



# RAPID DEPLOYMENT IN EASTERN EUROPE

Over 3,200 Spanish soldiers, ships, aircraft and vehicles take part in NATO's largest annual exercise

**S**EVERAL tactical vehicles with mounted machine guns surround the building and isolate the site, ready to provide security to the assault team. The sound of rotors announces the arrival of two helicopters, a Spanish NH-90 and a Bulgarian AS532. The two countries' special forces fast rope to the roof of the four-storey building, while a second team makes its way in at ground level. They use explosives to open access points and, once inside, clear one room after another until they capture the terrorist leader. Outside, marksmen cover the exit of the assault teams to facilitate an aerial extraction. Mission accomplished!

This was not an action movie but a full-fledged demonstration of the elite capabilities of NATO's Special Operations Forces (SOF). The goal was to quickly infiltrate an enemy-occupied building in a hostile environment to capture a terrorist. It all took place on 13 February 2025 at Tsrancha training centre in Bulgaria in the presence of several NATO command-

ing generals and nations. This was one of the many training activities included in exercise Steadfast Dart 25, the first deployment exercise of the Allied Reaction Force (ARF) and NATO's most visible exercise in 2025.

Held in Bulgaria, Greece and Romania from 10 to 21 February 2025, the exercise brought together some 10,000 troops from the three host nations, and six other nations (Slovenia, Spain, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Türkiye), which provided land, air, maritime and special operations forces. Altogether, 17 ships (amphibious landing ships, frigates, mine countermeasure vessels, destroy-

ers and submarines), more than 20 aircraft (including Eurofighters, F-16s, AV8B Harriers and A400Ms) and over 1,500 vehicles, including battle tanks, infantry vehicles and rocket launchers, as well as self-propelled artillery and armoured personnel carriers participated in this exercise.

The exercise was planned by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium, and led at the operational level by the Allied Joint Force Command Naples (JFCNP), Italy. It focused on the planning and execution of a joint and multi-domain activity with the aim of supporting the forces of allied nations in south-eastern Europe in a pre-crisis situation to exert a deterrent effect.

This exercise has tested the ability to activate the ARF and coordinate its rapid strategic deployment across multiple countries. This is a complex and large-scale test, in particular for land and special operations units, not only because of the number of soldiers, but also because of the amount of materiel and vehicles

**The first activation  
exercise of the  
Allied Reaction  
Force**

A member of the Spanish special operations teams at the training area in Burgas, Bulgaria.





Robert Gherment/ EFE

Spanish soldiers from task force “Legion” at the Smardan training area, near Galati, Romania, on 19 February, integrated in the ARF’s land component during exercise Steadfast Dart 25.

involved. These had to be transported rapidly to the area of operations in order to have all of the combat capabilities available on the ground as soon as possible.

**SPANISH PARTICIPATION**

The Spanish Armed Forces were heavily involved in the exercise, with some 3,200 military personnel integrated into the four ARF component commands (land, maritime, air and special operations), all under the operational control of Lieutenant General José Antonio Agüero, commander of the Operations Command.

In addition, for the first time, the Spanish Joint Special Operations Command (MCOE) led the Allied Special Operations Component, which is under Spain’s responsibility for a period of two years, from June 2024 to June 2026.

Some 370 Spanish green berets from the Army, Navy and Air Force participated in this exercise. The deployment began on 25 January with the transfer by land, air and sea of personnel, around 50 combat vehicles —mainly HMTV light vehicles and CNPTT heavy vehicles— and two NH-

90 helicopters, which flew from Spain to Bulgaria. Over the following days, these troops were deployed to different locations in Bulgaria and Greece to practise logistical procedures and collaborate with other special operations units as part of the ARF’s training objectives. Part of these

activities took place in the waters of the Black Sea, where Bulgarian and Spanish teams trained in Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO).

“Our forces have not only demonstrated their expertise and professionalism, but also their ability to integrate and operate with our Bulgarian allies with efficiency and determination. I am very proud of the performance of the Spanish special operations units in this exercise”, said General Ángel Herrezuelo, commander of the MCOE, after witnessing the exercise on 13



Sgt. Sam Terry/UK Army

Spanish vehicles leaving the port of Alexandroupolis (Greece) by rail during the strategic deployment of the exercise.



February 2025 at the Tsrancha training area in Bulgaria.

The brigade-size land component (led by the UK from 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025) was deployed to Romania and consisted of two British battalions, a French parachute task force and a Spanish regiment-size task force. It was made up of some 760 troops, mainly from the Spanish Legion's 2nd Brigade "Rey Alfonso XIII" (the 7th Infantry Battalion "Colón", a field artillery battery, a Mistral missile battery and a sappers company), as well as a national support element and a signals unit from the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Command. The contingent mobilised 213 vehicles, including 29 heavy vehicles, 110 HMTVs, 35 Anibals, three L118 light guns and a surveillance radar, as well as a variety of materiel loaded into 34 containers.

The strategic movement began on 16 January by sending these assets by sea to the port of Alexandroupolis, Greece. In early February, they arrived by rail and road in Romania and then travelled to Cincu training area, where they joined the rest of the multinational contingent (the line companies and the tactical command post) to start working and quickly attain full operational capability.

## ALLIED REACTION FORCE (ARF)

The ARF is a strategic force, highly available and with multi-domain capability, able to deploy in a very short time and increase its composition through scalable force packages. It plays a pivotal role as part of the new NATO Force Model, which supports the Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), agreed at the Vilnius Summit in 2023. Thus, it is capable of carrying out a full spectrum of missions. It can serve as a rapid deployable strategic reserve in crisis situations and it can be deployed to deter or respond to other emerging scenarios. Its flexibility also allows the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) to allocate additional forces to the ARF Commander as required.

The first stage of the training was devoted to technical demonstrations of each contingent's weaponry and combat vehicles. The French presented their Serval 4x4 wheeled armoured vehicle and the Fardier light reconnaissance vehicle. The Spanish legionnaires, in turn, showed their equipment, including the G36 assault rifle, the grenade launcher, the Mistral missile, the 105 mm mortar, the URO HMTV and the tactical drones they use for reconnaissance and attack missions.

The Spanish soldiers of task force "Legion" left Cincu and went to Smardan and Galati to conduct operational activities with

the British and French units deployed there. The activities included intensive trench warfare training at company level, which combined all the elements and weaponry of the different units of the multinational brigade, from infantry and sappers to artillery. They also involved testing logistical support and communications. Due to the sub-zero conditions experienced during those days in the Romanian training areas, the soldiers were able to demonstrate their endurance and capacity for cold environment adaptation.

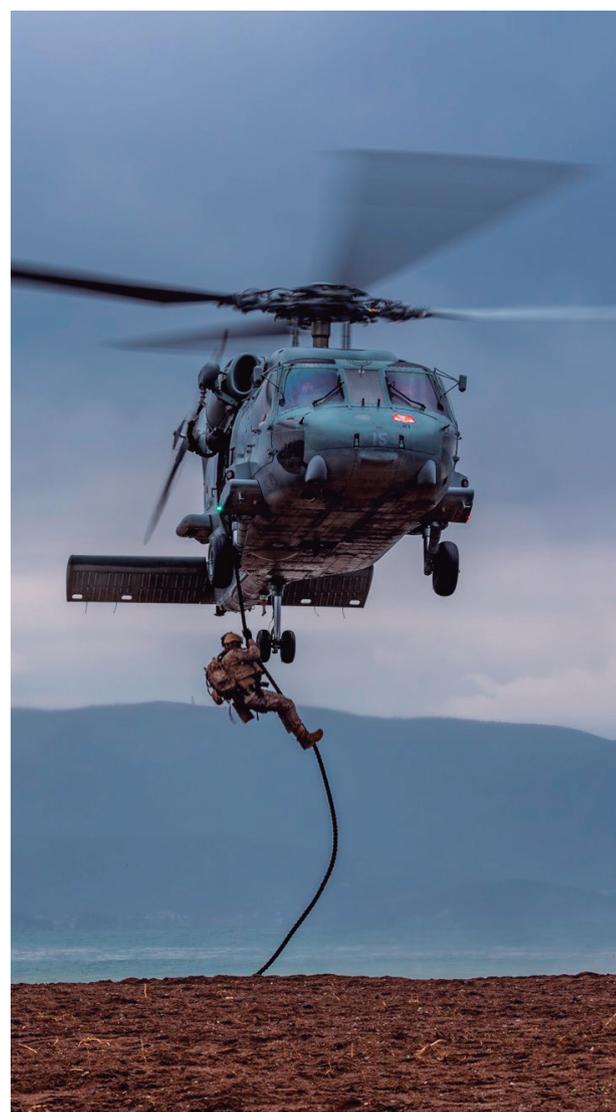
According to Lt. Col. Ignacio Puertas, commander of the Legion's 7th Infantry Battalion "Colón", "This exercise has been



A special operations team, with Spanish and Bulgarian personnel, trains with a Neton Mk2 light vehicle belonging to the Spanish special operations command (MOE).



A Harrier ready to take off from the flight deck of aircraft carrier Juan Carlos I; CSS Patiño resupplies F-101 Álvaro de Bazán at sea; amphibious landing on Volvos beach using LCMs and fast-rope from one of the SH-60Fs.





both a challenge and an opportunity for our units. In particular, due to the large number of capabilities that have been deployed, demonstrating Spain's determination to fulfil its commitments. Therefore, a thorough preparation has been carried out, similar to that of an international mission, but much more demanding than the usual international exercises".

Once the exercise was over, the ARF units, including the Spanish ones, extended their stay to participate in Dacia 2025, a Romanian national exercise that took place on land and lasted until 28 February.

Steadfast Dart's maritime component, made up of forces from Greece, Italy and Spain, included frigates Blas de Lezo and Victoria, LHD Juan Carlos I as its flagship and around 1,960 Spanish military personnel, most of whom were part of the Dédalo-24 Expeditionary Battle Group.

On board LHD Juan Carlos I was a landing force from the Spanish Marine Brigade, five AV-8B Harrier fighter jets, four helicopters (an SH60B, a H135 and two SH60Fs), four landing craft, and a Role 2B afloat for medical support. The assets of the landing force consisted of 23 heavy vehicles, 47 HMTVs and a Piranha amphibious combat vehicle.

In addition, F-101 Álvaro de Bazán and combat supply ship Patiño, which set off from Rota naval base in January as part of the Dédalo, joined Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2).



An A400M belonging to the 31st Wing from Zaragoza flew from Bezmer, Bulgaria, to Nea Anchialos, Greece, to transport a platoon of the special operations land task group (SOLTG).

Both the "Dédalo" Expeditionary Combat Group and the SNMG2 operated in the Aegean Sea under the ARF's maritime component command, aboard Italian ship Etna. On February 13, a "Media Day" was held near the port city of Volos, in the Pagasetic Gulf, where an amphibious demonstration was carried out with the support of fighter jets and helicopters. The event was attended by ARF commander, Lt. Gen.

Lorenzo D'Addario; deputy commander of the Allied Joint Force Command Naples, Lt. Gen. Peter Scott; and Spanish Rear Admiral Antonio Tanago, commander of the Spanish Fleet's Amphibious and Force Projection Group (GRUPFLOT).

In turn, the Spanish Air and Space Force contributed to the air component of this exercise with a Joint Force Air Component (JFAC), which, among other missions, coordinated and integrated the air activities of the ARF's specific assets with those already present in the area. All this was coordinated through the Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) in Torrejón. Spain also provided an A400M transport aircraft, as well as modules from the Air Deployment Support Squadron (EADA), with some 55 service members. Furthermore, the Eurofighters of the "Paznic" detachment, which are deployed on an air policing mission at Mihail Kogalniceanu airbase (Romania), conducted close air support (CAS) missions with UK Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs).

In order to be better prepared for future challenges, ten different nations joined forces in exercise Steadfast Dart 25 to demonstrate their commitment to collective defence and their readiness to respond to any challenge within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance.



British, French and Spanish soldiers and tactical vehicles in Smardan, Romania, one of the training areas of the ARF's land component in Romania.

**Victor Hernández**  
Photos: EMAD and JFC Naples