
JAVIER COLOMINA,
NATO SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

“INSTABILITY AND CHALLENGES IN THE SOUTH DIRECTLY AFFECT OUR SECURITY”

Our southern neighbourhood is “a great source of opportunities, and dialogue and cooperation are the best tools”

NATO also looks south. Our strategic environment is going through a period of unprecedented instability and NATO has stepped up the defence of the Eastern Flank more than ever, but it has also significantly expanded its focus on the Mediterranean region by taking a 360-degree approach. An Action Plan establishing the role of Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood was approved by the Allies at the July 2024 Washington Summit. Javier Colomina, a Spaniard with extensive knowledge of the Alliance and dialogue with partners, was chosen for the position. Since 2021, he had been Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy and Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia.

As a Spanish diplomat, he held posts at the Mission of Spain to the UN, and at the embassies in Syria, Argentina and Japan, and was Deputy Permanent Representative of the Spanish Delegation to NATO. His extensive background has allowed him to assume his new role with an awareness of the complexity and challenges of a region that extends from the

Sahel to Iraq, but also with the conviction that the Alliance can bring stability through practical cooperation, dialogue, and “an approach based on the principle of local ownership”. Colomina, who was born in Madrid 49 years ago, claims that his appointment comes in recognition of Spain’s involvement in NATO and, specifically, due to its steadfast defence for years of the need to look South.

—What are the main challenges of your new position?

—The Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel are regions of strategic interest to the Alliance. The instability and challenges in these areas directly affect our security and the security of our partners. We are aware that the situation in our southern neighbourhood is increasingly complex, with a number of challenges —demographic, economic, political and security—, which are all interconnected and exacerbated by the impact of dynamics such as climate change, fragile institutions, health emergencies and food insecurity. Over the past year, conflict and instability in the region have multiplied these challenges. Meanwhile, Russia has

continued to increase its presence in the South, China has stepped up its influence, and Iran’s destabilising effect in the Middle East has become more worrying than ever, with far-reaching implications for the security of our partners and the Alliance.

Despite the challenges we face, we must also bear in mind that the southern neighbourhood is a great source of opportunity. Through dialogue and cooperation with our partners in the Middle East and North Africa, NATO has been trying for years to promote greater security and stability in these regions, thus contributing to peace and prosperity. Our partners help us improve our regional situational awareness and have participated in our missions, operations and activities.

—A Southern Action Plan with a roadmap and concrete actions was also approved. What does this entail?

—The Action Plan provides the basis for NATO to develop a more robust, strategic and results-oriented approach to its cooperation with the southern neighbourhood. It is a comprehensive, detailed and ambitious document that will allow us to further strengthen our dialogue and



engagement with partner countries and other potential partners in our southern neighbourhood. Additionally, we will enhance our practical cooperation by using a coherent, effective and transparent approach and by strengthening existing instruments, such as the Defence Capacity Building Initiative, our Hub for the South in Naples, and the NATO-ICI Regional Centre in Kuwait, among others. It will also help us ensure that these efforts are commensurate with the right level of NATO visibility and presence in the South. We plan to open a liaison office in Amman and to expand our strategic communications outreach to regional audiences in a more proactive manner. Finally, the Action Plan highlights the importance of closer cooperation with other international and regional organisations.

—At the Vilnius Summit in July 2023, Allied members decided to start a reflection process on how to enhance NATO's role in the South and the Secretary General commissioned an independent group of experts to submit a report. To what extent will the conclusions of this report affect your new responsibilities?

—The group of experts provided important recommendations that served as the basis for many of the decisions taken by Allied leaders at the Washington Summit. One of the key recommendations reflected in these decisions is the appointment of a Special Representative.

The experts also pointed out that NATO should continue taking a comprehensive approach, centred on political dialogue, outreach and practical cooperation, both with partner nations and regional and international organisations, along with more investment in training and capacity building to manage highly complex secu-

“It is a very complex area, with a number of demographic, economic, political and security challenges, which are all interconnected”

riety challenges. They also highlighted priority areas on which NATO could focus its cooperation efforts in the South, such as the fight against terrorism, maritime security, resilience, climate security, the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Human Security approach.

—The Southern Neighbourhood concept encompasses a geographical space with different realities. How will the Alliance approach this diversity?

—We want to substantially increase political dialogue and practical cooperation with our partners and other actors in the Middle East and Africa. In doing so, we will specifically concentrate on providing a clearer explanation of the Atlantic Alliance, the guiding principles of our partnerships, and our added value.

We will also explain which areas we will work in with our partners —taking into account their requests and our experience—, and which areas we do not need to play a specific role in when it comes to matters that are beyond our scope.

Stepping up dialogue with relevant regional organisations, such as the African Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council and

the League of Arab States, will also help us expand the focus and scope of our efforts.

—Trust and cooperation have been essential features of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Will they be encouraged?

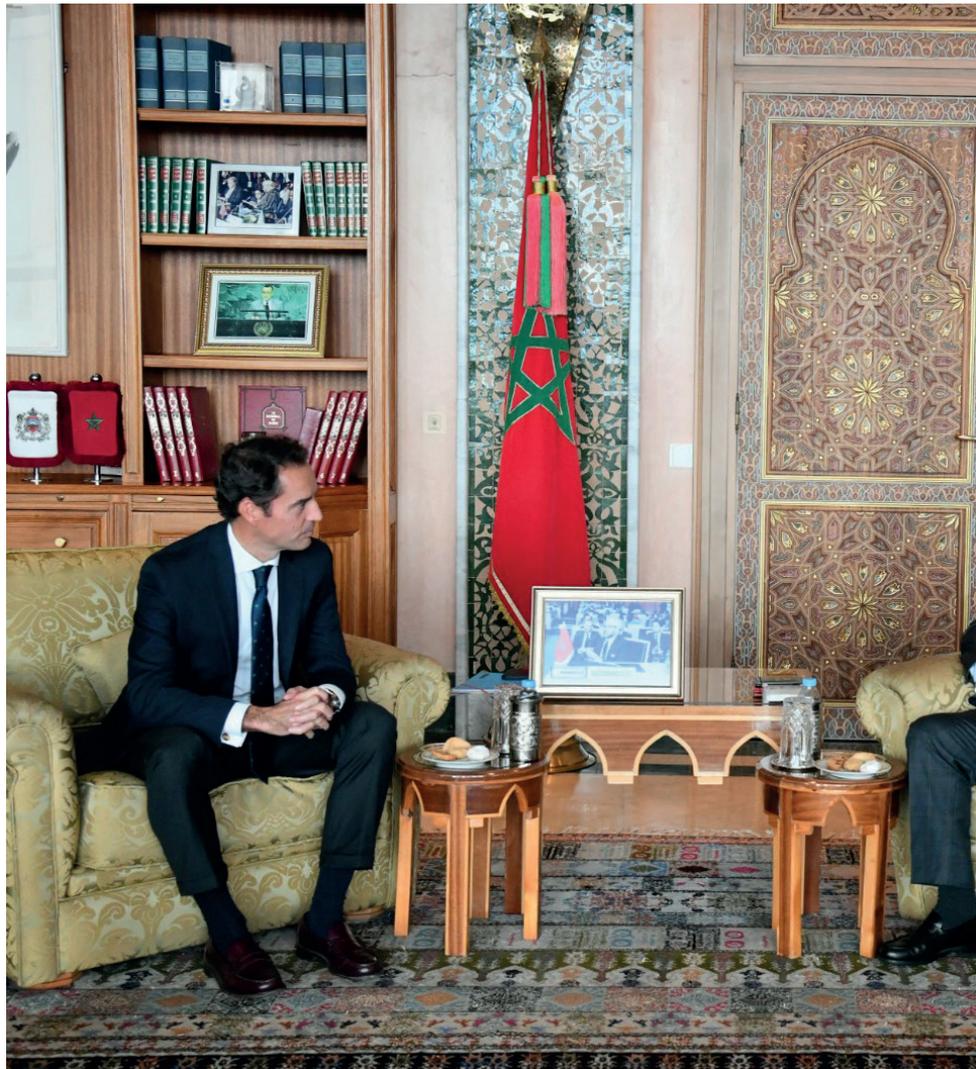
—These two initiatives are historical partnership frameworks that we have developed throughout the Middle East and North Africa region over the years on the basis of political dialogue and practical cooperation. This year we are celebrating their 30th and 20th anniversaries, respectively. Both serve as forums for enhancing security and stability in our southern neighbourhood and help promote good relations among participating countries. Within these frameworks, Allies and partners have worked and continue to work together in many areas, including counter-terrorism, defence capacity building, cyber security, small arms and light weapons, crisis management, civil preparedness, resilience, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

—As for military cooperation, is the Alliance considering new training missions such as the one currently underway in Iraq?

—Our approach to partners in the southern neighbourhood has always been and will always be based on the principle of local ownership. In the coming months, we will establish a NATO political office in Jordan, in response to a specific request from the Jordanian authorities. Our Action Plan foresees that, with our partners' consent and request, we will look into the possibility of opening additional offices in the region.

As far as our NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) is concerned, I am unable to anticipate whether or not it will be repeated, and, if so, in what form. What I can surely say is that NMI is a success story. In response to a specific request from the Iraqi authorities, our non-combat, advisory, and capacity-building mission was created in 2018 and has since evolved in a progressive manner.

The Iraqi authorities have identified a number of key objectives for cooperation with NMI. These include security training, logistics, cyber defence and good governance. From August 2023, at the request of the Iraqi authorities and upon the decision



Javier Colomina talking with a Moroccan government official during his visit to the Maghreb country in October

of the North Atlantic Council, the scope of action of NATO Mission Iraq also includes advisory and capacity-building activities to support the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Police Command. All NATO Mission activities are conducted with the consent of the Iraqi government and with full respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In order to strengthen our long-standing cooperation, NATO and Iraq have initiated a process of political dialogue that I have had the honour to co-lead. This process culminated in a meeting with Qasim al-Araji, the Iraqi National Security Advisor, who led a high-level official visit to NATO Headquarters at the end of August 2024.

—What can the Alliance do to help bring peace to the Middle East?

—As an organisation, NATO has no direct role in this matter. That said, our po-

sition on recent events has been clear and consistent throughout. Every effort must be made to prevent further escalation of the conflict and more casualties, and to put an end to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. The impact of the conflict is devastating, not only for the people of Gaza but also for Israel's security, and the risk of escalation in the region continues to grow.

We welcome the Allies' tireless diplomacy to achieve a cessation of hostilities and de-escalation of the conflict. In order to secure lasting security, it is crucial to find a way to permanently cease the violence in Gaza and the region.

The Israeli government has been urged by the Allies to adhere to international law and human rights when conducting military operations. At the same time, Hamas must stop its attacks and release all hostages.



OTAN

2024 as part of the Mediterranean Dialogue process.

We are also quite concerned about the most recent events in Lebanon. A new escalation of the war in the Middle East is in nobody's interest. The Allies called for and supported a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in order to facilitate a diplomatic agreement.

—The Sahel is one of the world's most unstable regions. How does the Alliance view this reality?

—Indeed, the Sahel is a highly fragile and complex region. It poses considerable security challenges, ranging from terrorism to human trafficking and illegal immigration, to name just a few.

All of them with direct implications for our security and the security of our partners. In this regard, I would like to recall our long-standing partnership with Mauritania, which joined the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1995. Last May, Hanana Ould Sidi, the country's

defence minister, visited our headquarters to take stock of our relations and agree on the way forward.

The NATO-Mauritania partnership has grown significantly over the years, with notable advancements in areas such as support for Mauritanian special operations forces, information sharing on maritime security, military career transition programmes, management of small arms arsenals, and military training. We look forward to enhancing this long-standing cooperation, among other things, to support and enrich the Mauritanian forces' capacity to fight terrorism. At the same time, I think it is crucial that we keep expanding the scope of our dialogue with the region, not only through Mauritania but also through the pertinent regional organisations.

—How does NATO view Moscow's involvement in destabilising various regimes in the region?

—An insufficient presence in a region undoubtedly leads to other actors filling the void and promoting their own interests. This is particularly evident in the current geopolitical situation, in which different countries work and cooperate with whomever they see fit in order to further their national interests. In this context, it is undeniable that Russia has a foothold in the region and that its presence exacerbates local and regional instability.

This is why it is even more important that we engage with our partners in the southern neighbourhood through constant political dialogue, practical cooperation —particularly in areas such as the modernisation of security forces, structures, and institutions, where NATO has significant experience and added value—, as well as robust public communication and outreach efforts to explain what NATO's partnership policy is all about.

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—What is the nature of NATO's collaboration with the European Union and the African Union?

—NATO has well-established relations with these organisations and, in particular, with the EU, which is an essential partner for us. The magnitude of the challenges we face in our southern neighbourhood justifies our joint exploration of the potential for further strengthening those ties. To this end, I have already held meetings with my interlocutors at the UN, the African Union and, in particular, the European Union.

—Is your appointment a recognition for Spain?

—Over the years, Spain has been a strong advocate of the need to further focus on the South. Madrid played a significant role in the process that led up to the launch of our Southern Neighbourhood Action Plan and continues to contribute greatly as we now enter the implementation stage. In fact, Spain hosted the first meeting of Senior Allied Officials on NATO's Southern Neighbourhood in November 2024, where they discussed the priorities of the Action Plan and exchanged views on the latest developments in the region and how they affect NATO security. My appointment therefore reflects, to some extent, that commitment. However, it is also a recognition of the years of service in this organisation and the efforts made to strengthen the relationship with our partners, especially during my time as Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia.

—What role should our country play in this new 360-degree approach that must prioritise the South?

—Spain has historically played a crucial role in the region as a NATO member and will continue to do so. Overall, Spain continues to be an essential ally, as evidenced by the contributions our nation makes to every aspect of NATO's agenda, including strengthening its deterrence and collective defence posture, supporting Ukraine, combatting terrorism, and various operational deployments, such as sending troops to its mission in Iraq —which was led by Spanish Lieutenant General José Antonio Agüero Martínez until a few months ago—. Likewise, along with the air policing and maritime surveillance missions, Spain has also deployed troops to NATO's multinational battlegroup in Slovakia, Latvia, and Romania.

Rosa Ruiz