

Spain: Zapatero government sends more troops to Afghanistan

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Last month Spain became the first European country to increase its military mission in Afghanistan.

The Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero announced it would be raising the number of Spanish troops deployed in NATO's 55,000-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from 778 to over 1,200.

Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos Moratinos declared, "Spain's commitment [to Afghanistan] is among the most solid and important of the allies, combining military and electoral presence, training and aid."

Moratinos' announcement follows in the wake of the PSOE's statement last December that it was lifting its self-imposed limit on the number of troops that could be sent abroad from 3,000 to 7,000. Defence Minister Carme Chacón said that, in future, Spain would only limit its intervention abroad "by the legality of the mission, by Spaniards' will and by the capability of the armed forces."

The increase in troops has taken place against the wishes of the Spanish people, the majority of whom are against the war in Afghanistan and want troops brought home. Spain has proportionally one of the highest casualty rates during the conflict-87 military personnel have been killed since 2002.

Back in November 2008, following the deaths of two soldiers in the western Afghan province of Herat, Moratinos told European Union foreign ministers, "The debate should not be over sending more troops, it should be about how to carry out a political-military development strategy that will end an unstable situation."

When Chacón made her statement about increasing the 3,000 limit, she emphatically rejected suggestions more troops would be dispatched to Afghanistan.

In February, when US President Barack Obama first made his call for more troops, Moratinos repeated that "the answer is not to increase our military presence. The military presence has been increasing every year, and the situation has only gotten worse."

The decision to send more troops to Afghanistan and maintain missions in Lebanon, Kosovo, Bosnia and Chad confirms that the PSOE's withdrawal of Spanish troops from

Iraq in no way implied opposition to imperialist war. It represented a tactical retreat in the face of mass antiwar sentiment that had led to the downfall of the right-wing Popular Party government under José María Aznar in 2004. Aznar, like Tony Blair in the UK, defied the popular will in giving full support to the US colonialist enterprise.

Zapatero's opposition to the Iraq war expressed the concerns of sections of the Spanish elite that were critical of Aznar's foreign policy, considering it to be too closely aligned with Washington. The resumption of Spain's "traditional axis in foreign policy," particularly an alliance with Germany and France, was viewed as a means of curbing the unilateralist ambitions of the United States and ensuring a share in the spoils from the exploitation of the Middle East and elsewhere for the European powers.

However, after withdrawing Spanish troops from Iraq Zapatero immediately re-deployed the same number of troops to Afghanistan to placate the hostile response of the Bush administration. Moratinos said he was in "no doubt" as to the "legitimacy" of a Spanish intervention. It was accompanied by cabinet promises that Spain would never station more than 3,000 troops abroad at any one time.

The PSOE's decision to jettison these promises is an overture to Obama and his strategic reorientation of US foreign policy towards securing control of Central Asia. In a break with protocol, Zapatero openly supported Obama during the US presidential elections. Immediately after Obama's election the PSOE re-established high level diplomatic relations with the US after a total breakdown of relations during the Bush presidency. *El País* commented that "The Obama-Zapatero meetings can and must herald a gradual, essential and full normalisation" of relations.

Since then Zapatero has used his initial contacts with Obama to encourage popular illusions in the new US administration, explaining "My impression of [President Obama] couldn't be better. The US and the world in general are experiencing a time of great hope."

Moratinos praised the strong bond between Obama and Zapatero saying the two men were "on the same wavelength...partners, friends and allies", who want to "strengthen and intensify their relations".

During the Alliance of Civilisations forum held in Istanbul in early April, Moratinos justified the PSOE's rapprochement with the new US administration saying, "I think that the Obama administration's focus on international relations-supporting multilateralism, dialogue and respect for others and intelligent diplomacy-fully coincides with the Alliance of Civilisations."

Zapatero and his ministers have refrained from publicly rebuking Obama for the continuing bloody occupation of Iraq, the indiscriminate bombing campaigns in Afghanistan and the cross border attacks into Pakistan. They have deployed "progressive" environmentalist arguments as a cover for securing US and Spanish interests. Moratinos has called for "a great green Marshall plan for Afghanistan". The *Christian Science Monitor* has pointed out, "Many Spanish companies, including such names as Iberdrola, Abengoa, and Acciona, are leaders on green energy, especially wind and solar power, and many are hoping to increase their already significant role in US plans to boost renewable energy output."

Spain is anxious that it is not left behind in the imperialist scramble for positions in the oil-rich and strategic zones of the world. Historically, the Spanish ruling elite, especially the PSOE, has paid special attention to strengthening Spain's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. Much of the economic liberalization that has taken place over the last three decades has benefited Spanish-owned corporations and Spain is using this to increase its bargaining power with the US and the other European powers.

More is required. A recent paper "*Spain and the G-20: A Strategic Proposal for Enhancing its Role in Global Governance*" published by the prestigious Elcano Royal Institute points out that the country ranks eighth in the world economy, but it is still regarded as a lightweight in international affairs. Spain's invite to the recent enlarged G20 summit, for example, was in doubt up to the last minute and came only after intense diplomatic lobbying.

The paper states that "it is clear that the economic crisis is hitting Spain hard. But it is up to the government to tap the opportunities that the crisis provides in order to give the country a stable spot in the new world order, one that allows it to use its full potential as a global player. In order to do this, besides the structural reforms needed at the domestic level, the government must embrace a foreign policy with greater strategic clarity, and more strength and effectiveness."

It continues "the structural problem of Spain's small military budget (the lowest in NATO, when measured as a percentage of GDP) or its small number of diplomats and diplomatic missions (less than those of the Netherlands or Sweden) must be addressed if Spain wants to achieve its goal of playing a greater role in the process of globalisation. This, as we have stated earlier, will demand just the right blend of 'soft' and 'hard' power."

The paper calls for greater involvement from political parties, trade unions and business associations to exert "direct influence

over everyday citizens" and "encourage intellectual thought on Spain's role in the world."

It concludes, "One cannot forget that an effective foreign policy depends to a large extent on domestic strength. While Spain's main overseas asset is its success at home, its main challenge also lies in its obvious domestic shortcomings."

Nothing could be clearer-wars abroad must be accompanied by stepped-up attacks on jobs and social services and the further erosion of democratic rights.

The aspiration of Spain's ruling elite to a more prominent place amongst the imperialist powers has been dealt an immediate blow. Around the same time as announcing the increase in troops to Afghanistan, Chacón announced plans to withdraw Spain's 620 troops from the 15,000-strong NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR). She declared "Mission accomplished. It's time to go home." Zapatero added, "Our role on that stage lost a part of its sense."

Both were forced to eat their words when the US administration heard the announcement. According to press reports Chacón had been unable to contact top US officials about it and left a message instead. She had not even informed the Spanish ambassador in Washington, Jorge Dezcallar, who was summoned to the White House to "clarify" what had happened. During the press conference that followed, the US State Department spokesman four times repeated how "deeply disappointed" the administration was with Spain.

The Chacón affair was a diplomatic disaster for Spain, which had made painstaking preparations for the G20 summit in London and NATO summit in Strasbourg in April. Within days, Zapatero's top foreign policy advisor, Bernadino Leon, had been packed off to Washington "to explain the reasons for the withdrawal and to reach a joint decision on a timetable...The decision to leave has been made but we can be flexible over the timetable, be it one year, 18 months or eight months."



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