

Historical Memory in the Foreign Policy of Spanish-speaking Countries

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the construction logic of historical memory in the foreign policies of Spanish-speaking countries, such as Spain and Latin American countries, against the backdrop of globalization. With the help of historical memory theory and the construction model of international identity, this paper studies how the colonial heritage and Cold War experience affect the formation of identity narrative in contemporary diplomatic decision-making. The memory of plundering resources in the colonial era prompts Mexico and other countries to further strengthen their resource sovereignty policies. The legacy left by the independence movement continues the process of regional integration by virtue of Bolivarianism. The memory of the intervention of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War prompts Cuba and other countries to develop ideological medical diplomacy. At the level of international identity building, Spanish promotes the convergence of the Ibero-American community in the form of cultural ties. Similarly, in view of the differences in the recognition of the “former colonist colonized” identity between Spain and Latin American countries, it has triggered regional cooperation conflicts. Taking the case studies of Spain, Mexico, and Argentina as the approach, this paper points out that there is a “double-edged sword” effect in the historical memory of foreign policy: it can enhance the cohesion between the internal, and it may also weaken the foundation of identity due to political polarization and the impact of the digital economy. Spanish-speaking countries may rely on the instrumental strategy of historical memory to reconstruct the identity of the “Global South” in the emerging issues, such as artificial intelligence ethics and deep-sea mining.

Keywords: Historical memory; Foreign policy; Colonial heritage; Cold War memory; International identity

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Today, with the close integration of globalization, the foreign policies of Spanish-speaking countries (Spain and 33 Latin American countries) show a special path dependence. As a region once colonized by Spain, Latin American countries have long been influenced by the geopolitics of the United States. However, as a member of

the European Union, Spain has been unable to give up its cultural ties with the Latin American “Ibero American community”^[1]. In view of this historical complexity, the positions of Spanish-speaking countries on issues such as climate negotiations and resource sovereignty disputes often have the dual characteristics of “post-colonial trauma” and “regional autonomy.” The lithium nationalization policy introduced by Mexico in 2022 is not only a response to the history of resource plundering during the colonial period, but also a practical choice for Mexico to compete for strategic initiative in the global new energy transformation. In addition, the apparent contradiction of Spain’s 2023 EU sanctions against Cuba and its promotion of the “Ibero-American community” highlights a more serious problem: Unresolved historical wounds haunt the foreign affairs of Spanish-speaking countries. A contradiction that reflects the difficulties Latin America faces in balancing economic dependence with anti-colonial rhetoric.

1.2. Research questions

How does historical memory use identity narration to influence the diplomatic decisions of Spanish-speaking countries? How can these countries’ identities in contemporary international affairs be shaped by the memory of resource plundering and cultural repression formed by colonial heritage, and the memory of the US Soviet intervention during the Cold War? Is the “anti-colonial discourse” that Argentina has been using in the sovereignty contradiction of the Falklands intrinsically related to the historical memory of its independence movement in the 19th century? Is the continuation of the ideology embodied in Cuba’s medical diplomacy historical feedback on Soviet aid during the Cold War?

1.3. Research significance

This study provides a new perspective for grasping the instrumental application of Spanish-speaking countries’ identity of the “Global South” in climate negotiations and the upsurge of nationalization in resource sovereignty disputes. During the nationalization of lithium mines in Chile, Mexico, and other countries, by emphasizing the “colonial heritage” to shape the international public opinion situation, the domestic policy and global justice narrative are tied together. Spain’s strategy of balancing Latin American traditional ties and European identity within the framework of the European Union highlights the complex role of historical memory in cross-regional diplomacy.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Key concepts

2.1.1. Theories involved in collective historical memory

Aleida Assmann’s historical memory theory defines collective historical memory as “collective identity constructed with the help of cultural symbols and rituals.” The core of this theory is that groups are not passively accepting historical facts, but actively using a series of cultural practices to transform past traumatic experiences or glorious moments into the spiritual core of shaping the current group identity^[2]. Its core role is to provide legal evidence from history for current actions, so that realistic choices can obtain deep meaning protection beyond immediate interests. On the stage of international affairs, Latin American countries have repeatedly emphasized the narrative of “ecological vulnerability caused by resource plundering during the colonial period” on multilateral occasions such as climate negotiations. This is just a typical practical example of this theory. By recalling the collective memory of resource plundering in colonial history, the historical injustice is connected with the distribution of ecological responsibility at present, so as to strive for a more favorable standard for the division of responsibility in matters related to Climate Governance, so that the appeal for realistic interests can be verified

from the perspective of historical justice.

2.1.2. International identity building model

Alexander Wendt's model of international identity, based on the perspective of social constructivism, firmly believes that national identity is not an a priori entity, but a "product of ideas." It is gradually formed in the process of continuous interaction with other actors in the international community. In this process of interaction, the state defines its position and identity in the international system by defining the boundary between "self" and "other"^[3]. In the practice of foreign affairs, identity labels such as "non-Western" and "Global South" are often used strategically. The main idea is to build a differentiated identity with Western developed countries and strengthen the sense of belonging and solidarity of internal groups. During the operation of the community of Latin American and Caribbean States (celac) mechanism, relying on the concept of regional autonomy contained in the Bolivarianism, and with continuous discourse construction and practice cooperation, it continuously enhances the regional identity among Member States, making the mechanism unique from other international organizations, highlighting the core significance of identity in shaping the mode of international cooperation.

2.2. Analysis dimension

2.2.1. Language and culture ties

On the occasion of the Ibero-American summit, Spanish has the dual characteristics of colonial heritage and modern cooperation ties. As a product of colonial history, it retains the memory of cultural infiltration; Its commonality breaks through the differences of political and economic existence among countries, forms the implicit identity based on cultural homology, and creates the communication cornerstone and dialogue space for regional cooperation.

2.2.2. Reconstruction of post-colonial identity

With the protection of the rights and interests of indigenous peoples and the nationalization of resources, Latin American countries have driven the pace of reshaping post-colonial identity. The former has achieved the revival of local culture and got rid of the subordinate shackles of colonial culture; The latter takes charge of strategic resources, removes external economic constraints, gets rid of the label of "colonized" together, and re-establishes an independent and equal national identity.

2.2.3. Regional integration conflict

Due to the differences in the recognition of the identity of "former colonist colonized" between Spain and Latin American countries, the Ibero-American community presents a situation of co-existence of cooperation and competition. Spain regards itself as a cultural source to seek leadership. Latin American countries are wary of the reappearance of power in history and strive to talk equally. The tension generated by this opposition promotes the development of regional integration in dealing with contradictions.

3. The influence of historical memory on foreign policy

3.1. Colonial trauma

During the colonial period, Spain's organized plundering of gold and silver veins in Latin America not only built up the historical memory of resource plundering, but also precipitated into a deep awareness of the intervention

of external forces in local resources in the collective consciousness of resource rich countries such as Mexico and Chile, which gave birth to and continued the policy tradition of “resource nationalism.” This tradition is not just a simple xenophobia, but a structural response to the damage to the right to development caused by the plundering of resources in history^[4-5]. In 2022, the Mexican government came up with a state-owned lithium company and clearly issued a policy of prohibiting foreign investment from participating in lithium mining. This is just the direct projection of historical traumatic memory in the contemporary resource governance area. Relying on the state’s mastery of strategic resources, it reconstructs the self-narrative of resource sovereignty and prevents the recurrence of the plundering mode of external resources. The arbitration demands of Chinese-funded enterprises, such as Ganfeng Lithium, due to policy adjustment, actually show the collision between the concept of resource sovereignty formed in history and the logic of contemporary international capital flows. The essence of this collision is the contradiction between the security cognition and the rules of real economic cooperation shaped by historical memory.

The practice of cultural assimilation promoted by Spain in the colonial period strengthened the legitimacy of colonial rule by suppressing indigenous languages, religions, and customs. The collective memory left by this cultural imprisonment prompted Latin American countries to upgrade the protection of indigenous rights and interests to the core position of national identity establishment and the Diplomatic Discourse System in modern times. In the negotiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the “pachamama” in indigenous culture was the introduction of the concept into the discussion of global ecological ethics is not only the display of cultural symbols, but also the reconstruction of the value reference system of ecological governance with the help of the concept of indigenous cosmology. This strategy of using indigenous culture as a weapon to resist the discourse of Western environmental hegemony not only responds to the trauma of cultural repression in history but also strives for a differentiated speaking space for developing countries in the global climate governance activities, creating a dual consistency between cultural identity and practical demands.

3.2. The legacy of the independence movement

The idea of “American Integration” advocated by Simon Bolivar, as a highly influential political idea during the Latin American independence movement, has not faded with the evolution of the times, but has been continued in the contemporary era with the help of regional mechanisms such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The key to this idea is to get rid of the control of external forces over American affairs and build a cooperation framework based on regional autonomy. The Kingston declaration, adopted at the eighth summit of CELAC held in 2024, emphasizes the common position of Latin American countries on issues such as food security and climate change. Its deep logical essence is the contemporary practice of Bolivarianism, relying on the cohesion of regional consensus, and gradually jumping out of the scope of influence of the Organization of American States (OAS) framework dominated by the United States for a long time. This effort is not only an echo of the ideal of “the Americans themselves governing American affairs” during the independence movement, but also a redefinition of the regional independent development space in the context of globalization, trying to balance the geopolitical impact of external forces by relying on collective forces.

3.3. Cold War experience

During the Cold War, the two camps of the United States and the Soviet Union frequently intervened in Latin American affairs, especially the history of external forces’ influence on regional regime change through ideological manipulation, which left a strong ideological vigilance in Latin American countries’ diplomatic decision-making.

This vigilance turned into a diplomatic practice with a strong anti-hegemonic color. The historical situation that Cuba was supported by the Soviet Union during the Cold War made it always integrate the anti-hegemonic narrative into humanitarian action in the stage of establishing a medical diplomacy system, creating a unique style of Ideological Diplomacy. In 2025, Cuba's dispatch of medical personnel to more than 60 countries in the world is not only the cross-border delivery of medical resources, but also the implementation of its own diplomatic philosophy. It should respond to the ideological defamation of external forces by actual humanitarian contributions. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Mao Ning highlighted the humanitarian value of "saving a large number of lives", which is basically a verbal counterattack against the United States' accusation of "forced labor." This counterattack relies on highlighting the consistency between the anti-hegemonic position developed from history and the actual humanitarian action, and then constructs a historical narrative of Cuba's diplomatic practice, resisting the discourse offensive in terms of ideological confrontation.

4. Construction path of international identity

4.1. Language and culture community

Spanish, as the output of the integration of the Iberian Peninsula and the American continent for hundreds of years, has long exceeded the attribute significance of simply being a communication tool in the mechanism framework formed by the contemporary Ibero American summit, and has become a cultural totem to maintain regional emotional interaction. This cultural community formed around language has built a dialogue platform for all participants to cross political system differences and geographical interests contradictions. With the help of its position as the cultural source of the Spanish-speaking world and the multilateral cooperation mechanism such as the "Spain China Forum", Spain has flexibly turned its linguistic advantages into diplomatic potential. In the process of promoting trilateral cooperation with Latin American countries, Spain has systematically strengthened its role as a "transatlantic bridge" connecting Europe and the Americas. With the help of the cultural identity hidden behind the language, Spain has calmed the opposition in the political game and created a favorable soft foundation for cooperation in a broader field. This diplomatic strategy based on culture has made Spanish an implicit way to resolve political differences and created a deeper emotional resonance outside the official discourse system.

4.2. Identity conflict in regional cooperation

The "former colonist colonized" identity gap formed in the historical narrative between Spain and Latin American countries has always been the cause of structural tension that is difficult to bridge in the process of regional cooperation. This difference caused by identity cognition is obviously different in the priority setting and value orientation of cooperation issues. In multilateral cooperation occasions such as the EU-CELAC summit, Spain, as a core member of the EU, has repeatedly put "values diplomacy" in a prominent position, trying to control the cooperation agenda by relying on the democratic standards and human rights concepts in the western discourse system; However, Latin American countries are more willing to take economic sovereignty and the right to development as the core focus of cooperation based on their historical memory of getting rid of colonial rule and the practical requirements of ensuring national independent development. At the summit between the EU and CELAC in 2023, the differences between the two sides on specific issues, such as the design of trade rules and the threshold of investment access, in essence, are the concentrated emergence of such differences in identity recognition. The EU side, represented by Spain, focuses on the universality of rules, and Latin American countries

guard the independent nature of the development route. This conflict of value orientation makes the further deepening of regional cooperation face insurmountable conceptual obstacles.

4.3. Participation in global governance

Latin American countries, which exist in the global governance system, adopt strategies to use the identity of “Global South” to create a discourse system that closely combines historical narrative and realistic demands. In global issues such as climate governance, Latin American countries wisely link the history of the plundering of resources during the colonial period with the current allocation of climate responsibility and shape a morally persuasive argument logic ^[6]. Argentina’s “anti-colonial” position on the dispute over the Malvinas Islands and its proposal to require developed countries to assume more emission reduction obligations during the negotiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have built a self-consistent discourse loop of “historical justice and practical benefits.” By linking the resource deprivation brought by colonial history to developing countries with the current differences in their ability to cope with climate change, Latin American countries have seized the commanding heights of discourse in terms of morality and have also transformed the historical narrative into a diplomatic means to seek practical benefits, forming a unique negotiating means in the global governance game.

5. Case study

5.1. Spain: Identity balance under the EU Framework

Spain will not accept the EU’s “rearming Europe” plan in 2025 and requires obtaining funds in the form of donations rather than loans, which not only maintains the status of EU Member States but also prevents the accumulation of debt from damaging the results of economic cooperation with Latin American countries. This strategy reflects the historical continuity of its “Europe-Latin America” dual identity.

5.2. Mexico: Dual recognition of NAFTA and Latin American regionalism

Mexico insisted on including the “labor and environment clause” in the USMCA negotiations. It not only responded to the pressure caused by the United States but also relied on the CELAC mechanism to promote regional standards in Latin America, striving to find a balance between North American Integration and Latin American autonomy.

6. Challenges and responses

6.1. Internal political polarization weakens identity cohesion

Colombia’s left and right wings are in opposition, resulting in repeated swings in foreign policy. In 2022, after the left-wing president Pedro came to power, he made adjustments to Venezuela’s policy, and the right-wing policy of closing the border was abolished. However, the domestic right-wing forces still use the judicial system to hinder regional cooperation.

6.2. Risk of weakening language and culture ties in the era of the digital economy

Even though Spain has promoted the “digital 2025” plan and used AI technology to improve the use of Spanish in e-commerce and tourism, the trend of Anglicization on TikTok and other platforms still poses a threat to the status

of Spanish. Mexican companies' use of AI to produce multilingual product videos has promoted the trade process, but may dilute the local cultural characteristics.

7. Conclusion

Historical memory plays a “double-edged sword” role in the foreign policies of Spanish-speaking countries: colonial heritage and Cold War experience have given legitimacy to resource sovereignty and regional integration, and may also cause internal cracks due to identity narrative conflicts. When dealing with emerging practical challenges, the Spanish-speaking countries have demonstrated their adept diplomatic strategy of weaving historical narratives, current interest demands, and identity politics together. In emerging issues such as artificial intelligence ethics and deep-sea mining, Spanish-speaking countries will probably continue to use the narrative strategy of “historical justice-realistic interests” to reconstruct the identity of the “Global South” through instrumental historical memory. At a time of deep-sea mining rights disputes, Latin American countries will probably invoke the principle of “maritime freedom” during the colonial period to claim sovereignty over deep-sea resources and then seek a more favorable situation in the negotiations of the International Seabed Authority (ISA). Consequently, in today's world, where multipolar development is taking place and international situations are increasingly complex, Spanish-speaking countries use historical memories as a tool to secure their own interests when dealing with new challenges. This strategy of tying historical memory with emerging issues will become a key feature of the diplomacy of Spanish-speaking countries.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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