

ETA cease-fire: Handle with caution

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Over the last few months there were rumors about ETA announcing a cease-fire. Since last Sunday, what was a possibility became an official fact. The Basque terrorist organization *Euskadi ta Askatasuna*, or Basque Country and Freedom, announced the end of “armed offensive actions” and proclaimed its willingness to negotiate with the Spanish government. Although the suspension of violence is always welcomed, some important issues for assessing the real scope of the statement remain uncertain. In the video where three ETA terrorists make the announcement, there is no information about whether this truce is temporary or permanent. Furthermore, by mentioning “armed offensive actions”, ETA maintains the possibility of perpetrating “armed defensive actions”, extortion and rearmament.

ETA is in a corner, facing all sorts of problems, ranging from human resources to logistics and political support. In an op-ed entitled “Freno y...¿marcha atrás?” published in the newspaper *El País*, Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater wrote that ETA is like a big vehicle: it needs a long road ahead in order to loose speed and properly immobilize itself. Savater adds that the vehicle is indeed trying to stop, but no one is quite sure about who is pushing the breaks. But more importantly, Savater notes that ETA is stopping because it is running out of gas. Indeed, the organization is going through its weakest moment in decades of terrorism, and negotiations are a natural step to take, as it allows the terrorist group to save face under the illusion that it negotiates because it wants and not because it needs to.

As far as conflict management and resolution theories are concerned, this truce provides great opportunities for peace. However, given ETA’s record, one should approach the Basque terrorist organization with caution.

ETA’s statement can have two different interpretations: the organization may finally be acknowledging that it is incapable of continuing the armed struggle and therefore is searching for a way to transform and enter Spanish democratic life; or, by recognizing its debility, ETA may be aiming to create a diversion that would allow for it to regroup and rearm its ranks. Bearing in mind the Basque terrorists’ past, the latter is the most probable. In fact, many past cease-fires were used by these terrorists to their own benefit, showing no intention whatsoever of solving the conflict and its underlying problems.

ETA’s last truce – a “permanent cease-fire” – was announced on March 22nd, 2006 and lasted until December 30th of that same year, when ETA detonated a bomb planted in the parking lot of the new Terminal 4 of Barajas International Airport in Madrid, causing significant property destruction and killing two persons. José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who was then serving his first term as Prime Minister, took the March 2006 cease-fire to negotiate with the Basque terrorists and, nine months later, he understood that ETA’s only intention had been to rearm, regroup so as to continue the terrorist attacks. Therefore, ETA may now be looking to create a similar window of opportunity with the purpose regaining strength.

Three aspects of this announcement suggest that any engagement with ETA must be done under extreme political caution.

First, ETA calls for a unification of the *abertzale* left-wing parties and movements. The terrorists argue that this will ease the path towards peace, but it could also be a move to consolidate ETA’s ranks. The political parties that revolve around ETA have been asking for a truce with international oversight, which caused rifts within the terrorist organization. Aside from aiming at internal cohe-



sion, the cease-fire may aspire to allow these banned left-wing parties to run in the next municipal elections, to be held in May. In fact, having representation in local assemblies or even directing City Halls is of the utmost importance because it provides financial resources, offers some legal protection and creates political problems for the government (in a democracy such as Spain, it is a sensitive topic to oust or prosecute elected parties, even when they support terrorism). Without regaining some municipalities, it will be very difficult for ETA to get back on its feet.

Second, ETA appeals to the international community to participate in the peace process. Such a request demonstrates that the organization is well aware that Madrid is less likely to be manipulated again, and that therefore it may want to search for external actors in order to have someone to exploit and manipulate during negotiations. ETA's manipulation of international actors goes beyond mere speculation, as the following case demonstrates. On October 25th 2006, the Spanish government took the Basque conflict to the European Parliament, which approved the resolution presented by the Socialists supporting the peace initiative in Basque Country. Representatives from some political parties close to ETA were allowed to attend the vote. It was an unequivocal political victory for ETA and its proxies, so one would expect that the Basque terrorist organization take the opportunity to consolidate its voice and develop its political wings to the detriment of its armed groups. Yet, that same day, ETA robbed a warehouse in France's Basque region and stole close to 300 weapons as well as ammunition.

Third, the terrorist group stated that the decision to end "armed offensive actions" was taken months ago, specifically last March according to the newspaper *El Mundo*. If this is true as it seems to be, ETA's intentions with this truce are questionable. In January 2010, two Basque terrorists were arrested in Torre de Moncorvo and Vila Nova de Foz, Portugal, while driving a van carrying explosives and detonators. A month later, half a ton of explosives were found in a house in Óbidos, Portugal, in what was probably a transfer of ETA's facilities from France to Portugal. Then, in March, Andoni Zengotitabengoa, one of

the terrorists in charge of the house in Óbidos, was arrested at Lisbon Airport trying to board a plane heading to Venezuela, a country where ETA allegedly has support from Colombian FARC terrorists and from Hugo Chávez. Assuming that ETA did decide months ago to declare a truce and is committed to it, it is contradictory that in the preceding months ETA invested time and money as well as risked its members in order to develop an operational structure in Portugal.

The biggest risk of this new cease-fire was that the Spanish government would decide to negotiate again without bearing in mind ETA's political practice and identity. In fact, and as mentioned before, even during the period between March and December 2006 there were numerous indications that ETA was using the cease-fire as well as negotiations as a prelude for rearmament before resuming hostilities. Yet this time around, considering the Interior Minister's first reaction, it appears that Madrid has finally learnt its lesson. Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba described ETA's truce as "insufficient" and rejected a return to the negotiation process. According to the government, ETA's only way out is through renouncing violence and depositing its weapons. And until that happens, Rubalcaba has pledged to maintain the counter-terrorism policy unchanged. It appears that the European Parliament has also learnt from the past: the cease-fire was received with skepticism, contrasting with the naivety – if not ignorance – displayed in October 2006.

Mounting police pressure and a solid political front against ETA have proved to be the solution. Therefore, and despite the new opportunity for building peace, any sign of concession by the Spanish government may mean a high price to pay. Present times are a unique opportunity to end the politics of violence and fear that have brutalized Spain since the 1960s once and for all. ETA is in fact a big vehicle that needs time and space to come to a full stop. But contrary to what happened last time, the driving must be done by the Spanish government. And it must be steered in strict respect for the law, without compromising the safety of passengers, other travelers and bystanders. Considering Rubalcaba's statements, the Spanish government is finally on the right track.

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