a ‘player’, it has not yet put the resources, capacity and intellectual effort behind really making an impact. The danger is that the mind-set of an under-performing medium state becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more Spain hunkers down and limits its attention to very select and familiar areas, the more it is treated by others in a way that cuts-across its aspirations to greater and broader influence.

Second, the notion of a values-driven foreign policy has relatively limited appeal amongst the Spanish political and diplomatic elite. Indeed, Spain is one the EU member states where the general de-legitimising of values-based foreign policies has proceeded furthest amongst diplomats and politicians. This is not the case on all normative questions, but our essays reiterate that it is evident in relation to many. The explanation for this is often found at a very personal level in the particular world outlook of the Spanish political elite. It is a matter of great puzzlement to many non-Spaniards why a country that received such generous international help for its own democratic transition, and has such a good story to tell in relation to that transition, has become one the most reluctant supporters of democratic reform

around the world. The current generation of politicians and diplomats seems to have taken from their own formative (and profoundly admirable) experience a lesson that is exactly the opposite of what we might expect.

The essays that follow do not claim to offer a comprehensive overview of Spanish foreign policy. They pick out a range of issues we believe to be instructive in exploring the theme of ‘unfulfilled potential’. The essays are FRIDE’s contribution to stimulating further debate. It has been repeated ad nauseum that the EU presidency represents an opportunity for Spain to raise its international profile. To do so, a deeper understanding of why it has under-performed so far would seem highly desirable.

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**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)**  
**[www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)**