

Aggressive claims by Spain helped provoke Gibraltar flare-up with Britain

Alejandro López
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The Spanish bourgeoisie has used the Brexit negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union (EU) to provocatively reassert its claims to the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar.

The 6.7 square kilometre territory was seized by Britain in 1704 for its strategic military importance at the entrance to the Mediterranean. It has since become a major tax haven for the British and international ruling elite. Although the territory's 30,000 inhabitants rejected Spanish sovereignty in a referendum in 2002, they voted by 96 percent in last June's Brexit referendum to remain in the EU.

Last year sections of the Spanish ruling class calculated that Brexit offered Spain a "golden opportunity," not only to reclaim Gibraltar but also to possibly become Washington's new strategic ally in Europe.

Former Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo declared that it would give Spain "an opportunity to have an even more important role than the one we already have with the United States, and don't forget about one other thing: we'll be talking about Gibraltar the very next day."

The renewed moves by Spain have the backing of the EU. Brussels has dropped its traditional neutral position on conflicting Spanish/UK claims on Gibraltar and adopted an aggressive anti-British position—as it has done on every issue of controversy since the result of the Brexit referendum.

Last week, in response to UK Prime Minister Theresa May's hardline demands on the terms of the UK-EU divorce, the EU sent its 27 remaining member a nine-page document containing its draft negotiating position. It warned, "A non-member of the union... cannot have the same rights and enjoy the same benefits as a member."

It made clear in a clause in the document that "no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without agreement

between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom."

On Monday, the European Commission's chief spokesman Margaritis Schinas said, "The guidelines presented on Friday have the complete backing of President [Jean-Claude] Juncker and [chief negotiator] Michel Barnier. We will give no more explanations."

Juncker's endorsement of the Gibraltar clause comes just a few weeks after his intervention over the status of Northern Ireland in EU-UK negotiations. Juncker and Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Enda Kenny jointly declared that "at some future time," there was a vote for a united Ireland, as laid down in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, "Northern Ireland would have ease of access to join as a member of the European Union again." The EU also indicated it opposes the re-establishing of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

In Britain, the Gibraltar clause led former Conservative Party leader Michael Howard to invoke Margaret Thatcher's 1982 war against Argentina over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands to declare the UK was prepared to go to war with Spain over Gibraltar. Former minister Norman Tebbit warned that Gibraltar is a "vital Western strategic interest" and suggested "inviting leaders of the Catalan independence movement to London, or even to raising their desire for independence at the United Nations." It took two days before UK Prime Minister May tried to make a joke of Howard's bellicose talk.

In contrast, Spain's *ABC* newspaper declared, "The Spanish government achieves its first triumph after the opening up of Brexit negotiations."

El País stated that the clause is "handing the Spanish government the negotiating key it needed in its claims over the territory."

For *El Español*, "in what has become a major diplomatic victory, Spain has a powerful ally on its side in

its dispute with the United Kingdom over The Rock: the European Union of the 27.”

Soon after, the leaders of three of Spain’s main parties, the ruling Popular Party (PP), the main opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) and Citizens met with high-ranking foreign ministry officials to agree on a joint strategy for Gibraltar.

Amid this tense situation, on Tuesday Spain dispatched a warship into the disputed territorial waters around Gibraltar. The Spanish Ministry of Defence described this as routine operations against illicit drugs and migrants, while the British Foreign Office declared it to be an unlawful maritime incursion.

Unhindered control of the Straits of Gibraltar has always been one of Spanish imperialism’s foreign policy priorities. Its repossession became official government policy during the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco (1939-1978) and following the Transition to democracy, the policy has remained in place under successive governments.

One of the main books dealing with Spanish foreign policy explains, “The Straits of Gibraltar continues to be the main sea route in the world, both because of the number of ships passing through it (80,000 a year, about 220 a day), and because of its tonnage and the presence of ships with nuclear weapons. It acts as a key to the Mediterranean, which is not only important from a military point of view, but also because of the large oil tankers from North Africa and/or the Persian Gulf coming through Suez, which are part of the normal supply of energy to the European countries. Ensuring the free movement and preventing any form of blockade that would affect countries like Spain, which receives 82% of its supplies by sea, is therefore a priority objective.” [Ricardo Méndez and Silva Marcu, “La posición geoestratégica de España” p.137-138 in *La política exterior de España de 1800 hasta hoy* (2010).]

Criticisms have been levelled at Spanish Foreign Minister Alfonso Dastis’ other piece of political brinkmanship targeting the UK—his suggesting that Spain would not block Scotland’s application for membership of the EU if it separated from the UK.

His remarks open the Pandora box regarding Catalonia and the Basque Country, which both have strong separatist movements that, like the Scottish National Party, are demanding independence as a first step to seeking EU membership. In Catalonia, a referendum on independence, declared illegal by the Spanish government, has been called in November by the regional

Catalan government. The Catalan position can only be strengthened by Dastis’ tacit support for the SNP’s own demand for a second independence referendum.

El Mundo said that when questioned about Scotland, “a Spanish minister is expected, at this point in time, to put nationalism in its place, which is that of garbage...” Dastis’ comments, it declared, had caused “Tebbit to threaten to take the Catalan cause to the UN.”

ABC posted an editorial, “Dastis’ grave mistake,” warning that “any reference to Scotland’s independence and eventual entry into the European Union from the mouth of a Member of the Government of Spain can be used against our national interests.”

The Gibraltar crisis is also an expression of the growing antagonisms brought about by President Donald Trump’s open declarations of support for Brexit and for the break-up of the EU, which he has described as a German-dominated economic competitor to the US.

While the UK is interested in defending the “special relationship” with the US after the UK leaves Europe and calculates it will have Trump’s support on Gibraltar and the EU negotiations, Spain is attempting to become the new strategic partner of the US in post-Brexit Europe.

Last week, Spanish Defence Minister María Dolores de Cospedal visited US Secretary of Defence James Mattis in Washington for talks described as successful. This week, Spain complied with Trump’s demand that NATO countries commit at least 2 percent of spending on defence, increasing its military spending by fully 32 percent—from €5.7 billion in 2016 to €7.5 billion in 2017. Two years ago, Spain signed an agreement with the US making permanent its airbase at Moron and naval base at Rota, just 1.5 hours away from Gibraltar. Both bases have played a major role in all US-led wars since the First Gulf War in 1990.



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