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The accession of Spain to NATO

Francisco José Rodrigo Luelmo

Since 1953 Spain had been linked to the Western defence system through its agreements with the United States, but Madrid decided to become a full member of that system and sought accession to the North Atlantic Treaty which had been signed by the United States, Canada and various Western European States in Washington in 1949. The Transition Governments formally applied for entry into the Atlantic Alliance, although the United States had tried to persuade the Allies to allow Spain to accede during the final days of the Franco regime. The US proposal had been rejected at a meeting of the North Atlantic Council in May 1975 on the grounds that Spain did not have a democratic political system and until it did so it could not be accepted as a member country of NATO, which was a politico-military organisation.

In January 1976, following General Franco's death, the Prime Minister of the first Government of King Juan Carlos I, Carlos Arias Navarro, told the Spanish Parliament that his Cabinet was considering 'possible options with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation' for the defence of Spain and even suggested 'future participation' by Madrid in the plans of the Atlantic Alliance.

As referred to previously, it fell to the Governments of the Union for the Democratic Centre (UCD) led by Adolfo Suárez and Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo to take the initiative and officially seek the entry of Spain into the Atlantic Alliance. However, the road to membership would not prove straightforward, because of the opposition faced by the Spanish Government domestically, both among the public and left-wing opposition in Parliament.

First there was the political aspect of the dispute, highlighting the ambivalence of the Government itself: the Prime Minister, Adolfo Suárez, never displayed much enthusiasm for joining NATO, in contrast to his Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marcelino Oreja. Suárez even attended the Havana Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1979, despite the UCD's pro-Atlantic programme.

The Government of Spain faced a further difficulty, however: it had failed to attract sufficient agreement among either the political parties or Spanish public opinion for accession to the North Atlantic Treaty. Although the potential entry of Spain into the EEC had the clear approval of all Spanish political and social sectors, the possibility of joining NATO was mired in bitter controversy. As a result the UCD Government secured the support only of the conservative People's Alliance and the nationalist Basque and Catalan parties. Both the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) championed opposition to Spain's involvement in the Atlantic Alliance. Indeed, Felipe González's Socialists were the driving force behind the *No to NATO* campaign, and demanded a referendum to ask the Spanish people whether Spain should accede to the Treaty of Washington.

Meanwhile, Spanish public opinion, which had not been against membership of NATO after Franco's death (membership was identified with the democratisation of Spain), was changing its view over time. This was due to antipathy towards the United States (many Spaniards blamed Washington for the excessive longevity of the Franco dictatorship), Spaniards' historic lack of interest in foreign affairs and the fact that a significant proportion of the Spanish public did not perceive the USSR and the Warsaw Pact as potential threats to national security. This was compounded by the growing complexity of the international situation and a boom in neutralism and pacifism in Spain.

The decisive moment in the debate came at the beginning of the 1980s, by which time Spain already had a democratic constitution and two general elections had been held. At the time, Spanish domestic politics was going through a turbulent phase which to some extent influenced the process of Spain's accession to NATO: in January 1981 the Prime Minister, Adolfo Suárez, resigned, and on 23 February that year a small group from the armed forces mounted an unsuccessful coup d'état against the fledgling Spanish democracy. Although the failed coup attempt boosted the resolve of the new Prime Minister, Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo, to seek membership of NATO — one of the aims being to democratise the Spanish armed forces — the decision to apply had already been taken while the Suárez Government was in its death throes.

The main reasons why the Government of Spain sought membership of the Atlantic Alliance were geopolitical, however. Given its military vulnerability, Spain, a country on the Iberian Peninsula, wanted to join NATO so as to guarantee its territorial integrity and thereby reinforce the security of the Balearic–Gibraltar Strait–Canary Islands axis by protecting it from possible foreign expansionism, principally from Morocco, which, having annexed Ifni and Western Sahara, now had ambitions to conquer the two Spanish cities in North Africa: Ceuta and Melilla. The Spanish Government furthermore feared potential offensive posturing by two other North African countries, Algeria and Libya, which were in the Soviet orbit. The Government also stated that Spain’s entry into NATO would merely ratify *de jure* a situation that already existed *de facto* under its agreements with the United States, namely the fact that Spain belonged to the Western defence system. Spain was also convinced that joining NATO would break the deadlock in negotiations for entry into the European Economic Community.

Parliamentary debate finally began in October 1981. As anticipated, the UCD, the People’s Alliance and the Basque and Catalan nationalists supported NATO entry whereas the left opposed it *en masse*. The signatory States of the Treaty of Washington fast-tracked Spain’s application, and on 30 May 1982 Spain became a full member of the Atlantic Alliance.

The domestic debate in Spain did not end with accession, however. On 28 October 1982 the PSOE secured an overall majority in the general election and the party’s leader, Felipe González, became the new Spanish Prime Minister. In their electoral campaign the Socialists had promised that they would put Spain’s integration into the military structure of NATO on ice and call a referendum so that the Spanish people could decide whether the country should remain part of the Atlantic Alliance.

Once in power, however, Felipe González performed a pro-Atlantic U-turn on the Socialist Government’s foreign policy and ultimately agreed to Spain’s membership of NATO, subject to conditions. This was spelled out in the ‘Decalogue on peace and security policy’ presented by González in the Debate on the State of the Nation held on 23–25 October 1984. The aim of the proposal was to achieve what had hitherto proved to be an unattainable national consensus on foreign policy. In the plan, the Spanish Prime Minister put the following points to the opposition for agreement:

1. Continued Spanish membership of NATO.
2. Non-incorporation of Spain into NATO’s military structure.
3. Reduction in the presence of the United States in Spain.
4. The non-nuclearisation of Spanish territory.
5. No ruling out of the possibility of signing the Treaty on Nuclear Non-Proliferation.
6. Willingness to participate in Western European Union.
7. Recovery of Gibraltar.
8. Application for membership of the Disarmament Committee of the United Nations.
9. Development of a network of bilateral agreements on defence cooperation with other Western European nations.
10. Joint strategic plan.

The promised referendum took its time in coming. Following its change in position, the PSOE Government feared it would not emerge victorious and was concerned about the potential loss of Spain’s credibility among its Western allies if the country left NATO. The first Socialist term of office in Spain was nearing its end, however, and there was no room for further procrastination on the promise to hold a referendum. Thus, in February 1986, the Spanish Government announced that a referendum would be held on 12 March that year. The PSOE, the Social Democratic Centre (the new party led by the former Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez) and the Basque and Catalan nationalists called for a ‘yes’ vote for Spain to stay in NATO; the PCE argued for a ‘no’ vote, and the conservative People’s Alliance, despite supporting membership of the Atlantic Alliance, called for voters to abstain on the grounds that the referendum was an ‘unnecessary’ move on the part of the Socialist Government, thereby giving its own interpretation of the referendum.

The question put to the Spanish people was as follows: *In your view, should Spain continue to be a member*

of the Atlantic Alliance subject to the terms agreed by the national Government? The conditions set out by the Socialist Government in the electoral pamphlet were as follows: non-incorporation into NATO's military structure; prohibition on the installation, storage or entry of nuclear weapons on Spanish territory; and the gradual reduction of the United States' military presence in Spain. Finally, despite polls indicating the opposite and a turn-out of 59.42 %, the 'yes' camp won with 52.5 % of the votes cast, as against 39.8 % for the 'no' camp; blank votes accounted for 6.5 % — a higher proportion than normal — and spoiled papers for 1.2 % of votes cast.

The result confirmed Spain's continued membership of NATO and Felipe González's Government was safe. Indeed, the PSOE won the general election convincingly a few months later. Moreover, Madrid succeeded in renegotiating the defence agreements with the United States to make them more favourable to Spanish interests; those agreements were renewed in 1988. Years later, in 1999, Spain made another step forward in the Atlantic Alliance when, under the Government of the People's Party led by José María Aznar, the country joined the military structure of NATO with the support of a broad parliamentary consensus. The heated domestic debates sparked by Spain's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty in the 1980s were a thing of the past.