

Spain and Turkey: can relations further widen and deepen?

by *Eduard Soler i Lecha*

During the past few decades, Spain-Turkey relations have experienced a substantial positive change in several areas including political dialogue, economic partnerships and socio-cultural linkages. The establishment of high-level political summits since 2009 and the blossoming of bilateral trade and foreign direct investment in the last decade are clear examples of this trend. This process has taken place in the context of mutual commitment between the two countries to the transatlantic alliance, their Europeanization processes and an impressive internationalization of both countries' economies.

Even if contemporary relations between the two countries have never been as strong and robust as they are right now, there exists room for widening and deepening them. The primary goal should be to make Spain-Turkey relations less dependent on political circumstantial impetus by decision-makers and less structured around limited corporative interests.

In addition, Turkey's EU accession process, broadly supported by Spanish political elites, and the democratic challenge in the Middle East and North Africa offer room for further improvements in bilateral cooperation. However, Spain and Turkey must find a way to explore new avenues for cooperation amidst a difficult context marked by the EU's hesitation regarding Turkey's accession and the economic crisis affecting Southern Europe as well as the European integration process as a whole.

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In the last three decades, Spain and Turkey have intensified, diversified and institutionalized their bilateral relations. This process has taken place in a context marked by their mutual commitment to the transatlantic alliance, by their Europeanization processes and by an impressive internationalization of both economies. Today, the challenge is to maintain, and if possible, enhance bilateral relations amidst an increasingly troubled environment marked by the European integration process going through its worst ever crisis and the Mediterranean region shaken by popular uprisings, political changes and conflict.

This paper responds to five focal questions: First, which factors have favored the rapid intensification of political and economic relations between both countries? Second, why has Spain always supported Turkish aspirations to join the EU? Third, how is the current European crisis affecting their bilateral relations and Spain's support to Turkey's EU bid? Fourth, in which topics on the international agenda have they shared common views and developed joint actions? Fifth, to what extent do both countries share a common understanding about the ongoing political and social changes in the Middle East and North Africa?

Bilateral Relations

Relations between Spain and Turkey gained momentum since they respectively recuperated democracy after almost forty years of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Madrid (1939-1975) and three years of military government in Ankara (1980-1983). Since then, political and economic interactions constantly increased regardless of the party in power in both countries. Several factors underpinned this positive evolution: the fact that relations were not very robust before the 1970s; the absence of bilateral disputes; the consensus among Spanish political elites on the benefits of Turkey's transatlantic alignment and European vocation; the dynamism of business elites in both countries; and the opening of new communication channels between the two societies.

Spanish-Turkish relations have simultaneously intensified in the political, economic and social arena and steps in any of these fields have also boosted progress in the others. On the political level, it is worth mentioning that the two countries decided to move their relations a step forward with the institutionalization of yearly governmental summits, known as High-Level Meetings, launched with the inaugural April 2009 summit in Istanbul. These meetings gather not only the heads of governments and the ministers of foreign affairs but also a wide range of technical ministries (energy, industry, education, culture, etc.) in an attempt to explore new fields of cooperation. By committing to organize these summits periodically, both countries reaffirm their recognition of each other as preferential partners. In fact, both countries hold similar high-level meetings: Spain with other states including its European and Mediterranean neighbors and key states within the EU; and Turkey with growing partners like Italy, the Russian Federation, Greece, Bulgaria, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Syria (until 2011) and with new regimes in the Middle East including Egypt following the Arab Spring.

These meetings have also turned out to be a unique space to advance bilateral relations at the non-governmental level. Occasionally, civil forums and business gatherings have been organized on the sidelines of official summits, especially since the private sector has become a dynamic force driving Spain-Turkey relations. The rapid increase in bilateral trade relations provides evidence of this reality. In 2012, Spain was the 10th largest market for Turkey's exports and its 9th largest provider of goods and services. The boost since 2001 is remarkable: a 291 percent increase in exports, and 464 percent in imports.¹ As for investment, notwithstanding the economic crisis hitting Spain and other Southern European countries, the growing interest and presence of Spanish companies in Turkey is visible, particularly in sectors such as finance, construction, infrastructure, textiles and tourism. Given its size and strategic importance, Spanish financial giant BBVA's November 2010 purchase of a 24.9 percent stake in Garanti Bank is an indicator of this trend.

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Due to this investment and other transactions, in 2011 Turkey became the first destination for Spanish Foreign Direct Investment (reaching 18 percent of its FDI).² The opening of the Spanish-Turkish Chamber of Commerce in 2011 and the organization of two Spain-Turkey Investment and Cooperation Conferences since November 2012 are also clear examples of the vitality of these relations despite the effects of the economic crisis on Spain since 2008.

Finally, social and cultural exchanges are not an exception to this positive trend. Among recent developments, Turkey's participation as "guest country" in the February 2013 ARCO fair (International Contemporary Art Fair) in Madrid was noteworthy.³ The openings of the Cervantes Institute in Istanbul in 2001 and the Turkish Consulate in Barcelona in 2008, and the increasing number of Erasmus exchanges among both countries' universities are also facilitating free flowing communication between both societies. Perhaps the clearest indication of these fast-growing links is the substantial increase of direct flights between various Spanish cities and Istanbul. While a few years ago there were only direct flights from Madrid and Barcelona (and they were not daily), today there are 21 weekly connections to Istanbul from Barcelona and 18 from Madrid. Moreover, Turkish Airlines is now flying to other Spanish cities such as Malaga, Bilbao, Valencia and Santiago de Compostela.⁴

The European Dimension

Since its accession to the EU in 1986, Spain has backed Turkey's aspirations to join the EU. Indeed, every time Spain assumed the EU-turn presidency (in 1989, 1995, 2002 and 2010) the Spanish government did its best to boost EU-Turkish relations as a complement to their excellent bilateral relations. The first occasion was in 1989, with a social-democratic government led by Felipe González. At that time, Turgut Özal visited Spain and the Spanish government expressed its support to Turkey's desire to join the EU (the Turkish government had applied for the first time for full membership two years earlier).⁵ Later in 1995, Spain held the rotational presidency of the EU at a crucial time for Turkey. At the time, the EU and Turkey were negotiating the prospective Customs Union, and Spain (still led by a Socialist government) applied pressure on other left-wing EU governments and members of the European Parliament to approve its entry. In 2002, with a conservative government led by José María Aznar, Spain also mediated the EU-Turkey negotiations to foster EU-NATO cooperation and to express its support for a fair evaluation of Turkey's candidacy. In 2010, at a very complicated moment when accession negotiations were at a virtual halt, Spain succeeded in opening one new chapter of the discussions (food security, veterinary and phytosanitary policy). This was labeled as a success taking into account the hostile position of several member states *vis-à-vis* accession negotiations with Turkey. However, it fell short of meeting the expectations created by the then

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Spanish President, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and his Foreign Affairs Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, who had affirmed that under the Spanish rotational Presidency four chapters would be opened and that negotiations would confirm the “irreversibility” of the accession process.⁶

Thus, one of Spain’s peculiarities is that although the Socialist Party and the Popular Party have disagreed on many issues over the foreign policy agenda, they have converged in their support for Turkey’s EU bid. Moreover, the two parties have been maintaining their positions both in government and in opposition. Mariano Rajoy, the current Spanish President of the Government confirmed this traditional line, affirming in the sidelines of the 2012 High-Level meeting that “if Turkey does the same as the rest of us did, it will be entitled to join the European Union and will receive unconditional support from Spain”.⁷ This continuity lends great stability to bilateral relations, and explains the lack of political and social debate on Turkey’s “Europeanness.” As such it contributed to the promotion of Spain’s image as a “friendly country” in Turkey. Not surprisingly therefore, Spain, together with other member states (United Kingdom, Italy, Sweden and Finland), is part of the “friends of Turkey” informal group aiming to speed up the accession process at the EU level.

On the other hand, however, a few exceptions to this general trend can be found in the positions of smaller political parties, mainly from the extreme left. On some occasions, they have referred to human rights as well as the Kurdish and Armenian issues as elements to put additional pressure on Turkey during accession negotiations. Some figures in center-right nationalist parties from Catalonia and the Basque Country have also questioned whether full accession should be the ultimate goal of EU-Turkish relations, linking this hesitation to their Christian conception of Europe. However, these ideas have never become their parties’ official position. Thus, Turkey has never been a major issue on the political debate and more importantly, no political party has used this issue as part of electoral confrontations.

This traditionally broad support should be framed within the pro-enlargement stance of the Spanish political elites. This political consensus results from a convergence of values, interests and strategic vision. Spanish elites are fully aware of the benefits of Spain’s accession to the EU and the contribution of the European perspective to the democratization and modernization of Spain. It follows that it is particularly difficult for them to deny this opportunity to Turkey and other countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Additionally, maintaining a pro-accession stance benefits Spain’s image in Turkey and other candidate countries, facilitating the development of bilateral relations that were either non-existent or marginal, and the improvement of business opportunities for Spanish companies. Finally, on a more strategic note, Turkey’s European aspirations were seen as a long-term opportunity to reinforce the Mediterranean axis within the EU and to shift the center of gravity of the Union southwards. This would also have additional benefits

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as it would increase the EU's leverage in North Africa and the Middle East, one of Spain's main foreign policy priorities. Still, we can observe nuances depending on the political affiliation of the Spanish governments in relation to this last point. While the Popular Party has emphasized the transatlantic dimension and the economic opportunities linked with Turkey's accession, the Socialist Party insisted on the need to reaffirm the EU's inclusiveness and to confront the conception of the EU as a Christian club.

The Impact of the European Crisis

Will Spain be able to maintain its pro-enlargement and pro-Turkey stance in a context of economic difficulties and popular disaffection towards the EU? Before giving an answer to this fundamental question, this brief underlines three repercussions of the current economic crisis on Spain-Turkey relations.

Firstly, enlargement is no longer a priority. The EU and most of its member states (Spain included) are currently focusing all their attention and efforts on improving their economic situations. European leaders have little time to devote to the enlargement strategy and are hesitating on whether they should deepen integration before considering widening membership. Thus, apart from Croatia, no other candidate is likely to be in a position to join the EU any time soon. On the other side, political and business elites in Turkey do not perceive the EU as an indispensable anchor anymore. This is mainly due to the relative good shape of Turkey's economy compared to the Euro Zone countries and this feeling will likely increase as Turkey's range of options widens, with an increase in economic collaboration and trade relations with the Middle East and Asia as compared to the early-2000s.

Secondly, the Turkish market is becoming increasingly important for Spain. Although Spain along with other Southern European countries has dropped a few ranks in Turkey's trade partners list, the trade balance is increasingly favorable to Spain. This is closely related to the Spanish economy's reduced aggregate demand and the growing competitiveness of its products. Moreover, Spanish internal market weakness is also nurturing the idea that internationalization might be the only way to survive. In that sense, Turkey's economic performance in the last decade and all the advantages from its customs union with the EU make it especially appealing for Spanish firms wanting to invest overseas.

Thirdly, the Spanish public is becoming increasingly critical towards the EU and this might also ultimately affect its traditional pro-enlargement stance. The 2012 Eurobarometer shows that Spaniards' distrust of the EU has multiplied to the extent that 72 percent affirm that they do not trust the EU while in 2007 this distrust represented only 20 percent of the population.⁸ This obviously has repercussions in the population's support levels for further EU enlargements. Comparing the results of the 2012 Eurobarometer with

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those of 2008, it becomes clear that opposition levels have increased mainly in countries where the crisis has hit more severely, including Cyprus (+25), Italy (+15), Portugal (+10) as well as our focal point, Spain (+23). Despite this considerable rise, the total percentage opposing enlargement in cases like Spain or Portugal (39 percent and 40 percent respectively) is not nearly close to cases like Austria (73 percent) or Germany (74 percent). Even if data for support or opposition to Turkey’s accession are only available until 2010, there is a similar trend and the opposition to Turkey’s accession increased more rapidly in countries affected by the crisis such as Spain (+14), Ireland (+14) or Portugal (+9). Once more, the level of opposition to Turkey’s accession in Spain (46 percent) is far from those of Austria (91 percent) or Germany (78 percent).⁹

Despite these figures, the support of the Spanish government to Turkey’s accession is likely to continue because the level of opposition of the Spanish public has not reached a critical point and economic interests at stake are more vital than ever before. The fact that enlargement is no longer a priority also reduces the pressure on the Spanish government to take an outspoken position on this particular issue. Certainly, this is a moment in which, due to the political changes in France and Cyprus, Turkey-EU relations could be revamped. In this context, the Spanish position is not likely to change the dynamics of EU-Turkish relations. Consequently, the most likely scenario is one in which Spain continues to support Turkey’s European aspiration but only becomes active in this particular field if (and only) other key European actors such as Germany and France agree to revive the accession process.

The International Agenda

Together with the EU agenda, transatlantic relations and the Middle East and North Africa are the two areas where Spain and Turkey have similar interests. In these areas Spain and Turkey are both committed members of organizations such as NATO, the OECD and the Union for the Mediterranean, as well as active members of the UN system. In other words, multilateralism has been a common pattern for Spain and Turkey’s foreign and security policies. On many occasions, Ankara and Madrid have manifested their intention towards finding a common ground and attaining a common position within these international platforms. A significant example of this dynamic is how the two countries endorsed one of the most controversial initiatives put forward by NATO on the Old Continent after the end of the Cold War, i.e. the European ballistic missile defense system for Europe. While Spain will host anti-missile batteries in Rota’s naval base, early warning radars are being deployed in Eastern Turkey.

However, their participation in these organizations has not necessarily translated into specific Spanish-Turkish-led initiatives. There is only one significant exception to this trend: the creation of the United Nations Alliance of

Civilizations (UNAOC), co-sponsored by President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2005. This initiative was presented as an alternative to the narrative of the “clash of civilizations” and intended to contribute to the mutual understanding among different cultures, focusing on relations between Islam and the West. Their success in establishing the UN subsidiary body can be seen as a step forward in their cooperation in international affairs, not to mention as a substantial demonstration of Turkey and Spain’s mutual complementary interests and their joint ability to insert issues and proposals into the global agenda. Inspired by this success, Erdogan and Zapatero co-authored an op-ed in *The New York Times* following the so-called “Cartoon crisis” in which they called for respect and calm, arguing that “the publication of these caricatures may be perfectly legal, but is not indifferent and thus ought to be rejected from a moral and political standpoint.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, the Alliance of Civilizations was a highly-ideological initiative which in Spain became the target of criticism by the Popular Party and the conservative media. Thus, the defeat of Rodríguez Zapatero in the 2011 elections, as well as the drastic cuts in international cooperation funds, were seen as a threat to the continuity of Spanish support to this initiative. For the moment, Spain has decided to maintain its participation, albeit reducing its contribution to this project. This unexpected continuity is largely due to the fact that a unilateral retreat from the Alliance of Civilizations could harm Spanish-Turkish relations and lead to a deterioration of Spain’s image among Muslim countries of the UN in a period in which Spain is competing with Turkey and New Zealand for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council for the period of 2015-2016.

Although the current Spanish government does not hold a warmly favorable view towards the Alliance of Civilizations, considering it an uncomfortable heritage of the previous socialist government, it nonetheless wishes to maintain a constructive foreign policy dialogue with Turkey. Therefore, the current main challenge is to explore additional avenues of mutual cooperation. The Alliance may not be the best framework for a joint political initiative but the Middle East and North Africa still remain the arenas where this cooperation could bear more fruits.

The Democracy Challenge in the Middle East and North Africa

There are four parallels between the two countries’ attitudes towards the Middle East and North Africa. Firstly, for a long time the two countries felt comfortable with the status-quo, were reluctant regarding unexpected consequences of regime change and prioritized regional stability over any other topic or concern in their agendas towards the region. Secondly, both countries have experienced bilateral disputes with some of their neighbors (i.e., Morocco for Spain, and Syria and Iraq for Turkey) and in the last

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decade have explored soft-diplomacy and increasing economic cooperation to appease these tensions. Thirdly, Turkey and Spain are highly dependent on energy sources from MENA countries and aspire to become transit countries as well as energy hubs. Finally, Spain and Turkey are approaching the ongoing political and social changes in the region both as an opportunity and as a source of concern: Syria has become a headache for Turkey, and Spain is particularly worried with the destabilization in the Sahel.

In their official discourses, Spain and Turkey have welcomed political change in this region since 2011. Moreover, they opened different spaces for dialogue with emerging political and social movements and started engaging with new political actors, particularly with Islamist groups in those countries where they won elections. Yet, the attitudes and policies of Madrid and Ankara towards political change in the region are nuanced as a result of two factors: proximity and degree of changes in neighboring countries. Spain's unconditional support to top-down reforms in Morocco, Turkey's involvement in the Syrian crisis, and their continuing silence on the lack of civil liberties in the Gulf region are indicative of this tailored approach.

Interestingly, the two countries have maintained strikingly similar positions on the Syrian conflict. Initially, Ankara and Madrid expressed their preferences for persuading President Al-Assad to deliver a set of reforms and to return the country to stability. Turkish and Spanish envoys were sent to Damascus but they remained unsuccessful in achieving a road-map for an orderly transition.¹¹ It was only Syria's progressively downward spiral into turmoil and total civil war that forced Spain and Turkey to reassess their bilateral relations with Al-Assad's regime. Especially after summer 2011, both countries openly joined those international voices calling on Assad to step down and to hold free and open elections.

Finally, both partners have attempted to share their own models of political change and democratization as a source of inspiration from the beginning of the Arab awakening. While Spain has attempted to depict its political transition in the late 1970s as an example of inclusiveness, gradualism and subjugation of the military under civilian power; Turkey presents its economic modernization and its experience in accommodating democracy and Islam as the benchmark for implementation throughout the region.

Conclusions

There always exists room for widening and deepening bilateral relations with mutual interests at stake and the accompanying political willingness to move relations forward. In the past few decades, Spain-Turkey relations undoubtedly experienced a period of rapid improvement, mainly due to the fact that prior to the 1980s; bilateral relations maintained a low profile with the non-existence of either bilateral disputes or robust contacts

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between both countries. Thus, contemporary relations have never been as strong and robust as they are right now.

Therefore, the main challenge is to explore ways for consolidating the quality and intensity of current relations so as to make them less dependent on political circumstantial impetus by decision-makers and less structured around limited corporative interests. The institutionalization of the high-level summits has been a positive step in that direction. The blossoming of investment platforms and broad economic initiatives are also a good signal. Social and cultural exchanges are a necessary complement to this political and economic boost. Needless to say, think-tanks, universities, media and cultural agents have an important role to play in this area.

Blockages in Turkey's accession process to the EU as well as the crisis affecting Southern Europe and the European integration process as a whole are not the most favorable context to boost those relations. Certainly, if the EU is able to find a way out of its multiple crises and if concurrently EU-Turkish relations gain momentum, this will open new avenues for Spanish-Turkish cooperation.

In the near future, the Middle East and North Africa will remain a top priority for both countries. One of the main Spanish contributions could be to highlight that Turkey and the EU have more to gain if they work together rather than if they attempt to promote solutions separately. Syria has become the most urgent issue on the agenda, but there are also less evident opportunities for cooperation in North Africa as an area where Turkey's influence is growing and where Spain and other Southern European countries have a long-lasting interest.

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1. According to Turkstat, in 2001 Turkey exports to Spain amounted to \$950 million and imports to \$1,066 million. In 2012, exports reached \$3,718 million and imports \$6,023 million (data available on-line at www.turkstat.gov.tr).

2. See *Registro de Inversiones Exteriores* (Spanish Ministry of Economy) http://datainvex.comercio.es/principal_invex.aspx.

3. See “Young Turks take over Arco” *El País* (English edition), 14 February 2013. (available on-line: http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/02/14/inenglish/1360846783_283363.html).

4. In addition, Pegasus has announced direct flights between Barcelona and Istanbul and charter connections operate in high season from different Spanish cities.

5. “Turgut Özal visitará CASA a cambio de almorzar con el Rey”, in *El País*, 15 September 1989.

6. “España quiere que el proceso de adhesión de Turquía a la UE sea irreversible” in *El País*, 21 October 2008.

7. “President of the Government confirms that Spain supports European aspiration of Turkey”, *La Moncloa*, 27 November 2012, available online at: www.lamoncloa.gob.es/IDIOMAS/9/Presidente/News/2012/20121127_Spain_Turkey_HLmeeting.htm.

8. José Ignacio Torreblanca “Europa salva al euro, pero pierde a los ciudadanos”, *El País*, 9 March 2013.

9. See *Eurobaromètre 69* (2008) et *Eurobaromètre 77* (2012).

10. Op-ed available online: www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/opinion/05iht-edprimes.html?_r=0 (published on 5 February 2006).

11. “Zapatero envió en secreto a Siria a un asesor con un plan de transición”, in *El País*, 15 August 2011.

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