


Beyond Brexit: the future of the Spanish-British relationship

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Theme

All the media noise about the possible implications of an eventual British exit from the EU (Brexit) should not stand in the way of a much-needed reassessment of the strategic potential offered by stronger bilateral ties between Spain and the UK.

Summary

Without prejudging the significance of Brexit or its possible implications, there is a risk that the debate surrounding an eventual British departure from the EU might monopolise the perception that Spain's political and strategic elites have of the UK. This could cause Spain to overlook or pay insufficient attention to a series of structural changes that have been unfolding in recent years at the core British foreign and defence policy. Such changes indicate a strengthening of the UK's global engagement and potential, and are aimed at preparing it for a world characterised by the progressive **displacement of the centre of economic and geopolitical gravity towards Asia**, the US's consequent strategic rebalancing towards Asia, the growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific sea corridor and doubts about the economic, demographic, political and strategic **sustainability of Europe**.

In a world in which Europe seems to be destined to count for less and the rest of the world destined to count for more, the future and the prosperity of European countries lies in their potential to project power globally, ie, beyond their immediate geographical neighbourhood. In this regard, its heritage as a global power and maritime persona mean the UK is arguably Europe's best-prepared country to get by in a 'non-European' world. Thus, the bilateral relationship with the UK appears to be a highly valuable asset for Spain in the context of a much-needed rediscovery of its own maritime and global potential.

Analysis

Introduction

After the uncertainty generated by the negative result of the British referendum about remaining in the EU, there is a risk of the perception of the UK in Spain being entirely conditioned by stereotypes and simplistic categories, eg, pro-EU versus anti-EU. This could well prevent many Spaniards from grasping wider changes in the global geopolitical scenario (such as the rise of Asia and other regions and the relative decline of Europe), as well as Britain's ongoing efforts to adjust to such changes, ie, through a

deliberate commitment to strengthening its strategic, diplomatic and economic influence beyond Europe.

The fallout from Brexit could certainly degenerate into British strategic atrophy and retrenchment, compromising both its internal cohesion and its capacity for leadership in Europe. However, this sort of speculation appears to be somewhat premature. In any event it is conceivable that the UK will try to maintain the closest-possible relations with the EU and seek to compensate for a possible Brexit by increasing defence spending and strengthening its network of bilateral relations in Europe and its role in NATO.¹ Theresa May, the new British Prime Minister, seems to be showing a clear interest in restating Britain's commitment to European and global security post-Brexit.² In this context, and without prejudging the possible implications of Brexit, it is worth emphasising that its global sensitivity and its record of strategic influence in the maritime domain make the UK the best-prepared country in Europe for confronting a 'non-European' world. This makes London a particularly attractive partner for Madrid.

Unlike many other EU countries, the historical legacy and strategic persona of Britain and Spain is one that transcends Europe. That is arguably the most important feature these two European countries share, and bears witness to the fact that their international position and orientation is informed by similar geopolitical traits and parameters. Critically, the Pyrenees and the English Channel play a comparable role in terms of framing the geostrategic predicament of Spain and the UK, in that they underscore the fact that they are both at the same time linked to the European peninsula but somewhat 'semi-detached' from it –and, through the Atlantic, oriented towards the wider world–. If Spain is located at the crossroads between the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, Europe and Africa, the UK too is perched between Western Europe and the Atlantic, with the North Sea-Baltic corridor taking the role of the Mediterranean. As with Spain, Britain's power depends to a great extent on its capacity to ensure an appropriately complementary fit between its (extra-European) maritime-global sway and a position of influence in the European geopolitical balances. In this very important sense, Britain's maritime and global character embodies the historical legacy of the Spanish Empire, and it is therefore an important point of reference for developing the strategic strength of Spain. Notwithstanding the key role that Europe and the EU have and will continue to have for Spain, the UK thus represents a significant partner in the context of a necessary global reorientation in Spanish foreign and defence policy.

Without prejudging the importance, the eventual disentanglement or the fallout from the Brexit drama, the need for reviving the strategic bilateral ties between Spain and the UK may be justified by a series of shifts in the tectonic plates that underlie global geopolitics, namely: (1) the gradual displacement of the world's economic and geopolitical centre of gravity towards Asia and the growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific sea corridor; (2) the US's consequent strategic rebalancing towards Asia; (3) the growing instability in Eastern Europe and the Middle East; (4) the doubts about the economic, demographic, political and strategic sustainability of Europe; and (5) the fact that Europe and the EU virtually monopolise the attention of Spanish foreign and security policy and

¹ See, for example, James Stavridis (2016), 'Europe's Loss is NATO's Gain', *Foreign Policy*, 25/VI/2016.

² Theresa May (2016), 'I'll make sure we build Trident right now', *Daily Mail*, 4/VII/2016.

exercise an influence over it that is more and more constraining, to the extent that it may become absorbed by them entirely. It follows from this that it is necessary to rethink the foundations of Spain's foreign and defence policy, complementing a very necessary and fruitful pro-European stance with a strengthening of Spain's extra-European outlook and a consequent diversification of its portfolio of alliances and partnerships. This would require greater effort to be made in terms of strategic maritime and global influence.³

In a changing world, bilateral relations with the UK are a highly valuable asset for rediscovering and developing Spain's maritime and global potential and persona. Here it is worth pointing out that strategic relations between Spain and the UK are under-exploited. This is due in large part to Spain's fixation on its Euro-Mediterranean component, to the detriment of the maritime and global component of its historical legacy and its strategic persona. The origins of this circumstance may be traced back to the 'crisis of 1898', and it seems to have taken on the tenor of a 'structural feature' of Spain's foreign and defence policy, evident since the transition to democracy in the late 1970s. To a somewhat lesser extent, the dispute over Gibraltar also acts as a hindrance to greater strategic cooperation between the UK and Spain.

The geopolitical and strategic foundations of British power

While its influence in Europe is perhaps less palpable today than that of Germany's, the UK continues being a strategic power of the first order on the continent. Apart from wielding a global influence and reach that arguably exceeds any other European country, the institutional and political balances of Europe continue to a significant extent to reflect the post-war Anglo-American geo-strategic design.⁴

The UK is a strategic power of the first rank in Europe and is also the European power with the greatest strategic global scope. This circumstance is underpinned by: (1) its advantageous geographical position (between the Atlantic and the North European plain and with its bases on the Gibraltar-Cyprus Mediterranean projection line), which confers upon the UK a sort of 'natural command and control' over the main European sea lanes of communication; (2) its demographic dynamism; (3) the depth of its strategic relations with the US; (4) its capacity for global influence (political, strategic and cultural); (5) London's role as a European and global financial centre; (6) its excellence in scientific and technological-industrial innovation (especially in the defence realm) and in the production of ideas and discourses (leading universities, think tanks, literature and television, publishers, news media with global reach); and (7) the geographical diversity of its trade and investments.

The demographic factor is especially revealing. In contrast with the rapid ageing characteristic of the rest of Europe (and Germany in particular), the UK maintains

³ Luis Simón (2014), "España después de Europa: la proyección marítima como elemento de la renovación estratégica española", *Estrategia Exterior Española*, nº 14/2014, Elcano Royal Institute, 14/V/2014.

⁴ See for instance John Baylis (1993), *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism: Britain and the Formation of NATO*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

dynamic and sustainable population growth. According to current projections, by 2040 the UK will be the country with largest population in Europe. It will have around 75 million inhabitants, of whom only 17 million will be aged above 65. For its part, Germany will have some 73 million inhabitants in 2040, of whom 24 million will be aged above 65.⁵

The UK's political geography accounts in large measure for its strategy and power. The twin strands of the British Empire were its maritime and global power and its involvement in European affairs. Its active engagement in European affairs, through a persistent strategy of forward diplomatic, economic and strategic presence, has enabled London to contribute to the preservation of a balance of power on the continent for the last three centuries, thereby forestalling the possible emergence of a dominant power that might upset the regional balance and eventually mount a challenge to British maritime-global primacy. In turn, its global power infrastructure has provided Britain a highly valuable source of wealth and strategic depth, one that helped underpin its own standing and position in European geopolitics.⁶ The efforts expended by British colonies during the Second World War provide a clear example of the strategic depth that the high seas and its global project give the UK amid the prospect of possible threats emanating from the European continent.

Admittedly, British power underwent a process of global strategic retrenchment following the Second World War –a process that was further compounded by the so-called withdrawal from 'east of Suez' in the 1970s–. Having said that, the tension between the global-maritime and the European dimensions continues to be at the heart of current discussions on the future of British grand strategy.⁷ Since the Second World War the special relationship with the US and NATO have come to represent Britain's maritime vocation, while its involvement in the EU (focusing on promoting free trade in Europe and counteracting the political and strategic integration of the continent) should be seen as an extension of its traditional strategic goal of preserving a balance of power on the continent.

The British geostrategic 'pendulum', which swings between the high seas and continental Europe, is clearly evident in the current circumstances. A good demonstration of this is the political distancing from an EU that is perceived from London as an excessively supranational project, and the steady weaving by the UK of a network of bilateral alliances in Europe that could serve as a counterbalance to the process of integration that, according to this logic, represents a threat to national sovereignty and to the concept of the balance of power in Europe, and would emphasise the economic and political leadership of Germany.⁸ This process includes mainly the strengthening of strategic ties

⁵ National statistics offices of the UK and Germany. These projections take migration trends into account.

⁶ Brendan Simms (2007), *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire*, Penguin Books, London.

⁷ See for instance Julian Lindley-French (2015), *Little Britain? Twenty-First Century Strategy for a Middling European Power*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

⁸ James Rogers & Luis Simón (2016), 'Brexit: Europe at a strategic crossroads?', *European Geostrategy*, vol. 8, nr 17.

with France and the development of stronger political, economic and strategic links with the Baltic and Scandinavian countries.⁹

The current Conservative government's interest in reviving the UK's maritime-global dimension should be added to this strategy of creating a system of balances in Europe. Despite the impact that the cuts in defence spending have had on the Royal Navy in recent years (it is currently without any aircraft carriers), the UK spends more on defence than any other European country.¹⁰ If anything its leadership in this arena has become more pronounced, owing to the fact that, over the last few years, defence cuts in other European countries (including France) have been even deeper than in the UK.

With two new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers, six new Type 45 destroyers, eight Type 26 frigates and Astute-class submarines in the pipeline (the latter significantly superior in capability to the French Barracuda class), greater tonnage, modern operational experience underpinned by its indisputable status as 'top lieutenant' to the US in the main post-Cold War western operations (Afghanistan and Iraq) and a global infrastructure of bases, intelligence and diplomacy, the UK's capacity for maritime-global influence is arguably unparalleled in Europe. In light of the pace of naval construction in China, India and Russia, and the intangible development and experience that is needed to get a global naval and maritime infrastructure up and running, it may be expected that the UK will remain the country with the second-greatest capacity for strategic maritime and global influence at least until the end of the 2020s.

In addition to the above it is important to highlight Britain's ongoing efforts to strengthen its network of global strategic partnerships, namely: (1) the opening of a new Royal Air Force station in Dubai and a new Royal Navy station in Bahrain, as well as the strengthening of the UK's strategic and industrial ties with Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar (initiatives that according to several British analysts herald a 'return east of Suez'); (2) recent efforts to develop a strategic relationship with Japan and (to a lesser degree) South Korea; (3) the growing presence in Myanmar; (4) the carrying out of periodic military exercises in the Indo-Pacific with Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand (with which the UK maintains a defence commitment within the framework of the Five Power Defence Arrangements); (5) the establishment of a strategic maritime partnership with Brazil, with the recent signing of a naval 'memorandum of understanding', and greater investment in the bases on Ascension and Saint Helena (which facilitate the UK's influence on both sides of the South Atlantic); (6) the collaboration agreement signed with Canada on global diplomacy; and (7) the drawing up of a strategy for the Arctic.¹¹ These initiatives confirm a pattern that promises to result

⁹ Luis Simón and James Rogers (2011), 'British Geostrategy for a New European Age', *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 56, nr 2, pp. 52-58.

¹⁰ See *The Military Balance 2016*, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, chapter 4.

¹¹ See for instance Gareth Stanfield & Saul Kelly (2015), 'A Return East of Suez? UK Military Deployments to the Gulf', *Briefing Paper Royal United Services Institute*, April; Jonathan Eyal *et. al.* (2015), 'Partners for Global Security: New Directions for the UK-Japan Defence and Security Relationship', *Whitehall Report*, vol. 2, nr 15, 11/VIII/2015; James Rogers (2013), 'European (British and French) Geostrategy in the Indo-Pacific', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, vol. 9, nr 1, pp. 69-89; and Luis Simón (2015), 'Europe, the Rise of Asia and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship', *International Affairs*, vol. 91, nr 5, pp. 269-289.

in the reinforcement of Britain's global persona, perhaps to the detriment of Europe, and may well be further aggravated in the coming years given the continent's negative long-term economic and demographic prospects. In short, the UK is taking steps at a rather impressive speed, at the level of strategies, capabilities and alliances, with the aim of strengthening its global influence and presence in an international context dominated by the rise of Asia and Europe's relative economic and political decline.

The UK's geostrategic priorities for the decades ahead may be portrayed as follows: (1) to consolidate itself as a leading power in the main maritime spaces surrounding the European peninsula (the Baltic-Arctic and the Mediterranean); (2) to affirm its position of strategic control (in cooperation with the US and France) over Europe's main maritime communication routes, including the North Atlantic, the 'old route' between Asia and northern Europe (via the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean), the 'new route' between Asia and northern Europe (via the Arctic Ocean and the Baltic Sea), as well as the connection between Europe and the Atlantic, both north (North and Central America) and south (West Africa and South America); (3) to strengthen its presence and strategic reach in the Persian Gulf and the western Indian Ocean in a context of strategic American scaling back; and (4) to maintain and underpin its strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific maritime corridor.

The UK and Spain: shared interests and geostrategic synergies

The advantages that Spain can derive from a strategic alignment with the UK are obvious, given the UK's position as a major strategic power in Europe and Europe's foremost global power, as a Mediterranean and Atlantic power and its pre-positioning in the Indo-Pacific and Arctic geopolitical spaces. A close strategic relationship with the UK would help advance some of Spain's main geopolitical objectives.

Its progressive distancing from the EU and global outreach does not mean Britain becomes unattractive as a partner for Spain. In fact, a strong bilateral relationship with Spain can help Spain overcome its excessive political dependency on the EU and diversify its global network of partnerships and alliances.

Moreover, its status as a global power makes the UK a highly valuable asset in aiding the necessary rediscovery of Spain's maritime and extra-European personality, indispensable for ensuring its political influence and economic prosperity over the medium and long run.

An improved strategic alignment with the UK would help Spain to 'think beyond' Europe and the Mediterranean, constituting an essential asset in regenerating its maritime and global character, as well as mitigating its excessive and growing economic, political and cultural dependence on the process of European integration.

Beyond its global and extra-European dimension, the UK's importance in Europe and its immediate geographical vicinity is only reinforced by the US decision to concentrate American strategic energies in the Asia-Pacific. Although the US will continue having influence in Europe from the rearguard, and offering 'strategic depth' to NATO, the UK will be one of the key European leaders of the Alliance, both in terms of guaranteeing

the preservation of the balance of power in Eastern Europe and in terms of leading any European efforts to project power beyond Europe.

It is worth emphasising the special importance of the maritime corridor that stretches from the eastern Mediterranean to the western Indian Ocean by way of the Red and Arabian Seas (of critical economic and security importance to Europe and Spain). The strategic retrenchment of the US and its rebalancing towards Asia have exposed the instability of this region, as exemplified by the violence and chaos currently ravaging the wider Middle East. In this context, Britain's efforts to strengthen its position both in the eastern Mediterranean (witness the intervention led by the UK and France in Libya in 2011, and the Royal Air Force's involvement in Syria) and 'east of Suez' will help safeguard European and Western security interests in those areas. In order to contribute to these goals and bolster its strategic influence, Spain should strengthen its cooperation in the maritime corridor that encompasses the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

That said, Spain should on no account make the mistake of idealising its relationship with the UK or, for that matter, any other bilateral or multilateral partnership. Any alliance runs the risk of creating pronounced dependencies. The only cast-iron guarantee that a particular alliance will be beneficial to Spain is Spain's own strength, which requires both a greater investment in defence as well as a diverse portfolio of strategic alliances and partnerships. Spain should thus combine its alliance with the UK with a greater financial investment in defence, a more globally-oriented defence and foreign policy, stronger strategic ties with Portugal, and strong relations with the US and France, which share key interests with Spain in Europe and the Maghreb-Sahel region.

Bearing all the above in mind, an alignment with the UK (at the level of capabilities and alliances) could serve to galvanise the development of Spain's strategic power and maritime reach over the coming decades. Here it is helpful to have an idea of the basic foundations of British maritime power:

- Investment in and commitment to developing long-range sea, air and amphibious capabilities, the principal goal of which is to underpin the UK's global influence and strategic reach.
- Investment in a worldwide diplomatic and intelligence network (civilian and military).
- The maintenance of a dense and profound worldwide strategic infrastructure for logistical provisioning, one that revolves around its overseas territories and a network of bases and supply points that extends to the Mediterranean (Gibraltar and Cyprus), the North Sea (Shetland Islands), Indian Ocean (Diego Garcia), Pacific Ocean (Singapore and Brunei) and the South Atlantic (Ascension-Saint Helena-Tristan da Cunha and the Falklands). Here it is worth emphasising the special importance of Ascension-Saint Helena and Diego Garcia, in terms of facilitating the UK's strategic reach in the South Atlantic (both South America and West Africa in its totality) and the Indo-Pacific, respectively.
- The cultivation of a network of strategic alliances and partnerships with small and larger powers located in geographical areas that facilitate the UK's global mobility and strategic reach. Examples include: Sierra Leone, Nigeria and South Africa in western and southern Africa; Brazil and Chile in the South Atlantic; India, Australia,

Myanmar and Singapore (in the Indo-Pacific region); Cyprus, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and southern Gulf States in the area adjoining the Mediterranean-Red Sea-Gulf corridor; Japan and South Korea in the North Pacific; and Norway and Canada in the Arctic. By means of access agreements, periodic visits, educational, military and intelligence exchanges, and the periodic carrying out of joint training, manoeuvres and exercises with these countries, the UK seeks to improve its situational awareness in regions of (growing) strategic and economic importance.

Apart from the benefits that close relations with the UK would have on Spain's influence in Europe, such relations would also garner the following specific rewards: the strengthening of Spain's strategic influence on the west coast of Africa (owing to the UK's naval power, relationships and bases in the region); projection towards the East, including the Levant, the Red Sea and (principally) the Indian Ocean; and Spain's pre-positioning in the Arctic.

Gibraltar as an opportunity

Of course, any attempt to reassess the need for closer bilateral strategic cooperation between Spain and the UK runs the risk of hitting the stumbling block of Gibraltar. This subject needs to be set in the appropriate context however, namely domestic politics and symbolism. The strategic impact on Spain of the British presence in Gibraltar is minor, and in any event not necessarily negative.

In fact, the main strategic challenge of the Gibraltar dispute is arguably its capacity for undermining (for domestic political reasons) greater strategic cooperation between the two countries. It is important that Spain's strategic and political elites take this problem on board and do not allow the Gibraltar 'squabble' to sabotage the development of a bilateral relationship that represents a major asset in realising Spain's strategic potential.

Paradoxically, the British decision to place its strategic relations with the US ahead of its frustration with such developments as Irish independence and the Suez crisis provide Spain with an example of how to address the Gibraltar dispute in a pragmatic manner. It is worth recalling in this context that the US has been a major political advocate of the independence of Ireland, the geographical location of which (between the UK and the Atlantic) could have a strategic value for the UK that is the equivalent of Gibraltar for Spain. The US also contributed, with its attitude to the 1956 Suez Canal crisis, to the progressive weakening of British influence in Egypt and east of Suez.

Despite these developments being initially perceived as unfavourable (if not downright hostile), the UK did not turn its back on the opportunity of strategic relations with the US. On the contrary: after the Suez crisis, if anything the UK strengthened its relations with US, thereby demonstrating its pragmatism and 'cool-headedness', prioritising the promise of a better future over the emotions generated by an uncomfortable past. The gamble paid off, because the strategic relationship with the US has played a key part in British global influence over recent decades.

The lesson to be learned is not that Spain should renounce its sovereignty over Gibraltar, but that it should not allow its relations with the UK to be 'hijacked' by a dispute

(surrounding Gibraltar) that tends to be governed more by the dynamics and emotions of domestic politics than by geostrategic logic. In this context, Spain should view the British presence in Gibraltar as an asset, in terms of the two countries sharing a series of fundamental geostrategic interests in common, namely: the need to safeguard the freedom of navigation in the Straits and the trade and strategic route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, as well as the need to ensure that instability in North Africa does not jeopardise the geopolitical status quo in the Straits.

Conclusion and recommendations

In a world in which Europe seems destined to count for less and the rest of the world to count for more, the future and prosperity of European countries depends upon their capacity for global strategic and economic influence, beyond the confines of their immediate geographical locale. In this context, and without prejudging the disengagement or possible implications of Brexit, it is worth highlighting that its global awareness and its record of engagement in the maritime domain ensure that the United Kingdom is the best-prepared country in Europe for a 'non-European' world. It follows that bilateral relations with the UK represent a highly valuable asset in the context of a much-needed rediscovery and development of Spain's maritime and global heritage and potential.

The fostering of cooperation at the highest political level is an indispensable requisite for constructing a close strategic relationship between Spain and the UK. Such a relationship should revolve around the willingness of Spain to align its capabilities and its 'portfolio of alliances and partnerships' in accordance with a maritime and global vision. In this context, the next Spanish government may wish to consider the following courses of action for its foreign and defence policies at the levels of strategy, capabilities and partnerships/alliances.

Strategic level

Spain needs to recognise and declare that its strategic vision revolves around the same fundamental principle governing British geostrategy: the preservation of a balance of power in Europe, and of a liberal and maritime-oriented regional geopolitical order. In this context, Spain should consider the following courses of action in the foreign policy realm:

- Recognising the UK as a necessary and positive interest in Europe, given its interest in countering hegemonic tendencies and preserving a balance of power on the continent. Here Spain should express its concern regarding the UK's political parting of ways from the EU and, in a hypothetical post-Brexit scenario, affirm its commitment to supporting the closest-possible relationship between London and Brussels.
- Conveying its concern about the decline in defence spending in Europe, making a bigger effort at the national level, and showing willingness to work with the UK, France and other countries (both within the framework of the EU and NATO) in order to remedy this tendency.
- Embracing its maritime and extra-regional vocation and its commitment to a defence policy centred on the promotion of strategic capabilities and a strategic culture that

reflect this vocation, both within the framework of NATO and the EU and its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In a possible post-Brexit scenario, Spain should look favourably on close ties between the UK and the structures of the CSDP and work in pursuit of a close relationship between the EU and NATO.

- Working towards greater strategic coordination and cooperation with the UK in West Africa and in the eastern Mediterranean, and increasing Spain's strategic presence, and cooperation with the UK, in the eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Arctic.

Capabilities

In this regard the capabilities of the Spanish Navy will need to be strengthened, consolidating the long-term commitment to maintaining excellence in areas that are critical to maritime and global power projection –such as surface vessels, submarines and modern and long-range aerial and amphibious resources– and strengthening strategic cooperation with the UK in the naval and aerial arenas.

Alliances/partnerships level

It will be necessary to strengthen strategic bilateral relations with the US and France (Britain's principal strategic partners) and invest in developing an infrastructure of strategic alliances relevant to Spain's maritime ambitions, following the trail carved out by the UK: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Nigeria, India, South Africa, Australia, Malaysia, Myanmar, South Korea and Japan (most of them countries with significant demographic and economic potential).