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WHY LIBYA ISN'T IRAQ FOR SPAIN: The Responsibility to Protect

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On 15 February 2003 over a million people were out on the streets of Barcelona and Madrid demonstrating against the War in Iraq. On 22 March 2011, the Spanish parliament approved the participation of Spanish troops in the Libya intervention with 99% of the votes in favour. Beyond such basic differences as the legitimacy bestowed on the intervention with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) and the backing of the Spanish parliament for the involvement of the Armed Forces, the military operation in Libya differs greatly from that in Iraq because of its very aim: protecting civilians from military attack by their own government. This means going beyond the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a country because it is overridden by that of the responsibility to protect. In this regard, Libya paves the way for this axiom to penetrate the awareness of Spanish public opinion to a greater extent than it has done hitherto. In the absence of surveys that might quantify public-opinion support for the Libya intervention, it would seem that Spanish society concurs with the decision taken by the government. At least this would seem to be the case if one is to judge by the scant mobilisation of protestors in the streets and the sweeping support given by the political parties represented in parliament.

It might have happened that, even if the Spanish people agree that Muammar al-Gaddafi must be prevented from attacking the civilian population, support for the participation of Spanish troops in the military operation would not have been so widespread. Traditionally, the foreign policy stance of the Spanish public has come under the heading of “doves” or pacifists and has mainly been characterised by disagreement with any military intervention, recognition of the importance of humanitarian action and economic aid, lack of support for any increases in the military budget, and unwillingness to support the use of force without a United Nations resolution. As evidenced in data offered by *Transatlantic Trends* in 2003 at the height of the Iraq War 54% of Spaniards defined themselves in these terms. One good example of this is the clear negative correlation shown in opinion polls between support for an international military mission and the sensation of danger associated with the mission. While 48% of the population is in favour of withdrawing Spanish troops from Afghanistan, only 20% support withdrawal from

the Indian Ocean missions (EUTM Somalia and EUNAVFOR-Atalanta), according to the latest Barometer of the Elcano Royal Institute. Moreover, the economic factor might be added as one of the possible reasons for the reticence of some people over greater involvement of the Spanish Armed Forces in international missions. In other words, the envisaged cost of some 25 million euros for the Spanish military intervention in Libya, precisely at this time of acute economic crisis, might be seen as a waste of money.

Nevertheless, from the discourse of politicians, trade unionists, journalists and public opinion makers in recent days one could draw the conclusion that Libya may represent a change of heart among Spanish citizens, with a shift towards a more pragmatic position that is less associated with doves. In other words, the Spanish public seems to have accepted the view that, although economic cooperation is more important than military might, military intervention is sometimes necessary. If this were true, Spain would be closing the gap that separates it from other European countries with respect to foreign policy attitudes. As late as 2007, according to the Barometer of the Elcano Royal Institute, only 17% of the Spanish population thought that sending Spanish troops to prevent civil war in another country was highly justified, while only self defence and humanitarian aid following a natural disaster achieved majority support. These figures seem to be changing today. Without a doubt, those occasions in which people are clearly and massively in danger can justify the need for military intervention: the responsibility to protect.

In recent years, the participation of Spanish troops in international missions has had its ups and downs. On the plus side, is the active involvement in missions in Afghanistan (ISAF, led by NATO) and Lebanon (UNIFIL, under United Nations mandate). The down side includes the unilateral withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq in June 2004, which was regarded in some quarters as over hasty, from the United Nations mission in Haiti in February 2006, and from the KFOR mission in Kosovo in September 2009. However, Spain is seen as an important ally in international missions of the European Union and NATO, as well as in international coalitions, especially if such missions are concerned with one of the Mediterranean countries. The Spanish government cannot shirk its responsibility *vis-à-vis* the stability of its southern neighbours.

Iraq represented a rupture between public opinion and the government in Spain. It showed up the government's disregard for the legitimacy of the United Nations, for the parliament and for just causes for war. The allied intervention in Libya could now constitute for Spain recognition of its significance in the region, not only with aid projects but also as part of a military coalition. The Spanish participation might also be understood as a contribution of the Spanish people towards the regime change wanted by the Libyan people, towards the freedom that the Spanish people yearned and strove for in their day, when the concept of non-intervention meant just that. Once again, it's about the responsibility to protect.