



## IBERIAN RELATIONS: ROUTES TO EXPLORE

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### **Abstract:**

Iberian relations are today a particularly important support to the two peninsular countries. Nevertheless, this involvement does not naturally result in a balanced geopolitical and geostrategic relationship in international terms. There are two fundamental issues that remain unresolved: the fear, created by some Portuguese sectors, of a Spanish imposition; and Portugal's relations with Spanish autonomous regions, particularly with their nationalist nuclei. In this situation, Portugal is interested in an ever increasing interpenetration with Spain, configuring an Iberian regional bloc.

**Keywords:** Spain; Portugal; Iberian Peninsula.

### **Resumen:**

*Las relaciones ibéricas son hoy un apoyo particularmente importante para los dos países de la península. Sin embargo, esta implicación no da lugar por sí sola a una relación geopolítica y geoestratégica equilibrada en el ámbito internacional. Hay dos temas fundamentales que quedan por resolver: el miedo, creado por determinados sectores portugueses, a una imposición española; y las relaciones de Portugal con las Comunidades Autónomas españolas, especialmente con sus núcleos nacionalistas. En esta situación, a Portugal le interesa una creciente interpenetración con España, configurando un bloque regional ibérico.*

**Palabras clave:** España; Portugal; península Ibérica.

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Iberian relations are today a particularly important support to the two peninsular countries. In a world moved mainly by economic criteria, Spain represents over 21% of Portugal's exports, by far its largest client. Nevertheless, Spain is not Portugal's only main commercial partner, whose reciprocal transactions represent approximately 20 million euros, but is also the third largest investor in Portugal. After a slow start, the internationalisation of the Portuguese economy and of its investments has focused greatly on Spain.

On the other hand there is an ever increasing number of Spanish workers in Portugal, not only in Spanish companies, but also as a result of a chronic deficit in specialised professionals in some specific sectors, as is the case of the health sector.

However, there is a significant number of Portuguese residing and working in Spain, as well as a large student population, reading particularly health related courses. By the border, there are Portuguese that, although they work in Portugal, have opted to reside in Spain as real estate tends to be significantly cheaper.

If one adds to this the significant flux of Erasmus students between Portugal and Spain, just as the increasing, though still far from hoped for, cultural exchange and reciprocal tourism, it is possible to value up to what point both countries are intertwined.

Nevertheless, this involvement, which is in line with both countries' participation as fully fledged members of main international organisations, such as the European Union, does not naturally result in a balanced geopolitical and geostrategic relationship in international terms.

In the first place, the Spanish geopolitical source, from human and physical resources to territorial extension is significantly larger than Portugal's, this being a fact that cannot be overlooked.

Secondly, and due to recent historical vicissitudes, namely the Colonial War and the Portuguese revolutionary process after the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974, Spain clearly reached a higher development index than Portugal. This gap continues to widen even today, allowing one to conclude that apart from starting at different points, Spain has managed more successfully the abundant resources that were made available to both countries, firstly by the EEC, followed by the EC and now the EU. One should not forget that Spanish economic and social modernisation precedes the Portuguese by decades, taking advantage of the Catalan and Basque pockets, the relative stability of the Canovian Restoration and a generation of unique cultural creators of singular quality – the silver age of Spanish culture. As is clear, the same did not take place in Portugal, a country politically more unstable, culturally poorer and very connected to a clearly shattered imperial economy and mindset. In other words, despite the Spanish Civil War and the long-term series of events preceding it, the countries were not at a par with regard to their potential and modernising attitude. They were also not levelled during the Cold War as Portugal had suffered greatly due to the Colonial War. Hence, its opportunity for internal investment and modernisation was compromised.

In third place, the role that Portugal has played in Lusophony<sup>2</sup> and the Portuguese-speaking Community itself is not quantifiable, not only because Brazil is a serious competitor to Portuguese influence in these communities, but also because Portugal disregarded the opportunity for investment at all levels. It was fed by a romantic vision, in some cases such as that of Timor, or in other cases, through one that was both over-egalitarian and prejudiced,

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<sup>2</sup> From the Portuguese term *Lusofonia*, the Portuguese-speaking world.



forgetting that some Portuguese-speaking countries are more important than others, in particular Brazil and Angola. Iberian-American relations, though not free of problems and without Spain having to deal with a power such as Brazil in its sphere of influence, appear to be experiencing a better phase, and the symbolic capital, the soft power, that Spain benefits from them is particularly visible. A clear example of this is the existence of an Iberian-American market for books in Spanish and the absence of a Luso-Brazilian market of the same kind.

Given this situation, there are two fundamental issues that remain unresolved in the relations between the two countries, not as far as relations at a State level are concerned, for these are naturally included in their own geostrategic setting, but in the relationship at a mental level between communities and resilient stereotypes.

The first issue resides in the degree of Spanish presence in Portugal, which for some sectors, though they are not the majority are still significant, creates the fear of an almost silent and obscure Spanish imposition, where a strong component of an atavistic anti-Spanish, or rather, anti-Castilian feeling, though not illegitimate in the past, plays its role. It is also likely that, in the same proportion, the old idea persists in some Spanish circles of a Peninsula ruled by only one State. If we add to this an obvious power difference, a certain self-applied rigidity that is actually recognised historically, one that some Spanish intellectuals complain about with regard to their culture, it is not improbable that at given points in time the feeling of a Spanish 'threat' should spread in Portugal. In truth, and this is clearly visible both in newspapers published in Madrid and in television programmes, namely those produced by RTVE in comparison with those of the autonomous regions, we can see the persistent focus of information relative to the political Centre or to its adjacent areas, whereas the autonomous regions' content resemble a sense of periphery and in some extreme cases, are shown as somewhat provincialist. I have personally had the opportunity to testify some translations in the main RTVE news programmes, of Galician politicians that were speaking mainly in Castilian, but for whom subtitles were used for their speeches in what seems to be an evident sign of a certain political affirmation of the central State, not to mention an undeniable snootiness.

It is clear to see that for the Portuguese elites, linguistically very sensitive to details, such actions, though they do not in themselves denote any imperial objective, are not a good omen for a relationship which, although differential, does not imply inferiority.

This takes us straight to the second fundamental issue, which is that of Portugal's relations with Spanish autonomous regions, particularly with their nationalist nuclei. It is unclear up to what point there is a faint feeling in Spain, namely in the non-historic autonomous regions, that Portugal sees these nationalist movements favourably. It is true that Portugal has never been very adamant in condemning ETA's terrorist activity, and there is even some Portuguese political folklore that still refers to a certain Castilian colonialism of the Basque Country without ever having become aware of what actually takes place there and being oblivious of serious works such as those by Elorza or Juaristi, which effectively explain Basque myths. However, in actual fact, the Portuguese stance, be it official or the one that permeates through the elites and public opinion, is that any other nationalist project in the Peninsula is, in the very least, worrying and threatening to national interests, since it increases geopolitical and geostrategic uncertainty and instability in the Iberian region and, on the other hand, potentialising federalist tendencies. Besides, this can be observed in the way in which the majority of Portuguese elites generally and bluntly dismiss Galician efforts to have the Portuguese norm applied to the Galician language. Anti-Castilian or anti-Spanish sentiment in



Portugal was never prone to supporting historical nationalisms in the Peninsula, but instead was in favour of balancing the power difference with Spain. On the other hand, pro-Spain Portuguese nationalists believe that Portugal would get its uniqueness from taking sole advantage of its Atlantic coast as part of an Iberian regional bloc. Making full use of its singularity and of the synergetic effort is what Portugal needs. An Iberian breakdown would jeopardise these objectives. Actually, the Catalan statutory project, as I have mentioned elsewhere, only increases Portuguese suspicion since, amongst other things, would lead to a revival of a certain historical occitanism, alive on the French side and that Catalonia could try to replicate.

In that sense, it would be positive if it were clear to the Spanish that there is no tradition for support to historical nationalisms in Spain on the part of the Portuguese, not even during bursts of anti-Spanish feeling. In this way, one could overcome any eventual remnants of suspicion that Spanish elites could hold towards Portugal and, through that, a certain feeling of superiority arising from it.

Having established the profile of the inevitable relationship, the unavoidable convergence and also of some loose ends that we have not been able to tie up, which on the other hand, is understandable since the main historical currents of mentality are not easily surpassed and we could not simply ignore a few recent centuries of antagonism or of having taken part in different alliances – up to recent decades, the conventional enemy in Portuguese army exercises was, without clearly mentioning it, the Spanish invader, in the same way that in many Spanish exercises and under several defence pretexts, the Portuguese border was to be crossed; following this rationale, having established this profile it is now vital to return to the argument for the convergence of the two peninsular States as a synergetic form for developing regional potential within the European Union.

In this situation, Portugal is interested in an ever increasing interpenetration with Spain, including the Iberian-American and Lusophony spheres, which naturally entails actions of partnership with Brazil. This interpenetration, configuring an Iberian regional bloc, not only undermines national independence, but also strengthens it. Portugal immediately presents itself as an obvious Atlantic front for the Peninsula and as the natural hinterland of vast extensions of contiguous Spanish territory. The port of Matosinhos, but also, or mainly, those of Aveiro and Figueira da Foz, would have conditions to be the main outlets for a large part of products natural to or transformed in the Iberian Meseta. Sines is also in a similar position with regard to Extremadura. This would require greater functional, road and railway communication between the two States. Portugal's Atlantic particularity would be a good pattern for a response to modernisation and globalisation. To use economic jargon, it is a pattern of specialisation by segments (blocs of an Iberian cross-sector matrix working as a part of a complete economy, niches (translating as a specialisation, strictly speaking) and lines (vertical integrations exploiting a global product)). Despite the jargon, this should also be understood in the geopolitical and geostrategic sense. However, contrary to what could appear to be an excessive specialisation, Portuguese Atlantic singularity does not impede the projection of Portugal's Mediterranean aspect. Quite on the contrary, it is reinforced by taking part in an Iberian bloc, itself strengthened as a whole, from which Portugal could take dividends. One should also not overlook the fact that Portugal, so dependent on Algerian gas, should develop a wider interaction with Spain precisely in a contentious area where it appears with another potential and vocation.

Besides, in a world increasingly marked by climate change and environmental concerns, where the Mediterranean ecosystem is particularly sensitive – for instance to water shortage –



a tighter collaboration between the Iberian States is essential. A common management of water resources is actually vital for Portugal, as it is downstream from the main international peninsular rivers. Could this management be more harmonious if there is less interpenetration? The answer seems obvious.

However, it is not enough to refer to a bloc of regional association within Europe, in a model somewhat similar to the German-Dutch bloc. Further training of the elites is required and of the messages they get across through the various channels of awareness, with the aim of increasing the scale of integration of products and cultural livelihoods of the other side of the border. What type of Spanish cinema or theatre do the Portuguese have access to, and vice versa? In the area in which I work, humanities, who in Portugal can claim to know major philosophers such as Reyes Mate, or theologians like Torres Queiruga or Juan Tamayo-Acosta, or a sociologist and epistemologist as acclaimed as Javier Echeverría? It is true that literature is more widely received on both sides, take the success in Portugal of writers such as Pérez-Reverte, Javier Marias or Vila-Matas, the latter two not always dully appreciated by Spanish critics, maybe due to their refusal to being self-centred, something that the Portuguese elites applaud. Be that as it may, mutual ignorance of history and livelihoods on either side is enormous, regardless of the fact that the two countries are neighbours and that they both basically belong to the same historical and geographical setting and to the same framework of ecosystems.

I believe that this is the greatest challenge.

