

Divisions widen in Spanish ruling class over relations with US

By Alejandro López
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The coming to power in the US of an aggressively nationalist, protectionist and anti-European Union administration under Donald Trump is opening up significant divisions in the Spanish ruling class over how best to preserve and advance national interests.

In the aftermath of the fall of the fascist Franco regime in the mid-1970s, Spain was brought into both the European Economic Community and the US-led NATO military alliance. Because of US support for European integration, there was no apparent conflict between an economic orientation to Europe and the US acting as the main guarantor of Spain's national interests. For its part, the US saw Spain, located at the entrance of the Mediterranean, as a vital geo-strategic asset in the Cold War and as a NATO member.

The new Trump administration, however, is repudiating its previous role as the overseer of European integration. Trump is openly forging ties with Europe's neo-fascists who are hostile to the European Union (EU). He has described it as a German instrument and extolled the UK's decision to leave the EU as the model for other European countries.

The question posed for the ruling elite in Spain and elsewhere in Europe is how to defend their economic and military positions vis-a-vis actual and potential competitors in the new situation.

The official position of the Spanish Popular Party (PP) government was set out by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy who stated that Spain will maintain "the best possible relations" with the new US president, insisting both countries are "strategic partners and solid allies."

Foreign Minister Alfonso Dastis declared, "We enjoy a relationship that, regardless of the White House tenant, is based on constant elements," including a shared history and language as well as Spain's

influence in Europe, South America, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. He added there was also "a very close cooperation in defense and security, which was deepened during the term of the previous administration."

Such a position is based on wishful thinking that relations will continue as before and a cautious wait and see attitude with respect to the reaction of other major European powers. This complacent position came under attack by *El País*, the voice of liberal Spanish imperialism. Traditionally a pro-US newspaper, it has dedicated more than a dozen editorial articles criticising Trump since his inauguration in November—a sign of deep crisis in Spanish foreign policy and a shift to more pro-EU, pro-German positions.

In an editorial, "Too prudent: Appeasement policies will not work with Donald Trump," *El País* warns that the Trump administration, "isolationist in defense and very aggressive and protectionist in trade," can seriously damage the interests of Spain. The government had "to face this circumstance and show the necessary firmness."

It called on EU leaders, particularly German Chancellor Angela Merkel, "to defend the values and interests that are at odds with those held by Trump," and which "have cemented the transatlantic alliance for decades."

In another piece, "Trump against Europe," *El País* says Trump "sympathizes with Europhobes, wants to encourage divisions and is ramping up tension across the Atlantic" and therefore, "Europe can no longer ignore the evidence or hope simply that all of this comes to nothing."

On January 21, "A Sad Confirmation," the newspaper warns that Europe should "clearly state the

red lines they will not allow Trump to cross.”

On January 27, “In Defence of Mexico,” *El País* exclaimed on the need to defend Spain’s interests in its former colony, stating, “Mexico cannot defend itself alone from the aggressions...This is why a clear and a loud voice is necessary for Mexico’s defence, both from Europe and, above all, from the Ibero-American countries.”

Similar sentiments are expressed in the publications of the prestigious state-funded Elcano Royal Institute think tank. One example is the January 19 article, “Welcome Mr. Marshall,” by senior analyst Félix Artega, one of Spain’s foremost strategists who has close links to the country’s military and intelligence services and a history of support for US-led wars and Spain’s involvement in them. In it he warns that the “views expressed by Donald Trump on NATO, the EU and Europeans, both during the campaign and on the eve of his inauguration...do not allow hope that anything good can come from the new administration on the other side of the Atlantic.”

Elsewhere, Artega has called for the EU to consider increasing its “strategic autonomy” and reinforcing its “collective defence.”

There is also a position in ruling circles, which states that the coming to power of the Trump administration should be viewed as an opportunity for Spanish imperialism. Carlos Malamud, another senior analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute, says it could open more doors for Spain in South America. “Spain must strengthen its presence in Latin America...If the projections for an increase in protectionism in the US are met, there will not only be opportunities for China in Latin America, but also for Spain and the EU. In the increasingly uncertain world we live...Latin America should be important for Europeans.”

For others, Spain should align its destiny even more firmly with the US. PP Deputy Secretary of Communication, Pablo Casado, states that Spain can replace the UK as the new “priority partner” of the US in the EU following Brexit, when the UK officially leaves. In other words, Madrid should play a pivotal role as a bridge between the US and Europe.

Even more explicit is Luís Simón, director of the Elcano Royal Institute. In his piece, “Trump, Rajoy II and the future strategic relation between the US and Spain,” Simón declares that the moment has come to

turn the page on the pessimism over Trump’s victory and to realize it “opens up a series of opportunities to relaunch the bilateral relationship between Madrid and Washington.”

Spain, Simón continues, should have a “pro-active attitude” meaning that the old conception of it merely being an “operational base” for the US army is transformed into one based on “Spain as a strategic actor and privileged partner.”

This would be achieved by first exploiting those geostrategic attributes of Spain identified as a priority by the US, including “the missile defence, amphibious and special operations areas.” And second, developing other dimensions of the Spain-US alliance that could be of specific interest to Spanish imperialism, such as “the exploration of the extra-European potential (Atlantic and Indo-Pacific) of the alliance.”

In other words, Spain becomes a massive US military platform from which Washington will launch its military operations in exchange for its support for Spain’s interests elsewhere.

Whatever happens, the author says, a massive increase in Spanish military expenditure is required and “a greater effort” made “to promote Spain’s culture of defence.”

The “culture of defense,” a truly Orwellian term for militarism, is a reference to the call which all geopolitical analysts make, irrespective of their position on the US, to overcome the Spanish population’s traditional hostility towards the military. Beset by unemployment of 22 percent (53 percent among youth) and poverty levels affecting a quarter of the population, the political establishment has no progressive answer. Whichever faction prevails in the fight over Spain’s future political alignments, the response, as it is across the globe, to the collapse of the US-led post-war capitalist world order is militarism, austerity, and the suppression of social and political opposition at home.

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