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KEYS TO FACILITATE THE MONITORING OF THE SPANISH FOREIGN POLICY AND THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN 2008

U.S.-Spain Relations from the Perspective of 2009.

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The advent of the Obama Administration in Washington on January 20, 2009 was greeted with widespread enthusiasm in Spain, with many commentators on both sides of the Atlantic suggesting a new era of closer bilateral relations. Others have warned, however, that these high expectations could easily be disappointed, given the asymmetry between U.S. needs and Spanish inclinations.

In this author’s judgment, there is in fact considerable potential for closer relations. This might be dismissed as the natural bias of a former American diplomat who has served with pleasure in Spain. However, the author personally experienced one of the more difficult stretches in U.S.-Spanish relations and is fully aware that harmony in the relationship is by no means preordained. One has only to recall the recent dramatic low point in 2004, when Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero abruptly pulled all Spanish troops out of Iraq – to an extremely frigid reaction in Washington. This contrasted sharply with the euphoria of 2003, when Prime Minister Aznar joined with President Bush and Prime Minister Blair at the Azores Summit to launch the “Coalition of the Willing” and Spain dispatched 1,300 peacekeeping troops to Iraq.

These are by no means the only major oscillations in U.S.-Spain relations in recent decades. Given the role of the *Annuario CIDOB* as an important reference work for understanding Spain’s overall international relations, this article will examine the bilateral relationship not only from the vantage point of recent history, but also from a longer-term perspective, so as to assess the potential for growth, or for regression, in the foreseeable future. We will start with a brief look at a few of the “legacy issues” that affect relations between Washington and Madrid and the two societies more broadly.

Divergent histories and a period of enmity

From the perspective of many Spaniards, the relationship with what is now the United States began in 1513 when Juan Ponce de León landed in Florida and claimed the territory for the Spanish crown. Saint Augustine was founded in 1565, 55 years before the first British colonial settlement. For most Americans, however, the first four centuries of the relationship are part of a distant past that is generally given limited attention. There is little recognition of fact that Spain supported the American colonists in their war of independence – albeit based on alliance with France and enmity for Great Britain, rather than any enthusiasm for republican democracy. Also forgotten is that Spain was among the first European powers to establish diplomatic relations with the United States (in 1785), and it facilitated America’s westward expansion by “gracefully” ceding vast territories west of the Mississippi via the Transcontinental Treaty of 1819.

In contrast, what many Americans do retain from their high school history is a largely negative image of 19th century Spain as a declining monarchy and an unwelcome colonial power. U.S. textbooks highlight the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which declared that European powers like Spain were not welcome in the Western Hemisphere. They also stress Spain’s quick defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898, after the U.S. press whipped up jingoist sentiment against Spain’s “tyrannical” presence in Cuba and Puerto Rico. During the first part of the 20th century, most Americans thought of Spain as a reactionary, not very relevant power in which the United States no longer had much interest. For Spain, however, the U.S. loomed large as the only country with which it had fought a recent war – a war that stripped away the last vestiges of a once-glorious Latin American empire.

The next events of major consequence in shaping American attitudes towards Spain centered on the Spanish Civil War and relations with the Franco regime. President Franklin Roosevelt publicly condemned General Franco’s uprising against the Republican government (1936-39). Despite official U.S. neutrality, most Americans were inclined against Franco.
and what they saw as the anti-democratic forces he represented. This led to the formation of the “Lincoln Brigade,” in which individual American volunteers fought on the Republican side. Negative images of Franco’s Spain took hold through the press and contemporary literature. Books like *Farewell to Catalonia* and, above all, Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* vividly depicted the Civil War from a Spanish Republican perspective.

With Hitler’s ascendance in Europe and U.S. engagement in World War II, Franco’s de facto tilt towards the Axis powers further damaged Spain’s image. This culminated in 1946 with the principal victorious powers – the United States, Great Britain and France – signing the Tripartite Declaration saying there would be “no full and cordial association [with Spain] as long as Franco rules” (Chislett, 2006). Spain was initially excluded from the United Nations, just as it was barred from the Marshall Plan when it was launched in 1948. As of 1950, the Franco regime was cast into the role of a pariah and most Americans saw it as a poor, backward country of little interest or promise.

"Spain will have a clear incentive to cultivate a positive relationship with Washington and with other centers of political and cultural influence in the U.S." During the 1950’s and 1960’s, these negative American perspectives on Spain gradually began to change. The Cold War became the primary prism through which Americans viewed the world. Faced with an increasingly powerful and aggressive Soviet Union, Washington geared up for a potential military confrontation. American sea and air power were essential to Western defenses, and they required secure bases in Europe as far away as possible from NATO’s eastern front. The Spanish base at Rota was the perfect location from which to project naval power into the Mediterranean, and the air bases at Moron, Zaragoza and Torrejón (just outside Madrid) had outstanding potential as rear-echelon bases and training and staging facilities for the U.S. Air Force. Spain’s potential as a basing country thus quickly became a dominant consideration in Washington’s relationship with Madrid.

By 1953, negotiations for a U.S.-Spanish basing agreement had been completed. The “Pact of Madrid,” granted American forces use of these four bases in exchange for significant economic assistance – and implicit acknowledgement of the Franco regime’s durability. In 1955, the U.S. supported Spain’s admission to the U.N., despite the continuing reluctance of the U.K. and France. This warming of relations between Washington and Madrid culminated in an official visit by President Dwight Eisenhower to Spain in 1959. For American public opinion, the visit by “Ike” bestowed Spain with an aura of normalcy, despite its dictatorial government. But for anti-Franco forces in Spain, and particularly for the political left, the Eisenhower visit and the ongoing base agreements became major focal points for enduring anti-Americanism.

At the same time, however, parallel developments on the economic front were beginning to draw the two countries gradually closer. Whereas Madrid had been kept out of the Marshall Plan in the late 1940’s, from 1953 to 1961 Spain became the third-largest recipient of U.S. economic assistance, thanks to the base agreements. This assistance, combined with Spain’s gradual economic recovery and the perception of political stability reinforced by the Madrid Pact, made Spain an increasingly attractive location for U.S. business investment. The trend accelerated significantly after 1959, when Spain adopted a U.S.-backed IMF economic stabilization and liberalization plan. By 1966, U.S. firms accounted for 79.5% of total FDI, and had begun to contribute significantly to Spain’s economic recovery and rapidly increasing exports (Chislett, 2005). More Americans got to know Spain, including tens of thousands of retirees seeking its sunny climate and low cost of living. U.S. public opinion thus continued to evolve in a more positive direction.

**The bumpy road to normal relations**

The great majority of Americans welcomed the end of the Franco regime in 1975 and the rapid consolidation of democracy that followed. The U.S. moved promptly towards establishing normal bilateral working relationships with Spain’s initial post-Franco governments, patterned on those with other democratic European allies. Washington also helped to ensure that Spain was promptly invited to join NATO and generally welcomed as a full-fledged member of the trans-Atlantic community. In 1976, the U.S. and Spain signed a Treaty of Friendship, Defense and Cooperation symbolizing a commitment to a full-fledged bilateral alliance and further accelerating educational, professional and cultural exchanges. U.S. investment in Spain also continued to grow. In sum, by 1980, relations seemed to be blossoming.

There was a significant setback in February 1981, however, when a group of Guardia Civil officers entered the Spanish parliament in an attempted coup. Rather than coming out unambiguously in support of Spain’s new democracy, the then U.S. Secretary of State General Alexander Haig initially called the attempt “an internal matter.” Although Washington subsequently made clear its condemnation of the coup and
its full support of democracy, Haig’s much-publicized gaffe reinforced pre-existing beliefs on the Spanish left regarding U.S. intentions. Given that the Socialist party (PSOE) would win the next year’s parliamentary elections, this incident significantly delayed the full normalization of U.S.-Spanish relations, perhaps by as much as a decade.

The triumph of the PSOE in 1982 thus opened a difficult new phase in bilateral relations. The new Prime Minister, Felipe Gonzalez, had been formed as a political leader during the Franco years, at a time when the U.S. Embassy was having little to do with the opposition underground. Alfonso Guerra, initially Gonzalez’s second in command, was an avowed admirer of Che Guevara, with all of the romantic anti-American symbolism that this implied. Both Gonzalez and Guerra shared an initial distrust of the U.S. based on suspicion that Washington’s interest in Spain’s military bases might override its commitment to their country’s fledgling democracy. Washington, for its part, was wary of the new government because the PSOE had campaigned against Spanish membership in NATO and favored a sharp reduction in U.S. military presence at Spain’s bases. The 1982 elections thus ushered in a period of significant bilateral tensions.

Once in power, however, the Gonzalez government began to see that its ambition to become an influential member of the European Union and of other Western “clubs,” and to develop into an advanced industrial economy, would be better served by Spain’s remaining inside NATO. Gonzalez thus called for a referendum that reversed the previous PSOE position against NATO membership. However, the political “bargain” through which Gonzalez won the referendum (with 52.5% vs. 39.8% of the vote) included an explicit pledge to drastically reduce the U.S. military presence at Spanish bases. Politically, these reductions, and particularly the removal of the F-16 fighter wing at Torrejón right outside of Madrid, took on critical importance for the Gonzalez government. For the U.S., however, the Cold War was still unresolved, and Washington and Madrid were in agreement as to the eastward expansion of what seemed an increasingly political alliance.

In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and threatened to annex the northern oil fields of Saudi Arabia. In response, U.S. President George H.W. Bush declared that the invasion “would not stand” and secured both a UN mandate and a European consensus in favor of military action to push Saddam’s armies out of Kuwait. After a series of direct communications between the White House and the Prime Minister’s office, Gonzalez agreed to grant the U.S. unprecedented use of the bases in Spain as a transit point and logistical back-up for the massive movement of American troops and equipment to the Gulf region in preparation for war. Spain also contributed forces to the combined military effort to liberate Kuwait. All of this would previously have been unthinkable, given Spain’s long-standing policy of developing close relations with the Arab states and of thus prohibiting the use of its bases for U.S. military operations in the Middle East. From the viewpoint of Washington, Spain was proving to be very much “a friend in need.”

An important additional factor in bringing Washington and Madrid closer during this period was the personal chemistry and open communication between the first President Bush and Prime Minister Gonzalez. This started with a Bush invitation for Gonzalez to visit the White House in October 1989, a visit that not only...
The Special Relationship and its seemingly abrupt ending

"The U.S. economy can only benefit from the involvement of leading-edge Spanish firms in areas of the U.S. economy that require new investment and new technologies"

When José María Aznar became Prime Minister in 1996, he quickly set out to build further upon an already strong relationship. His interest was reciprocated by the Clinton Administration, which led to a further deepening of cooperation symbolized by the signing of a “Joint Political Declaration” in January 2001, one of the last high-profile actions of the Clinton Administration. With the inauguration of the George W. Bush Administration just a few days later, Aznar found an even more enthusiastic U.S. partner who largely shared his ideological inclinations.

The U.S.-Spain official relationship quickly blossomed into one of the warmest and most intense that Washington had with any European ally other than the U.K. President Bush paid Aznar the honor of making Spain the first stop on his initial trip to Europe in June 2001. When Al-Qaeda carried out its massive terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Aznar was among the first European leaders to step forward in active solidarity, and he translated that solidarity into strong Spanish support for the U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Throughout the Aznar-Bush period, cooperation continued to grow on a wide variety of issues of common concern, including counter-terrorism, anti-narcotics and intelligence sharing. As of February 2004, a historian looking back at the previous eight years could credibly have said that

attracted considerable positive media attention but also proved successful in terms of personal relations. Thus, when the Persian Gulf crisis erupted in the summer of 1990, the groundwork had already been laid for highly productive direct telephone contacts between the two leaders to discuss an urgent common response.

At the same time, the Spanish economy was prospering and providing a hospitable environment for U.S. business investment; and leading Spanish firms were beginning to invest in the U.S. Also, Spanish was becoming by far the predominant foreign language taught in the U.S., thanks partly to heavy Hispanic immigration and to growing trade with Latin America. With increased travel and other exchanges, many more Americans were becoming familiar with a rapidly modernizing democratic Spain. Thus by 1996, at the end of Felipe Gonzalez’ 13 years in office, most Americans viewed Spain as a “normal” European ally, and this view was reciprocated from the Spanish perspective.

Then came the Atocha bombing on March 11, 2004, followed by parliamentary elections three days later. Prime Minister Rodriguez Zapatero and the PSOE were swept into office. In keeping with his campaign pledge – and a Spanish public opinion that was strongly set against the war – Zapatero abruptly withdrew all Spanish forces from Iraq. This dealt a severe blow to the Bush Administration’s “Coalition of the Willing” and suddenly turned bilateral relations frigid, at least at the presidential level. Zapatero became the only major European leader not invited for an individual visit to the “Bush 43” White House, and Spain’s reputation as a reliable ally was damaged at least in more hawkish U.S. political circles.

Aznar’s attempt to build a “Special Relationship” thus seemed to end with a crash. U.S-Spanish relations had suddenly reached a low point after decades of progress. Beyond the headlines and below the presidential level, however, major portions of the bilateral relationship were in fact preserved. Foreign Minister Moratinos met regularly with Secretary of State Rice, who visited Spain in 2007. Cooperation between other U.S. departments and the corresponding Spanish ministries continued, as did cultural and educational exchanges and business investment. Very importantly, Spanish direct investment in the U.S. accelerated dramatically, jumping from $5 billion in 2000 to $26.6 billion in 2007, thus putting Spain well ahead of Italy and numerous other European allies.

After the re-election of the PSOE in March, 2008 – and well before the arrival of the Obama Administration – the Zapatero government began systematically to try to open “a new chapter” in bilateral relations via a series of high-level visits and other initiatives. And, since the inauguration of President Obama in January 2009, Prime Minister Zapatero has made it clear that he sees considerable common ground with the new U.S. leader, both personally and ideologically. The question is thus whether the new personalities at the top, combined with the unprecedented challenges facing both countries, will lead to a new period of close and fruitful relations.

Prospects for the U.S.-Spain relationship

Although U.S.-Spanish bilateral relations have seen significant pendulum swings even in the recent past, the extent of this oscillation has been diminishing over the longer term. The relationship has been moving gradually towards a positive middle ground that should be eminently sustainable, assuming capable leadership on both sides.
Spain is committed to continuing to build its role as a respected and influential member of the trans-Atlantic community and of other international groupings in which the United States plays a leading role. Spain has also in recent decades carved out an increasingly important economic and political role in Latin America. Despite the daunting challenges that it currently faces, the U.S. will almost certainly continue to play a major role globally, in Europe and in Latin America. On the likely assumption that Spain will continue to pursue a foreign policy along its current lines, it will have a clear incentive to cultivate a positive relationship with Washington and with other centers of political and cultural influence in the U.S. Culturally, the increasing importance of Spanish as a second language and the fast-growing Hispanic population offers new opportunities to interest Americans in Spain. There is also considerable potential for growth on the economic front, as major Spanish corporations such as Banco Santander and BBVA have begun to demonstrate in banking, and others in the fields of highway and other infrastructure construction and renewable energy.

From the viewpoint of American interests, there are strong reciprocal reasons to continue working to deepen the relationship. The U.S. economy can only benefit from the involvement of leading-edge Spanish firms in areas of the U.S. economy that require new investment and new technologies. In geopolitical terms, Spain remains strategically placed as an overall gateway to the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Even though the specific military considerations that proved so powerful during the Cold War have become a less dominant factor, the bases at Rota and Moron continue to provide invaluable logistical support for U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Spain is also one of the few countries in the Europe Union with a growing population and a dynamic interest in other regions of the world. In terms of U.S. interests in Europe, in Latin America and globally, therefore, continuing to build a strong relationship with a democratic and increasingly outward-looking Spain continues to have major advantages.

After the aborted Aznar-Bush experiment in attempting to build something akin to the British-U.S. “special relationship,” it would be imprudent for leaders either in Washington or Madrid to try to recreate as close embrace anytime soon. Any major movement in this direction would require a considerable change in Spanish public opinion, which is currently considerably more pacifist and “welfare-state”-oriented than American opinion. On the other hand, the negative bilateral issues of the past have long since buried, and a solid level of confidence and wide-ranging interactions have now been established between these two democracies that face many similar challenges. There is thus no intrinsic reason why Spain and the United States should revert to the tensions that have at times characterized relations in the past. In sum, with enlightened leadership from the top in both Washington and Madrid, plus the skilful use of diplomacy at all levels when inevitable differences do arise, the U.S.-Spanish relationship should indeed prosper rather than decline over the coming decade and beyond.

**Notes**

1. During his prior diplomatic career he had several postings in Europe and Latin America, including an assignment in Madrid in 1986-1989 as Deputy Chief of Mission and Deputy U.S. Base Negotiator, and subsequently as Chargé d’Affaires. He then served as Director for European Affairs at the White House/National Security Council 1989-1991, where his responsibilities included Spain.

2. The author has drawn heavily on this excellent work as well as its even more comprehensive antecedent, “Spain and the United States: the Quest for Mutual Rediscovery.”

3. See the previously cited works by William Chislett for an extensive discussion of recent trends in Spanish investment in the U.S., and of the participation of Spanish firms in highway building, renewable energy and other important areas of U.S. infrastructure development.

**Bibliography**
