

INTERVIEW

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Interview: Pedro Morenés, Spanish Minister of Defence



It is not often that a defence minister finds himself in charge of drawing up two annual budgets in the space of half a calendar year, but that is the task facing Spain's Pedro Morenés.

Recruited from the private sector after the conservative Partido Popular (PP) won the general elections on 20 November 2011, Morenés has spent the first quarter of 2012 overseeing the preparation of spending schedules for this year. When the schedules are presented as part of the government's overall programme at the end of March, his ministry will spend the next three months drawing up the budget for 2013. This unusual budgetary process has occurred because the new administration pushed the 2012 budget back to enable it to look at the accounts of a country that has suffered more than most in the current economic crisis.

Morenés is sure that there is not going to be any extra money forthcoming after four consecutive years of cuts in defence spending. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defence has been left with little room for manoeuvre as the country faces the costs of paying off major programmes - from the Eurofighter Typhoon to its biggest ever warship, the strategic projection ship Juan Carlos I - on an annual budget that fell back below the EUR7 billion (USD9.3 billion) mark in 2011.

As the head of that ministry, Morenés is under no illusions that his will be treated any differently from other government departments. "Apart from a few social areas, all ministries are going to have to adjust their spending to the current circumstances," he said. "I think we will have another cut."

Various figures have been talked about in the Spanish media as to just how much is owed on the modernisation programme, much of which got under way under the last PP government before it was ousted in the 2004 elections.

"The figures change each month, but now [at the end of February] the total cost of the programmes stands at around EUR32 billion up to 2025," Morenés said. "That's not the same as debt because some of it has yet to be delivered."

Balancing the ministry's accounts between income and spending is starting with a thorough appraisal of where money can be saved. However, while Morenés acknowledges Spain is in a "very complicated economic situation ... it is not much different to

that faced by the country's Western allies", he argued.

"We are doing a study and a review of all our programmes, just as France and the United Kingdom have had to do, to see which ones we can afford and which not," said Morenés, adding that, of the programmes that will continue, he will "see what numbers of units we are going to be able to incorporate".

That is also likely to affect both of the two new major programmes announced but not contracted by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) government before they left office: the ordering of new 8x8 armoured infantry fighting vehicles for the army and a further batch of Buques de Acción Marítima (BAM) patrol boats for the navy.

"As with the rest of the existing programmes, we are going to have to prioritise," he said.

For Morenés, "just as the United States has made the fight against the deficit in spending one of the goals of its national defence policy, we too are working on this as one of our objectives".

One of the mechanisms he wants to establish is a "new framework for investment in defence over the next 20 years ... that is the only way for companies to have stability and for the forces to be able to plan their requirements".

Morenés is also hoping for close co-operation between his own party and the PSOE. Apart from Iraq, where the Socialists withdrew troops unilaterally, there has been a "general consensus" on other missions such as Afghanistan and Somalia, he said.

Morenés also points to the last Socialist government having continued between 2004 and 2011 with the PP's policy of pre-financing new defence programmes through the Ministry of Industry to enable them to get under way despite a shortfall in funding.

When it comes to looking for concrete ways of saving money, Morenés insists that "operability is our number one goal".

He will be starting with the ministry itself and those "barracks" that are not directly involved with the front line. "They themselves are the ones best placed to know what is superfluous and what is not," he noted.

However, one advantage of the economic crisis is the calibre of people applying to join the forces. "In good economic times it was difficult to find good soldiers. Now they are lining up for places," said Morenés.

With France spending almost 2.1 per cent of its GDP on defence, Spain's level of 0.6 per cent is more like that of Luxembourg, he admitted, adding that in the longer term Spain would like to see that figure rise closer to that of its allies, but "for the moment we have to work with what we have".

This means that the national defence industry will "have to look to exports, just as Spain's banks and telecoms and electricity companies have done in recent years".

As for relations with allies, Morenés sees Spain as being in a key geostrategic location, effectively "an aircraft carrier between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic".

Of key importance will be forging closer links with allies, but also with neighbouring countries in North Africa, with the nearest of all, Morocco, being "very important", he added.

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