

David McKinnon - Bell

"Philip II"

In the years that followed, a second and third armada (in 1596 and 1597) was assembled, but neither reached its destination, due once again to adverse weather. Around 400 Spanish troops did land briefly in Cornwall in 1595, burning Penzance before being driven off.¹¹ However, whilst the mere threat of another armada was enough to strike panic into English hearts, the enormous cost of these expeditions placed an intolerable burden upon Spain's finances. English naval expeditions were barely more successful. Drake raided the coastlines of northern Spain in 1589, but a raid on the Azores in 1591 was driven off with heavy losses by the rebuilt Spanish navy, and a further landing in Portugal made little impact. Repeated English raids in the Indies met with only partial success. The Holy Grail of such expeditions, the capture of the bullion fleet, was never achieved and on the 1595 expedition to Panama, Drake died. However, in July 1596 the Earl of Essex succeeded in capturing and holding Cadiz for a fortnight. The city was pillaged relentlessly, much to Philip's embarrassment, and before sailing away (unmolested) the English set the city alight. The whole episode was regarded as a national humiliation by Spaniards.

Throughout the 1590s, the struggle continued on land in the Netherlands, where England aided the Dutch rebels, and France, particularly Brittany and Normandy, where both English and Spanish forces intervened in France's internal conflicts. Meanwhile, Philip attempted to stir up Elizabeth's Irish subjects, led by the rebellious Earl of Tyrone. Tyrone's rebellion between 1597 and 1599 tied down 17,000 English troops, and 4,500 Spanish troops landed in Ireland in 1601, although they made little impression and were eventually forced to surrender at Kinsale. But whereas Philip needed to defeat Elizabeth, the English required merely that Spain remained tied down in multiple theatres of warfare until her finances collapsed. In this respect, it might be argued that England 'won' the fitful and inconclusive exchanges of the Anglo-Spanish War, although the damage done to the important trading relationships that had existed between the two countries was enduring, and reinforces the impression of a war that neither side really 'won'. The Treaty of London finally brought peace in 1604, but hostilities had effectively petered-out several years previously.

4 The Debate over Philip's Foreign Policy

KEY ISSUE What were the aims and objectives of Philip II's foreign policy?

Philip's foreign policy was controversial even during his own lifetime. Philip's enemies argued that Spain was aggressive and expansionist, and that he sought to establish 'Universal Monarchy'.

Contemporaries, especially in Protestant Europe, interpreted Philip's ill-considered attempt to place his daughter on the French and English thrones as a plan for Habsburg hegemony over Europe. Henry of Navarre's propagandists claimed that Philip sought 'to make himself absolute lord of all France'.¹² Such ideas gained apparent support from the medal struck in 1583 to mark Spain's acquisition of Portugal's empire, which proclaimed 'The world is not enough'. Even Philip's allies were alive to the possibility. The Pope, in a letter to his ambassador in Paris in 1589, suggested that Philip's motives were primarily self-interested:

The King of Spain, as a temporal sovereign, is anxious above all to safeguard and increase his dominions ... The preservation of the Catholic religion ... is only a pretext for His Majesty, whose principal aim is the security and aggrandisement of his dominions.¹³

Some historians have agreed that Philip had expansionist goals. R. Trevor Davies argued, in 1937:

1 To Philip, no doubt, all his policy was consciously directed to the glory of God and the good of His Church; but these things were identical in his mind with the exaltation of the power of Spain ... Whenever political interest and religious zeal clashed, religious zeal almost invariably gave way.¹⁴

Generally, the 'Universal Monarchy' theory should be seen for the sixteenth Century 'Black Legend' propaganda that it was. However, in Protestant Europe, Spanish foreign policy was suspected of serving the Catholic cause. Elizabeth I's spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham argued that an international Catholic conspiracy, with its centre in Rome and Madrid, was working to exterminate Protestantism. This thesis was repeated in Amsterdam and Geneva, where Spain was perceived as the principal threat to European Protestantism. How valid was this view? Did Philip seek to become the 'Champion of Christendom'? Certainly, the defence of Catholicism was a traditional foreign policy priority of the Spanish monarchs, and Philip was a devout Catholic. The nineteenth century German historian von Ranke argued that religion was the driving force of Philip's foreign policy, and other, more recent historians have taken up this theme:

1 His prior and unquestioning task was to defend in arms the interests of God and His Church ... It was the essence of the contract between the Habsburg rulers and their maker and benefactor, that they would unceasingly advance His cause, just as He automatically protected theirs.¹⁵

Certainly one motivation for the Armada against England in 1588 was religious. Medina Sidonia's orders to the fleet before they set sail for England stated:

1 The principal reason which has moved his Majesty to undertake this enterprise is his desire to serve God, and to convert to His Church many peoples and souls who are now oppressed by the heretical enemies of our holy Catholic faith, and are subjected to their sects and errors.¹⁶

However, whilst religion undoubtedly influenced Philip's thinking, it seems unlikely that religious objectives predominated in the shaping of policy. Although Philip spent the first 20 years of his reign at war with the Turks, there were excellent strategic and defensive reasons for this, irrespective of religious considerations. Equally, it is true that Philip's attitude to Protestant heretics, famously expressed in his claim in 1566 that 'rather than suffer the slightest prejudice to religion I would prefer to lose all my dominions and a hundred lives if I had them', was hostile. But words are cheap, and if the proof of his ardour is sought in action, the evidence is inconclusive. Malta and Lepanto represented important Christian victories over the Turks, but Philip's readiness to make peace with the Sultan in 1581 suggests a more ambiguous attitude, and his invasion in 1580 of Portugal, a fellow Catholic country, seems to scotch the idea that his policies were motivated by religious considerations. Towards the end of his life, religious considerations may have assumed greater centrality in his thinking. Ministers protesting against Spain's military intervention in France were told 'These are not matters which can be dropped... because they involve the cause of religion, which must take precedence over everything'.¹⁷

The Venetian Ambassador offered a more cautious contemporary analysis of Philip's motives:

1 His Majesty has been aiming not to wage war, so that he can add to his kingdoms but to wage peace, so that he can keep the lands that he has
 ... If he wanted to imitate the Emperor ... his enormous resources combined with some luck would make him feared throughout the
 5 world ... But he differs from him in many of the respects that make rulers truly great. His father loved the battleground and mastered the arts of war, but his son dislikes warfare and knows little about it. The Emperor undertook great campaigns of conquest, but the King avoids them. Charles planned great projects and eventually carried them
 10 through with enormous profit to himself, but Philip cares less about his own grandeur than he does about blocking the progress of others.¹⁸

This seems to suggest that Philip was primarily motivated by the defence of his dynastic inheritance, seeking only to protect the Netherlands, the Western Mediterranean, and Spanish possessions elsewhere against foreign threat, and to pass on his inheritance intact to his son. Indeed Philip consistently argued that 'I have no intention of breaking the general peace, which is a thing I myself most wish to preserve', claiming 'God is my witness that I have never made war to gain more kingdoms, but only to maintain them in the faith and in

peace'. Whilst this appears to be contradicted by the invasion of Portugal, it should be stressed that Philip could reasonably claim to be protecting his rightful inheritance when he invaded Portugal in 1580.

Other historians have argued that personal honour and Spanish pride were key considerations. In the sixteenth century, the foreign policy of a nation often served the honour and '*reputacion*' of the monarch more than the interests of the nation. Woodward suggests that 'honour and reputation meant more to Philip than the acquisition of new lands, fighting religious wars, or the creation of a universal monarchy',¹⁹ and certainly Philip was acutely conscious of his '*reputacion*', arguing in 1557 that his war against France was in defence of 'my states, as well as my honour and *reputacion*, which I value above all else'.²⁰ However, he did not wage war for this reason alone, although it may have provided an element of his thinking at crucial moments. During the Netherlands revolt, Philip refused to grant concessions to the rebels because 'to do so would be dishonourable, even if this meant the continuation of a ruinous war. However, surely more weighty was the argument that to make an ignominious peace was to signal to his other enemies and to potentially rebellious subjects that he (and, by implication, Spain) was weak. As one minister observed in 1566: 'If the Netherlands situation is not remedied it will bring about the loss of Spain and all the rest'.

In his defence, Philip rarely had the luxury to devise a policy and pursue it. His foreign policy can be viewed as little more than a series of short-term responses to individual crises, but this is only a partial explanation. Philip, like other early modern rulers, possessed limited bureaucratic and technological means, and often devised and pursued policy within circumscribed limits, hemmed in by events and developments, as he saw it, outside his control. But equally his response to events was shaped, to some extent, by a 'world view', an ideological or strategic framework. Parker has recently revived the idea that Philip did possess a 'Grand Design' for his '*monarquía*'.²¹ Although this was not necessarily a blueprint for empire, as his enemies asserted, it did lead him to commit acts of aggression towards his neighbours, driven above all by his perception of himself as God's instrument for the defence and furtherance of the Catholic faith. It is striking how frequently Philip claimed that a given project would succeed because God would ensure that it did. He wrote to Requesens in the Netherlands that 'You are engaged in God's service and in mine, which is the same thing'. Such 'providentialism' was hardly unusual in early modern Europe (Gromwell was famous for his faith in Providence, as were most Calvinists), but Parker perhaps overstates the messianic nature of Philip's self-perception as 'God's servant'.

Philip II's foreign policy objectives remain controversial, and an accurate assessment of his motives probably lies in a combination of factors, the precise mix of which varied according to circumstance

and the perspective from which one views the question. The late sixteenth century was an era of imperial conflict, in which Philip's enemies, viewing his policies from Amsterdam, Paris and London, could plausibly regard Spain as aggressive and expansionist. The annexation of Portugal, the appearance of Spanish troops in Paris during the 1590s and the armadas sent against England provided evidence supporting this view. However, modern research shows us a monarch struggling to preserve his widely scattered and vulnerable monarchy against a sea of enemies. Philip's wars were usually, in his mind, defensive, fought primarily to protect his inheritance and defend his and Spain's interests. Spain did not seek to annex territories that did not legitimately belong to her. Even in the invasion of Portugal in 1580 Philip had arguably the strongest claim of any candidate to the throne. Philip always claimed that he acted within his rights as King of Spain and that he sought only to defend his inheritance, his faith and Spain's interests. However, he failed to appreciate that the robust defence, by force of arms if necessary, of his legitimate interests, appeared proof of hostile intent and was consequently viewed with alarm by his neighbours. This difference of perspective offers a possible explanation for the different interpretations of Philippine foreign policy.

5 Conclusion – Success or Failure?

KEY ISSUES How successful was Philip II's foreign policy? How strong was Spain at the time of Philip II's death?

It is arguable whether Philip II's foreign policy promoted the interests of Spain or of the Habsburg dynasty, but to an extent this would be an artificial distinction to make, since in the sixteenth century there was no modern concept of the national interest and the two would have been regarded as inseparable. Philip II was Spain, and his interests were hers. A more pressing issue is whether Philip's foreign policy achieved its objectives although, inevitably, our answer to this question is partially determined by our view of precisely what Philip sought to achieve. Equally, when considering Philip's foreign policy the inter-relationship between foreign policy and imperial policy (especially in the Netherlands and the Indies) is vital. English piracy on the 'Spanish Main' and intervention in the Dutch Revolt ultimately poisoned Philip's initially cordial relations with Elizabeth of England, and the connections between Dutch and French Protestantism played a part in dragging Philip into France's civil war.

Seen from 1598, Philip's foreign policy appears disastrous. At his death, Spain was bankrupt, embroiled in an expensive but unproductive war with England and no nearer than in 1572 to ending the rebellion in the Netherlands. Indeed, Philip's decision to grant his

daughter Isabella and her husband Albert of Austria the archduke-dom of the 'Spanish Netherlands' appeared to recognise the loss of the northern provinces, although the conflict dragged on for a further decade. Worse, in many contemporaries' eyes, was the loss of '*reputation*' as a result of the Armada defeat and the defeat by France. Insiders in Philip's government believed that Spain had taken on too many commitments and had failed to undertake decisive action in any one field, thus perpetuating a number of parallel conflicts, which bled the human and financial resources of the country, and made victory in any one conflict unattainable. Padilla argued that 'wars thus become chronic, and the expense and trouble resulting from long continued wars are endless'.²²

Philip's failure to avoid new commitments or cut his losses in one theatre *so* as better to concentrate them elsewhere was crucial to the ultimate collapse of all his projects. He constantly restated that to concede defeat in one area would be to invite challenge elsewhere, and he was most reluctant to cede possession of lands inherited from his father. This was particularly so in the Netherlands, where Philip refused to compromise or admit defeat for 30 years, expending thousands of lives and perhaps 80 million ducats to retain control over his father's ancestral lands. This consciousness of his dynastic duty expressed itself in a sort of 'domino theory', preventing him from making a realistic assessment of the regime's capacity to defend and maintain its possessions.

In the early part of his reign Philip by and large pursued limited, defensive policies. Even this entailed multiple commitments in the Netherlands and the Mediterranean, leading to a state bankruptcy in 1575. Nevertheless, by 1580 he had maintained peace with France and England, had stemmed the Turkish tide and had successfully invaded and conquered Portugal. Even in the Netherlands, things were beginning to improve. From the perspective of 1580, Philip's management of foreign policy appears shrewd and successful. After this date, however, the tone of Philip's policy became more aggressive. Legitimate or not, Philip's acquisition of the crown of Portugal in 1580 alarmed other European powers, but he failed to appreciate how threatened his other neighbours felt by the further expansion of the already immense Spanish empire. His adoption of an aggressive policy towards England (albeit with some justification, given the provocation endured at English hands in the preceding years) and his intervention in France significantly raised the stakes in Europe. Yet to the end Philip did not regard himself as an aggressor. Why was he unable to see what the rest of Europe saw so plainly? The explanation may be sought in the rhetoric with which he urged his subordinates on during the last two decades of his life. His correspondence with ministers and commanders was increasingly dominated by a belief that he was engaged upon God's work and that he could not fail because God would bless his endeavours, however ill conceived and

hare-brained! His policies in France show him increasingly inclined to place his religious duty to defend the Catholic faith above other considerations. Towards the end of his life, then, Philip's ideological rigidity led him to take on commitments that good sense would have counselled against. The outcome of this was to over-commit Spain and thereby to hamstring her efforts in each and every theatre of war, leading eventually to multiple defeats and financial and economic ruin.

References

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- 2 Cited in G. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (Yale, 1998), p. 273.
- 3 Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 4 Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- 5 Cited in J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain* (Penguin, 1963), p. 288.
- 6 Cited in G. Parker, 'Why the Armada Failed' in *History Today* (May 1988), p. 33.
- 7 Don Francisco de Bobadilla, cited in J. Lotherington ed., *Years of Renewal* (Hodder, 1999), p. 455.
- 8 F. Fernandez-Armesto, *The Spanish Armada* (Oxford, 1989) p. 268.
- 9 Cited in Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 271.
- 10 Cited in C. Marin & G. Parker, *The Spanish Armada* (Mandolin, Manchester, 1999), p. 245.
- 11 See G. Darby, 'The Spanish Armada of ... 1597?' in *The Historian* 55 (1997), p. 14.
- 12 Anon, 'An Admonition to the Duke of Savoy' (1589), cited in J. Lock, 'How Many Tercios has the Pope? The Spanish War and the Sublimation of Elizabethan Anti-Popery' in *History* 81 (1996), p. 207.
- 13 Instructions from Pope Sixtus V to Cardinal Caetani, Papal ambassador in France, 1589. Cited in J. Lynch, 'Philip II and the Papacy', in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1961), p. 23.
- 14 R. Trevor Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain, 1501–1621* (Macmillan, 1937), p. 131.
- 15 R. H. Stradling, *Europe and the Decline of Spain* (London, 1981), p. 27.
- 16 Cited in Marin & Parker, *The Spanish Armada*, p. 26.
- 17 Letter to Mateo Vazquez in 1591, cited in Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 93.
- 18 Ambassador Suriano, cited in J. C. Davis, *The Pursuit of Power* (Harper, New York, 1970), p. 69.
- 19 See G. Woodward, 'Philip II's Foreign Policy', in *History Review* 21, p. 9.
- 20 Letter to Juana, cited in M. J. Rodriguez Salgado, *The Changing Face of Empire* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 169–170.
- 21 See Parker *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*.
- 22 Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 282.

Summary Diagram

| PHILIP'S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 1584 | |
|---|--|
| War Against France | War Against England |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports Holy League against King • Treaty of Joinville, 1584 • Parma's intervention in France 1590, 1592 • Franco-Spanish War 1595–8 • Treaty of Vervins, 1598 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treaty of Nonsuch, 1585 • Drake raids Cadiz, 1587 • Spanish Armada, 1558 • English raid on Azores, 1590 • Spain supports Irish rebellion against England |
| EVALUATING PHILIP II'S FOREIGN POLICY, 1556–98 | |
| 1. AIMS | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 'Universal Monarchy'? • The 'Champion of Catholicism'? • Defence of his inheritance! | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Reputación'? • 'A Grand Design'? • Was there a 'policy' at all? |
| 2. ACHIEVEMENTS, SUCCESS OR FAILURE? | |
| <p>Successes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held back the Turkish threat in the Mediterranean <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malta • Lepanto • Neutralised England and France for much of the reign • Conquered Portugal (1580) • May have helped persuade Henry IV of France to become a Catholic | <p>Failures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could not prevent Turkish capture of Cyprus (1571) and Tunis (1574) • Anglo-Spanish war was disastrous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armada failed • Cadiz raided in 1587 and 1596 • Cost of incessant war bankrupted Spain (e.g. 1575, 1596) • Diverted Spain's efforts away from pacification of Netherlands consequently lost northern provinces |