

## **For or Against NATO? The Spanish Transition into Democracy as a New Challenge for the US State Department, 1975-1977.**

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### **Introduction.**

By using American diplomatic sources, the present paper aims to explain the evolution of Spain's foreign policy on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) question in the early years of the Spanish transition, as well as its impact on American-Spanish relations during the Gerald R. Ford presidency. Overall, we will contend two main arguments. Firstly, that Spain's democratization process provoked a critical detachment from General Francisco Franco's pro-Atlantic aspirations. And secondly, that this de-atlantization of the Spanish discourse forced the US State Department to shape a new, more active and persuasive, strategy towards Spain to guarantee its successful integration into NATO. By way of conclusion, we will briefly analyze these two aspects from a broader perspective of change vs. continuation in the history of Spanish-American relations, thus hoping to rise reflection on the matter and to connect with the workshop's main subject.

### **The Spanish democracy in the West: a more-European, less-Atlantic, discourse.**

From the time of their conception, American-Spanish relations – and, most especially, their predominant defensive dimension- had been established under two different premises. For the United States, these relations had merely a military value, and were seen a second-best solution to their ideal security scenario: to have a unified Western defense bloc under NATO, in which Spain would need to become part due to its geostrategic position. For the Franco regime, on the other hand, bilateral security relations - along with the longstanding desire for NATO membership – were mainly an instrument for internal and external consolidation.<sup>1</sup> The permanence of the American bases, therefore, became dependent on the political needs of the regime. Furthermore, Washington's interests in maintaining its own facilities made the superpower uncomfortable with any prospect of Spanish instability, as radical internal

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<sup>1</sup>Ángel VIÑAS: "La política franquista de seguridad y defensa", *Historia Contemporánea*, 30 (2005), p. 109.

transformations could threaten the sovereignty of the bases, and so, American security interests. Washington's security needs, in short, were intrinsically intertwined with the stability of the dictatorship.

The dictatorship was well aware of the flaws that this relation implied and, more often than not, gambled with the base card for its own benefit. Franco's strategy to obtain through the US some liaison with the Atlantic Alliance is a very illustrative example of this, as tough bilateral negotiations throughout 1975 demonstrate. With increasing internal opposition as the life of the aging dictator was coming to an end, the Francoist regime made of the Alliance a priority in the negotiations, and it went so far as to condition the future of the American installations to a successful renegotiation of Spain's relations with the West. According to Spanish negotiators, the American use of Spanish facilities made the country an important contributor to Western defense and, as a consequence, deserved a better treatment from the Alliance. If closer ties with NATO were not soon established, so the argument concluded, American-Spanish security cooperation "would be adjusted accordingly".<sup>2</sup>

This sort of diplomacy never managed to be effective, since Western opposition at the NATO headquarters remained strong on the grounds of the authoritarian character of the regime.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the 1975 negotiations serve us to illustrate the three major elements that composed the problem of Spanish accession to NATO during the Franco era. Firstly, a dictatorship with pro-Atlantic aspirations, as it understood that a place at the Alliance would help the regime to consolidate its position both internally and externally. Secondly, a majority of Western allies at the NATO headquarters unwilling to consider this proposal, on the basis of the dictatorial nature of the regime. And thirdly, the United States, which supported the Spanish cause and served as an intermediary between Brussels and Madrid, focusing its efforts on convincing Western allies about the virtues and necessity of accepting Spain<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to NATO and Brussels, "Briefing on Spain for April 9 NAC", April 9, 1975, National Archives and Records of the Administration (hereinafter referred to as NARA), Washington, on <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=14003&dt=2476&dl=1345>

<sup>3</sup>Pilar ORTUÑO ANAYA: "La promoción americana de la democracia y España, 1968-1976", *Baética: Estudios de arte, geografía e historia*, 30 (2008), p. 481.

<sup>4</sup> For a general overview of US handling of this triangular diplomacy see Víctor GAVÍN: "The Nixon and Ford Administration and the Future of Post-Franco Spain (1970-6)", *The International History Review*, 38, 5 (2016), pp. 930-942; and most especially Encarnación LEMUS: *Estados Unidos y la Transición española. Entre la Revolución de los Claveles y la Marcha Verde*, Cadiz, Sílex, 2011, pp.19-106.

The death of Franco brought significant changes on the problem of Spanish accession to the Atlantic Alliance, as new political figures in Madrid - under King, Juan Carlos' lead – started to give priority to other sorts of accommodation within the West. Most notably, Spanish negotiators sidelined their pro-NATO aspirations just to give priority to a plausible integration into the European Community (EC), taking advantage of the new possibilities that upcoming liberalization reforms would open. It was in this way that, throughout 1976, the post-Franco regime started to craft a more pro-European and less-Atlantic public discourse, therefore reflecting a public debate that lasted until the next decade: as a pro-European country, should Spain *necessarily* also stand for NATO?

Explaining this change of discourse is more complicated than what it might seem on the surface. It is self-evident that this detachment was partially consequence of the internal changes that a liberalizing Spain was facing. As political scientists like Alexander Cooley have highlighted, this problem is a common feature of liberalizing regimes, where security relations – foreign military bases, for the purposes of Cooley's study - usually become a politicized issue, and so political elites often feel forced to challenge their traditional course to demonstrate their will to break from the authoritarian past.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, a new pro-European emphasis was on the table because, so it was supposed, the end of the Franco regime brought down the last obstacle on the way to Spanish integration into the EC. European institutions had always been more exigent on this issue than NATO, since the Alliance would have had serious problems in justifying the membership of allies such as Portugal, Greece, and Turkey.

While arguments like these are solid and mostly correct, internally driven explanations do not show the full picture of the issue. External circumstances were also essential, and most especially two key factors. First of all, formal links with the Atlantic Alliance were not indispensable thanks to the safety net that the new Spanish-American Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation provided since February 1976. Even more, the Treaty supported the creation of a bilateral council for the framing of security policies consistent with those of the Alliance<sup>6</sup>, so remaining outside NATO would never imply an

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander COOLEY: *Base Politics. Democratic change and the US military overseas*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2008, pp. 16-18.

<sup>6</sup> Ángel VIÑAS: *En las garras del águila. Los pactos con Estados Unidos de Francisco Franco a Felipe González 1945-1995*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2003, p. 432.

opposition to it nor a disengagement from the “Western cause”. In this light, it is hard to imagine that similar lines of action could have been followed had the post-Franco regime failed to cover its security needs with any Western political force.

Secondly, the post-Franco order supported a pro-European, non-Atlantic, discourse because the international arena of the mid-1970s permitted to do so. As specialists on West-West affairs usually point out, transatlantic relations were at a turning point during this time. Within a broader context of superpower détente and ever-increasing globalization, traditional Cold War dynamics were already losing ground. Consequently, American and Western European voices started to consider different interests and approaches towards the new challenges of the international arena, as we can in cases such as the creation of the European Political Committee, West Germany’s *Ostpolitik*, or the multiple transatlantic disputes in 1973 over the Yom-Kippur War, the Arab Oil Crisis, and Kissinger’s infamous “Year of Europe” speech.<sup>7</sup> The international scene of the 1970s, in other words, allowed European countries to call for a new identity that did not -or not always- had to convey US interests. To put it bluntly, it would have made little sense for a pro-European and non-Atlantic discourse to exist in the late 1940s, when Cold War imperatives made both identities to be two halves of the same coin.

The new discourse by the post-Franco regime appeared repeatedly over time throughout 1976, and it is difficult to cherry-pick a specific moment as a departure point. However, two public appearances stand out from the rest due to its importance, representativeness, and impact: the address of King Juan Carlos before US Congress on June 2, and Marcelino Oreja’s - the Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister by the end of the year- first public positioning regarding NATO on August 9.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jussi HANHIMÄKI, Benedikt SHOENBORN, Barbara ZANCHETTA: *Transatlantic Relations since 1945*, London, Routledge, 2012, pp. 86-104; Mary NOLAN, *The Transatlantic Century, the Transatlantic Century. Europe and the United States, 1890-2010*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 267-303; Lawrence KAPLAN: *NATO divided, NATO united. The evolution of an Alliance*, London, Praeger Publishers, 2000, pp. 57-86; Daniel MÖCKLI: *European Foreign Policy during the Cold War. Heath, Brandt, Pompidou and the Short Dream of Political Unity*, London, Bloomsbury, 2008; and practically most of the issues at Matthias SCHULZ and Thomas SCWARTZ (eds.): *The Strained Alliance. US-European Relations from Nixon to Carter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Conceived as a unique opportunity to consolidate his international public image as a pro-democratic figure,<sup>8</sup> there is little doubt that the King was aware of the resounding impact that any reference to Europe and NATO would at home and abroad. Therefore, Juan Carlos's reference to the Atlantic and European institutions are presumably good evidence of what the King expected from Western institutions and vice versa.

In his speech, Juan Carlos made reference to both the country's Atlantic and European obligations, albeit with different emphasis. When referring to security matters, it is noticeable his efforts not to mention directly the Alliance nor the prospects for a future adhesion:

“España asume con decisión el papel que le corresponde en el concierto internacional. Situados en un lugar estratégico de primera magnitud, entre el Atlántico y el Mediterráneo, estamos dispuestos a poner todo nuestro esfuerzo para el mantenimiento de la paz, la seguridad y de la libertad en tan importante región del mundo, vital para nosotros.”<sup>9</sup>

A cautious statement that sharply contrasts with the straightforwardness taken on the European issue, where he directly aimed at the EC as well at Spain's desire to join it:

“España es parte de Europa, y en cuanto tal hemos suscrito la Declaración de Helsinki sobre la Seguridad y Cooperación en Europa, cuyos principios inspiran nuestra política relativa al continente europeo (...). Al mismo tiempo, España está dispuesta a reforzar su relación con las Comunidades Europeas, con vistas a su eventual integración en ellas”.<sup>10</sup>

This difference of tone and content in both references was well noted by Samuel Eaton, the Deputy Chief at the American embassy in Madrid, who recognized to his European peers that this was evidence that Spain was giving higher priority to EC membership than to NATO.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As US document suggest, see Memorandum by Bent Scowcroft to the President, Untitled, April 27, 1976, The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library (GRFPL), Ann Arbor, The National Security Adviser Collection (NSAC), NSC Europe, Canada, and Ocean Affairs Staff Files, box 22.

<sup>9</sup> Address by King Juan Carlos before the United State Congress, June 2, 1976, Official Website of the Spanish Royal Family, on [http://www.casareal.es/ES/actividades/Paginas/actividades\\_discursos\\_detalle.aspx?data=2817](http://www.casareal.es/ES/actividades/Paginas/actividades_discursos_detalle.aspx?data=2817).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Telegram from the British embassy in Madrid to FCO, “Spanish Royal Visit to United States”, June 10, 1976, National Archives of the United Kingdom, London, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 9/2430.

Marcelino Oreja's public reference on August 9 to NATO is equally as interesting, although for different reasons. Firstly, because it is the first public intervention of Oreja on the issue as Spain's Foreign Affairs Ministers. Consequently, it depicts the positioning of the new government which - directed by its young and charismatic Spanish Prime Minister, Adolfo Suárez - would remain in power until the early 1980s. And, secondly, because the statement itself illustrates the wide range of factors that shaped Spanish thinking.

According to Wells Stabler, the American ambassador in Madrid, Oreja had claimed in an interview to a newspaper that his government had "no position" on NATO membership, and that any further decision would require "a broad national debate". In the view of the Spanish Foreign Minister, Stabler continued, Spain needed to consider the advantages and disadvantages of its present security relations. On the one hand, entering into NATO would give Spain access to multilateral security arrangements and allow it to participate in various negotiating fora on political and military matters. On the other hand, however, the current American-Spanish treaty offered some security guarantees without formally crystallizing the Spanish international posture as a member of one of the two blocs of the Cold War".<sup>12</sup>

### **A new challenge for the US State Department: placing Spain's internal opinion at its center.**

The US State Department had born in mind the prospects of this evolving discourse since the early days of Juan Carlos' reign, as an analysis by the Ad Hoc Interagency Group demonstrates.<sup>13</sup> However, this issue did not become a main concern until the summer 1976. Until then, Washington had focused its energies on supporting the new King in his quest for stability and partial liberalization,<sup>14</sup> as well as on advancing Spain's candidacy in front of the rest of Western allies at the NATO headquarters. After all, it had traditionally been in Brussels, rather than in Spain, where main obstacles on the issue laid.

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<sup>12</sup> Telegram from the American embassy in Madrid to the Department of State, "Spain and NATO", August 9, 1976, NARA, on <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=57409&dt=2082&dl=1345>.

<sup>13</sup> "Summary of a Study Prepared in the Ad Hoc Interagency Group", December 15, 1975, Doc. 79, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. E-15, Part 2, Documents on Western Europe 1973-1976 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and document number), on <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve15p2/d79>.

<sup>14</sup> Charles POWELL: *El amigo americano. España y Estados Unidos: de la dictadura a la democracia*, Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2011, p. 396.

In this way, it was only when the Spanish political reform was on its feet that the United States started to give special attention to the new Spanish discourse on NATO. In general lines, two main scenarios were feared. First, that Spain sought Western integration merely through its introduction into the EC, thus freezing – or even discarding - the possibility of accessing to the Alliance.<sup>15</sup> And second, as we will later demonstrate, that the Spanish government rejected its full integration into NATO by rather maintaining solely bilateral relations with the United States or seeking a partial association *à la de Gaulle*.

In light of the new circumstances, it was in September that the State Department prepared an analysis of the Spanish problem, suggesting a plan de route of a different kind. As a guide for the future, the Department set five main lines of approach to “begin to shape Spanish opinion”. First, the United States should make clear to the Spaniards that formal *association* of Spain with NATO, as opposed to its full *membership*, served neither American nor Spanish interests. Second, it was necessary to find a definite role for Spain in NATO as well as to convince the Spanish military of its importance for the Alliance. Third, when searching for a role for Spain, Washington should take into consideration Spanish interests and not just those of the Alliance, although Spain should be encouraged to see its own interests as compatible with those of NATO. Forth, the prospect of an IBERLANT command - a coordinating body for the Iberian Peninsula – could be a first approach to these problems. And finally, the United States should attract the Spanish military and industry by emphasizing the advantages that they might gain from NATO’s broad network of co-production arrangements for military equipment.<sup>16</sup>

This suggested line of action, radically placing its efforts in Spain rather than at the NATO headquarters, served as a blueprint for the new American approach to resolve the Spanish integrational problem. Practical consequences were soon to be noted, as the plan was put into practice during the last months of the Ford administration.

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<sup>15</sup> Once again, see “Summary of a Study Prepared in the Ad Hoc Interagency Group”, December 15, 1975, Doc. 79, in *FRUS*, on <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve15p2/d79>.

<sup>16</sup> Briefing memorandum from the Department of State to Kissinger, “Spain and NATO”, September 28, 1976, GRFPL, NSAF, Presidential Country Files for Europe and Canada, Box 12.

The Spanish military being set as a first objective, the State Department, in conjunction with the US Embassy in Madrid, managed to make a first contact with one of the most influential and intellectual services: the Centro Superior de Estudios de Defensa Nacional, or Spanish War College (from now on CESEDEN), which had requested to visit the United States for the preparation of a study on NATO membership. The Department saw in this a “major opportunity to broaden Spanish thinking on NATO”, and not only did it give its permission to proceed with the trip, but even proposed that the Spaniards visited the NATO headquarters in Naples, Brussels, Bonn, and Stuttgart.<sup>17</sup>

Although the CESEDEN was not the most conservative sector in the military, the American embassy in Madrid disregarded its ambivalent position on NATO membership. For example, the title of the CESEDEN study, “The Integration or *Association* [emphasis added] of Spain with NATO”, suggested to Stabler that the Spanish military was considering other sorts of relations with the Alliance that were not full membership. According to the ambassador, this distrust in NATO was the result of years of misinformation and political isolationism in Spain. It was imperative, so he concluded, that the United States made “an educational effort” in finding ways to influence the study.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout October, the American embassy stood in close contact with the CESEDEN, providing study materials on different subjects of NATO, preparing the American trip, and convincing the study group to visit the European NATO headquarters, where the Spaniards feared not be welcomed. Stabler considered these efforts to be exceptional and highly risky, since a disappointing development of the visits could make it even harder in the future to convince the Spanish military.<sup>19</sup> The Embassy, nonetheless, became more optimistic soon after the conclusion of the seven-day European trip of early November, which Stabler considered a resounding success.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the American embassy in Madrid, “Study by Spanish War College”, September 1, 1976, NARA, on <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=342937&dt=2082&dl=1345>.

<sup>18</sup> Telegram from the American embassy in Madrid to the Department of State, “Spain and NATO – The Meaning of Full Membership”, October 18, 1976, NARA, on <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=315983&dt=2082&dl=1345>.

<sup>19</sup> Telegram from the American embassy in Madrid to the Department of State, “Spanish War College Study of NATO”, October 26, 1976, NARA, <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=314148&dt=2082&dl=1345>.

<sup>20</sup> Telegram from the American embassy in Madrid to the Department of State, “Spain and NATO”, November 16, 1976, NARA, on <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=291380&dt=2082&dl=1345>.

American expectations, however, fell short during the American tour of the group in December. The disappointment was most evident in a telegram from the State Department, which described the Spanish visit to its own headquarters on December 6. The CESEDEN study group had received a full day of briefings from State officials on a wide range of subjects, such as East-West relations, global issues of resources, or the Middle East. All these efforts, which intended to demonstrate the broad political and military functions that Alliance offered, were in vain. As the Department recognized at the end of its report, the Spaniards appeared to have left Washington with their visions unchanged, it could be expected that “the group may well endorse[d] options short of full NATO membership in the future”.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the Ford administration, there was still much work to be done.

This new approach to the Spanish problem did not limit itself to the Ford years. On the contrary, this was a policy to be continued during the Carter presidency and – while further investigation is still necessary in this line – most possibly during the Reagan years. As one telegram from the State Department to the NATO headquarters illustrates, there were little or no significant changes on the American approach by September 1977, apart from the evident dismantling of Western skepticism after the consolidation of King Juan Carlos’ political reform:

“The Department has given further thought to what might be done on Spanish entry into NATO. In particular, we would like to take advantage of apparent consensus within NATO that Spanish membership can now be considered seriously. We must do, however, within the parameters of our policy on this issue: that we not press NATO membership on Spain, but that we be supportive of a positive decision by Madrid. (...) We need to look for ways to help the pro-NATO leaders in Spain to build the necessary consensus for the membership”.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that the Carter administration followed this same guideline allows us to contend three final comments. Firstly, that American interests in shaping Spanish internal

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<sup>21</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the American embassy in Madrid, “SWC – State Department Briefings”, December 8, 1976, NARA, on <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=69309&dt=2082&dl=1345>.

<sup>22</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the American mission to NATO and the Spanish embassy in Madrid, “Spanish Entry into NATO”, September 21, 1977, NARA, on <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=225184&dt=2532&dl=1629>.

opinion on NATO counted with internal bilateral consensus. Secondly - and as a consequence of our first point - that possible suggestions that even the Reagan presidency followed similar lines might probably be well founded. And thirdly, and contrary to what other historians on this subject may have suggested,<sup>23</sup> that Carter's involvement and actions on the Atlantic question were not new, but rather a continuing preoccupation that was born during the late Ford years.

### **Conclusion: new bottles for old wines?**

Taking everything into consideration, it is safe to say that the demise of the Franco regime had important impact on Spanish-American relations. Spain's liberalizing process generated a reorientation of its traditional international discourse, as new leaders in Madrid sidelined traditional objectives of a pro-NATO liaison, and searched for a more European, less Atlantic, integrative solution.

At the same time, this new scenario provoked an alteration of the American approach towards Spain's integration into NATO, since Spanish internal opinion -rather than European allies- became the prominent obstacle to Washington's longstanding objective. As a consequence of this, American efforts shifted from the NATO headquarters in Brussels to their embassy in Madrid, thus starting a new cause *for the souls and minds* of the Spanish people. The CESEDEN case is the most relevant example of this, and the continuation of this policy by President Carter demonstrates two main points. Firstly -and contrary to what it has been suggested by recent Spanish scholarship- that Carter's preoccupation and policy towards the new Spanish problem was not new, but rather a continuing issue inherited from the Ford years. Secondly, that this new approach towards Spain's internal opinion counted with a bipartisan support. And thirdly, that there might be a case in suggesting that this new policy continued up until the Reagan presidency.

Nevertheless, we should also be careful not to overestimate the transcendence of these changes in the diplomatic arena, since hard-dying assumptions persisted on both sides of the Atlantic. On the one hand, the Spanish discourse never considered a complete nor permanent detachment from the Atlantic framework. As a matter of fact, it could be argued that this de-Atlantized discourse was partially possible due to the safety net that the Spanish-American treaty in 1976 offered. Also, this sidelining of the NATO question

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<sup>23</sup> Charles POWELL: *El amigo americano*, pp. 494-495.

might had only been a temporally measure with face value, so as not to complicate the already-troubled waters of Spanish internal politics.

On the other hand, the new American policy towards Spain highlights the Ford administration's capacity to break with former lines of action. We should question, nonetheless, whether this new plan was result of personal policymaking or, rather, an obligatory deviation forced by the winds of change in Spain. In other words, while there should be some credit on the Ford administration for pursuing a new -and possibly longstanding- policy on the Spanish security problem, it is hard to imagine that former or later presidencies would had acted differently had the circumstances been the same. Ford's or Kissinger's new line of action could be seen, in conclusion, more as the result of chronological opportunism, rather than as the consequence of imaginative diplomacy. Afterall, US means were different, but security objectives remained being the same.

All in all, there is little doubt that the end of the Franco regime gave birth to new complicated scenarios, and that Spanish-American relations were not immune to this. There is a clear need for research in this line, and only future works will have the last word on whether these were years of notable change, or rather times of new bottles and old wine.

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