Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

Why does the Spanish PM advocate a greater role of China in the world?

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez is in China again this week, his fourth trip in just over three years to the world's number two economy as Spain seeks to strengthen its political and commercial ties with Beijing.

His visit comes at a complex geopolitical moment as European leaders try to influence an end to the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran, and as Spain's relationship with the U.S. has been strained by Sánchez's vocal disapproval of the conflict.

On Monday, Sánchez urged China to assume a larger role in a multipolar world, speaking at Beijing's Tsinghua University a day before he is set to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"China can do more. For example, by demanding ... that international law be respected and that the conflicts in Lebanon, Iran, Gaza and the West Bank and Ukraine cease," Sánchez said.

Sánchez is back in China, again

Spain says it wants to diversify its political relations with the world's large powers, including Beijing.

Spanish officials have said the government wants to shore up more Chinese investment, and boost exports to the country, even though trade is conducted by the European Union, which negotiates on behalf of all 27 member states.

The southern European nation, which generates more than half its electricity from renewable sources, needs Chinese critical raw materials, solar panels and green technologies — similar to other European countries transitioning away from fossil fuels.

> Given the increased frictions with the U.S. administration, these annual meetings have taken on an increased importance - Eric Sigmon

Politically, the trip comes as Spain has stuck its neck out in Europe as the continent's loudest critic of the U.S. and Israel's military actions in the Middle East, with the Sánchez government recently declaring its airspace closed to U.S. planes being used in Iran, and refusing the U.S. the use of jointly operated military bases in southern Spain.

"Given the increased frictions with the U.S. administration, these annual meetings have taken on an increased importance," said Eric Sigmon, a Madrid-based political analyst and a former U.S. national security adviser, about Sánchez's latest trip to China.

Sánchez is in China from April 13-15, and will hold talks Tuesday with Xi, Premier Li Qiang and China's top lawmaker, Zhao Leji, the third-ranking leader of its ruling Communist Party.

A friendlier Spain seeks to balance trade with China with limited success

Spain, the eurozone's fourth-largest economy, has been less adversarial toward China than other EU countries in recent years.

It has sought to reposition trade relations with China, whose exports to Spain are far greater than those of the Iberian nation of 49 million people. China has a population of more than 1.4 billion people.

Sánchez's government has had little success, with China accounting for about 74% of Spain's overall trade gap.

> For China, Spain serves as "a relatively soft, conciliatory partner" that advocates for dialogue over tougher EU measures - Alicia García-Herrero

"This repeated annual pilgrimage by Sánchez — his fourth in four (calendar) years — highlights an increasingly one-sided and

unbalanced relationship," said Alicia García-Herrero, chief economist for Asia Pacific at the French investment bank Natixis.

For China, Spain serves as "a relatively soft, conciliatory partner" that advocates for dialogue over tougher EU measures, García-Herrero said.

Sánchez, speaking in Beijing on Monday, said the EU had done its part, however slow-moving, to balance trade, and urged China to follow suit.

"We need China to do the same. To open up so that Europe doesn't have to close itself off," he said.

Spain wants stronger ties with major global powers

As a midsize political power, Spain under Sánchez has said it wants to develop stronger bilateral ties with the world's large powers and economies, including China and, increasingly, India, in addition to the U.S.

Spain's King Felipe VI also made an official visit to China last November, demonstrating the nation's interest in bolstering its relationship with Beijing

Spain's King Felipe VI also made an official visit to China last November, the first time in 18 years that a Spanish monarch did so, demonstrating the nation's interest in bolstering its relationship with Beijing.

Sánchez's last visit to Beijing ruffled feathers in Washington and took place shortly after the Trump administration announced sweeping global tariffs. U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent at the time warned Spain about "cutting your own throat."

On Monday, Sánchez encouraged China to play a larger role alongside the EU to fight climate change, promote global health and control the development of responsible artificial intelligence as well as nuclear weapons.

"Especially now that the U.S. has decided to withdraw from many of these fronts," Sánchez said.