

Narrative Battle: Spain and Morocco in the Western Sahara
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Introduction

Spain and Morocco's diplomatic relationship has been deteriorating for decades, particularly regarding matters in the Western Sahara. Prior to this year, Spain ignored the political agreements it made to Morocco in the 1975 tripartite agreement, which included Mauritania.¹ The regional disagreements, as well as Spain's imperialistic history towards Morocco, has created a narrative battle between the two countries. It is not until recently that a shift occurred within this narrative contest, which can be attributed to Spain's decision to support Morocco's autonomy plan in the Western Sahara.² Given Spain's new stance, it is necessary to evaluate how the two countries' master narratives are influencing the issue narrative of autonomy in the Western Sahara. A master narrative "is a transhistorical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture," and which has component stories that have been "widely shared and repeated across time."³ Master narratives are considered a "middle ground," as they are stories that are sometimes retold explicitly, but in other instances are assumed and taken for granted.⁴ An issue narrative is defined as being "strategic in the sense of seeking to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place."⁵

¹ Minder, Raphael. "Spain, Seeking Better Ties with Morocco, Shifts Stance on Western Sahara." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 19, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/19/world/europe/spain-morocco-western-sahara.html>.

² "Morocco Says Spain Supports Western Sahara Plan in Shift Closer to Rabat." Reuters. March 18, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/morocco-says-spain-supports-wsahara-plan-shift-closer-rabat-2022-03-18/>

³ Jeffrey R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall, Jr. and Steven R. Corman, "Master Narratives in Strategic Communication," in *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, 182, 2011.

⁴ Jeffrey R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall, Jr. and Steven R. Corman, 182.

⁵ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Routledge, 7, 2013.

This paper will examine the master narratives of Spain and Morocco that have created a narrative battle over the Western Sahara, the implications for both countries regarding Spain's new stance, and how the countries should proceed to message around the issue narrative moving forward. Understanding the narratives of the opposing sides will allow diplomats to better address counterarguments and form stronger public diplomacy goals. For countries to effectively exemplify its intended narratives, they must examine the narratives it needs to overcome, the cultural resistance that exists, and what narratives exist that support the intended messaging.

Spain's Narrative History

Spain's complicated history with developing its identity is important to understand when looking at the narratives Spain represents today. State identity is how each state interprets the role of regional and international organizations, what role states should play in the world, and what kinds of interests are worth pursuing."⁶ Constructivist theory suggests that state identities are multifaceted and will need to be updated with time.⁷ Spain's evolving identity demonstrates this well. For centuries Spain was labeled an imperialistic power, despite its strong ties to Catholicism. Spain has taken the colonizer narrative and framed it differently however, by memorializing their territorial claims as discoveries and conquests. States frame their own narratives, and the narratives of other states "by selecting and highlighting some facets of their history or actions in order to promote a particular interpretation and evaluation of their character."⁸

For nearly forty years, Spain was under the rule of dictator General Franco. Franco suppressed basic freedoms and certain expressions of tradition and culture, crippled the state's

⁶ Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle, 31.

⁷ Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle, 32.

⁸ Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle, 5.

economy, and lessened international support for the country. However, after the death of General Franco in 1975, Spain turned into a country that was rapidly reforming.⁹ The Spanish people saw his death as a sign of rebirth in the country and were hopeful. Since 1975, the country has been able to modernize in all aspects (socially, politically, and economically) and a new constitution was signed guaranteeing basic rights and liberties to all citizens. Besides achieving national success, Spain has also rebuilt their foreign relationships and has become a top player in the world market. Spain still deals with domestic challenges, but many see the death of Franco as the resurrection of the Spanish state. For Spain, it is imperative that it maintain the identity it worked so hard to solidify, as a democratic and cooperative international actor.

Morocco's Narrative History

Opposite of Spain, Morocco has had a history of being colonized and profited off. Tensions over borders and spheres of influence have been growing since the 1800s between Spain and Morocco. In the 1860s the two states began feuding over the Ceuta region, which is an argument that has continued to this day. Ultimately in the 1860s, Ceuta was declared Spanish territory and has remained that way since despite its proximity to Morocco.¹⁰ Later in the 1800s France and Spain created a protectorate in Morocco, which was turned into a sphere of influence in the early 1900s. France and Spain continued to increase their power in Morocco through methods like port monitoring and fee collections, but the protectorates would end in the mid 1950s. As mentioned earlier the tripartite agreement was signed in 1975 and Spain exited the

⁹ Rep. *Spain: From Dictatorship to Democracy and Poverty to Prosperity*. Washington, DC, 1. 2010. <https://effectivestates.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Spain-From-Dictatorship-to-Democracy-and-Poverty-to-Prosperity.pdf>

¹⁰ "Morocco Profile - Timeline." BBC News. BBC, April 24, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14123260>.

Western Sahara. The agreement aimed at stabilizing the future of the Western Sahara's borders and citizens.¹¹

In the years following the signing of the agreement Spain did not formalize or honor its political and diplomatic ties to Morocco. Therefore, the Western Sahara remained a geopolitical sore spot for Morocco. Morocco wanted to combat the non-threatening, colonial narrative other states believed and attempted to punish Spain for its ignorance on a few occasions. For example in 2021, Spain welcomed nationalist movement leader seeking independence from Morocco, Brahim Ghali, into their country despite him also being wanted in Spain for crimes against humanity. Morocco was upset by this and issued a statement that if Spain hosts Ghali again that Spain will face repercussions from Morocco. When Spain ignored Morocco's message, Morocco used this to frame Spain as uninterested in fighting against crimes against humanity. This helped Morocco develop the narrative that it is not a sheepish state, and hurt Spain's narrative that they are a peaceful, democratic state.

Later in that year, Morocco opened its' border in May 2021 to Ceuta, leading to many trying to illegally enter the city and chaos erupting. Many speculate that Morocco did this to try to wear down Spain and gain their support in the Western Sahara. Hours after the border was opened to migrants, Spain approved a bill to supply nearly \$40 million in aid to policing Ceuta's border. More illegal migrants entered Spain on the day Morocco opened Ceuta's borders than ever in history, and many media outlets framed Morocco as weaponizing migrants for economic or political gain.¹² Morocco's lack of fear in making a strong, and potentially dangerous, political

¹¹ "Morocco Profile - Timeline."

¹² Pflughoeft, Aspen. "Tensions Flare between Morocco and Spain over Unregulated Migration." Deseret News. Deseret News, June 2, 2021. <https://www.deseret.com/u-s-world/2021/6/2/22465382/tensions-flare-between-morocco-and-spain-weaponized-migration-ceuta>.

decision against Spain highlights the master narrative Morocco is trying to portray of being a force to be reckoned with. Morocco's lack of concern for potential consequences is used to help illustrate that the state is a strong, and active international player.

Spain's Master & Identity Narratives	Morocco's Master & Identity Narratives	Issue Narratives: Western Sahara
Discoverer of new territories Conquistador Catholic values Peaceful democracy Cooperative international actor Influential world power	Colonial past Turbulent and conflict filled history Independent nation Relevant international actor Human rights protector	What should the autonomy plan be for Western Sahara and how should it be decided Potential referendum Who should be the actors involved in deciding the future of the Western Sahara Conflict; sovereignty Ethnic tensions Historical tensions Logistics of implementing autonomy plan EU support Polisario Front/Algeria's support

Issue Narrative: Western Sahara

Spain's strategic messaging of its newly defined stance with Morocco highlights how Spain is attempting to develop the narrative that it is a cooperative democracy and international partner. Since the end of General Franco's dictatorship in Spain, the country has worked diligently to democratize and become part of the international system. This however conflicts with Spain's imperialistic history with Morocco, and until recently, apathetic nature towards mending lingering tensions.¹³ In order for Spain to shed its dictatorial and imperialistic ways and prove its relevance as a democratic actor, it needed to readjust its relationship with Morocco. Spain could not let Morocco continue to capitalize on events like the meeting with Ghali, or exploit weaknesses like Ceuta, to maintain its reputation as a democratized state. Moreover, for Spain to appear as a collaborative foreign power, it could not continue to ignore its diplomatic agreements with Morocco in the Western Saharan. Amends needed to be made with Morocco to prevent anything from undermining Spain's legitimacy and relationships in the international system.

Spain's recent move to support Moroccan autonomy in the Western Sahara signifies the country's re-commitment to one of their master narratives, restoring and maintaining a cooperative, democratic state. Since Spain transitioned from a dictatorship to a democracy, the state has been focused on positioning themselves as a collaborative and peaceful international partner. Until recently, Morocco had been an exception to Spain's narrative, as Spain has historically ignored Morocco's authority in the Western Sahara. However, after a statement made earlier this month by the Spanish Foreign Minister, Spain has reversed its positioning and now

¹³ "Morocco-Spain: 'the Other Kingdom Clinging to the Remains of an Obsolete Empire'." The Africa Report.com. The Africa Report, June 8, 2021.<https://www.theafricareport.com/95988/morocco-spain-the-other-kingdom-clinging-to-the-remains-of-an-obsolete-empire/>.

sees Moroccan autonomy in the Western Sahara as the most credible solution.¹⁴ Spain's change in stance illustrates Spain's goals of bolstering its national image, increasing allies and fortifying its international rank.

Spain's decision to have their Foreign Minister make this announcement was strategic; it made good news and offered credibility. According to Galtung and Ruge's news values, Spain's decision was newsworthy because it was unexpected, meaningful, unambiguous, and made reference to elite nations and people.¹⁵ After the decision was announced, Morocco had sent back its ambassador to Spain, who had previously been removed. This was critical because people have largely lost faith in public institutions due to the myriad of information available, so this move reinstated the government's commitment to its services.¹⁶ Spain's strategic use of their most prominent foreign affairs' official to relay such a momentous message, limited disinformation and varying perceptions on where Spain stands on the issue.

The lack of disinformation coming from Spain also reaffirms the country's ambition to be a cooperating democracy. In order for a democracy to remain true to its values, it cannot defer to disinformation like authoritarian regimes do. Democracies should instead utilize soft power and a strong rule of law.¹⁷ Spain's avoidance of disinformation, despite the backlash it receives from other countries such as Algeria, further emphasizes the peaceful and democratic narrative that Spain is trying to push.

¹⁴ Al Jazeera. "Algeria Recalls Spain Envoy over Western Sahara Policy Change." News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, March 19, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/19/algeria-recalls-spain-envoy-over-western-sahara-policy-change>.

¹⁵ Tony Harcup & Deirdre O'Neill, What Is News? Galtung and Ruge revisited, *Journalism Studies*, 2:2, 261-280, 2001.

¹⁶ Sean Illing, [The Elites have Failed](#), Unherd, March 27, 2021

¹⁷ Jessica Brandt, How Democracies can Win an Information Contest without Undercutting their Values, Carnegie Endowment for Peace, August 2, 2021.

Spain's change in stance also symbolizes the country's interest in being a prominent member of the international community. Middle powers need to be more assertive and responsible in foreign affairs for the world order to continue, and Spain is attempting to show this.¹⁸ Additionally, the onslaught of information that is available to people now, makes governments less able to guarantee security for their citizens.¹⁹ Spain is aware of the power of media manipulation from their own domestic issues (i.e. Catalonia). To ensure the safety of their citizens, the Spanish government delivered this message themselves in an attempt to mitigate opposing information and potential conflict.

Despite Spain's efforts to deliver this change of stance in the most clear and safe way, the media is still highlighting potential repercussions that the country could face, as that is another aspect of compelling news. For example, the news is discussing how Spain's support of Morocco could be compared to the situation in Ukraine, since Morocco unlawfully annexed the land in the Western Sahara. However, to counteract these narratives, Spain's messaging uses many aspects of narrative contestation. For example, the country used the process of projection to declare the message from the highest officials first, to dispel potential rumors.²⁰

Spain's messaging similarly relates to Germany's narrative during the Eurozone crisis. Germany used their narrative to further their foreign policy goals, as Spain is doing now with Morocco.²¹ Spain's repositioning is favorable in the EU's eyes, which is an organization Spain wants to remain a relevant part of and have the support of. Spain is even admitting to some faults

¹⁸ Stewart M. Patrick. The World Order is Dead. Long Live the World Order. Council on Foreign Affairs, June 25, 2019.

¹⁹ Aris Roussinos, The Anarchy is Coming: the liberal world order has failed to usher in global peace. Unherd, March 22, 2021.

²⁰ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle,.

²¹ Isabelle Hertou and Alister Miskimmon, Germany's Strategic Narrative of the Eurozone Crisis, German Politics and Society, Vol 33, pp. 42-52, Spring/Summer 2015.

and accepting responsibility to bolster their narrative. Spain is also still managing a domestic conflict regarding the Catalan region. Catalonia is one of Spain's autonomous communities that has in the past few decades made strides and calls for secession from Spain. Given that Spain is already trying to minimize this issue and refine its messaging of the problem to the international community, it may have also mended relations with Morocco to limit its conflicts. Fixing relations with Morocco allows Spain to more favorably message their cooperativeness, which may be useful for Spain regarding other issues like Catalonia.

Implications Following Spain's Repositioning

Spain's new positioning will have many potential implications for both states. Thus far, Spain's new positioning has led Morocco to reinstate its ambassador to Spain, which it had previously recalled.²² This, in addition to other comments made by Morocco, portrays that Morocco is pleased with Spain's new alignment and is open to working with the state. The EU has also established that it welcomes Spain's change in stance with Morocco.²³ Morocco remains an important ally to many EU nations. Therefore, neither Spain, nor Morocco, want to lose overall EU support just for this issue.

While Spain has strengthened some of its relationships through this decision, it has also had some negative implications as well. For example, since the Polisario Front is backed by Algeria, Algeria removed its ambassador to Spain because of its decision.²⁴ Besides this damaging foreign relations between Spain and Algeria, it could also have economic consequences for Spain. Algeria supplies gas to Spain, and given the crisis in Ukraine, Algeria's

²² Minder, Raphael.

²³ "EU Welcomes Spain's Shift on Western Sahara, Backs UN Efforts." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 22, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-backs-spains-shift-western-saharan-autonomy-2022-03-21/>.

²⁴ Minder, Raphael.

supply has become ever more important.²⁵ Spain could risk increasing gas prices even further if relations are damaged even more with Algeria.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Master narratives form the basis for a culture's common knowledge as they can be invoked without always having to explain their full context.²⁶ Master narratives however, are not inherently strategic.

Going forward, Spain's relations with other states will shift as well. Some states support Morocco's proposal and will embrace Spain's new positioning, such as the US. However, there are other states and international organizations that believe a referendum should occur in the region to decide who is in control.²⁷ To illustrate its identity as collaborative and credible democracies, Spain and Morocco should continue its use of elite officials as spokespeople. As citizens recognize the contradictions between government practices and government's projected narratives, master narratives are called into question. When citizens do not trust the media, they "are less likely to access accurate information, which has civic and political ramifications."²⁸ Using trusted officials to relay important foreign affairs messages can deter some of these problems from occurring.

Morocco and Spain need to understand each other's identity narratives, remain loyal to and supportive of allies, and be proactive in discourse around international issues. Spain waited a

²⁵ Bellamy, Daniel. "Spain Angers Algeria after It Sides with Morocco over Western Sahara." euronews, March 20, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/20/spain-angers-algeria-after-it-sides-with-morocco-over-western-sahara>.

²⁶ Jeffrey R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall, Jr. and Steven R. Corman, 182.

²⁷ Al Jazeera. "Algeria Recalls Spain Envoy over Western Sahara Policy Change." News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, March 19, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/19/algeria-recalls-spain-envoy-over-western-sahara-policy-change>.

²⁸ Student Presentation 1 & 2 Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online, Data and Society, 2020

long time to support Morocco on this issue, and it caused tension between the two countries for years. In the future, it is suggested that the states consider positions on issues early and communicate their thoughts to their allies to avoid conflict. Just as perceptions of history and identity change for a state due to growing media landscapes, so do perceptions of foreign actors. Open dialogue between Spain and Morocco around matters related to the Western Sahara will not only benefit how the two countries cooperate, but will further their intended master narratives .

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