

Centrifugal Forces Tug at the World

Spain's former leader, José María Aznar, reflects on secession movements at home and in Europe, and on the Trump era's challenges to the postwar order.

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The view of Europe from America is of a landscape of disarray. Britain staggers daily from pandemonium to deadlock as it haggles with itself over the terms of exit from the European Union. Italy is more than usually paralyzed. Germany, under a chancellor grown weary of herding Europe's cats, seems eerily inert. And countries like Poland and Hungary are often in open conflict with the union to which they belong.

We can add another shambles to the list. Spain has just had an election—its fourth in four years, and its second in 2019 alone—with no political party able to form a government on its own. The ruling Socialist Party, which has a plurality of seats in Parliament, has entered into a coalition pact with Unidas Podemos, a communist party in all but name. Such a coalition is unlikely to endure, and the country's voters face the prospect of yet another election in 2020, which would give Spain the unenviable average of almost one election a year since December 2015. Move over, Italy.

Spain also faces a separatist threat in Catalonia, a prosperous region in the country's northeast, as well as the rise of Vox, a party of the radical right, which won 15% of the vote and became the third-largest in Parliament. Vox emerged in large measure as a Spanish nationalist backlash against the Catalan secessionists.

All this upheaval alarms José María Aznar of the conservative People's Party, who served as Spain's prime minister from 1996 through 2004. Mr. Aznar, 66, is now a globe-trotting elder statesman who sees these centrifugal forces at work not only in Catalonia and Brexit, but also in the flight of voters away from established political parties on both the left and the right toward groups on either extreme. He also sees them in the global unilateralism of President Trump.

Spain, naturally, is Mr. Aznar's first concern.

The prospective coalition government will rely on the support of Catalan separatists to survive. Mr. Aznar describes this as "a Frankenstein formula of radical socialists and communists, with the complicity of secessionists" and asks: "Can you imagine a country whose government will depend on those who want to wipe out the country? Well, that's what's happening in Spain right now."

The present crisis in the traditional political parties, as well as the lurch to nationalist, protectionist and populist politics, he tells me, "is not unlike what happened in the 1930s in Italy, Spain, France and Germany." One of the "most important questions in the European politics of the future will be the evolution of Germany," he warns. "Europe can survive Brexit. It's not good news, but it can survive. But a deterioration of the political situation in Germany would be more difficult for the EU to survive." In Germany's most recent federal election, as in Spain's, a young right-wing party finished third, and it's possible a Green Party chancellor could succeed Angela Merkel.

Mr. Aznar also sees a "trend of political fragmentation" in countries of the democratic West, with Spain as a prime example. "The results of Spain's election has meant the presence in Parliament of 16 parties," he says. "You cannot guarantee reasonable government in these circumstances."

Although Mr. Aznar doesn't command universal affection in his own country—a land riven along ideological lines—he had a largely successful political career. His election as prime minister ended a socialist stranglehold on democratic Spanish politics and marked the re-emergence of conservatism as a political force in a country still scarred by memories of Generalissimo Francisco Franco, Spain's dictator from 1936-75.

Americans will remember Mr. Aznar for his support of George W. Bush and the war in Iraq. In Florida for a conference at Miami Dade College, he is unrepentant about backing Mr. Bush. "What happened in the Middle East in 2003," he tells me, "has to be understood in the context of Sept. 11. The concept of international solidarity and loyalty among allies must not work in only one direction. It must be mutual."

The U.S. was "in solidarity with Spain in our fight against terrorism," Mr. Aznar says, referring to ETA, the armed secessionist group that fought for decades to establish an independent Basque state. "So Spain had to be supportive when the U.S. felt threatened."

In the four decades until 2010, when it effectively forswore terrorism, ETA killed around 850 people, wounding and maiming thousands more. Its bloodiest attack was in 1987, when a

car bomb in a shopping-center parking lot in Barcelona killed 21 civilians. Mr. Aznar's government initially blamed ETA for what turned out to be an al Qaeda attack on a Madrid train station in March 2004, which killed 192, and his party was voted out of office three days later.

The achievement of which Mr. Aznar appears proudest these days isn't political, it's linguistic. When he was in office, he spoke not a word of English. Today, he speaks the language with confidence, albeit with a strong Castilian accent. "I began to study English on the day I left office in 2004," he says. Georgetown had offered him a professorship. He studied "every hour, every day, for months," he says, before adding—startlingly—that for the past 15 years he has read books only in English.

At his house in Madrid, Mr. Aznar has the collected works of Churchill and Lincoln. He calls Churchill "a fighter for freedom, who made his contribution to save the world from the tyranny of the Nazis." He admires Lincoln, "the creator of the modern U.S.," even more. "He had to confront the most important challenge in the history of the United States, with the secessionists and the Confederacy. And he guaranteed the unity of the country."

The echo is clear. Spain's unity is under threat from a secessionist movement in Catalonia, whose leaders believe that their autonomous region—more prosperous than the rest of the country—is hobbled economically by fiscal burdens imposed by Madrid. The separatists have added a 21st-century tribalism—complete with anti-Spain demonstrators summoned by WhatsApp—to their fiscal rage. Some of their more fevered complaints—that Catalan culture is suppressed in Spain, and that Catalans are victims of oppression—don't withstand the barest scrutiny.

Mr. Aznar says Spain's politicians have much to learn from Lincoln, whom he quotes with obvious relish: " 'A house divided against itself,' said Lincoln, 'cannot stand.' And a unity of the house is most necessary in Spain. We're almost the oldest nation in the world, and I'd like to keep it intact."

In contrast with ETA, and the Confederacy, the Catalan separatists have not taken to arms. But the threat they pose to Spain's unity is as palpable. "Don't compromise with separatists," is the lesson Mr. Aznar takes from Lincoln. "Safeguarding the unity of the United States meant defeating the Confederacy, not reaching an agreement with it," he says. "There is no room for consensus between unity and separatism."

These days Mr. Aznar is also concerned about the growing disunity of the West. "The formal institutions that were created after the Second World War don't really represent the reality of the world," he says. "There is a new distribution of power. The global leadership of

the U.S. grows every day more complicated. The rise of China is a reality, as is the existence of a new belligerent in political terms—Russia."

These facts, allied to the nature of the current U.S. administration, tell Mr. Aznar that the world is spiraling away from multilateralism—and a shared belief in the old postwar norms—toward a fragmented mess of unilateral action and bilateral deals. We can see this already, he says, in the increase in protectionism and the decline in free trade.

Mr. Aznar is an avowed Atlanticist—which means he subscribes to the postwar compact of free trade, liberal values and military alliance that enabled the West, and much of the rest of the world, to prosper after 1945. With the policies of the Trump administration and Britain's departure from the EU, however, he sees those values under threat.

Brexit has been "a mess," Mr. Aznar says. "The referendum was an enormous mistake. You cannot transfer the responsibility of government to the people, and this decision—whether or not to stay in the EU—is clearly a responsibility of the government." Departing the EU will leave the U.K. "less united, less of a kingdom and less great." The damage will run in both directions: The EU is losing a bulwark of Atlantic values.

At the same time, Mr. Aznar wonders how Europe will navigate the competition between the U.S. and China if "the Atlantic policy is called into question by the U.S." As the alliance erodes, "Europeans have more to lose than Americans. But the U.S. is also harming itself. As it faces China, it needs allies, and the Europeans continue to be the best allies for the U.S." Mr. Aznar speaks of a "family of liberal democracies" and says that he prefers to live under "these democratic rules than under the rule of China. I prefer a pluralistic society, with all its imperfections, than a society with the tyranny of one party."

Mr. Trump's unilateralism makes Mr. Aznar nostalgic for George W. Bush, with whom he forged a close relationship. The two leaders had lunch when they overlapped in office, "every year from 2001 to 2004. The two of us. And we would sit down with a list of Latin American countries, from Mexico to Argentina, and go through them one by one." Using interpreters, they'd discuss what was right with each one, and what was wrong.

"There does not exist, now, in my view, a clear U.S. policy toward Latin America," Mr. Aznar says. For that he doesn't blame Mr. Trump but his predecessor. Barack Obama "made three mistakes. One was to recognize the regime in Cuba without conditions. Two, pushing the Colombian government to reach agreement with the FARC guerrillas. And three, tolerating the dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela."

The last was particularly unfortunate, as it resulted in the entrenching of Mr. Maduro. "Sixty countries—60 democracies—including the United States, recognize the legitimacy of Juan Guaidó" as interim president after the National Assembly declared Mr. Maduro's 2018 re-election illegitimate. "But Maduro is still securely in place." Emboldened by this, the Venezuelan dictator and the Cuban regime have continued to foment unrest in South America, most recently in Chile.

For Mr. Aznar, President Trump's gravest foreign-policy error has been in the Middle East, specifically with the Syrian Kurds, with whom he recently broke a yearslong pact in favor of a contingent deal with Turkey. "I can understand the American reluctance to get involved in Syria. But his abandoning of the Kurds, in terms of trust—it's very difficult for him to live this down."

The Trump administration, Mr. Aznar says, "bullies allies, bullies friends, doesn't make new friends, doesn't respect existing friends." The betrayal of the Kurds will exact "a heavy price in terms of trust, and in terms of confidence in U.S. policy and in the U.S. as a nation."

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Credit: By Tunku Varadarajan

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