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## Spain's Zapatero Favors Low Profile in Foreign Policy



Zapatero is usually willing to let Brussels lead when it comes to foreign policy decisions

**Reelected in circumstances similar to in 2004, Zapatero will likely demure to the EU when it comes to international politics. Except in the bloc's relations with Latin America, where he can take a lead role.**

It was deja-vu in Spain on Sunday, March 9.

Socialist party leader Jose Luis Zapatero, 47, was reelected in an election with high voter turnout that was close to the record participation levels of 75 percent back in 2004. He had also scored a second victory over the same conservative opponent, Mariano Rajoy.

There had even been a terrorist attack days before the election, when Isaias Carrasco, a municipal Socialist legislator was shot dead, allegedly by Basque separatists. Exactly four years ago, on March 11, Islamic terror attacks on Madrid's commuter trains had killed 191 people, and were followed by an election that had shocked Spanish voters into ousting the incumbent right of center People's Party (PP) in favor of the relatively unknown Zapatero.

Virtually all Spaniards agree that had 11-M, which is Spanish shorthand for the Madrid attacks, not occurred days before the 2004 elections, Zapatero would not be serving two terms today.

### Reversed US relationship

In his first term, Zapatero had taken Spain in a radically different direction from his PP predecessor, Jose Maria Aznar, especially in foreign policy. Aznar had been closely allied with US President George W. Bush and had involved Spain in the Iraq war, which was opposed by 90 percent of Spaniards.

Zapatero immediately reversed Aznar's policy and realigned Spain with the France and Germany in terms of the Iraq war. He fulfilled his campaign pledge of unilaterally withdrawing Spanish troops from an international brigade -- a move that angered the Bush administration and sent US-Spain relations on a downward spiral.



Spain's Aznar (center) and Britain's Blair (left) had a privileged partnership with Bush

"Bush had been a convenient cover for expressing an ideological antipathy towards the US," said Soeren Kern, a German fellow for transatlantic relations at the Strategic Studies Group (GEES) in Madrid. "Even many socialists believe that Zapatero has taken Spain too far to the left.

"Zapatero grew up with a hard-core leftist ideology, so it is not just a matter of being anti-Bush, but anti-hypercapitalist America," he added.

### No need to RSVP

Zapatero has never been invited to the White House and even when US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice paid a courtesy call to Madrid last year, policy differences on Cuba were a bone of contention.

Spain, which maintains business interests with Havana, wants to



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engage the Communist dictatorship in a dialogue, whereas Rice had chided her counterpart, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, for not doing enough to support human rights on the island.



The US and Spain could work to end Cuba's isolation now that Castro has stepped down

"It will take a new US president in 2009 to restore bilateral relations," said Antonio Garrigues Walker, honorary president of the Spain-US Council in Madrid. He emphasized that commercial and cultural exchanges are thriving in spite of the personal animosity between Zapatero and Bush.

#### Common ground in Latin America

Garrigues pointed out that Spain has become the fourth-largest foreign investor in the US, after Canada, the UK and the Netherlands, with much of its financial resources going into Hispanic-owned businesses. The Spanish-speaking community is the fastest growing ethnic group in the US.

He added that both countries can also find common ground in Latin America, where Spain has always had strong historical and linguistic ties to its former colonies. And now that Fidel Castro has stepped down after nearly 50 years in power, they could even work constructively together to end Cuba's isolation.

#### Spain leads EU in Latin America, North Africa

Latin America is where Spain could lead the European Union in foreign policy, according to Guenther Maihold, a specialist in Iberian and Latin American affairs at the Berlin-based German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). Zapatero's policy of engagement in Cuba, in particular, could be beneficial for both Europe and the US.

"Another region where Spain is influential is North Africa," said Maihold, who explained that Zapatero has actively sought an EU-wide solution to stem the flow of African migration to Europe, which has been particularly problematic for countries on the Mediterranean rim.

Maihold added that Zapatero's consensual approach to foreign policy has worked well for the European Union. Unlike Aznar, who had tried to elevate Spain's international profile by regular meetings with Bush and then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Zapatero has generally has been content to take a backseat in the 27-nation bloc, letting France, Germany and Britain lead the EU.

#### Multilateral approach in foreign affairs

Other than in Kosovo, where Spain has come out against recognizing the former Serbian province's independence, Madrid is content to let Brussels take the driver's seat in foreign policy issues, according to Tom Burns Maranon, a news commentator and corporate strategist at Madrid-based Eurocofin.



Spain is concerned Kosovar secession will encourage militant Basques to declare independence

"Zapatero is not interested in creating a Spanish agenda in foreign affairs, but is keen on working within a multinational framework," he said.

The premier is concerned that Kosovo's recent secession from Serbia could encourage Spain's own militant Basque movement to declare independence unilaterally, Maranon explained.

Experts disagree, however, on whether domestic or foreign affairs will be the focus of Zapatero's second term. Although over the last ten years Spain has experienced unprecedented growth rates that have been largely fuelled by a construction boom, the economy has been slowing down due to the international credit crunch, Maranon said.

"Zapatero could even wind up devoting more time to foreign affairs to deflect from problems at home," he said.

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Kern of GEES, however, said Zapatero could become so consumed with the domestic economy that there would be little energy left to focus on Spain's international role.

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