



**THE CENTER FOR  
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**Spanish Case Study**

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# SPANISH CASE STUDY

## **Introduction**

Spain has frequently and correctly been offered as a model of how to negotiate a democratic transition and consolidate a democracy. The transition from authoritarianism to democracy was initiated in the late 1970s and completed with the election of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) in 1982. It was the forerunner in the contemporary “third wave” of democracy. A, if not the, crucial factor in the overall process of the Spanish transition was the resolution of civil–military relations. The Spanish transition provides an example of a “success story.” As such it is particularly useful to analyze for it can shed light on strategies of transition which are likely to promote as opposed to undermine democratic consolidation.

In the following paper, I discuss four factors which were crucial to the Spanish success in redefining civil-military relations: the creation of a ministry of defense that institutionalized the power of civilians over the armed forces, a decision to redefine military roles and missions, the emergence of a small group of civilians who became proficient in issues concerning security, defense, and democratic civil – military relations, and, finally the interventions of international organizations – primarily the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and later the European Union (EU) which helped guide and encourage the emergence of a democratic model of civilian control.

## **Historical Background**

Spain had, until the late 1970s, an authoritarian regime. General Francisco Franco, having won the civil war of 1936–39 ruled the country until his death in November 1975, accountable, in his words, only to God and History, and not his fellow citizens. Lacking popular support, the Spanish authoritarian regime looked to the armed forces, the Catholic Church and established groups and classes. On occasion, it resorted to political repression to maintain stability and control of the state.

The country in general, and the armed forces in particular, were isolated from the larger dynamic of modernization and democratization in post–World War Two Europe

due to its collaboration with the defeated Axis powers. Spain was not allowed to join NATO nor the European Communities (EC), nor ancillary organizations such as the Council of Europe. Although Franco's Spain was finally allowed to join the UN in 1955, until the early 1970s the country was regarded as a pariah by large parts of the international community. The Spanish armed forces had not been deployed abroad since the Spanish–American War of 1898, when they were defeated by the United States and anti-colonial insurgents in the colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. But, for limited action in Morocco, the fundamental role and function of the armed forces was as a garrison force; to occupy the country and keep the population under control.

With the passing of the years and the tremendous change in an integrating and democratic Western Europe, authoritarian Spain became increasingly anachronistic. Initially, in 1953, the United States signed agreements with Spain for access to military bases. Later, in the 1960s Spain began to change economically and socially with the influx of millions of sun-seeking tourists from northern Europe and the US, and the emigration of Spaniards to find work. Finally, after seven years of negotiations, in August 1970 Spain signed a preferential agreement with the EC. Notwithstanding Spain's gradual reintegration into Europe, the country remained a dictatorship.

General Franco, who assumed power prior to the end of World War II, was both chief of state and chief of the armed forces. He made the armed forces the bulwark of his regime. They held positions in Franco's cabinet, exercised a monopoly in the enforcement of public order, and had prominence in the exercise of justice.

### **Transition Process**

Despite a tendency in retrospect to view the process as linear and inevitable, the Spanish democratic transition like all other political transitions, was extremely complicated and its outcome was far from predetermined. Notwithstanding the changing internal and external economic, social and political climate, the regime resisted change. Change only began, and then in reaction at first, with the coup d'état by junior officers in Portugal on 25 April 1974, which overthrew the only other dictatorship in Western

Europe. The transition really began, however, with the death of Franco in November 1975. His absence after almost four decades, and particularly his providing for the return of the monarchy with King Don Juan Carlos, opened the way for a transition in which political parties emerged, negotiated with each other and other social actors, and gradually created the structures and processes of a democratic regime. International actors, including states, political parties, and unions played an important role in helping to encourage and mold the process.

While the Spanish armed forces did not play an independent political role in the authoritarian regime, they were of necessity a key element in its continuation. They were totally integrated throughout its structures and processes. Further, by virtue of being a national armed force they held a monopoly of the means of violence. And, in contrast to neighboring Portugal where the armed forces became factionalized with many officers developing leftist sympathies, the Spanish armed forces remained intact as an organization and overwhelmingly conservative politically. As a consequence, it was clear that civilians who wanted to orchestrate a political transition had to devise a strategy to deal with the armed forces.

As in all else concerning the Spanish transition, the main defining theme is a process of negotiation involving a relatively small group of civilian politicians, bureaucrats, and academics who devised plans to win over the armed forces in order to allow the transition to proceed. As might be imagined, the series of understandings and the nuances extending over approximately ten years is very complicated, and much of it remains untold even though there are several excellent unpublished theses and published books on the general topic. But we can describe the highlights, which should provide information and insights relevant for other countries. There are three main issues or questions in this process, the answers to which make the Spanish experience particularly relevant to other countries. First why did the armed forces allow the transition to proceed; second who was involved in the strategy; and third, what was the vehicle?

**First, why would the armed forces allow the transition to proceed and thereby surrender their central role in government and society?** We must remember

that the armed forces were a core or pivotal actor in the Franco regime. In democracies, except in time of war, armed forces are not central actors. A valid first question is whether the leaders in the armed forces realized that there would be a radical change in their status in Spain? Could they conceive of a democratic Spain in which they were not a huge occupation force with the corresponding power and perquisites? A second question is whether, once the transition began, could they oppose it? There is insufficient data to answer the first question. The latter question will be dealt with below. The short answer to the overall question is that the armed forces accepted a *quid pro quo* of guarantees for their acquiescence to the transition. They were given guarantees concerning the unity of Spain, the consolidation of the recently re-established monarchy, and respect for legality. Further, all were aware that the Spanish armed forces, and particularly the army, were totally out of date in terms of equipment and training. They were given explicit commitments to modernize the armed forces through the acquisition of new equipment and the training to operate it. For example, the civilian cabinet agreed in January 1977 to raise defense budgets by 31% per year whereas the total increase for the 1971–76 period had been only 20%.

**Second, who was involved in developing and implementing the strategy?** In Spain, as in virtually all other authoritarian regimes, security and defense policies are the monopoly of the armed forces. Civilians have no opportunity, and clearly no incentive, to become involved in these issues. Indeed, it would be risky to display any interest. In Spain specifically, where the role of the armed forces was exclusively internal control, there was even less interest and incentive. Thus, how could civilians learn about these issues in order to be able to assume control of the armed forces as is necessary in a democracy? In Spain, from the late 1970s, a small self-appointed group, known as the “Sanhedrin” composed of academics, bureaucrats mainly in the Foreign Ministry, and politicians learned about these issues utilizing academic materials, exchanges, consultation with some Spanish officers, short courses, and, after joining NATO in 1982, experience in Belgium with on the job training. They were, in short, largely self-taught and learned by doing in combination with other opportunities. These civilians reached out to a small group of officers and they jointly redefined civil–military relations.

**Third, what was the vehicle for the gradual assertion of civilian control over the armed forces?** General Franco, as chief of state and chief of the armed forces, controlled the armed forces personally. The three services operated independently, and nobody but possibly Franco himself coordinated them. After his death there was no legal mechanism for the executive to control the armed forces. They were literally out of control. By 1977 the “Sanhedrin”, and a few general officers, decided to follow the example of other democracies and in July of that year created the ministry of defense. Initially it was largely hollow, barely a bureaucracy, but gradually it assumed greater roles to where in the early 1980s it was already handling budgets, personnel, and policy. After 1979 a civilian assumed control of the ministry. The other key element of control was the creation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JUJEM). In 1984 the Joint Chiefs became a consultative and not a command body, and the minister of defense had become responsible for overall military policy making. From then on the ministry of defense became the bureaucratic vehicle for civilians to exercise control over the armed forces and its powers continued to expand.

The Spanish transition, and particularly the dimensions concerning civil–military relations, reinforces a key finding of the studies of democratic transitions. They are not linear and inevitable, and those in favor of promoting democracy must be extremely cautious in how they handle the armed forces. Due to the accumulation of difficult issues (legalization of the Spanish Communist Party, granting of autonomy to the regions, and economic problems), in combination with a very rapid assertion of control by civilians, there was a reaction. On 23 February 1981 a heavily armed unit of the Civil Guard took over the Palace of Congress with the prime minister and his cabinet inside. The government held hostage, army units in important regions mobilized in support of the conspiracy to overthrow the nascent democracy and return to authoritarianism. The attempted coup was finally put down, but only after King Don Juan Carlos, as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, came out clearly for democracy and opposed the coup. The civilians, as well as their few allies, learned from this event and moderated

their strategies to assert control over the armed forces. The coup's suppression removed internal opposition to the consolidation of democracy.

### **Lessons Learned**

A key element in the further transition and then consolidation of democracy in Spain, and particularly in civil–military relations, was the entry into NATO and the EC. It must be repeated that Spain under Franco had belonged to neither of these organizations. On his death, the government quickly applied to join the EC aware (as were the Greeks and Portuguese) that the country's economic future depended on integration into Western Europe. Negotiations began in 1979 and Spain, as was true of Portugal, entered in 1986. There was tremendous popular and even elite resistance against joining NATO due to several factors including the following: Disinterest in the stakes involved in the Cold War; anti-Americanism due to the US support for Franco tied to the agreements for base access; and an overall lack of interest in international security issues. The options were either NATO or neutrality, which in the case of Spain, meant isolation. As the transition progressed, however, and particularly after the attempted coup in February 1981, the government began to perceive the benefits of providing new links and orientation for the armed forces. Spain thus applied for, and was approved for, membership in NATO in May 1982.

At that time, however, the PSOE, which had run on a platform questioning membership in NATO, won the elections in October 1982. Entry was thus frozen and the government committed itself to holding a referendum on the issue. However, as the PSOE in power came to focus on the centrality of civil–military relations in democratic consolidation, they began to change their orientation on this issue. It must be acknowledged that there may have also been a link made by one or more European members of NATO and the EC between remaining in NATO and continued integration into the EC. When the government thus held the referendum, in March 1986, the PSOE supported continued membership and their position was supported by 53% of the voters.

Political learning has played a central role in the Spanish government determining how to deal with the armed forces, including participation in NATO. As they assessed

this participation, and the composition and roles of the armed forces, they benefited tremendously from membership in NATO. First, by sending officers and civilians to NATO headquarters in Belgium and in the regional commands, to learn about all aspects of the armed forces in modern democracies, officers learned that civilian control is normal for the most proficient armed forces in the world. The civilians learned about all areas of security and defense. NATO thus helped train a group of middle and upper level bureaucrats who could in fact credibly exercise control over the armed forces.

Second, with the end of the Cold War and the rapid onset of the Gulf War in 1990, Spain had the opportunity to participate with NATO and other allies in a real conflict. Spain's participation included sending three ships to enforce the embargo against Iraq. While this was done in the context of the Western European Union (WEU), the nuance was lost on the general population who considered it a US-led war. This was the first external involvement by the Spanish military in 100 years, and it turned out to be extremely popular among the population. Spain also allowed the US unlimited base access in the conflict. In short, the Gulf War allowed the Spanish military to legitimate in the eyes of the population that it had an important external role to play.

Third, as the Cold War ended, the world did not become a simpler and more tranquil place and peacekeeping missions emerged as a key military mission internationally. The Spanish quickly identified peacekeeping missions as key vocations for their armed forces. For the world it is probably good to have their participation. Peacekeeping missions allowed Spanish civilians to both participate in international forums and establish new relations with their armed forces. It gave the Spanish military a reason to exist and function within a modern and democratic Spain and in the world.

It should be noted that Spain continues to be active in peacekeeping missions both in the context of NATO and the UN, and also participates in the WEU. All of these external commitments have thoroughly integrated the Spanish armed forces into a complex web of operations and training. And, with these new missions, the forces have been reduced and redefined. First, they are no longer located in garrisons throughout the

country. Second, they are increasingly abandoning conscription in favor of building a volunteer army. Third, they have reduced their forces to around 170,000. Fourth, civilians have reduced the defense share of the budget from 10% in 1984 to 5.5% in 1993. Finally, the Spanish armed forces have formally shifted their focus from being internally oriented to concentrating on external missions.

## **Conclusion**

Spain is a paradigmatic case of democratic transition and consolidation in which civil–military relations was a central factor in its success. From a very large military whose main function was to maintain control in the authoritarian regime of Franco, the Spanish armed forces today are much smaller, professional, internationally–oriented, and an apolitical component of the democratic system. It did not have to happen this way, and the key elements of the success lie in the political learning of the civilians, their creation of a ministry of defense to “manage” the relations with the armed forces, and the integration into NATO and other multi–national organizations. There is much in the Spanish experience of relevance for other new democracies seeking to consolidate democratic civil–military relations. Although no two cases of transition nor of consolidation are identical, lessons can still be drawn and made relevant elsewhere. The purpose here was to call attention to some of these lessons.