

Presidency of the European Union: Maghreb as an opportunity for Spain

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Spain was one of the European countries who most suffered – and still does – from the latest international financial crisis. Although the Spanish Government blames the harsh consequences on the U.S.'s deficient regulatory policies, as well as on its banks and investors, what the crisis really did was unveil the country's own structural problems: despite a loss of competitiveness, big mortgage debts weighing on consumers, rigidity of employment rules and a decrease of productivity, there was a growth of pay average – i.e. 3% in 2009 – and a significant increase of public spending. In fact, the financial crisis is quite embarrassing for the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) – the ruling party – because its campaign for the March 2008 general elections was based on the narrative that Spain was immune to economic distress – a fact that PSOE had to correct shortly after winning.

Concerning foreign policy, Spain's record over the last few years is not brilliant either. During his first term in office, from 2004 to 2008, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero adopted a ferocious, even childish stance against the United States of America. This attitude led to unfortunate episodes such as the one that occurred in 2008 during a NATO summit in Bucharest, where Zapatero was caught on camera sitting all alone at the negotiation table while all his counterparts talk-

ed amongst themselves during an informal moment of the meeting. In Spain, these images were interpreted by many as a personification of the country's growing isolation from international politics' inner circles.

Therefore, with the reinforced legitimacy acquired in March 2008's general elections – although with less mandates in the Parliament – the Spanish Executive expected the six months of the Presidency of the European Council to serve as a fresh start. However, with regard to transatlantic relations and in spite of being one of U.S. President Barack Obama's main supporters in Europe, odds are not looking good for Zapatero. The Spanish Presidency had scheduled a EU-U.S. summit for the 24th and 25th of May 2010 in Madrid. Then, in January, Obama said he would not attend the gathering – the first time in 10 years that a U.S. President is not present – which caused significant disappointment and even resentment within the Spanish Government, feelings clearly mirrored by President of Congress José Bono on 3rd January in a press conference. Moreover, the moment Spain took the EU's Presidency is also far from ideal. The country's foreign image was damaged due to the current international financial crisis and, at the European level, the relevance of presiding the European Council diminished after the approval of the Lisbon Treaty.



Hence, the Maghreb – a main topic on the agenda of the Spanish Presidency – presents itself as a opportunity for Spain to demonstrate its diplomatic skills and in the process may confer a new impetus to its international relevance, given the country's comprehensive understanding of the region. Yet, due to Spain's often-troubled relations with the states in the region, especially with Morocco, seizing this opportunity will not be easy.

Spanish foreign policy: Where does the Maghreb stand?

Since the advent of democracy, particularly after 1986, Spain's foreign policy has orbited around three vectors: Europe, Latin America and the Maghreb. The role of Europe is of the outmost importance in understanding Spain's foreign policy and even its contemporary political identity. Joining the European Communities in 1986 ended the country's transition to democracy and, generally speaking, since then Spain has been a commendable member – for example, it was the state that better invested cohesion and structural funds. In an article published in the January/February 2010 edition of the Spanish foreign policy journal *Política Exterior*, José Ignacio Torreblanca, Director of European Council on Foreign Affairs' office in Madrid, argues that over the last 30 years Spain's foreign policy has been centered on Europe, in such a way that other objectives were simply set aside or defined in a subsidiary fashion to Europe. Torreblanca writes that Spain, on one hand, fully embraced European positions on issues where it had no specific interests as if they were the country's own priorities – concerning for example central European and former Soviet satellite states – and, on the other hand, tried to Europeanize its traditional bilateral relations both in the Mediterranean and in Latin America.

With regard to Latin America, and in spite of historical and linguistic affinities, this vector results from a symbiosis. After decades of an authoritarian regime, Spain saw in Latin America a stage for acquiring international relevance as well as economic benefits. For Latin America, Spain was the road to Europe and a possible way to bypass North American traditional influence.

Then, there is the Maghreb. During the late years of General Franco's regime, and even during the first post-Franco period, Madrid's main concern was to secure its territorial possessions in the Maghreb – Ceuta, Melilla and, until the mid-1970's, the Western Sahara. Such an objective was pursued through a policy known as "compensation" or "equilibrium strategy": a polarized and conflictive Maghreb was the best way to assure the preservation of Spanish interests, thus exploiting rivalries between the two local powers with regional hegemonic designs – Morocco and Algeria – presented itself as the best path for Spain. While exploiting differences between Rabat and Algiers, Spain gave compensatory gains to one country each time that – through bilateral relations – it benefited the other, maintaining the instability that characterized bilateral relations between the two.

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When, in 1982, PSOE won the general elections and Felipe González became Prime Minister, a different approach was chosen. The "global strategy" was aimed at regional integration, in part due to the fact that the Maghreb's internal problems started to give signs of a possible spillover effect – namely through immigration, weapons proliferation and Islamist terrorism. It was also a way of trying to prevent south Mediterranean states from becoming more involved in the Cold War game of political influence. With regard to security, while the "equilibrium strategy" had a narrow understanding – exclusively military – the "global" policy required a comprehensive approach. Still, due to Spain's fear of losing its territorial possessions and because of the divergences between Morocco and Algeria, PSOE's new strategy was little more than a mere intention. Later, in 1986, after acquiring full European mem-

bership as well as changing Minister of Foreign Affairs, Spain undertook a path of Europeanizing its Mediterranean agenda. Given Madrid's historical management of its foreign policy towards the Maghreb and the cyclic conflicts between both Spain and Morocco, and Morocco and Algeria, taking the matter to European institutions could be a way of de-escalating antagonisms. In the particular case of Spanish-Moroccan relations, it could be a way of bypassing the conflicts that usually surfaced during, for example, agricultural and fishery agreements. Hence, Madrid promoted several Mediterranean initiatives within European institutions such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, also known as



Barcelona Process, inaugurated in a summit held in that same city in 1995. In a volume entitled *La política exterior española hacia el Magreb*, published in 2009 by Ariel and Real Instituto Elcano, Irene Fernández Molina points out that this was a bottom-up strategy of taking national interests into the European sphere. The Spanish Foreign Affairs Ministry wanted to attach the Maghreb to Europe in order to promote the social and economic development that would set better conditions for Madrid's interests in the region. Fernández Molina adds that this Euro-Mediterranean link would create what became known as a *colchón de intereses*, or common ground, a netting of shared interests and institutional cooperation that would work as a deterrent for traditional clashes. In the bilateral sphere, Spain's bet was to remain committed to the "global strategy": this implied having political relations with non-democratic regimes, and it became necessary to find a delicate balance between common interests and the promotion of democracy and social development. Such balance gave birth to a new concept called "dynamic stability" which, in other words, stands for promoting democratic progress as long as that does not harm Spanish interest in the region. During PSOE's first term in office, Madrid and Rabat signed a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty that established annual high-level meetings, usually postponed during tense diplomatic periods. As Haizam Amirah Fernández notes in a chapter published in a volume entitled *El Magreb: Realidades Nacionales y Dinámicas Regionales*, these meetings have worked as a thermometer, measuring how cold the relations between Spain and Morocco are.

Between the mid-1990's and the 2010 Presidency of the European Union

In 1996, the *Partido Popular* (PP) replaced the PSOE in the Government and, with regard to foreign policy, Prime Minister José María Aznar set continuity as the strategy to follow, although giving a stronger economic angle to Spain's exterior action. The novelties of this

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period were a growing proximity to Algiers as internal violence subsided, Libya's reintegration in the international community, and the perception that economic development is a route towards stability and democracy. Irene Fernández Molina argues that although the official position was centered on a multilateral approach, PP was more committed to reinstating the value of bilateral relations. This caused a resuscitation of the

"equilibrium strategy", though in a milder version. In April 2001, at the beginning of Aznar's second term as Prime Minister, Morocco refused to renew its fishery agreement with the EU, beginning a period of crisis that had its highest point with the invasion of Perejil by Moroccan troops in July 2002. It is imperative to point out at this juncture that Morocco occupies a central role in Spain's relations with its southern neighbors. There is a tacit rule according to which the first official visit made by a new Prime Minister – regardless of whether it is a first or second term – is to Morocco. Spain is the only European country that still has territorial possessions in North Africa, and the country shares borders with Morocco, who claims sovereignty over Ceuta, Melilla and some small islands just off the coast. Furthermore, from 1912 to 1956, Spain had a protectorate in northern Morocco, and this territorial relationship brought the two countries closer, both in cooperation and in conflict. While today Spain enjoys diplomatic ties with other countries in the Maghreb, those relations were only possible after other Euro-

pean states lost their leverage as colonizing powers in the region, which means that until the late 1950's Madrid's influence was limited to Morocco. Furthermore, there is also the central topic of the Western Sahara region. A Spanish colony until 1976, Western Sahara was left quite suddenly without any auto-determination referendum. As soon as Spain left the territory, Morocco marched in and claimed sovereignty. Since then, all Spanish Governments have found themselves caught between support for Sahraoui independence in public opinion, and Rabat's political ambitions. Throughout, Madrid has always tended to subscribe to United Na-



tions resolutions in a posture called “active neutrality”. Hence, Spain’s relationship with Western Sahara forces the country to manage a delicate balance between international law and Spanish public opinion, while at the same time avoiding enraging Morocco. With regard to this topic, and as Haizam Amirah Fernández notes, Rabat has been using the fear-of-the-unknown argument in order to maintain the *statu quo* and acquire the West’s complacency towards the issue – an argument particularly effective nowadays due to growing reports of jihadist activities in Mauritania and all over the Sahel desert.

With regard to the aforementioned fishery crisis of 2001, José María Aznar argued that Rabat had broken previously set goals. The crisis was followed by the mutual retreat of ambassadors and evident political tension. In fact, besides the fishery agreement, immigration and agricultural deals were also relevant for the degradation of Spain’s bilateral ties with Morocco. Then, in July 2002, Moroccan troops invaded Perejil, a small island – actually, more of a rock – located in front of its shores, and as in the case of Ceuta and Melilla, claimed sovereignty over it. The *statu quo* rupture finally ended at the beginning of 2003 with the intervention of U.S. State Secretary Colin Powell. Perejil’s crisis proved that the net of common interest was ineffective and highlighted the unsuccessful role played by the European Union as an instrument of de-escalation. In fact, and within the ranks of the European Union, the crisis showed that France was more interested in getting closer to Morocco than to Spain. Another important aspect has ambivalent interpretations: while some analysts argue that this crisis and the sentiment of betrayal by the European Union and France led PP’s Government to shift foreign policy towards the U.S., others say that the entire problem was fueled by Aznar’s transatlantic tendency. Yet, it is indisputable that bilateral ties with Rabat were seriously damaged by a complete absence of mutual trust, and the Maghreb as a whole was excluded from Spain’s external priorities. The relation with Morocco was also tainted due to Ma-

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drid’s support of Baker Plan II, in 2003. It was approved by the United Nations Security Council under the Spanish Presidency and accepted by the Polisario Front and by the U.S. against the will of Rabat. The fact that this was followed by the signing of a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with Algeria showed that as a whole, the antagonism between Rabat and Algiers was again being exploited. Still, on the multilateral scale, and contrary to what had happened during PP’s first term in office, Spain tried to regain leadership of the Barcelona Process, namely during its Presidency of the European Council in the first semester of 2002. The Spanish Presidency pushed for issues of Justice and Interior – namely terrorism and immigration – to become pillars of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, a purpose accomplished that same year in Valencia.

In 2004, PSOE regained Executive power, this time fronted by José Luis Zapatero. The new Government aimed at rebuilding the relationship with Morocco without harming the solid bilateral ties it had with Algeria. With regard to Western Sahara, Zapatero perceives it as a cause of conflict and polarization in the region. Therefore PSOE left the “active neutrality” policy and adopted a clear role as mediator. At this point, the Maghreb was without a doubt the cause of some of Spain’s most serious problems: immigration, drug trafficking and terrorism. In fact, the majority of the men involved in the terrorist attacks of March 11th 2004 – where close to 200 people died and 2.000 were injured – came from North African countries. However, this mediation could often be confused with the use of the Western Sahara region as a tool to smooth over differences with Rabat, which was seriously bothered by developments of the previous Executive. Furthermore, Zapatero failed to present any substantial project that could turn the tables. Troublesome cases keep emerging with regard to Morocco’s posture towards the Western Sahara and its people, such as the recent hunger strike of Aminatou Haidar, a Sahraoui human rights activist forbidden by Rabat to reenter her own country. The fact is that Zapatero’s support to King Mohamed VI’s 2007 autonomy



plan and often complacent stance on the Western Sahara territory is perceived by many as treason to the Sahraoui people and has led to reactions by Algiers – Spain's chief energy supplier – threatening an increase in gas prices and momentarily dropping business deals with Spanish hydrocarbons companies.

Zapatero's Government also tried once more to rejuvenate the Barcelona Process in November 2005, marking the initiative's tenth anniversary. Nevertheless, both the Spanish attempt and the Process itself ended up to be a failure, and are now for the most part replaced by the French Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) initiative, presented in July 2008 in Paris as a renewed solution, even though time and again guided by French interests.

As expected, with regard to human rights, Madrid perpetuates the ambiguity that results from a pro-democracy speech and a reality where the maintenance of North Africa's statu quo is the rule – not only for traditional reasons, but also because of the fear caused by the uncertainty of political change within Arab countries.

The 2010 Spanish Presidency of the European Union

Before taking the Presidency of the European Council, Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero visited several Middle Eastern countries. It was a display of interest and commitment to the region and a sign that it would have a relevant role during Spain's presence under the European spotlight. Moreover, it also seems to indicate that Madrid sees the Mediterranean as a whole, being therefore dedicated to a global understanding of the region and, consequently, to Mediterranean integration. However, this was the first time after six years in office that Zapatero set foot in the Eastern Mediterranean. In fact, Spain is not the only actor to blame. The European Union has a timid and inconsistent approach to the Middle East, and as a result the conflicting parties in the region do not credit any significant leverage to Europe. Although six months provide a slim window of opportunity to make significant changes, Spain should take this opportunity to strengthen its bilateral ties in the region, and simultaneously try to set a different tone and attitude in Europe towards a Mediterranean area characterized by conflicts entrenched in time. Indeed, Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos could prove to be a valuable asset since he is an expert in the Mediterranean and a man with good political contacts in the region.

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In spite of Spain's diplomatic ability to maintain the Secretariat located in Barcelona, the UfM was a successful French move that countered Madrid's influence in Euro-Mediterranean relations. The Presidency of the European Union may offer some opening for rebalancing the process. The UfM is still far from being fully operational, and its organic structure is still insipid. Furthermore, it has a clear economic tendency and is centered on inter-governmental ties – and not attached to European institutions. The second UfM summit will be held during Spain's Presidency, in June 2010. Among many other aspects, it will have to approve a Work Program for 2010-2012. Hence, Spain should try to influence the agenda by presenting solutions in advance. It should also strengthen the political dimension of the UfM as well as transform the inter-governmental practices into a EU institutional framework. It would also be rather significant if many of the stalled institutional aspects of the initiative

could be set in motion during Spain's Presidency.

Another highlight of this Presidency took place between the 6th and 7th of March, in the first ever EU-Morocco summit, held in the Spanish city of Granada. José Manuel Durão Barroso, President of the European Commission, said that "the EU-Morocco summit is an unprecedented event that attests to the pioneering nature of the EU-Morocco partnership". Barroso added that "Morocco's geographical proximity and our common history and interests make it a major strategic partner, and it has opted for closer relations with the EU. The Granada summit demonstrates the strengthening of our political dialogue since Morocco was granted ad-

vanced Status in 2008". According to an EU press release, the summit also discussed Western Sahara, the security challenges posed by the Sahel desert and the UfM. This meeting took place after Morocco was granted the Advanced Status (during France's Presidency of the EU), which comes in the sequence of the entry into force of the Association Agreement of March 2000 and the adoption of the Action Plan in July 2005, all part of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). The Advanced Status agreement represents a roadmap that defines objectives in three areas: strengthening political ties, with the holding of an EU-Morocco summit and the establishment of consultation mechanisms at ministerial level; integration of the single market on the basis of gradual adoption of the EU *acquis* and specialized cooperation; and a focus on the human dimension. As of this article, it is still early to foresee what will be the real consequences of such a gather-



ing. However, in the final press conference attended by Zapatero, Barroso, and the permanent President of the European Council, as well as the Moroccan Prime Minister, respectively Herman Van Rompuy and Abbas El Fassi, every participant agreed that Morocco should work on its proximity with the EU through political modernization and economic liberalization. In other words, nothing more than what the European Neighborhood Policy already stands for. Concerning Western Sahara, declarations indicate no development whatsoever. Prime Minister Zapatero reiterated his support “for the work and mission of the UN” and stated that “a frank, positive and constructive” dialogue has always been kept up with Morocco on this matter. Even before the meeting, King Mohamed VI sent a message where he showed no signs of overture by inviting all the parties to address the issue “with the aim of responding to the calls of the Security Council and embarking on the road to a political solution of the artificial dispute around its territorial integrity, based on the Moroccan initiative of awarding the Saharan region extensive autonomy within the framework of the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco and its national and territorial integrity”. In short, independence is ruled out. The Joint Declaration reflects the lack of progress on the issue: the two parties state their support to the efforts of the UN’s Security Council, General Secretary and of his special envoy to Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, in order to find a political solution which is mutually acceptable. With regard to the Sahel, terrorism and immigration and promises of cooperation reinforcement were also agreed upon.

In line with the ENP and Morocco’s current role in it, the Spanish agenda also defined the deepening of ties and development of status with the following partners: Israel, Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt. Concurrently, Madrid demonstrates once again broad objectives, an integrated view of the region and a desire to regain leadership in the process.

Conclusions

Spain’s diplomatic relation with the Maghreb is centered on Morocco and marked by a history of shifts be-

tween cooperation and conflict. Those conflicts, usually fueled by territorial disputes, are not enough to mitigate the importance that the region has to Madrid. In fact, those conflicts are a reflection of needs and interests that bond the two parties together. After trying different approaches, and as a consequence of the current situation, Spain seems to be reinvesting in Europeanizing its Mediterranean agenda. Spain needs to regain influence in the region as well as to counterbalance France’s self-interested ventures. As such, the EU-Morocco summit appears to be a good sign of such intentions.

As often happens with other Southern Mediterranean

countries such as Tunisia, while the economic facet of policies has sound developments, the political dimension – namely concerning human rights and democratization – remains a mere compromise. The EU-Morocco partnership is no different. After all, the summit was preceded by the EU-Morocco Business summit where Prime Minister Zapatero portrayed trade as a way of setting conditions for stronger political ties. It appears that the colchón de intereses will now be built on a business ground. It is important to determine if it will generate any significant results: one should bear in mind that during Perejil’s crisis, trade between Spain and Morocco increased notably in spite of tense political relations. Hence, portraying trade as a political softener may be precipitated. However, the Joint Declaration indicates a stabilized and solid EU-Morocco relationship and, from Spain’s perspective, it had a good outcome. In order to properly address controversial issues such as the West-

ern Sahara, Spain would lose any possibility of having a smooth summit and of developing cooperation between the EU and Rabat – which, after the recently granted Advanced Status to Morocco, would have caused disappointment and been a blow to the ENP’s credibility. Although pressing issues were set aside due to realpolitik needs, the impulse given on trade and cooperation allowed Spain to regain solid ties and be the European protagonist in a region where it wants to develop its political influence.

For now, it is unfair to charge Madrid of having a linear strategy where economy is portrayed as the single key

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to unlock all problems. Moreover, and as history has proven, the European Union is no silver bullet when it comes to Spain's interests in the region. Due to loss of influence, Spain urges for results, and the economic sphere is for now the only possibility for growth in that sense. Therefore, Madrid's strategy seems to be based on a first phase of regaining leverage and then in institutionally tying Maghreb to Europe – until now, this relationship is dependent on the inter-governmental interests of European member states, and not on independent institutions such as the European Commission

or Parliament. In other words, the path taken could be the one of integrating the Maghreb in the European Union. In theory, this strategy will bypass bilateral tensions, and if Spain is seen as the one to credit for the involvement and attachment of European institutions to the Mediterranean – especially the Maghreb – this will help counter France's growing influence. The European axis can present itself as a path through which bilateral ties can be reshaped. Many opportunities lay ahead and it will be interesting to see how Madrid manages them.

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