

While the US Alienates Brazil and LatAm Spain Woos Them

Contributed by Julian Armington
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The 2004 elections in Spain pitted incumbent Prime Minister José María Aznar López of the conservative Partido Popular (Popular Party-PP) against the head of the liberal Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Worker's Socialist Party-PSOE), Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

Unlike any other electoral race since the return of democracy to Spain in 1978, the primary issue in this election was foreign policy: specifically, Aznar's fervent goal of being Uncle Sam's guy in the EU. This desire was the motivating factor behind his decision to support the American-led coalition in Iraq in the form of troops and equipment.

On March 14, days after a coordinated murderous terrorist attack on commuter trains in downtown Madrid shook the nation, Zapatero won a decisive electoral victory.

In a strong break with his predecessor, Zapatero proceeded to put Latin America at the forefront of his foreign policy agenda with the hopes of returning Spain to a more central role in the region. On the eve of the annual Iberoamerican Summit, we examine how Spanish foreign policy in Latin America has been transformed by Zapatero.

Looking South

Aznar's foreign policy was largely based on his strategic relationship with the United States, which he routinely sustained by backing the Bush administration's initiatives around the world, including in Latin America.

These included the decisions to send troops to Iraq and enthusiastically join Washington's hard-line crusade against Havana. In a sign of things to come, Zapatero quickly terminated the partnership when he removed all Spanish troops from Iraq shortly after taking office.

Instead of relying on the United States as a strategic ally, the Spanish prime minister has opted in favor of a more multilateral stance, including an emphasis on Latin America as a vital component of such a strategy.

In European affairs, Zapatero has turned away from the U.K., Aznar's main regional ally, to focus his efforts on developing ties to the two major continental powers, France and Germany. By assuming a pro-continental, pro-Latin America stance, Zapatero has sought to position Spain as an important global player.

In his effort for new direction, Zapatero has been aided by a yawning diplomatic void in Latin America, stemming from the myopic focus of both the U.S. and a number of European governments who suddenly dropped Latin America to the basement of their agendas.

The new Spanish government has seized this opportunity both to act in the near future as a major regional factor, as well as serve as a gateway to the EU for Latin American nations seeking greater integration with Europe.

This renewed goodwill between Spain and its former colonies has mostly been based around a series of diplomatic and economic agreements and a renovated attitude intended to mutually benefit both sides' economies, as well as to register each of their commitment to cooperative working relationships.

Not all of Zapatero's initiatives have been so enlightened. He permitted Chile's decidedly pro-U.S. president Ricardo Lagos to convince him to join in the U.S.-backed effort to provide peacekeepers for the controversial Brazilian-led force in Haiti, and he became an enthusiastic partner of Colombian President Álvaro Uribe's plan to demobilize the right-wing vigilantes in his country, and basically grant them semi-immunity for murderous past crimes.

Las Cumbres Iberoamericanas

Part of Zapatero's major regional diplomatic offensive has been his attempt to reinvigorate the Cumbres Iberoamericanas, which have been intended to unite the Portuguese and Spanish speaking countries of Latin America and Europe. The Cumbres, which began in 1990, have arguably decreased in importance in recent years to the point where they are widely viewed as peripheral.

Building on the 2005 Cumbre, which will convene in the Spanish city of Salamanca on October 14 and 15, Zapatero has reemphasized the value of the gatherings and has stated that his goal is for the meetings to become a definitive forum for the member countries' diplomatic relationships.

Toward this end, Spain took the unprecedented step of sending a high-level delegation to a number of key regional players in the months preceding the event. This summer, Spanish vice president María Teresa Fernández de la Vega traveled to Costa Rica, Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay to discuss the upcoming meeting's agenda and to encourage the active participation of those states.

Yet even after the Vice President's tour of South America to boost the upcoming summit, such notable figures as Presidents Chávez of Venezuela and Kirchner of Argentina were reluctant to commit themselves until late last month, when they acquiesced. Such indecisiveness reveals that in spite of Zapatero's best efforts, the Cumbre is not, as of yet, accorded the elevated status he would like to see it have with all of its members.

Chávez' hesitation especially could be seen by some as an unfortunate slap in the face for the Spanish leader who, in spite of Washington's displeasure, went ahead with a major sale of Spanish naval vessels and aircraft to Venezuela earlier this year.

Zapatero's heated efforts to reverse the summit's waning diplomatic importance indicates an intent on his part to find a venue to strut Spain's stuff as the best possible external partner for the region. Zapatero is showering attention on his new Latin American comrades, not to demonstrate his devotion to Spain's colonist heritage, but to serve a broadly held perception in Spain of Latin America's real value: the summit furnishes the best ambience for Spain to advance its regional diplomatic strategy.

Up to now this strategy has not resulted in major breakthroughs for Spain, but the prime minister's careful attention to his country's bilateral relations with some of the more influential countries of the region has led to some movement toward the beginning of deeper cross-continental integration.

Changing Course

Since Zapatero came to office he has taken a decidedly divergent approach to many issues in Latin America from his right-wing predecessor, José María Aznar. In March, Zapatero organized a conference in the Venezuelan city of Ciudad Guayana which he convened along with the Presidents of Venezuela, Brazil and Colombia.

Among the meeting's main purposes was to facilitate the public rapprochement between Presidents Chávez of Venezuela and Uribe of Colombia. Relations between the two Andean nations had come to a standstill after the controversial Caracas abduction by Colombian authorities of guerrilla commando Ricardo Granda, of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The summit was also a chance for Zapatero to prove his commitment to regional issues and showcase his government's desire to build trust among three of South America's most important countries.

The Venezuelan summit also highlighted one of the most noticeable shifts in Spain's bilateral relations with Latin American nations since Zapatero first took residence in the Moncloa Palace: the new entente with Hugo Chávez Frías' controversial regime. Aznar's confrontational relationship with the Venezuelan president, and Spain's possible tangential involvement in the 2002 golpe de estado that briefly removed Chávez from power, had caused the fiery Venezuelan president to frequently target the Aznar government for scorching reproaches both in the press and at diplomatic gatherings.

The ill will that had characterized the Aznar government's dealings with Venezuela vanished after Zapatero's inauguration in April 2004.

Selling Spain Abroad

Chávez traveled to Spain as part of the Venezuelan leader's world tour that fall, where he received a warm welcome both in the streets and from the new government. In the ten months since Chávez's trip, both sides have done more than just exchange protestations of goodwill and acts of solidarity. During Zapatero's trip to the country in March, the Spanish prime minister spoke before the Venezuelan parliament and signed economic and military agreements.

Zapatero was able to use his newfound good standing to secure a bigger role for Spain's largest oil company, REPSOL YPF, in Venezuela's oil-driven economy. Under the agreement, REPSOL will increase its exports from Venezuela by 60%, reaching 160,000 barrels a day, as well as become more integrated with Venezuela's state-run Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).

Zapatero's visit to Venezuela also included the signing of a provocative arms deal between the two countries. In the transaction, Chávez purchased planes and patrol boats for \$US\$ 1.7 billion (€ 1.3 billion). Both sides defended the transaction by asserting that the equipment, which Spain says was sold without any weaponry, would be used to protect Venezuelan borders from narcotrafickers.

Those assurances, however, did little to allay the fears of Pentagon skeptics and at least one EU official, who claimed that the Venezuelan arms build up is only serving to further destabilize an already unstable region. Karl von Wogau, Chairman of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Security and Defense, went as far as to suggest to European Parliament President Josep Borrell (ESP) that parliament investigate the arms sale to see whether or not it violated the EU Code of Conduct on Arms and Exports, though a formal investigation was never conducted.

Indeed, the sale was somewhat challenging considering that in 2004 Zapatero cancelled an agreement which the Aznar government had signed with Colombia, which would have sent 46 tanks to that nation in a move supportive of the multi-billion dollar U.S. funded and now heavily militarized Plan Colombia.

Zapatero cited regional stability when terminating the sale, but that explanation could be open to debate. For more information surrounding the arms sale, see COHA's analysis of it in Memorandum to the Press 05.37 "Having it Both Ways: U.S. Protests Spanish Arms Sale to Venezuela while it Arms Latin America and the World."

In response to the ruffled feathers in Washington, Brussels and Bogotá over the Venezuelan arms deal, Zapatero decided to extend his South American trip to Bogotá to meet with Colombian president Álvaro Uribe, who had publicly protested the sale. Following the meeting, the announcement was made that Spain would lend Colombia three military planes and that it would try to help mediate peace talks between the warring factions in Colombia's decades-long civil war.

Indeed, Spain assumed a critical role in the Mexican-led peace talks on April 8, 2005, when the Spanish ambassador to Colombia, Carlos Gómez Múgica, joined by the Venezuelan and Brazilian ambassadors, met with National Liberation Army (ELN) spokesman Francisco Galán at his prison cell in Itagüi, Colombia, where they urged his organization to agree to a cease fire.

The eventual result of those talks was the declaration of an armistice between the two parties, which just happened to coincide with Galán's recent release from prison.

Zapatero, who now sees himself as Latin America's point man in Europe, has continued his country's involvement in Colombian peace negotiations after Uribe visited Madrid in July. Spain was one of the protagonists behind the EU resolution signed on October 3, which supports the Colombian "Ley de Justicia y Paz" (Justice and Peace Law).

That measure, which was signed in June, is said to be a key part of the Colombian government's demobilization plan. NGO's and human rights groups around the world have protested the law as well as the EU's sanctioning of it, saying that the law will create a "legal limbo" where human rights violators will be immune to prosecution. Zapatero's backing of the Justice and Peace Law has somewhat tarnished his reputation for doing everything right when it comes to human rights.

Another regional relationship that has dramatically changed course under Zapatero is that involving Cuba and Spain. In September of last year, Spain moved to relax the sanctions that the EU placed on Cuba in 2003 in response to Fidel Castro's imprisonment of 75 dissidents in June of that year.

In attacking the EU strategy, Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos stated that the EU's policy was "the worst possible for improving the fate of dissidents and prisoners of conscience." Zapatero has argued that relaxed sanctions could serve as an incentive for the Castro government to improve its human rights record.

Since Spain renewed discussion of the Cuban question within the EU, Havana has resumed contact with all of the EU countries maintaining embassies in Cuba and has released some of the imprisoned dissidents, although the sanctions remain in place. By offering a fresh approach to an old problem, Zapatero brought a venturesome capacity for innovation to an array of nettlesome regional issues and went a long way in voiding Aznar's particularly splenetic Cuban policy.

Taking Action

Zapatero has stated that the promotion of democracy and human rights around the world is one of his country's main foreign policy priorities, but his actions regarding one of the western hemisphere's most persistent diplomatic issues hasn't exactly demonstrated his commitment to constructive regional engagement in all situations.

Shortly after Zapatero came to office, he was urged by Chilean president Ricardo Lagos to send troops to Haiti as part of the Brazilian-led U.N. peacekeeping mission there. The Spanish prime minister followed through, requesting that his congress send troops to Haiti and Afghanistan, which they did in October 2004. Spain currently has 200 soldiers and 30 police officers participating in the flawed UN mission to Haiti, but they may not be there for much longer.

In September, Spanish Defense Minister José Bono threatened to remove its troops from the beleaguered Caribbean island if the countries financing the mission don't ante up and deliver upon the donations that they had previously

promised. According to Bono, so far only \$300 million of the \$700 million in pledged assistance to the crisis-stricken island has actually arrived.

Spain's participation in the Haitian debacle reflects Zapatero's misguided belief that if his country is to be perceived as a leader within a Latin American context, he needs to prove that it is willing to take an active role in confronting some of the region's major problems.

Continued Economic Integration

In the Southern Cone, Zapatero has attempted to further integrate his country with Mercosur and the ever-expanding Chilean economy. In January, the Spanish prime minister traveled to Brazil, Argentina and Chile to speak with the leaders of those countries about economic issues and address tariff concerns raised by Spanish industries.

During the tour he declared that he would like to initiate a "second wave of Spanish investment" in the region and told Chilean business leaders that Spain could be their "point of entry" to Europe and the Mediterranean.

Chilean-Spanish trade has thrived in recent years and it continues to expand, thanks in large part to the free trade agreement Chile signed with the EU in 2002. In 2004, trade between the two nations reached \$1.2 billion, a 31% increase over the previous year.

In meetings with Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and Nestor Kirchner of Argentina, he declared that he would strongly back a Mercosur-EU free trade agreement. Spanish advocacy could help break the current stalemate over the proposed alternative to the U.S.-backed FTAA.

Zapatero has also sought to help restore Argentina's debt-ridden economy, telling Kirchner at a January meeting that he would support the Argentine leader's proposed debt exchange plan. Since then, the Spanish prime minister has continued to back Argentina's debt reduction efforts, meeting in December in Madrid with high level Argentine finance officials.

At that reunion he defended the Argentine president against the International Monetary Fund, observing that it should have "more confidence in Argentina." In New York, Zapatero also promised to meet with former Spanish finance minister and current IMF managing director Rodrigo Rato, at Kirchner's urging.

Conclusion

By capitalizing on the diplomatic vacuum left in the wake of September 11, Prime Minister Zapatero's efforts in Latin America make it clear that he is attempting to give Spain a new and more prominent role on the world stage by becoming the only extra-hemispheric leader willing to engage, with respect and deference Latin America on a variety of issues.

While Washington's stance towards the area has been generally tactless and at times outright belligerent, Madrid has taken a much more fraternal tone. Through his efforts, Zapatero has created for Spain a diplomatic liaison role of the highest importance in dealing with some of the more troubled countries of the region, while at the same time creating new investment opportunities for countries looking to expand in the globalized economy.

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