6 The European Dimension

At the start of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, Spain was a semi-isolated country that recently, albeit briefly, had been a subject of the EEC’s Mediterranean policy, designed to assist the weaker economies to the south of the Community. Less than a quarter of a century later, she had become a major architect of that policy, as the Community sought to develop it, and partly through acquiring this role she had achieved influence within Europe. The relationship between Spain’s Mediterranean activism and her European success was fundamental, at least during the González period. The Spaniards recognized the limitations of any Mediterranean policy pursued purely at the national level, and saw in the EC a unique ‘force and means multiplier’ – an unrivalled instrument for pursuing national objectives in relation to North Africa, whose economies were bound so intimately and dependently to Europe (MAE, Actividades 1985: 373; Ortega, 1995a: 44).1

Conversely, Spain’s past involvement in the Mediterranean provided Madrid with a foundation from which it could begin to play an influential role in European decision-making at a time when the Community, prodded by its southern members, was concerning itself increasingly with the pursuit of stability in neighbouring southern (as well as eastern) regions. Mediterranean policy thus became a high priority for Spain as an aspect of foreign policy. Equally it acquired greater domestic significance, owing eventually to the growth of immigration from the South but much more immediately to economic considerations, for the evolution of EC Mediterranean policy greatly influenced the positions of both southern and northern Mediterranean states within the so-called European ‘pyramid of influence’ or privilege. While post-Franco Spain has tended to turn away from the Third World and preoccupy herself with the First,2 this has not affected the Mediterranean in the way that it has – in some respects – Latin America. Rather, owing to a combination of factors – geography, strategic considerations, European political trends and conscious design – Spanish responses to Mediterranean problems have become substantially ‘Europeanized’, to the extent that one observer could say, without exaggeration, that ‘Spain’s Mediterranean policy is the other side of the coin of its European policy’ (Tovias, 1995: 99–100; Ortega, 1995b: 193).
As Spanish influence within Europe has grown, Madrid has offered itself as a champion or mentor of southern Mediterranean states in their dealings with the EC/EU. However, there have been clear constraints on Spain’s suitability for such a role. For one, Spain has clear limitations as a prospective role model. While pre-1986 Spain could always aspire to Community membership, the southern Mediterraneans can dream at most of some ‘privileged’ form of association, such as that of Mexico with the USA. Another limitation is the historical primacy of French involvement in the Maghreb, although the colonial background has created difficulties as well as advantages for France. Moreover, important conflicts of economic interest have persisted between Spain and the southern states. North African calls for free access to the European market for key agricultural exports such as citrus fruits and olive oil have never been welcome to Spanish ears. Spain herself had to struggle hard to overcome French objections in order to join the Community and thereafter made every effort to retain her hard-won position of ascendancy over Mediterranean non-member countries (MNMCs) in the ‘pyramid of influence’. Yet here Spain soon found herself in a deeply ambivalent position: on the one hand, she continued to need EU support in order to reduce the gap separating herself from the lead group of European nations, and could not easily show generosity towards the South if she were to continue progressing; on the other hand, aware of gathering storm clouds over the Mediterranean, she saw the need for an increased financial commitment towards the South, in her own as well as in broader European interests, yet was reluctant to make special sacrifices herself – especially once the EU had turned its attention towards central and eastern Europe and the pressure upon Community resources increased.

This ambivalence was reflected in occasional divergence within the Spanish policy-making community, with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, under pressure from domestic farmers’ and fishermen’s lobbies, expressing less generous sentiments towards the South than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At times, such ‘inconsistency’ has damaged the credibility of Spanish policy and even of ‘Europe’. It has appeared to Spain’s southern interlocutors that the real contradiction has been between an official rhetoric in which Spanish statesmen and diplomats stand up for ‘the Mediterranean’ and a realpolitik in which national ambitions prevail, frequently informed by narrow short-term considerations. These contradictions will be analysed below, in the course of examining the dramatic evolution of Spain’s status vis-à-vis the EC, our main focus being the Community’s Mediterranean policy.