

REVISTA ESPAÑOLA DE DEFENSA

**Exercise
Steadfast Dart 26**

ALLIED REACTION POWER

INTERVIEW
Admiral Giuseppe
Cavo Dragone, Chair of
the NATO Military Committee

**GLOBAL SUMMIT
IN SPAIN**

Responsible Artificial
Intelligence in the
Military Domain

ANALYSIS

The Sahel: A region of
constant instability





REVISTA ESPAÑOLA DE DEFENSA

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A High-Readiness, Multi-Domain Force

STEADFAST Dart 26, NATO's largest exercise this year, has concluded successfully in Germany, proving the Alliance's capability to deploy rapidly and integrate land, air, space, cyber, maritime and special operations forces into a joint multinational operation.

Following Steadfast Dart 25, this year's exercise marked the second large-scale rehearsal of the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), established in July 2024 to replace the NATO Response Force (NRF). The ARF, which plays a crucial role as part of the new NATO Force Model, is distinguished by its high readiness and capability to deploy at very short notice. It can increase its composition through scalable force modules to strengthen deterrence in peacetime or crisis, across the full spectrum of operations.

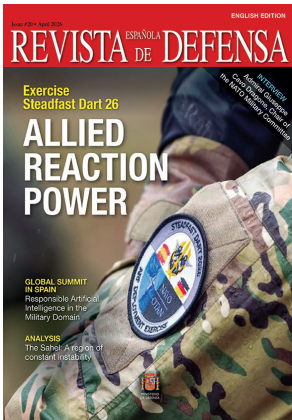
Spain has made a significant contribution to this exercise, providing approximately 1,500 of the 10,000 service members from eleven participating nations. In qualitative terms, our Joint Special Operations Command has once again led the Special Operations Component Command, as it did in 2025, while the Spanish Navy has contributed the Maritime Component Command embarked aboard the flagship

LPD *Castilla*. Equally notable was the participation of a substantial land contingent, featuring special operations units, paratroopers and helicopters, which involved the projection of 790 troops, 230 vehicles and 25 containers of materiel and equipment.

The fact that our country will most likely lead the ARF in 2027 and assume command of Steadfast Dart 28, which would take place on Spanish soil, demonstrates once again Spain's standing as a reliable, responsible and committed NATO Ally. Our presence in various missions and the increase in defence spending to 2% of GDP serve as proof of this commitment.

"Capability is not only budgets," said Italian Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, Chair of the NATO Military Committee, in an interview included in this issue, describing Spain as "a high-value Ally". We are fully committed to peace, freedom, security and the international order, as well as to our partners and allies in NATO, the EU and the United Nations. This will continue to be the case, based on the conviction that investing in defence today also means defending our values and a fairer society.

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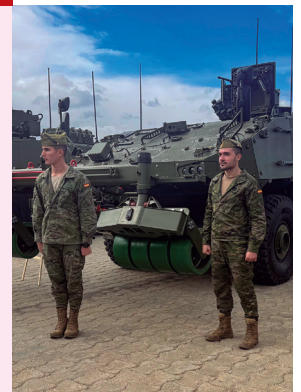
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ALLIED REACTION POWER

Spain leads special and maritime operations in NATO's largest annual exercise, Steadfast Dart 26, held in Germany and the Baltic



Spanish and Turkish special operations teams inserted by helicopters onto Putlos beach to secure positions and prepare for the landing of the main Marine Corps force.



S NOW covers Putlos beach on the Baltic coast of the German state of Schleswig-Holstein. A Bayraktar TB-3 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) flies over the coastline on a surveillance mission. It has been launched from the deck of the amphibious assault ship *Anadolu*, the flagship of the Turkish Navy and sister ship to the Spanish LHD *Juan Carlos I*. The UAV identifies several simulated hostile positions on the white and muddy landscape. Minutes later, the information gathered is put into action as a German Eurofighter squadron conducts precision strikes on the designated targets.

A Spanish special operations team emerges on the coastline, having performed an underwater insertion to neutralise explosive threats. Subsequently, Turkish and Spanish special operations teams insert via fast-rope from helicopters

to secure key positions, while attack helicopters provide close air support.

Once the path is cleared for the main landing force, Turkish marines approach the beach in speedboats, followed by assault vehicles, which provide protected mobility and firepower as the forces advance inland. Some speedboats land further east to reinforce and expand the beachhead.

Once the landing has been successfully completed, Spanish special operations personnel are extracted by helicopter, highlighting the ARF's capability not only to deploy rapidly, but also to recover forces efficiently once objectives have been secured.

This comprehensive amphibious demonstration conducted on 18 February 2026 at the Putlos military training area, marked the maritime highlight of exercise Steadfast Dart-NATO's most visible



LPD *Castilla* carried the maritime component's HQ and served as a platform for special operations (below). On the right, a Bayraktar TB-3 UAV on the deck of Turkish vessel *Anadolu* and, below, amphibious assault vehicles land on the beach.





and important exercise in 2026.

STRATEGIC FORCE

This exercise is part of the regular training of the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), which NATO launched at the 2023 Vilnius Summit to adapt to the current strategic environment, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine four years ago.

"As early as the 2022 Madrid Summit, the Alliance became aware that it needed more agile forces, with higher readiness and more efficient activation mechanisms," said Spanish Vice Admiral Juan Bautista Pérez Puig, currently commanding the maritime component of this force.

In order to meet this need, the ARF was designed as a high-readiness strategic force capable of deploying at very short notice and of increasing its composition through scalable force modules to strengthen deterrence in peacetime or crisis. According to Vice Admiral Pérez Puig, "the ARF is a credible deterrence tool because it combines three fundamental factors: pre-assigned forces, demanding readiness standards, and proven common procedures".

Exercise Steadfast Dart 2025 tested the ARF's real deployment capability in Romania, Greece and Bulgaria. This year, however, the exercise took place in Germany from 12 to 25 February, under the responsibility of Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFC-Brunssum). It involved 10,000 troops from eleven countries, including ARF units from Italy, Greece, Germany, the Czech Republic, Spain, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Türkiye, with additional support from France, Belgium and the United Kingdom.

The primary objective of the exercise was to demonstrate the ability to deploy rapidly and merge effects in time and space with other forces. It was also a multi-domain activity, integrating land, air, maritime, space, cyber, and special operations forces.



The commander of JFC Brunssum, German General Ingo Gerharzt, and Vice Admiral Juan Bautista Pérez Puig, during the press conference at the commencement of the exercise.

all levels". "There were around 2,600 sailors, 750 of whom were Spanish. With this entire force, Steadfast Dart has projected the Alliance's maritime power in a demanding scenario and contributed to credible deterrence against conventional, hybrid or emerging threats," emphasised Commander José Pérez Núñez, SP-MARFOR's operations commander.

LPD *Castilla* set sail on 30 January 2026 from Rota naval base, Cádiz, accompanied by F-105 *Cristóbal Colón* and a Turkish task force comprising

the amphibious assault ship TCG *Anadol*, frigates TCG *Oruçreis* and TCG *Istanbul*, and the fleet replenishment oiler TCG *Derya*.

During the transit, the Spanish-Turkish naval formation progressively enhanced interoperability among its units and conducted cooperation activities with the French, German and British navies, covering air defence and surface warfare exercises, as well as coordinated operations with maritime patrol aircraft.

From 6 to 8 February, the maritime task force escorted the logistics transport ship *Ysabel*, which carried Spanish Army materiel to support the exercise's land component.

Upon arrival in Kiel, Germany, on 11 February, other Allied units joined and completed the maritime group. These included frigate *Almirante Juan de Borbón*, combat replenishment ship *Patiño*, French frigate *Commandant Blaison*, and German frigates *Brandenburg* and *Schasen*, all integrated into Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1), commanded by Spanish Rear Admiral Joaquín Ruiz Escagedo. Ships from Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1) —Polish ORP *Czernicki*, German FGS *Fulda*, and Dutch HNLMS *Schiedam*— also joined the exercise.

The formation reached the Baltic Sea on 14 February from Kiel. It was no coincidence

Spain has played a prominent role, assuming the leadership of special operations —for the second consecutive year— and the command of the maritime component, in addition to contributing a significant land contingent, totalling approximately 1,500 service members.

MARITIME OPERATIONS

Aboard LPD *Castilla*, the Spanish Maritime Forces Headquarters (SPMARFOR) gathered frigates, amphibious forces, maritime patrol aircraft, helicopters and drones under its operational command in close coordination with other Allied commands. As Vice Admiral Pérez Puig underscored, "Spain is one of only six countries capable of providing this command capability within the Alliance, which presents an enormous coordination challenge at

The exercise demonstrated the capability to deploy forces in a multi-domain environment

Román Píros/EFE

**VICE ADMIRAL JUAN BAUTISTA PÉREZ PUIG,
COMMANDER OF THE SPANISH MARITIME FORCES
(SPMARFOR) HEADQUARTERS**

“THE BEST WAY TO DETER IS TO BE PREPARED”

ABOARD LPD *Castilla*, the Spanish Maritime Forces Headquarters (SPMARFOR) has led the maritime operations of exercise Steadfast Dart 26. “We have taken on complex responsibilities and proven our reliability, continuity and professionalism,” states its commander, Vice Admiral Juan Bautista Pérez Puig. In his view, this deployment in the Baltic Sea has sent a clear message: “NATO acts as one”.

—What did NATO value the most when choosing the Spanish Navy for this mission?

—For decades, Spain has been fully integrated into NATO’s force structure, demonstrating great professionalism. In fact, this Headquarters —the Spanish Maritime Forces HQ or SPMARFOR— was established in 2003 as a high-readiness, deployable command capable of leading high-intensity maritime operations within the framework of what was then NATO Response Force (NRF).

Today, of the 32 member states of the Alliance, only six can provide a fully certified maritime component command (MCC). In doing so, we have taken on complex responsibilities and proven our reliability, continuity and professionalism.

Furthermore, this designation is backed by a certification process led by the Alliance itself. This process has certified our ability to respond to any contingency — ranging from our present strategic stance to high-intensity conflicts— with both agility and speed.



Pepe Díez

“It is not just a matter of deploying rapidly; it has to be done in a coordinated, integrated and effective manner”

—How important is the maritime domain within the ARF and, in general, in current conflicts?

—It is an essential domain because the sea is a global strategic space. It is in this domain that NATO guarantees freedom of navigation and sea lines of communication, protects critical undersea infrastructure, facilitates the sustainment of operations, and enables force projection wherever necessary.

It is important to remember that over 90% of global trade is conducted by sea; and more than 95% of internet traffic travels via undersea cables. Therefore, without a protected maritime domain, there would be no prosperity. Within the ARF, the maritime component provides strategic mobility,

sustained presence and operational flexibility. A naval force can deploy without the need for land-based infrastructure, adapt to the evolution of a crisis and act as a visible and credible deterrent. Effects are projected from the sea onto land and into the air, integrating cyber and space capabilities. In short, the maritime domain is essential to NATO’s three core tasks: deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security.

—How do these exercises contribute to strengthening interoperability and cohesion among NATO maritime forces?

—The Steadfast Dart exercise series, specifically designed for the ARF, offers the Alliance the chance to demonstrate which of its real capabilities can generate effective deterrence, and prove that the Alliance can respond to a crisis if necessary.

Moreover, in both its planning and execution, this exercise is tangible proof of Allied interoperability across the multi-domain operational environment. We share procedures, an operational culture and a common understanding of the environment; this can only be achieved by training together repeatedly in demanding scenarios.

This exercise allows us to validate the activation and deployment of the ARF, verify the integration of the maritime component within the joint effort, and strengthen cohesion among Allies. Our presence here sends a message in itself: NATO acts as one. The best way to deter is to be prepared.

—Is the ARF already capable of deploying rapidly wherever needed?

—Steadfast Dart 26 has, in fact, validated that responsiveness. It is not just a matter of deploying rapidly; it has to be done in a coordinated, integrated and effective manner. Deterrence is based on political will, but also on military readiness. Both dimensions are present here.

—What would the activation process and timelines be like in a crisis situation?

—The ARF is structured by readiness echelons. The maritime component we lead is at Tier 1, the highest state of readiness. This entails a five-day Notice to Move (NTM): within five days of receiving the activation order, the force is at sea. After this first tier there are other force levels —additional tiers— that can be activated progressively depending on how the crisis develops.

Furthermore, we have a ten-day Notice to Effect (NTE), which requires us to be ready to deliver effects at sea within ten days. In other words, it is not just a matter of deploying, but of being fully integrated into the joint and multi-domain effort, contributing effectively to deterrence and, if necessary, to collective defence.

—What challenges does an on-board headquarters face when working in a multi-domain environment?

—Today we operate across six domains: land, maritime, air, special forces, cyber and space. Each of them generates constant information that must be shared amongst the component commands and sent to the joint command to align the overall effort. Our battle rhythms are synchronised, and it is standard practice to deploy liaison officers between the various headquarters.

The main challenge is to incorporate the information into the decision-making process and assess its impact on time variables (whether the effect occurs now, in six days or in a month) and capabilities (whether these are excessive or insufficient). This must be done in a complex environment where information and disinformation intertwine. For an on-board headquarters, this requires resilient systems, protection against hybrid threats and highly qualified personnel. Exercises such as Steadfast Dart 26 allow us to train for this integration across the six domains in realistic conditions, reinforcing our collective deterrence and defence capabilities.



German frigate FGS *Brandenburg* is boarded by special operations forces in a simulated maritime interdiction exercise.

that this location was chosen when planning the exercise. The Baltic Sea is a vital strategic hub for NATO's regional security. The area is home to key maritime trade routes, critical energy infrastructure and undersea cables on which our economies and societies depend. Therefore, a credible and sustained Allied maritime presence in this region is essential to ensure deterrence, freedom of navigation and the protection of NATO's collective interests against conventional and hybrid threats.

“The maritime component,” explained Vice Admiral Pérez Puig, “brings a unique agility to the Allied architecture: our mobility and autonomy allow us to react swiftly, while our mere maritime presence

in the area already has a strategic impact and sends a clear deterrent message.

MARITIME INTERDICTION

The amphibious exercise conducted on 18 February at Putlos beach in Germany highlighted NATO's ability to seamlessly integrate maritime, air and special operations capabilities in a contested coastal environment.

Following this phase, a maritime interdiction operation was carried out from the *Castilla*, with German frigate FGS *Brandenburg* acting as the simulated hostile vessel. The aim was to test the ARF's capability to intercept and control vessels operating outside the law at sea, thereby reinforcing international law. The

Under the command of Joint Force Command Brunssum, 10,000 troops from eleven countries participated in this exercise



boarding team was inserted by helicopter to rapidly secure the vessel and control its critical areas. Once the vessel was secured, the forces carried out thorough inspections, demonstrating their ability to execute non-cooperative boarding, cargo searching, evidence collection and, if necessary, divert the vessel to an Allied port for further action.

The *Castilla* also served as a platform for Spanish special operations units to rehearse other activities. From its deck, helicopters performed fast-rope manoeuvres, and both rescue and threat neutralisation procedures in coastal environments. These forces were integrated into the ARF Special Operations Component Command (SOCC), which Spain has led for the second consecutive year through a Headquarters under the command of General Ángel Ramón Herrezuelo Pérez.

In addition to these operations at sea, the special operations personnel integrated



The logistical projection was carried out by land, sea and air. Pictured here is the loading of vehicles onto the *Ysabel* in the port of Santander on 5 February, bound for the German port of Emden.



Spanish VAMTAC ST5 vehicles at the Bergen training area during an exercise alongside troops from the Czech Republic, Italy and Türkiye.

Imane Rachidi/EEF

their capabilities into a land task force that conducted intensive training sessions in marksmanship, parachute and helicopter insertion, joint terminal attack controller procedures, close air support (CAS) and medical evacuations, in collaboration with Italian, Turkish and Czech units.

LAND COMPONENT

The projection of the Spanish Army units to the area of operations involved the transfer of 750 troops, 230 vehicles and 25 containers of materiel and equipment, belonging to the 6th *Almogávares* Parachute Brigade (BRIPAC), the Army Airmobile Force (FAMET) and the Special Operations Command (MOE). The strategic deployment took place from 27 January to 5 February 2026 and combined maritime transport (from the ports of Cartagena and Santander), air transport, rail and road convoys.

The BRIPAC contributed an infantry battalion —*Lauria* task force—, comprising field and anti-aircraft artillery batteries, a sapper company, cavalry reconnaissance teams and a logistical support unit. For its part, the MOE participated with elements from its headquarters, a signals unit (reinforced with Navy and Air and Space Force personnel), a special operations task group (SOTG), two AS532 Cougar helicopters and a logistical support unit, while the



EMAD

Troops from the BRIPAC Lauria task force joined units from Italy and Türkiye as part of the ARF's land component command.

**With the ARF,
Allies can ensure
deterrence and,
if necessary,
respond to a crisis**

FAMET deployed two NH90 *Sarrío* transport helicopters.

Once in Germany, the units began their Reception, Staging and Onward Movement (RSOM) phase, during which the units moved to the Trauen and Hohn training areas. “We projected personnel, vehicles and command and control systems within very tight deadlines, and in less than 72 hours we were ready to execute tactical operations,” noted Lt Col Santiago Jiménez, commander of the Lauria battalion, regarding this logistical effort.

Multinational land forces practised combat in wooded terrain using live fire with all types of deployed weaponry. One of the most notable Spanish capabilities was the Light Gun howitzer battery, which, despite the harsh Baltic winter, carried out numerous fire missions and coordinated indirect fire support with multinational forward observers.

The Spanish sappers integrated with the Italian sapper battalion. “We have demonstrated that our support is essential for the success of the exercise,” noted the company commander, Captain Jorge Sánchez, “as it enables the task group to breach and clear obstacles, contain the enemy, and secure our own positions; in short, we facilitate mobility, counter-mobility and protection”.

The exercise concluded on 20 February with a demonstration at the Bergen training area, the largest and best-equipped in Germany. The dynamic display, with live fire,



K9 Lucas, a four-year-old Belgian Malinois from the Special Operations Command, with his handler after performing a parachute jump at the German training area.

**MAJOR GENERAL ÁNGEL RAMÓN HERREZUELO
PÉREZ, COMMANDER OF THE JOINT SPECIAL
OPERATIONS COMMAND**

“WE ADAPT TO ANY SCENARIO”



EMAD

FOR the second consecutive year, Spain has led the Special Operations Component Command (SOCC) of the Allied Reaction Force (ARF) during exercise Steadfast Dart. “The main conclusion,” says Marine Corps Major General Ángel Ramón Herrezuelo, “is that we are perfectly capable of successfully carrying out this mission”. This comes as no surprise to the commander of the SOCC: “It is a proven fact that the readiness, training and equipment of our units are of a very high standard within the Alliance”.

—The Spanish special forces have played a prominent role in this exercise. What has been their contribution?

—For the execution phase, the Spanish Joint Special Operations Command (SOCC) has provided the ARF Special Operations Component Command Headquarters (ARF SOCC HQ). This headquarters is primarily based on the SOCC, with contributions from the Span-

**“Spain was the
first Ally to offer
special operations
capabilities to
NATO”**

ish Army, Navy, and Air and Space Force. It includes a land special operations task group (SOTG) and a maritime SOTG —each with integrated air-to-ground capabilities— a rotary-wing unit, as well as the necessary logistical and command and control assets required for a deployment of this nature.

It should be noted that Spain was the first and only Ally to offer NATO the Special Operations Component Command capabilities that the ARF required at the time of its creation in 2024. Back then, Spain accepted the challenge of establishing and leading it, not just for an initial rotation, but extending its offer for a second year, until July 2026.

—These units are known for their speed and precision. How have they been tested in this exercise?

—Undoubtedly, high readiness is one of the ARF’s primary and most demanding requirements. This is achieved through rapid deployment, enabling them to transition efficiently from deployment to operational readiness within the area of operations, thereby ensuring the operability and achievement of the assigned objectives. To this end, following the deployment phase —which utilised various converging projection assets in the assigned areas— the exercise sought a rapid transition to full operational capability in a particularly demanding scenario: northern Germany, bordering the Baltic Sea, with the inherent meteorological factors of the season.

—Was logistics a challenge?

—Without a doubt. The primary objective was the planning and execution of a force deployment in a multi-domain environment in a simulated pre-crisis scenario, in which the logistical deployment of personnel and equipment, and the integration of the different domains in the area of operations was absolutely realistic. From that perspective, the logistical challenge of deploying over 10,000 troops from different Allied nations, along with their warfighting assets, is a very significant undertaking. In the case of special operations, the goal is always to minimise the logistical footprint as much as possible and to ensure an effective and easy deployment. Forces were deployed by land, sea and air; and the process of reception, staging and onward movement (RSOM) to various locations required a major multinational

coordination and synchronisation effort. This process culminated successfully with full operational capability in the area, with all the necessary assets to carry out the assigned tasks, which enabled the implementation of various techniques and procedures, including close air support (CAS), maritime interdiction operations (MIO), combat diving and parachute insertions, amongst others.

—And what about command and control?

—The necessary networks and links were established to ensure, on the one hand, contact with subordinate units and, on the other, contact with the superior unit, namely the ARF commander. Furthermore, this level of connectivity enabled constant contact with the other component commands, thereby increasing the level of interoperability across the entire ARF. This entire interconnectivity framework was also reinforced by the essential exchange of liaison teams between all the commands, a necessary tool to ensure fluidity in overall situational awareness and its development.

—What conclusions can be drawn from these two years of ARF leadership?

—The main conclusion is that Spain is perfectly capable of successfully carrying out this task. On the one hand, the SOCC, with the necessary support, is capable of exercising command and control over a special operations component command, including subordinate units, in accordance with NATO requirements and standards.

Its successful participation in the various ARF-scoped exercises proves this. On the other hand, it is a proven fact that the readiness, training and equipment of our units are of a very high standard within the Alliance.

However, experience shows us that there is always room for improvement, such as the essential provision of CIS capabilities that are interoperable with Allied nations and capable of operating in hybrid environments, next-generation electronic warfare capabilities, or the constant updating of UAS/C-UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems/Counter-UAS) means, in line with the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine.



The Spanish Army deployed 750 troops and 230 vehicles to Germany, mostly from the BRIPAC and the MOE

demonstrated how land, air and special operations forces integrate to achieve a shared operational effect. The tactical purpose was the coordinated use of airborne infantry and special operations forces to neutralise a simulated high-value target (HVT).

A multinational task group of approximately 300 troops from the Czech Republic, Italy, Spain and Türkiye took part, operating under the unified command of the Italian 8th Alpini Regiment.

Following Steadfast Dart 26, the Spanish units that were integrated into the land component command continued their training by participating in the German Army's exercise Grand Quadriga 26 for another four days. Following the conclusion of this bilateral phase, the units were strategically redeployed to their home bases. Meanwhile, the Spanish maritime units remained in the area for a few more days to participate in exercise Northern Quadriga

26, conducted in the North Sea and the German coastal waters.

The leadership of the ARF rotates annually among the Allies. It is currently held by Italy, which will be replaced by France in July. Spain aspires to command the force in the following period, from July 2027 to June 2028.

To this end, and in parallel with exercise Steadfast Dart 26, the *Castillejos* Division Headquarters has undergone a NATO evaluation (CREVAL). Once this certification is obtained, during the specified period a Spanish general will be in charge of training the forces of the various NATO member states, integrating them and ensuring their interoperability. This will also mean that Steadfast Dart 28 —NATO's most important exercise in 2028— will take place on Spanish soil.

Víctor Hernández

Photos: JFC Brunssum and EMAD



Spanish military personnel at the Bergen training area during exercise Grand Quadriga 26, where they continued their training after the conclusion of Steadfast Dart.

ADMIRAL GIUSEPPE CAVO DRAGONE, CHAIR OF THE NATO MILITARY COMMITTEE

“SPAIN IS A HIGH-VALUE ALLY”

“The Alliance is solid and strong, and the security of Europe and North America is indivisible”

ADMIRAL Cavo Dragone (Arquata Scrivia, Italy, 1957) is satisfied with the official visit he conducted to Spain as head of the NATO Military Committee. Over the course of three days, from 3 to 5 February 2026, he was received in audience by HM King Felipe VI; he met with Defence Minister Margarita Robles and with the Chief of the Defence Staff (CHOD), Admiral General Teodoro López Calderón; and led the visits of the Committee —the organization’s highest military authority— to various NATO, EU, and national facilities in Madrid and Valencia. “These visits are not an ‘extra’ —he stated— they are absolutely essential. In our daily work we speak of capabilities, readiness, resilience, and command and control, but here we see how decisions are translated into actions, information into awareness, and awareness into protection. And most importantly, we have met the personnel behind these tasks: professionals who monitor, coordinate, analyse and anticipate, often working quietly behind the scenes, and always tirelessly”.

Former Chief of Staff of the Italian Navy and Defence, Admiral Cavo Dragone, asserted that Spain contributes substantially to the Alliance through its capabilities, its deployments, and by hosting key functions. As he pointed out in this interview, “capabilities are not just a matter of funding, they also involve personnel, equipment, and training”. “You provide security —he told Spanish service members dur-

ing one of the visits— not as a slogan, but as a daily, tangible service that is always available”.

—We are currently experiencing a period of particular discord between the US and the rest of its allies, especially the Europeans. From a military perspective, is the transatlantic link strong?

—I can confirm that the Alliance is solid and strong. The US commitment to NATO remains ironclad. But this commitment comes with the expectation that Allies step up their investment in defence. That is exactly what is happening. At the last meeting of the Chiefs of Defence, a couple of weeks ago in Brussels, our cohesion was tangible. The link is built into how NATO deters and defends: integrated commands, planning, and forces that train and deploy together every day. At the military level, the “transatlantic link” is a combined system. Europeans are should-

“The aim in Ukraine is to create an integrated system so that it can defend itself today and deter tomorrow”

dering their responsibility, by leading most of NATO’s Forward Land Forces battle-groups along the Eastern Flank. Spain, for example, leads in Slovakia, while the US and Canada remain key framework nations in Poland and Latvia. Finally, NATO’s deterrence rests on the right mix of conventional, missile defence, cyber/space, and nuclear forces, the latter in which US strategic forces remain the ultimate guarantee, alongside UK and French contributions. As a last update, I can add that —at the beginning of February— Allies have agreed on a new distribution of senior officer responsibility across the NATO Command Structure in which European Allies, including NATO’s newest members, will play a more prominent role in the Alliance’s military leadership.

—What are the main challenges and threats to the Alliance and its citizens at this time?

—Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allied security, while terrorism remains the most direct asymmetric threat to our citizens. At the same time, the threat picture has widened: hybrid campaigns —including sabotage, disinformation, coercion— malicious cyber activity, electronic warfare like GPS jamming, and risks to critical infrastructure, especially undersea cables and pipelines. For militaries, this means a true “multi-domain” posture: stronger Integrated Air and Missile Defence, better counter-UAS, and higher resilience and readiness so we can respond at the speed



of relevance. In regard to China, while it is not considered as an adversary, we know that by providing dual-use technologies to Russia, and helping them to circumvent sanctions, it remains a decisive enabler of the Russian war against Ukraine.

—Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Alliance has shown its full military support for Kiev. Is that support still solid?

—Without a doubt! Ukraine's security contributes to NATO's security, and their

fight is our fight. We have a number of initiatives in support to Ukraine, starting with NSATU (NATO Security Assistance and Training in Ukraine, based in Wiesbaden, with logistics hubs on the Eastern Flank), which coordinates training, equipment flows, repair/sustainment and longer-term force development to help Ukraine move toward NATO interoperability. Technically, this is about building an end-to-end system: training pipelines, unified "request signals," sustainment and repair capacity, and lessons-learned integration, so Ukraine can defend today and deter tomorrow. Additionally, the initiative called PURL (Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List) provides critical equipment for Ukraine, like air defence, ammunition and other essential equipment. Over two-thirds of Allies have committed to PURL, and two partners, New Zealand and Australia. This support complements other initiatives, like the NSATU Trust Fund and the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) Trust Fund, as well as a range of other Allied bilateral or multilateral initiatives.

—Is the Alliance considering getting involved in any way in the future Volunteer Mission that will be deployed once a peace agreement with Russia has been signed?

—First of all, it must be emphasised that any post-agreement arrangements would depend on the conditions, the mandate, and political decisions. A key principle is durability: any future settlement must avoid what happened in the past, and ensure Russia cannot threaten Ukraine again. If NATO were asked to contribute in any form, it would be assessed through the appropriate NATO political and military channels and aligned with Alliance tasks and legal frameworks. I believe it is important to praise the ongoing efforts by the Coalition of the Willing, led by the UK and France, to provide robust security guarantees, after a peace deal with Russia.

—After peace is achieved, what role will NATO Security Assistance and Training in Ukraine (NSATU) play?

—NSATU's purpose is to make support more coherent and predictable, and that remains essential after any agreement, because deterrence is what prevents relapse

INTERVIEW

into war. And here too the role of the Coalition of the Willing will be key. NSATU's core tasks — coordinating training, coordinating equipment donations, coordinating transfer/repair via logistics hubs, and supporting longer-term force developments— are exactly the building blocks of sustainable defence. It also helps integrate Ukrainian staff into the process, keeping support tied to operational needs and accelerating NATO-standard interoperability. Regardless of when this war ends, our support to Ukraine will continue, as an important factor to ensure a lasting peace.

—In recent months, the Alliance has launched new defence activities such as Eastern Sentry on the Eastern Flank and a similar one in the Baltic. How are these missions progressing? [Following this interview, NATO launched Arctic Sentry, another activity in the Northern Flank]

—They are progressing well and reflect adaptation to a changing threat. Eastern Sentry, launched by our Allied Command for Operations in September 2025, is a flexible multi-domain activity enhancing vigilance along the entire Eastern Flank: across air, land and sea domains, whilst incorporating innovative tactics and technologies for threats like drones. It also connects and synchronises assets that already exist from the High North to the Black Sea, thus improving warning, response and reinforcement. Baltic Sentry, launched in January 2025, strengthens protection of critical undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea through increased presence and surveillance by frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, and other assets, like uncrewed systems (as successfully tested by our Allied Command for Transformation), to deter and respond to destabilising acts. Both activities add flexibility and strength to our posture, and make clear that, as a defensive Alliance, we are always ready to defend.

—How are the new Alliance Defence Plans agreed upon at the Vilnius Summit being implemented?

—Implementation means turning plans into executable readiness: assigning forces, ensuring enablers logistics, infrastructure, stockpiles, spares and exercising the full reinforcement chain, from national units

to NATO command and control. The decisions taken at the 2024 Vilnius Summit also reinforced the move toward much higher readiness, well over 300,000 troops at high readiness, backed by substantial air and naval power. In practical terms, we are measuring progress by preparedness outcomes: how quickly forces can deploy, integrate, sustain, and fight under NATO command in a contested environment. And we work daily in further developing our forces and capabilities, against the targets agreed by Allies, which define the resources, forces and capabilities we need to fulfil our defence plans.

—With regard to capabilities, what is the Alliance doing to implement the new objectives?

—As mentioned, NATO has translated the defence plans into new capability targets, as agreed by Defence Ministers on 5 June 2025. These targets outline what Allies must field to be ready “to fight tonight”: air and missile defence, long-range fires, logistics, large manoeuvre formations, and more. To resource this, Allies agreed at The Hague Summit last year to a 5% defence investment commitment by 2035, made of: 3.5% for core defence requirements, like warships, aircraft, munitions stockpiles but also drones and long-range missile systems, as well as space and cyber capabilities; and up to 1.5% for defence and security-related investments, such as resilience, infrastructure and industrial capacity, able to surge and sustain. But let me remind a key point: capability is not only budgets. It is also about personnel, which remains central in our mission to deter and defend, with its equipment and training.

—How is this development of priority capabilities being coordinated with the EU?

“NATO and the EU complement each other when they coordinate and remain interoperable”



—NATO sets the military requirements and standards; the EU brings powerful tools on industrial scale-up, regulation, infrastructure investment, and mobility. This is complementary when aligned early and kept interoperable. Military mobility is a flagship example: NATO needs fast reinforcement; the EU can reduce legal and administrative friction and upgrade dual-use transport corridors. The concept remains the same: one set of forces, one set of credible plans, supported by coherent NATO-EU implementation.

—In recent months, the European Union has been taking historic steps to develop strategic autonomy and its own defence. How is this compatible with the Alliance?

—A stronger European defence is not only desirable, but is a must when



it strengthens the European pillar within NATO, avoids duplication, and preserves full interoperability, because Europe's and North America's security are indivisible. Strategic autonomy should mean greater European capacity to act and sustain, more readiness, more resilience, more industrial output, and not strategic separation. That is how we keep deterrence credible and burden-sharing fair.

—Along these lines, the EU has just approved a new regulation on military mobility to facilitate the movement of troops and equipment throughout Europe. How will this mobility benefit the Alliance?

—Yes, in November 2025, the European Commission launched a Military Mobility Package, with a direction exactly right for

NATO: faster cross-border permissions for military equipment, clearer national coordination, and infrastructure such as roads, railways and bridges that can actually take heavy or big loads. For the Alliance, military mobility is a combat multiplier: the ability to reinforce and sustain quickly is as decisive as the number of battalions available.

—Projecting security is another of NATO's main pillars. What missions does the Alliance currently have outside NATO territory?

—NATO's current missions include: KFOR in Kosovo, ensuring a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement; NATO Mission Iraq [temporarily suspended on the ground, due to the Middle East conflict], a non-combat advisory and capacity-building mission;

and Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean, which delivers maritime security tasks including situational awareness and counter-terrorism. We also cooperate with a large number of partners, even far from the Atlantic, because security is not regional, but global. We do this through tailored partnership support, training, interoperability, and resilience-building, so partners can provide their own security and reduce spillover risks. Several countries in the Indo-Pacific —Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand— joined us for part of the recent meeting of the Chiefs of Defence at NATO Headquarters.

—Finally, how do you assess Spain's contribution to the Alliance?

—Spain is a high-value Ally: strategically positioned, operationally engaged, and increasingly central to NATO's posture. We have no doubt that Spain made it a priority to fulfil its capability targets, and work is in progress. From an operational point of view, it is the framework nation for NATO's Forward Land Forces in Slovakia, directly strengthening deterrence on the Eastern Flank. Spain also hosts and enables key NATO functions, like the Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC), in Torrejón, and the High Readiness Force Land Headquarters in Bétera (Valencia), both of which I had the pleasure to visit, along with the whole NATO Military Committee, at the beginning of February. There, we got a first-hand impression on how effectively Spain supports NATO operations. Spain also hosts the C-IED Centre of Excellence in Madrid, which builds expertise that saves lives across the Alliance. Let me also highlight Spain's contributions across the air and maritime domains, on the Eastern Flank and especially in the Mediterranean, all essential for a 360-degree security: from deterrence and defence to maritime situational awareness and counter-terrorism. In December, I was in Baghdad and I had the pleasure to meet the Spanish forces contributing to NATO Mission Iraq. And a last, important word on the support to Ukraine: Spain announced a significant support package for Ukraine, including an important contribution to the PURL initiative, to make sure that Ukraine can get the critical military equipment it urgently needs to defend itself.

Rosa Ruiz/ Santiago F. del Vado
Photos: Héliène Gicquel



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE

The city of A Coruña hosted the third global Summit on Responsible Artificial Intelligence in the Military Domain (REAIM 2026), where Margarita Robles advocated a framework focused on 'ethical values'



Opening ceremony of REAIM 2026, which hosted various activities relating to AI in the field of defence.

A Coruña / Spain 2026 / 4-5 February 2026
Responsible AI in the Military Domain Summit

REAIM



REAIM 2026

Defence Minister Margarita Robles together with Amparo Valcarce, Secretary of State for Defence; Esperanza Casteleiro, Secretary of State and Director of the National Intelligence Centre; and other civilian and military officials.

ARTIFICIAL Intelligence (AI) is changing everything. This is equally true in the field of defence, where its unrestrained application in an increasingly polarised geopolitical context can prove destructive. As a result, to identify principles aimed at preventing advanced analytics in the military domain from escaping human control, representatives from international organisations, governments, industry, academia and civil society gathered at the third global Summit on Responsible Artificial Intelligence in the Military Domain. Held on 4-5 February 2026 at the Exhibition and Congress Centre in A Coruña, the summit was co-organised by the Spanish Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (MAEUEC), with the participation of over 1,000 people from some 85 delegations. The event featured round-table discussions, expert presentations and plenary sessions, while several industry stakeholders displayed a variety of practical AI applications in an exhibition area with live demonstrations of AI-enabled tools.

THE ETHICAL DIMENSION

Defence Minister Margarita Robles advocated a framework for the use and application of AI focused on 'ethical values' and the pursuit of peace. "We want to maximise the role of the Armed Forces, and we understand that artificial intelligence is crucial in any scenario; however, in these difficult times, the ethical dimension is paramount," declared the head of the Defence Department. During the summit in the city of A Coruña, she also held bilateral meetings with her counterparts from Bolivia, Cape Verde, Kenya, North Macedonia and Mauritania.

**Over 1,000
people from
85 delegations
participated in
the meeting**

Due to delays brought on by adverse weather conditions, neither Robles nor the Secretary of State for Defence (SEDEF), Amparo Valcarce, or the Secretary of State and Director of the National Intelligence Centre, Esperanza Casteleiro, were able to attend the opening ceremony. Lt Gen Miguel Ivorra, Director General for Strategy and Innovation of the Defence Industry (DIGEID), therefore delivered the SEDEF's speech, which argued that the summit should not only be a forum for reflection, but also for application.

According to Valentín González Formoso, President of the Provincial Council of A Coruña, "Summits like this one, which address accountability and ethics in the use of this technology, speak highly of those who promote them". For her part, Inés Rey, Mayor of A Coruña, home to the Spanish Agency for the Supervision of Artificial Intelligence (AESIA), highlighted this city's role in the military and technological fields and called for "an ethical governance that prioritises individuals and upholds compliance with international law".

Before the opening session, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CHOD), Admiral



Maria José Muñoz

In A Coruña, Minister Robles held bilateral meetings with her counterparts from several countries, including Janine Lélis from Cape Verde.

General Teodoro López Calderón, emphasised that our Armed Forces seek AI solutions that improve situational awareness, decision-making processes and our military capabilities, “but always within a transparent, legally compliant, ethical, moral, and strict control framework”.

Lt Gen José María Millán, Director General of the Centre for Information and Communication Systems and Technologies (CESTIC) of the Spanish Ministry of Defence, stated during the summit that “we must continue to be responsible and accountable for the use of AI in the military domain”. “We need to strengthen this joint project,” added Millán in reference to the REAIM summit, “to ensure that AI is a force in the service of peace, stability and the common good”. He also added that AI “does not replace human judgement, but it does amplify its consequences”.

DAY TWO

The second and final day of the summit began with a discussion moderated by the Director General of the CESTIC, in which several speakers presented their views on the military use of AI, including Major General Fernando Morón, Director of Doctrine, Organisation and Materiel of the Spanish Army’s Training and Doctrine Command; Rear Admiral Javier Vázquez of the Navy General Staff; and Major General Alejandro Chueca of the Air and Space Force General Staff. All three agreed that,

There was a formal call for the summit’s conclusions to be integrated into the United Nations open debates

although capabilities and missions vary greatly and are quite different between the Army, the Navy and the Air and Space Force, in general terms AI should serve to support the decision-making process; however, its recommendations should not be interpreted as binding orders.

Soraya Artiles, Deputy Director General for Information Security and Artificial Intelligence of the CESTIC, who participated in one of the sessions, presented Spain’s strategic plan to strengthen the capabilities of the future.

The official closing ceremony was led by Alberto Ucelay, Director General for Foreign and Security Policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as neither Minister Albares nor the Minister for Digital Transformation and the Civil Service, Óscar López, were able to attend the summit due to adverse weather conditions. However, the Secretary of State for Defence, Amparo Valcarce, did attend this session.

Ucelay argued that “it is essential to enhance our commitment to multilateralism,” stressing that “on its own, no country can face new challenges, nor can it harness the benefits that new technologies have to offer”. In this regard, he emphasised that Spain seeks to “promote inclusive and effective international initiatives that enable the advancement of responsible AI use”. He also insisted that the summit’s conclusions be integrated into the United Nations open debates and



REAIM 2026

The Director General of the CESTIC, Lt Gen José María Millán, chaired a round-table discussion attended by representatives from the Spanish Army, Navy, and Air and Space Force.

Artificial intelligence and human accountability



**Admiral General
Teodoro López
Calderón**
Chief of the
Defence Staff

THIS third edition of the REAIM summit has served as a magnificent platform for exchanging views on how military AI can contribute to strengthening peace and security —avoiding risks derived from irresponsible use or system failure— while ensuring combat superiority in current and future operating environments. This is achieved through ethical standards that permit the exploitation of AI advantages while closely managing and monitoring its risks.

We can affirm that we are already engaged in what is often referred to as information-age warfare. It is characterised, among other things, by battlefield transparency, in which every platform is likely to be located, tracked, acquired by weapon systems and engaged, particularly close to the front line. All this takes place on a highly sensor-driven battlefield that generates an enormous amount of data from six different domains. This information must be updated in near-real time, fused, analysed and presented appropriately to each level of command and operational planning: strategic, operational and tactical.

For several years now, there has been a clear need to introduce new, emerging and disruptive technologies in order to achieve combat superiority, thereby partially offsetting the need for large amounts of material resources and, in particular, personnel, which is the hardest resource to acquire.

Amongst these disruptive technologies, AI stands out as an operational and strategic necessity, as I already outlined in the ‘Visión de la Inteligencia Artificial en las Fuerzas Armadas’ (Vision of Artificial Intelligence in the Armed Forces) in March 2024.

In fact, AI is already a key driver of our defence digital transformation. It will allow us to achieve decisive operational advantages in today’s complex security environment, as it is applicable not only to combat, but also to logistics or force readiness. It will also pave the way for advances in predictive and prescriptive maintenance and simulation, which directly translate into greater systems availability and improved training standards, essential aspects in the current climate in which the demand for enlisted personnel is ever-increasing. If we accept these assertions as true, the development of our own sovereign capabilities, which limit our external dependence on these

systems, becomes one of the structural and urgent strategic priorities of defence policy, both our own and that of our Allies.

Spain has adopted and expanded upon the principles of responsible use set out in the NATO strategy. These principles are not mere recommendations, but mandatory requirements for any system employing artificial intelligence within the Alliance. These include legality, responsibility, accountability, explainability, traceability, reliability, governance and the mitigation of unintended biases. It is crucial that the governance framework overseeing the use of this promising technology ensures strict adherence to our values and code of conduct during its implementation, and this should be considered a non-negotiable objective of our activity in this field. Consequently, we must continue to facilitate the integration of artificial intelligence into our military capabilities in order to maintain superiority over the adversary, paying special attention to improving interoperability and protecting ourselves from the use of AI by both state and non-state actors who oppose us. However, as the Spanish strategy points out, artificial intelligence must be an enabler, not a substitute for human accountability: individuals must always remain ultimately accountable for actions undertaken by an AI-enabled system.

This ‘Human in the loop’ concept is a non-negotiable legal and moral requirement for our Armed Forces. This summit on the responsible use of AI in the military domain is undoubtedly an important initiative to try to expand the responsible use of a crucial technology that many knowledgeable thinkers have compared to the turning point marked by the advent of the nuclear weapon.

As mentioned earlier, the vision of the Spanish Armed Forces focuses on seeking AI solutions that improve situational awareness, decision-making processes and our military capabilities, but always within a transparent, legally compliant, ethical, moral, and strict control framework.

In the face of this challenging technological landscape, we must remember that the men and women serving in our Armed Forces are their greatest asset, and that their conduct in compliance with our ethical code, as set out in the Royal Ordinances of the Spanish Armed Forces, is absolutely essential, whether it involves AI or any other technology.

**Artificial
Intelligence
must be an
enabler, not
a substitute,
for human
responsibility**

Speech at the opening day of REAIM 26



Cabalar/Elle

Several companies, including Navantia, presented various initiatives related to the military use of AI.

called for an ongoing dialogue between the REAIM and the United Nations.

Navantia was among the defence contractors and tech firms showcasing AI-driven solutions. During the summit, this state-owned company presented its Integrated Services System (ISS), developed in partnership with the University of Vigo as part of a broader naval digital transformation strategy to provide a secure and intelligent digital structure aboard ships.

PATHWAYS TO ACTION

The final declaration, entitled “Pathways to Action”, underscores that the responsible use and development of AI “can and should contribute to international peace and security”. This declaration points out that artificial intelligence can help reduce the exposure of personnel to danger, improve the protection of civilians, and support more timely and better-informed decision-making, but warns of risks such as miscalculations, bias or loss of control. In this regard, the document reiterates that “states and individuals (rather than machines and algorithms)”

bear legal and ethical accountability and emphasises that AI-enabled decision-support systems “should support, not replace, the exercise of human judgement”.

The declaration sets out specific measures: conducting risk assessments of AI-enabled military systems prior to deployment; performing legal reviews of weapons, means and methods of warfare enabled by this technology; strengthening

measures to protect the integrity, availability and confidentiality of data and mitigating its manipulation by non-state actors, including terrorist groups; ensuring the delineation of clear chains of command to avoid accountability gaps; designating a national focal point —such as a designated AI director— to facilitate government-wide coordination, etc.

Furthermore, the text stresses the importance of strengthening international cooperation, promoting capacity-building —including for developing countries—, and involving industry and academia more closely in promoting responsible AI in the military domain and in boosting research.

The A Coruña summit was a continuation of two previous meetings held in The Hague (Netherlands) in 2023 and Seoul (Republic of Korea) in 2024. These meetings already established a common understanding of the vital importance of AI in areas such as military operations, command and control, intelligence, training, information management and logistical support.

Santiago F. del Vado

There was a formal call for the summit’s conclusions to be integrated into the United Nations open debates



MUSEO DEL EJÉRCITO



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Human judgement in the era of artificial intelligence

Military Leadership and Command Ethics

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THE Spanish Armed Forces are currently undergoing a process of deep transformation driven by the progressive integration of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and big data analytics. This evolution affects not only weapons systems and logistical processes, but also the exercise of command, decision-making and the ethics underpinning military leadership in an increasingly complex and fast-paced operational environment.

Technology is a decisive factor in shaping the States' power, not only because it reinforces it, but also because it generates cumulative transformation dynamics: every new breakthrough paves the way for other technological developments, multiplying their strategic impact. Against this backdrop, the international balance of power is conditioned by the technological gap between nations, in a scenario of accelerated competition in which many capabilities quickly become obsolete.

Furthermore, a significant portion of these technologies is dual-use. Systems designed for civilian, commercial or scientific purposes can be directly applied in the military field, while others originate directly from defence research. Artificial intelligence has thus established itself as one of the keys to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and in 2026 it has gone from being a possibility to becoming an operational reality in various theatres and domains.

In the current environment, the Armed Forces face a new paradigm. This goes beyond a mere technological or armament upgrade, as it reaches the very core of military culture. In fact, the emergence of AI is reshaping the very essence of military lead-

ership. In this context, military leaders must operate in scenarios in which reality changes in milliseconds. Addressing such circumstances requires defining the different spheres of responsibility, as well as the ethics that should bridge the gap between legal rules and military culture.

In the light of this reality, the challenge for the Armed Forces is not only technical. The integration of intelligent systems raises profound issues regarding the exercise of command, the attribution of accountability and the preservation of the values that have historically underpinned military leadership. This is because tools do not possess morality or ethics of their own; such values depend on how they are used. The issue is that this complexity makes assigning responsibilities increasingly difficult, which accentuates problems that were already present in previous technological contexts.

"Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? That's not my department," said Wernher von Braun. This reflection illustrates the risks of a fragmentation of responsibilities, which modern military leadership must consciously avoid. Military history offers numerous examples of how the functional fragmentation of

Military leaders must operate in scenarios in which reality changes in milliseconds



decisions can dilute the perception of individual responsibility. In the industrialised conflicts of the 20th century, the separation between those who designed the strategy, those who operated the technical systems and those who implemented orders on the ground contributed to a progressive depersonalisation of the use of force.

This phenomenon is exacerbated in highly technologised contexts in which the use of complex systems introduces a psychological distance between the decision made and its consequences. When an action depends on multiple actors —analysts, operators, planners and decision-makers— the risk is not only operational but also moral: the temptation is to blame technique, procedures or systems for the result of the decision, instead of holding the human leader accountable for authorising the action.

Artificial intelligence, like any major technological innovation, exacerbates this challenge. As classical political theory has cautioned, no far-reaching technical discovery allows us to fully anticipate its political effects. This is precisely why military leadership must reinforce, rather than weaken, the sense of personal responsibility in the exercise of command.

Military leadership rests on a dual pillar: on the one hand, ‘potestas’, the legal power emanating from hierarchy; and on the other, ‘auctoritas’, the moral legitimacy resulting from expertise and example. However, AI alters this balance. We should bear in mind that the total sum of the information available in history is now expanding so fast that it doubles in size roughly every two years. At a command post that is overflowing with electromagnetic signals and geographic intelligence, the leader is no longer

the main source of information but rather the primary manager of uncertainty.

Moral authority in 2026 is no longer rooted in “knowing more” than the machine. Human discernment becomes the last bastion of ‘auctoritas’. An algorithm can optimise a logistical route or identify a target with 99% accuracy; however, it lacks the ability to assess the politico-strategic impact of an error or to understand the morale of an exhausted unit. The command authority must act as a regulator, ensuring that algorithmic efficiency does not undermine the ultimate goal of the mission. It is important to remember that war is a social, cultural and fundamentally human phenomenon that is waged using the tools that a society has at its disposal at a given time in history.

THE FOUR TRANSFORMATIONS

The integration of AI into the military sphere does not introduce just a single change, but rather a series of concurrent shifts affecting knowledge, human relations, decision-making time and the command’s ethical framework. Below are four of the most relevant transformations from the perspective of contemporary military leadership:

1. The Epistemic Revolution: From Data to Contextual Understanding. AI’s processing power has led to a knowledge asymmetry. Leaders need to change from being “analysts” to “interpreters”. The epistemic risk lies in a “blind trust in the screen”: if the AI concludes the enemy is flanking the force, the leader must be able to discern whether the algorithm is falling prey to data spoofing or training bias. Critical data literacy must now be a core command skill.

2. The Relational Dimension: Hybrid Teams and Trust. The integration of autonomous systems, such as the drone swarms tested in the Ukraine conflict and the US Gremlins programme, has ushered in the era of Manned-Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T). Leadership is no longer exclusively interpersonal; it is exercised in hybrid environments in which people and autonomous systems interact. Since trust is an eminently human factor, managing it is a complex task for the command authority: excessive trust in AI leads to complacency while a lack of trust leads to operational inefficiency.

The integration of AI into Spain's 'Force 35' programme seeks to ensure that soldiers view the autonomous system as a reliable "partner" whose oversight is a tactical advantage rather than a burden.

3. Temporal Compression: The End of Traditional Deliberation. AI has compressed decision-making time. In scenarios of swarm saturation, the human brain cannot react at the required speed. This poses an operational dilemma: whether to delegate lethality to the machine (human-out-of-the-loop) or accept tactical vulnerability in order to retain human control (human-in-the-loop). Modern leadership requires the creation of pre-established trust protocols, in which human judgement operates primarily in the design of rules of engagement and in real-time oversight, acting more as an emergency override than as a manual operator. In this situation, leadership is determined by how well the boundaries of delegation and human control mechanisms are established, not by how quickly one responds.

4. The Ethical and Governance Dimension: The Power of Values. Ethics multiplies the long-term effectiveness of innovation rather than impeding it. The use of AI in target selection, as observed in recent precision operations in various international scenarios, raises challenges regarding traceability. The EU AI Act establishes strict frameworks which, despite some military exceptions, inevitably set the standard for what democratic society expects from its armed forces.

The military leader is the ultimate guardian of the principles of proportionality and distinction —pillars of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)— whose application cannot be fully delegated to opaque or non-explainable systems.

CASES OF APPLICATION

The following examples should not be viewed just as technological applications, but as illustrations of how military leadership is either reinforced or strained by the use of AI-enabled



AI speeds up detection, whereas human leadership decides when, how and to what extent to act

systems. Technology always serves as decision support; it never replaces the exercise of human judgement.

The Spanish Ministry of Defence has taken significant steps in this regard. The implementation of the SILPRE system by Indra for predictive logistics illustrates how AI can enhance the operational effectiveness of the Spanish Army without displacing human command authority. In this case, the logistics officer makes decisions based on failure predictions but weighs factors such as the operational context,

geopolitical deployment or strategic priorities, which are aspects that no automated system can assess on its own. The final decision is, therefore, still the responsibility of the human command authority.

Likewise, the Joint Cyberspace Command (MCCE) uses AI to detect intrusions that would be invisible to the human eye. However, the decision to launch a cyber-counteroffensive is still the prerogative of humans, who



Generative AI - OpenAI

are aware of the implications of conflict escalation. These cases underscore the need for technological sovereignty: AI leadership requires possessing one's own AI, whose biases and algorithms are known and auditable by the national chain of command. This example shows that even in highly automated domains such as cyberspace, the exercise of command retains a strategic and political dimension that cannot be automated. AI speeds up detection, whereas human leadership decides when, how and to what extent to act.

TRAINING FOR THE TIMES

Training in military academies and educational centres must be geared towards a model in which technological skills and humanistic education converge in a balanced manner. The leadership of the future is taught not only in military training areas, but also in high-fidelity simulators that use generative AI to create adaptive scenarios, as well as by studying the works of the classical thinkers.

The command authority needs to develop a "growth mindset" that can handle frustration with malfunctioning systems and the responsibility of commanding units where information is abundant but clarity is lacking.

In this context, leadership relies not only on technical skills, but also on the character of the command authority. Traditional virtues such as prudence, temperance and a sense of duty take on renewed relevance when decisions are made using intelligent systems.

THE MORAL BURDEN OF ALGORITHMIC ERROR

One of the least explored dilemmas of military leadership in the AI era is not technological, but profoundly human: who bears the moral burden of the error when the decision has been made using an algorithm? In the military sphere in which obedience and responsibility are clearly defined, the integration of intelligent systems introduces an unprecedented grey area.

When a decision support system recommends a course of action that eventually results in undesired consequences — collateral damage, political escalation, or the loss of lives— the leader cannot claim technological neutrality. Delegating is not the same as abdicating. The military authority remains accountable even if the process was algorithmically assisted. This tension can lead to what some authors refer to as moral injury: the internal fracture occurring when the actions performed transgress the leader's personal and professional values.

Unlike traditional human errors, algorithmic failure is often opaque, statistical and difficult to explain *ex post facto*. This requires a dual competence from the military command: accountability and moral strength to take responsibility for decisions made in a situation of great uncertainty. In this context, military command ethics ceases to be merely regulatory and becomes an ethics of character: prudence, temperance and moral courage in the face of systems that promise certainty but provide no meaning. From this perspective, AI does not reduce the burden of leadership; it intensifies it. The true leader is not the one who delegates the most, but the one who knows how far to delegate without losing his/her moral identity.

HUMAN JUDGEMENT AS AN ASYMMETRIC ADVANTAGE

AI will not replace military leaders, but those who use AI will replace those who do not. The real asymmetric advantage in 21st-century warfare will not be the fastest algorithm, but the organisation that best combines the machine's computing power with human moral judgement, intuition and courage.

Ultimately, leadership consists in taking responsibility. A machine can perform an order, but it can never be held accountable before history or justice. The military leader of 2026, therefore, needs to be a technological humanist: someone who masters technology to protect the essence of humanity, even in the chaos of battle.

AI may be the sword, but human judgement remains the arm that wields it and, above all, the mind that determines when force should be applied and when it must be restrained.

LT. GEN. JUAN PABLO SÁNCHEZ DE LARA, CAOC TJ COMMANDER

“WE ARE NATO AMBASSADORS IN SPAIN”

CAOC TJ stands out for its precision and speed in detecting and identifying all aircraft overflying the skies of Southern Europe

LT. Gen. Juan Pablo Sánchez commands the Combined Air Operations Centre in Torrejón (CAOC TJ), the only operational unit of the NATO Command Structure (NCS) located in Spain: an assignment of profound significance. “It is especially important because I must not only live up to the demands of this role as a Spanish commander of a multinational contingent and be responsible for the protection of our territory and its citizens, but also because of the need to honour the trust placed in our centre by the nations to which we provide air defence and security,” he explains.

With over 3,500 flight hours, mostly as a fighter and attack aircraft pilot, Lt. Gen. Sánchez de Lara was in charge of the Canary Islands Air Command when, in February 2023, he was appointed to lead one of NATO’s most important posts, the centre from where the skies of Southern Europe are protected 24/7/365, through a 360-degree approach within his area of responsibility. “It is proving to be an unparalleled professional experience, especially given the current situation in Europe,” he says. “We have a huge amount of activity affecting many areas that require us to adapt continuously”.

For this 62-year-old officer from Albacete, serving as CAOC TJ commander “is priceless due to the camaraderie, professionalism, and the chemistry among the members of this crew, this family...”. “All

this also makes us see ourselves as NATO ambassadors in Spain, advocates of a real success story, and representatives of an Atlantic Alliance that, through cohesion and solidarity, permanently guarantees the protection of its citizens and territories from the air”.

—CAOC TJ has been in operation for thirteen years. What is your overall assessment of this period?

—Yes, its history dates back to 7 February 2013, thanks to Spain’s steadfast commitment to ensuring that the then CAOC 8, which operated in Torrejón, would become a permanent Headquarters within the NATO Command Structure (NCS), with the main mission of executing air defence operations across NATO’s Southern Flank, covering 14 countries, from the Azores and the Canary Islands in the west to Türkiye in the east. It was no coincidence that Spain was chosen to

host this headquarters. The operational efficiency and professionalism of our predecessors, and the spirit of solidarity and inclusive mindset we inherited from them, were decisive factors in unifying the five CAOCs that existed in southern Europe into a single entity. This is a clear example of cohesion and of how the sum of national capabilities acts as a force multiplier for collective air defence, thanks to the inherent characteristics of air power (flexibility of use, speed of action, ubiquity and radius of action), technological advances, improved procedures, interoperability and, above all, trust.

—What has been the primary focus in recent years?

—Obviously, the conflict in Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia’s illegal and brutal invasion has been our primary focus due to the events that have taken place in or near NATO territory. I am satisfied with the work of our air defence teams, who have carried out their jobs perfectly and rapidly in conjunction with the national units transferred and deployed to the most affected countries: Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Türkiye. However, there is always room for improvement and that task is an ongoing one that is part of our DNA.

But it is not all about the Eastern Flank. Our teams have also successfully resolved all air security incidents in or near other countries, caused by both civil aircraft and unidentified military aircraft not

“Our reaction is automatic as soon as we detect a NATO airspace violation”



following international flight rules. This latter aspect is often overlooked, but it has often forced us to scramble our Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) interceptor aircraft to resolve incidents caused by communication loss, air emergencies, hijackings, bomb threats, illicit trafficking, overflights in restricted or prohibited areas, balloons and, of course, unmanned aerial systems or drones.

Additionally, in 2025, we enhanced the preparedness of our personnel to plan and conduct all types of air operations in crisis or conflict, notably through high-intensity exercises, such as Ramstein Ambition and Steadfast Duel, in which our personnel demonstrated their professionalism and ability to work as a team in complex situations.

—How does this centre protect the European population?

—NATO's Air Policing mission is a critical pillar of our collective defence in peacetime and has been carried out since 1961 as an intrinsic element of the Alliance's founding Treaty. It guarantees the integrity of NATO airspace and ensures the protection of nations by maintaining a permanent posture. Consequently, it serves as a continuous and highly visible demonstration of the Allies' commitment to mutual protection. All this is in keeping with the spirit of solidarity that we have shown since the establishment of the NATO Integrated Air Defence within the Euro-Atlantic area over 65 years ago.

The best news for everyone would be that there is no need for action. That is why this permanent 24/7/365 air defence posture is marked by its robustness and proactivity. Our task to detect and identify all overflying aircraft is highly precise and fast, performed in conjunction with the Control and Reporting Centres (CRCs) transferred to us by the nations. Thanks to this, we maintain the highest levels of security in our airspace of responsibility.

Ultimately, if there is no positive identification or the aircraft fails to respond to controllers, we order an alpha scramble to intercept, identify, escort, and/or provide a defensive and proportional response to an immediate threat, always in accordance with International Law and the UN Charter.

This defensive posture, which transcends the national borders of the countries under our remit, allows us to arrive as quickly as possible to resolve any situation in any part of NATO territory, and also allows us to provide collective and joint protection of the airspace for those nations lacking their own interceptor aircraft, leveraging the capabilities of their neighbours, all under the command and control of our CAOC.

The robustness of our integrated air defence system also seeks to achieve a deterrent effect, which is sometimes difficult to quantify in peacetime. However, we are certain that, thanks to our speed, reach, and flexibility, as well as our readiness and resolve, we are a force to be reckoned with.

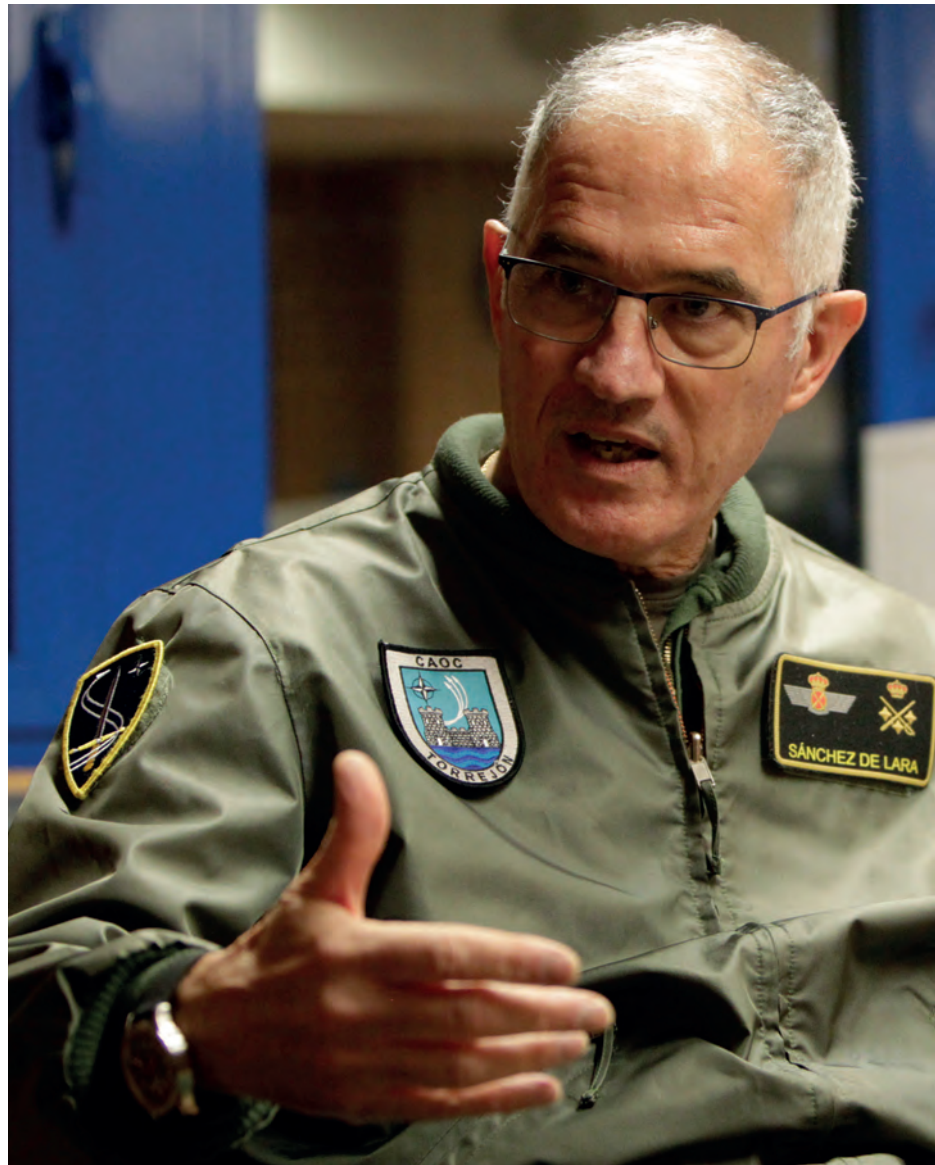
—How many flights a day are controlled from Torrejón?

—As many as there are civil and military aircraft overflying our skies and their approach areas, whether arriving from non-NATO countries or originating from international airspace. While there is no exact figure, across Europe, an average of over 35,000 aircraft overfly on a daily basis and are verified by NATO CAOCs in conjunction with national CRCs. This constitutes our primary daily workload, especially in the case of those tracks — whether identified or not— that are not flying under regulated flight plans.

Furthermore, under our command and control, we conduct all types of air operations on a daily basis. These include not only air defence exercises —which frequently traverse the borders of multiple nations— but also other types of training missions aimed at enhancing integration and interoperability among our Allies' units, including air, land and maritime units, as well as special operations forces, etc.

—Are there many airspace violations?

—Thanks to our air defence posture, the number of unauthorised air incursions into Allied territory is low. Our reaction is virtually automatic as soon as we detect or even have indications of potential activity involving a NATO airspace violation, which in the end often prevents the overflight from occurring.



“The sum of national capabilities acts as a force multiplier for collective air defence”

—Are there specific surveillance zones where more incidents occur than others, or which are of greater severity?

—Our main effort is to maintain the same levels of air security across every part of Allied territory. Regarding incidents involving civil aviation, there are no areas of higher or lower activity density.

Obviously, we must maintain a special focus of attention wherever there is increased military air activity that could affect the security of our citizens, as is the case resulting from the Ukrainian conflict. Russian air operations near the borders of our Eastern Flank countries —specifically



“We strive to foster leadership-associated values, such as loyalty, initiative and commitment”

—What tasks would CAOC Torrejón assume in a crisis situation requiring air operations?

—Our main mission in peacetime is the air defence of the area of responsibility assigned to CAOC TJ. We are a defensive alliance and, therefore, in the event of a crisis —and subject to the decision and consensus of the 32 NATO nations— we would form an integrated air defence shield far more robust than the current one, with the contribution of additional air, land, and maritime units from the nations. However, it is also necessary to plan and execute other types of air operations, whether they be intelligence, air mobility or even offensive or support missions for other components, within a joint or multi-domain environment that is here to stay.

Applying the principles of centralised command, distributed control and decentralised execution, our Operations Centre could have planning and execution functions delegated to it by the NATO Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) —located at Ramstein air base in Germany— for all such air operations within our assigned area. This is something for which we are constantly getting ready.

And, of course, we must continue to maintain our air defence responsibilities in those areas not affected by the crisis situation.

—How do you assess Spain’s participation in the Black Sea airspace surveillance mission?

—Thanks, above all, to the special training of the Spanish Air and Space Force units and personnel, as well as to our proven solidarity on the Eastern Flank, Spain is one of the countries contributing the most units to reinforcing NATO’s defensive posture in that area. Not only due to the air detachments specifically deployed to protect Romanian territory, but also because of the volume of assets transferred per detachment, which, generally speaking, exceeds the number of aircraft provided by other nations.

Our personnel train on a daily basis across the full spectrum of missions, from live alpha scrambles to large-scale exercises involving numerous Allied units, not only air assets but also land and maritime forces. This elevates our readiness and interoperability to the highest levels, thereby contributing to deterrence and, if necessary, the mitigation of potential threats in this sensitive area. This year, we expect to see our fighter jets participating once again from Romania for another four-month rotation.

I must also mention the Tigrú Detachment, which has maintained a permanent presence for three years with our Deployable Air Defence Radar (DADR). This asset is essential for maintaining a robust air picture, which is critical in order for our mission to detect and identify any aircraft in the area.

—What are the specific challenges of dealing with unmanned aerial systems (UAS)?

—The primary distinction is precisely that they are unmanned, which allows us, if necessary, to employ specific procedures, albeit similar to those used for manned aircraft.

Our greatest challenge lies in countering small UAS. In these cases, and in order to achieve maximum effectiveness and efficiency, it is necessary to possess specialised assets, implement continuously evolving technologies, and activate distinct technical-operational protocols to remain ready to neutralise them if necessary.

The violations of Polish airspace by numerous drones, which required NATO to launch Operation Eastern Sentry last year, exemplify how we are constantly updating our counter-drone capabilities and procedures, improving the integration of all these actions in peacetime in order to maximise the operational yield of these capabilities.

—Your controllers guide a remarkable variety of Allied aircraft models. Does this present any difficulties?

Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Türkiye— have compelled us to strengthen our defensive posture through NATO’s enhanced Air Policing (eAP) mission. This requires us to activate our air defence protocols to identify and, if necessary, respond to threats against our territory, citizens, or our forces.

Beyond the Eastern Flank, there are other areas of particular concern to us, notably the Mediterranean and its avenues of approach toward our sovereign space, although we always maintain a vigilant and flexible 360-degree approach to ensure that security is not compromised.

“Spain is one of the countries contributing the most units to reinforcing NATO’s defensive posture on the Eastern Flank”

—Interoperability within the Alliance is key to ensuring the maximum effectiveness and efficiency of the capabilities and units provided by all nations. This interoperability is established through a strict standardisation of tactics, techniques and procedures, as well as information sharing and a robust and continuous training plan within the Allied environment.

Having the command over the units transferred to our centre allows us to guarantee such interoperability during mission execution. It is true that operating a Mig-29 is not the same as operating a Eurofighter or an F-35, but understanding their respective strengths and weaknesses and complementing each other as a team we ensure that virtually the same security standards are guaranteed in any area.

—How is your personnel trained for the centre’s various missions?

—Education and training are highly rigorous and, of course, strictly standardised. We are fortunate that our personnel come from different Allied nations with extensive experience in similar roles within their home units. At CAOC Torrejón, we adapt them to their posts in a structured yet rapid manner: first through individual training and subsequently through collective training, entering a cycle of exercises ranging from low to high intensity. Our goal is to have our personnel ready in the shortest possible timeframe.

Continuous training is pivotal to maintaining skills and qualifications. Therefore, we leverage all types of events or exercises —whether live or virtual— to ensure our personnel are fully prepared to operate in peace-

time and make a rapid transition to their roles in the event of a crisis or conflict.

—How many service members are assigned to the CAOC TJ?

—There are currently 180 people, almost all service members, from 18 NATO countries. It is a multinational CAOC, yet with a strong Spanish character, as Spain provides the largest contingent within the

CAOC. This enables our military personnel to develop professionally within an Allied Operations Centre without leaving Spain.

CAOC Torrejón is not only combined or multinational but also joint, as we have personnel from the Army, Navy, and Air and Space Force on our permanent staff, thus constituting a clear example of the integration of multi-domain capabilities and expertise.

—Do you find it difficult to manage the capabilities of officers, NCOs and enlisted personnel with such diverse mindsets?

—NATO has a long track record of integrating its —now 32— nations across a vast range of areas. Operating within a multinational environment is no longer a novelty, except perhaps for the nations that have recently joined the Alliance.

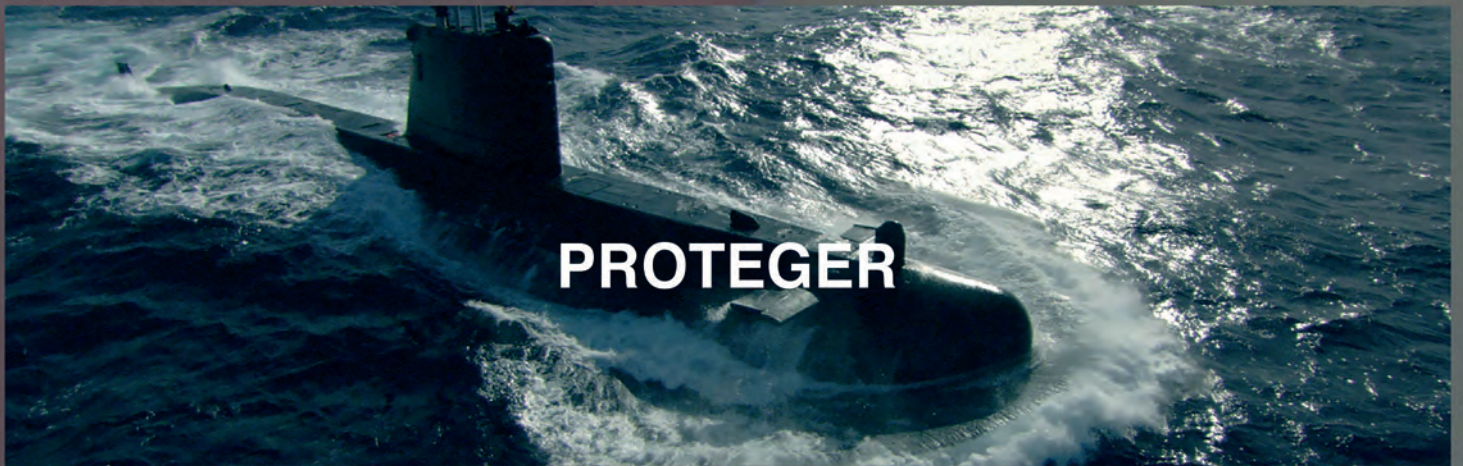
The novelty is more likely felt by the individuals assigned for the first time to a post such as our CAOC, where they must integrate within a very short timeframe. To facilitate this, we rely not only on our training and qualification plan but, above all, on the teamwork and camaraderie that prevails in this centre. Furthermore, we strive to foster other leadership-associated values such as loyalty, professionalism, impartiality, initiative and commitment.

At CAOC Torrejón, no one walks alone; we all look out for our colleagues, and we all try to humbly learn from one another. It is a true privilege to be able to work, converse, or simply build friendships with personnel from such a wide variety of nations and cultures, which has an enriching effect on all of our mindsets.

Santiago F. del Vado
Photos: H el ene Gicquel



Scramble mission at the Spanish Tactical Air Detachment (TAD) Vilkas, deployed at Šiauliai air base, Lithuania.



PROTEGER



TU LIBERTAD

Hay muchas personas que defienden
la libertad que disfrutamos todos los días.



GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
DE DEFENSA

Nuestra misión, tu libertad.

Activities, initiatives, meetings and exchanges with third countries that strengthen dialogue and cooperation, while building mutual trust

The role of Defence Diplomacy

Colonel Vicente Gonzalvo

Deputy Directorate-General for Defence Plans and International Relations – General Secretariat for Defence Policy (SEGENPOL)

THE Ministry of Defence's remit generally encompasses both the domestic and international spheres. In the latter area, one of the key activities currently carried out by this Department (primarily through the Armed Forces), and which forms part of the National Security System, falls within the field of Defence Diplomacy. In general, the Spanish Constitution (Article 8.2) establishes that the bases of the military organisation shall be determined by Organic Law. In particular, the general provisions and limitations governing the activities of the Armed Forces are specifically defined (responsibilities, organisation, missions, etc.) in Organic Law 5/2005 on National Defence.

Today, the Ministry of Defence's external projection activities are arguably among the most relevant, well-known and highly valued by Spanish society. In this regard, as is widely recognised and established, in accordance with its Preamble, the aforementioned Law stipulates that "Spain's international projection and our defence policy within the broader context of external action means that, since the late 20th century, our Armed Forces have been operating beyond our borders as observers, interposition forces, and in peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance roles".

EXTERNAL ACTION IN DEFENCE

In parallel, and as established by the Spanish State's External Action and Service Law, this external activity is legally defined as the "orderly set of actions carried out abroad by constitutional bodies, public administrations and agencies, entities and institutions dependent upon them" (Law 2/2014 - Article 1). Currently, and in the sense expressed earlier, this external action includes coordinated activity in different fields and areas, such as public diplomacy, economic diplomacy and the aforementioned Defence Diplomacy, among others.

Defence Diplomacy is essentially the set of activities, initiatives, meetings and exchanges led by the General Secretariat for Defence Policy (SEGENPOL) and carried out with specific countries

This initiative is based on an effective multilateralism, derived from our membership in the EU and NATO, and our steadfast support for the UN



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considered to be of particular interest to Spain's security and defence policy. Its ultimate goal is to reinforce dialogue and cooperation and build mutual trust, essential for guaranteeing our security and the effectiveness of our external action.

Generally speaking, Spanish Defence Diplomacy is based on an effective multilateralism, derived from our membership in the EU and NATO, and our steadfast support for the United Nations through a combination of various approaches. In conclusion, and according to the 2020 National Defence Directive: "Spain presents itself to the world as a responsible and supportive partner". From a formal standpoint, these activities are structured through a series of mechanisms made available to other countries, positioning Spain and its Armed Forces as an international benchmark for the promotion of international cooperation, dialogue and peace.

Notable among these tools are the holding of Joint Defence Commissions; the approval of Bilateral Cooperation Plans, in which Armed Forces units of both countries agree on joint activities; Military Education Cooperation Programmes, which offer foreign military personnel the chance to attend highly prestigious courses, such as the Staff College or Special Operations courses, and

Spanish language training; and our active involvement in the 5+5 Defence Initiative.

These instruments are complemented by others of a more unique nature but with far-reaching projection, such as port calls by naval vessels along the West African coast and the Gulf of Guinea, or those of Spanish training ship *Juan Sebastián de Elcano* (which undertakes an annual voyage that typically visits various ports in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Europe). Others include participation in international exercises or involvement in various multinational initiatives, such as the 5+5 Defence Initiative, which brings together ten countries from both shores of the Mediterranean, and in which Spain plays a very active and relevant role.

Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of Defence Diplomacy is undoubtedly included in what are known as "cooperative security activities". These comprise a set of actions, coordinated by the operational structure of the Armed Forces under the authority of the Operations Command (MOPS) of the Defence Staff, involving the preparation, training and support for the activities of partners and allies, primarily in the Maghreb and the Sahel, with the ultimate objective of improving the security situation in the region.

Cooperative security reinforces the capacity of countries to respond to shared challenges

Capacity building and/or capability development is thus a key tool of Defence Diplomacy and can be carried out both within the framework of comprehensive Security Sector Reform (SSR) processes and through specific initiatives (in designated areas). In short, in both cases, cooperative security activities focus on reinforcing the capacity of countries of interest to respond to shared security and defence challenges through advisory tasks, education, training and cooperation for military capacity-building.

These activities definitively encompass the land, air, and maritime domains, as well as disaster management and special operations, among others. They lead to long-term capability improvement (through training, preparation and military support) that is highly appreciated by the nations receiving this support and assistance.

Finally, Defence Diplomacy also serves as a tool for stimulating relations in the defence industry, which benefits both Spanish companies and those in partner nations, providing clear economic returns for our country.

PRIORITY FIELDS OF ACTION

From a geographical perspective, beyond Spain's more traditional allies within the framework of the European Union or the Atlantic Alliance, Defence Diplomacy bases its actions on support for international law and the initiatives of the United Nations. Furthermore, it has identified a series of specific countries and geographical areas (priority areas considered of special interest by the National Security Directive), where it primarily carries out its activities.

Priority regions include North Africa, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Ibero-America, and, increasingly, the Asia-Pacific. In these areas, the Armed Forces conduct Defence Diplomacy activities with countries as diverse as Senegal, Morocco, Mauritania, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and the Republic of Korea, among many others.

Today, the Mediterranean and North Africa represent the priority regions for Defence Diplomacy activities due to the clear national interest in issues such as security, migration and the economy. In this area, the work of the Directorate-General for Defence Policy (DIGENPOL), through the Deputy-Directorate-General for Defence Plans and International Relations, and the advisory staff and

bodies of the General Secretariat for Defence Policy (SEGENPOL), is particularly significant and its results are especially relevant.

On the other hand, Ibero-America is a natural priority area for Spanish Defence Diplomacy. Shared historical, cultural, linguistic and institutional ties allow Spain to act as a bridge, connecting European cooperative security agendas with Ibero-American priorities, facilitating access to common standards, and enhancing trust, transparency and dialogue between Europe and Ibero-America.

Spain's presence in Africa, specifically in the Gulf of Guinea, materialises in two annual four-month deployments of a Spanish





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Navy vessel. These ships typically maintain a maritime presence in the ports of several countries in the area during each deployment, conducting cooperative security activities (such as exercises with other navies or training in ports or, occasionally, at sea).

On the one hand, the visit itself is already a means of strengthening ties with these countries and their authorities, a traditional task of naval diplomacy. On the other hand, these deployments

are coordinated with the EU and with the other European navies conducting similar missions, so Spain's presence also serves to highlight and support the presence of this international organisation and to build trust.

As part of Operation Atalanta against Somali piracy, Spain also maintains a standing presence in the North-West Indian Ocean with a Navy vessel and an Air and Space Force aircraft, carrying out activities with the navies and maritime security agencies in the region. Although these activities are carried out on behalf of the European Union, the presence and cooperation of the Spanish ship and aircraft are noticeable and also contribute to Defence Diplomacy.

Finally, in 2025, Spanish Defence Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific shifted from an ad hoc presence to a consolidated strategic priority.

The main milestone was the approval in December 2025 of Spain's new Asia-Pacific Strategy 2029, which focuses on increasing its diplomatic and commercial presence, seeking alignment with Spain's External Action Strategy 2025-2028.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Defence Diplomacy is a strategic tool at the disposal of the Government which, through the Ministry of Defence, enhances stability, mutual trust and cooperation via multiple mechanisms, both bilaterally and through various international organisations.

In particular, the training of military and civilian cadres in Spanish institutions creates professional networks and consolidates doctrinal interoperability.

Furthermore, promoting participation in multinational exercises and peacekeeping operations through Defence Diplomacy — particularly under UN mandates— allows contributing countries to modernise their military capabilities, improve the training of their armed forces, increase their industrial capacities and enhance their international prestige.

On the other hand, the potential cooperation formalised by the General Secretariat for Defence Policy in non-traditional fields — such as disaster management, support for civil protection, maritime security, humanitarian assistance or cyber defence— reinforces the capabilities of our partners and allies in areas of broad social consensus and high social returns. Simultaneously, it develops stable professional relationships and direct cooperation channels between institutions, with the ultimate goal of promoting global peace and stability.

Priority regions include North Africa, the Mediterranean and Ibero-America



The infantry fighting and combat engineer variants delivered to the Legion.

DELIVERY OF THE FIRST 8X8 DRAGON VEHICLES

Spanish Army takes delivery of 40 new armoured fighting vehicles at the Legion's Álvarez de Sotomayor base in Almería

THE VCR 8x8 Dragon programme has reached a major milestone with the Spanish Army's acquisition of the first 40 wheeled armoured fighting vehicles. "This programme consolidates a model of a modern, forward-looking, balanced and sustainable army," said the Minister of Defence during the handover ceremony held on 16 January 2026 at the Legion's Álvarez de Sotomayor base in Almería.

Robles pointed out that the delivery of the 8x8s is the result of months of work, time, and effort. This vehicle meets the technical requirements of the Spanish Army's General Staff Document and is adapted to operate in the most demanding scenarios. Among its capabilities, the minister emphasised that the Dragon's design prioritises the safety of its crews, including providing advanced armour to withstand explosions and gunfire, "because our soldiers are what really matters".

"Thanks to this programme," she added, "the Spanish Army's interoperability has been improved, as have its reliability and commitment to NATO, EU and UN missions".

Against this backdrop, Spanish Army Chief of Staff Amador Enseñat emphasised that this vehicle is set to become the backbone of the Force 2035 project, designed to transform the military structure into a more modern model, connected to and interoperable with our Allies.

He also mentioned that the VCR 8x8 consolidates this model of a forward-looking, sustainable and well-balanced army, and linked this programme to those included in the Spanish Industrial and Technological Plan for Security and Defence, saying that they are "essential tools for meeting our obligations to our Allies but, above all, for implementing our commitment to modernisation and ensuring the capabilities of our Armed Forces".

State Secretary of Defence Amparo Valcarce underscored that this programme, with an investment of over €2.61 billion, has driven innovation in critical areas, created highly skilled jobs, improved the competitiveness of our industry and attracted significant returns throughout Spain's three industrial corridors where it is being developed.

Speaking on behalf of the industry, the President of Indra —the lead partner of the TESS Defence consortium since July 2025, which also comprises GDELS-Santa Bárbara Sistemas, SAPA Placencia, and Escribano Mechanical & Engineering— indicated that, following the transition in programme leadership, a 'diagnostic and planning' approach was implemented to address the accumulated delays. The VCR 8x8 Dragon, he continued, has been a considerable achievement of the Spanish industry's vision and capabilities and there is no doubt that,

with the necessary institutional support, it will become a reality of which we can be extremely proud.

The programme was established to replace legacy platforms, “primarily the BMR, Lince, and RG31,” as Admiral Aniceto Rosique, Director General for Armament and Materiel (DGAM), pointed out. This programme calls for the three-phase acquisition of a total of 998 vehicles. The first production phase, assigned to TESS Defence, comprises 348 units.

Of the first 40 armoured vehicles delivered in Almería, 15 are Infantry Fighting Vehicle (VCI) variants, 5 are Anti-Tank (ATGM) variants, and 20 are Combat Engineer Vehicle (VCZ) variants. Prior to entering service, all of them commenced the operational evaluation phase to test their real tactical capabilities. One more vehicle has been delivered to the Logistics Academy in Calatayud to train the maintenance crews.

Another 24 units are scheduled for delivery in the near future. These are the first mobile command post (VCPC) variants, currently undergoing the qualification process at the GDELS-Santa Bárbara factory in Alcalá de Guadaíra (Seville). While final assembly of the 8x8 Dragon has been conducted by this company at its Trubia factory in Oviedo up to now, the process is currently being transferred to Indra’s newly acquired ‘El Tallerón’ facility in Gijón, where the first vehicle has already arrived for facility validation.

The delivery of the new armoured fighting vehicles entails a training programme for their drivers, vehicle commanders, gunners and instructors, as well as for the maintenance crews. Additionally, simulators and an armament turret trainer have been provided to ensure that training takes place in optimal conditions.

It has also required the expansion of the initial logistical support, reinforcing the facilities at the Álvarez de Sotomayor base and acquiring the necessary materiel to deploy a mobile maintenance echelon.

HIGHLY ADVANCED TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

The aim of the 8x8 programme is to obtain a wheeled armoured fighting vehicle with various configurations and equipped with new technical solutions to address evolving threats.

As the Minister of Defence highlighted at the handover ceremony, the vehicle provides a high level of protection for the crew, significant internal volume and a payload capacity that provides a mission endurance of over 48 hours. Its firepower also stands out among its capabilities, not only because of the 12.7 and 30 mm remote control turrets and the missile integrated into the turret, but also because of the state-of-the-art



The Minister of Defence during the vehicle handover ceremony at the Legion’s base in Almería, where the operational evaluation phase was officially initiated.

management system, which acts as a force multiplier for the 8x8’s combat power.

The VCR has great mobility, reaching road speeds of up to 100 km/h. It demonstrates high stability on 60% longitudinal slopes and 30% lateral side slopes and is capable of surmounting vertical obstacles of up to 80 cm. It also has a high capacity for strategic, operational and tactical deployment and is fully certified for strategic airlift via the Spanish Air and Space Force’s A400M aircraft.

The vehicle features a modular and open system that facilitates continuous evolution and improvement. It integrates advanced Command, Control, and Communications (C3) suites, ensuring seamless coordination and interopera-

bility among crew members across their respective onboard workstations. The system is based on a modular, open, and scalable network architecture, supported by a redundant fibre optic ring. It is capable of operating in degraded environments, ensuring persistent communications without data loss or service interruptions.

Its advanced voice and data communications system ensures seamless interoperability with the legacy fleet assets, while integrating state-of-the-art personal combat, satellite, and HF digital radio systems. It also has an integrated battlefield management system that optimises the control of operations.

All the systems are integrated into several intelligent terminals that help crews to operate through a user-friendly human-machine interface, allowing intuitive and efficient control of all vehicle functions.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

With over 70% national industrial participation, Spain retains design authority over the 8x8. This ensures sovereign control over all vehicle configurations and the capability to execute system upgrades throughout their service life. This capability provides full strategic autonomy, reduces dependence on third parties and facilitates access to international markets.

Each of the four partners in the TESS Defence consortium provides a specialised pillar of industrial expertise: Escribano is a leader in the on-board weapon systems; Indra, in the vehicle’s mission system, communications system and electronic architecture; SAPA, in the drive train, the power generation system and the auxiliary power unit; and Santa Bárbara, in the armoured structure, electrical architecture and all other systems of the platform.

In addition, the programme serves as a driving force that integrates over 400 national suppliers, distributed throughout our country across various industrial corridors and technological clusters.

Víctor Hernández
Photos: María José Muñoz

VCR 8x8 DRAGON

The objective of the programme is to provide the Spanish Army with a wheeled armoured fighting vehicle (VCR) that is highly adaptable to different tasks and capable of operating in peacekeeping missions and high-intensity conflicts, using new technical solutions to counter evolving threats. A total of 998 platforms will be procured across three production phases.

The first phase, awarded to TESS Defence, covers the initial delivery of 348 units.

30 mm cannon
(adaptable to 40 mm)

GUARDIAN 30
WEAPONS STATION

Twin missile launcher on
anti-tank versions

High mobility, height
adjustable suspension
and tire pressure control



Capacity

3 crew members - 6 soldiers

Weight



Tonnes

Autonomy



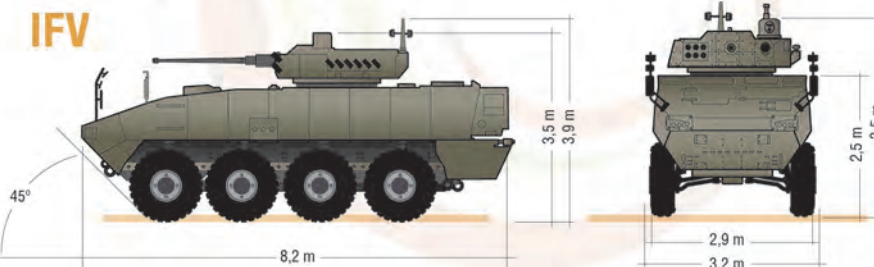
550 km

Max. speed



100 km/h

IFV



60%



Longitudinal slope

1.5 m (no preparation)



Wading capacity

2 m



Maximum gap

Maximum lateral slope

30%



0,8 m



Vertical obstacle

48 h



Combat autonomy

In addition to the rear ramp, it has an emergency exit.

Vehicular radio antenna

Auxiliary Power
Unit (APU)

Safe, self-sealing and
anti-deflagration
fuel tanks



Two types of ammunition
(high-explosive and piercing)

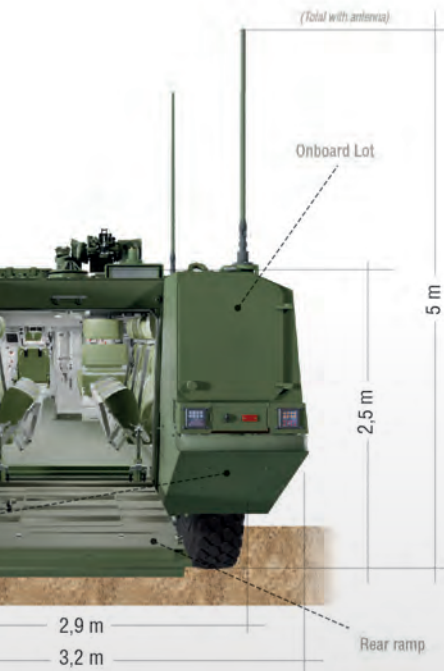
IFV
(Infantry Fighting Vehicle)

Automatic target recognition

Modular, open and scalable mission system includes multi-function terminals and vehicle navigation

Powerful 540 kW engine set and a high-efficiency SW624 multi-speed transmission

Integrated software-defined communications that allow networking (NEC)



4 VERSIONS

Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV)



Armoured Command Vehicle (ACV)



Combat Engineering Vehicle (CEV)



Two-axis gyroscopic stabilisation

Great load capacity platform and high ballistic protection, against mines and NBC

Forward Observer Combat Vehicle (FOCV)



Infographic: INFOGRÁFICA DISEÑO Y COMUNICACIÓN

The Sahel: A region of constant instability

Colonel Luis Moreno Esteban

Coordination Division for Security and Defence Studies (SEGENPOL)

LOCATED between the Sahara Desert to the north and the more humid regions of West Africa to the south, the strip of land known as the Sahel encompasses several countries, each with its own cultural, political and environmental characteristics, and its own historical and social context. Africa faces numerous and varied threats with a wide range of causes and consequences, particularly in the Sahel region. Let us attempt to briefly and concisely break down those that are considered most relevant.

First of all, we could mention the exponential growth of terrorism and organised crime, which have spread throughout all the Sahelian countries, leading to an increase in human trafficking, greater movement in terms of arms trafficking and a significant rise in armed incidents. A clear example of this is what is happening in Mali, where Al Qaeda terrorists, through their franchise for the Sahel, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), have been systematically attacking the tanker trucks that supply fuel to Bamako, the capital. The attacks, which include the burning of trucks escorted by military forces, occur almost every day. This fuel is imported by road from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania and Guinea. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are among the ten countries most affected by terrorism worldwide.

Coups d'état have significantly increased in recent years as a result of the challenging issue of lack of governance (Mali, Burkina

Faso, Guinea Conakry, Niger, Sudan, etc.), a high percentage of them leading to a change of political regime. This has led to serious internal conflicts for very young and inherently unstable democracies, giving rise to a multitude of different political leaders vying for power and creating a microcosm of factions unable to reach an agreement. Repeated and constant elections are not always sufficiently democratic and transparent. A clear example of this is the Central African Republic (CAR), where a crucial presidential election was held on 28 December 2025, the first since 1988. President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who was running for a third term, won by a large majority. However, the opposition denounced the results, describing them as election fraud. Following the imprisonment of numerous candidates throughout the campaign, the main opposition party (BRDC) boycotted the election on the grounds of oppressive government practices. Nevertheless, the Observer Mission of the African Union (AU) highlighted in its initial assessment that voting took place peacefully and in line with international standards.

Exponential growth in terrorism and organised crime leads to an increase in human and arms trafficking



Marco Domingo/UN

Cameroon, for its part, held elections on 12 October 2025, the results being announced on 27 October. According to the official results released by the Constitutional Council, 92-year-old Paul Biya, the president of Cameroon since 1982 and a candidate for re-election, was proclaimed the winner of the presidential election, sparking serious protests with the number of casualties yet to be determined.

Continuing with the analysis of conflicting situations, it should be noted that the Sahel is also a meeting point for different ethnic groups and cultures. The Tuareg, Fulani and Soninke are just some of the communities that live in this region. Each of these communities has its own traditions, languages and lifestyles, making it sometimes difficult for them to live together within borders that were established without considering these differences. Furthermore, the population of the Sahel countries, predominantly young and with a high demographic growth rate, represents both an opportunity and a challenge because, although it could become a driver of change and development, it also exacerbates problems such as resource scarcity, unemployment, inter-ethnic tensions, precarious socio-economic conditions and a lack of opportunities. Due to this, the Sahel has become a fertile ground for violent extremism, leading many young people to join armed groups. These groups often exploit already-existing tensions between different communities, triggering violent cycles that are difficult to end.

On the other hand, the Sahel has a predominantly arid and semi-arid climate. Water scarcity is one of the main challenges in the region. These endemic problems have been exacerbated by climate change, which is becoming a key destabilising factor, while droughts are becoming more frequent and severe, endangering the food security and livelihoods of millions of people. This region thus faces a double challenge: adapting to current weather conditions and getting ready for a future where these might get even worse.

In short, it could be said that the future of the region is being shaped by several destabilising factors: violent extremism marked by terrorism, political instability, inter-ethnic tensions, a predominantly young population with no clear future, socio-economic inequality, and an increasingly adverse climate that hinders sustainable development.

In 1993, British economist Richard M. Auty coined the term 'resource curse' to describe how resource-rich countries often develop more slowly, corruptly and violently. The Sahel has abundant mineral resources, but these have rarely been able to drive economic development.

EXTERNAL ACTORS

In addition to these threats, inherent to the countries comprising the Sahel, there are also external actors exercising varying degrees of influence over the region's political leaders. Broadly speaking, these



actors are countries such as Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. The downsizing of Western presence, visibly evidenced by France's withdrawal or even by the United States' retreat from certain areas, has created a vacuum that has been quickly exploited by other powers to establish themselves on the front lines as essential collaborators with Sahelian governments.

Let us recall the withdrawal of US troops from their bases in Niger in April 2023. This withdrawal was conducted at the request of the country's ruling military junta, which seized power in a coup in July 2023, despite significant diplomatic efforts by Biden administration officials to maintain the two US bases on Nigerien soil. This movement took place after French troops left the country at the end of 2023.

The increasingly frequent military coups across the Sahel have disrupted Western counter-terrorism efforts, opening the door to the deployment of Russian mercenaries. Dozens of them arrived in Niger in 2024, repeating a pattern previously seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, where agents from the Wagner mercenary group (Africa Corps) descended on both countries shortly after France's withdrawal.

Russia has continued to increase its presence and economic commitment to the Sahel juntas (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso). A clear example of this is the meeting held by Malian junta leader Assimi Goïta with Russian President Vladimir Putin and other officials during his trip to Moscow in June 2025. Mali and Russia signed several agreements during this visit, including some on nuclear energy

cooperation and trade. Burkina Faso also signed an agreement with Russia on nuclear energy cooperation. This country has been working with the Russian state-owned nuclear energy company Rosatom since 2023 to build a power plant in Burkina Faso.

These agreements are the first major commitments between the Juntas and Russia since the foreign ministers of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)) met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in April 2025. The AES is a pro-Russian economic, military and political bloc that the Kremlin wants to use as a model and a means across the continent to draw other states in West Africa and the Sahel into Russia's sphere of influence. Within this dynamic, states such as Chad, Sudan and Togo are showing signs of rapprochement with Moscow as they grow closer to the AES. Russia is trying to supplant Western presence and influence in Africa through the AES, establishing itself as a revitalised great power by focusing its efforts on defence and security cooperation and attempting to replace existing Western military partnerships with AES states.

However, Russian trade and investment continue to lag behind those of China and EU member states, and this situation is likely to continue given the downward projections for the Russian economy. Nuclear energy projects aim to demonstrate that Russia can address Africa's energy needs, seeking to position itself on a par with other great powers such as China and the collective West. It remains to be seen if something as complex as a nuclear power plant can be feasible and sustainable in countries with limited technological and logistical capacity.

We have seen how Russia's influence is focused primarily on providing military and security assistance. China, in turn, has devoted itself to increasing its interests and influence in the socio-economic, financial and infrastructure spheres.

Beijing is very interested in mining activities in this region; an example of this is the Ganfeng Lithium company, currently working on lithium extraction at the Goulamina mine (Mali). Although the Malian authorities have tightened measures since the coup d'état with new provisions in the mining sector (the state must own up to 30% of the shares of each mine; all taxes have been increased significantly; and every company must deposit its earnings in a bank account in Mali), this Chinese company, which had already invested more than €100 million, continues with its mining operations. Assimi Goïta has described Beijing as a "strategic and sincere part-

ner that has significantly aided Mali in its pursuit of economic and political sovereignty".

On the other hand, Chinese interests in Mali's gold mines have also increased significantly since Goïta took office, displacing major Canadian and Australian-owned corporations such as Barrick Gold and Resolute Mining. There is already a noticeable Chinese presence in Bamako, the capital, particularly in the Niarela neighbourhood, as well as in the gold-bearing regions in the west and south of the country (the Kita region, 190 km west of Bamako, and the Kéniéba region, close to the border with Guinea).

At the same time, China's economic expansion has also kept a watchful eye on neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso. In the latter case, the government has granted prospection licences to Chinese company Yunhong International Holdings for the extraction of gold, copper and nickel from three mining areas: Somanguina, Paspanga, and Yelemassé.

In Niger, China is taking advantage of France's departure to squeeze into a strategic sector that is necessary for its development: uranium. Eager to expand its nuclear power plants, the demand for this material has grown exponentially, prompting a need for new supply chains. Nigerien officials announced that Azelik mining company (Somina) would resume its activities after ten years of inactivity due to the fall in world uranium prices. The mine is majority-owned by the China

National Nuclear Corporation.

As in Mali, Niger wants to review the exploitation of its raw materials by foreign companies. In June and July 2024, Niger revoked the operating licences of France's Orano and Canada's GoviEx for the Madaouéla and Imouraren mines. With 200,000 tonnes of reserves, Imouraren is considered one of the largest uranium deposits in the world.

Likewise, Türkiye is emerging as a significant player as a result of its active expansion, primarily concentrated in three areas: diplomacy, security and economy. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has turned his attention to Africa, positioning Türkiye as an alternative to the traditional great powers (the United States, France, Russia and China) in terms of development, alliance building and military cooperation. It has thus become a major arms supplier, focusing its exports on drones and small arms, and its military presence (Turkish Armed Forces and private military companies) has expanded rapidly.

Russia has increased its presence and economic commitment to the military juntas in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso

ANALYSIS

According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute for 2024, Türkiye is on a par with Russia as the third largest arms supplier to West Africa. Military drones are central to this effort, Baykar Technology being Türkiye's leading drone manufacturer. Eighteen African states, more than half of them in North Africa and the Sahel, operate with Turkish combat drones. Ethiopia and Libya have used these drones in civil wars, and similar deployments in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel cannot be ruled out.

ACTIONS BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The instability in the area has prompted various meetings in international forums to address the situation in the Sahel. The third ministerial meeting between the European Union and the African Union took place in May 2025, serving as a preparatory meeting for the summit held in November 2025. The foreign ministers of the two organisations met to take stock of the progress made since the sixth EU-AU summit in February 2022. During the meeting, they exchanged views on the EU-AU partnership and on how to further strengthen cooperation in the historic year that marked the 25th anniversary of their long-standing and special partnership. Discussions focused on peace, security and governance; multilateralism; prosperity; people, migration and mobility.

The meeting was co-chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Angola, Tete António, who is also Chairman of the AU Executive Council. One of the main conclusions of this meeting was that Africa is a geopolitical priority for the EU at a time of increased geopolitical volatility. The EU and Africa can wield considerable political and economic clout if they act together. For most African countries, the EU and its member states are still the leading trading partner, the top investor and the major donor of humanitarian and official development aid, with €309 billion in foreign direct investment in Africa in 2022.

The year 2025 marked the 25th anniversary of the EU-AU partnership, a crucial year for testing its validity and strength. Against this backdrop of political instability, insecurity and economic hardship, the Sahel Governance Forum emerged as a critical platform for reshaping governance and promoting long-lasting solutions in the region. It was organised in collaboration with the Goodluck Jonathan Foundation (GJF), the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel (OSCDs) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The forum was presented as a turning point and a change of narrative that no longer sees the Sahel as a problem to be solved from outside but instead recognises it as a sub-region that can shape its own future. The Sahel Governance Forum is therefore making a defiant stand for inclusive governance, institutional strengthening and sustainable peace.



In this regard, hosting the Forum in The Gambia was highly symbolic, given the country's autocratic past. In recent years, The Gambia has emerged as a clear example of democratic renewal. Its peaceful transition of power in 2017 highlighted the supremacy of dialogue over violence. In Banjul, the region was reminded of what is possible when democracy is protected and nurtured, which is the clear objective of this Forum.

CONCLUSION

The Sahel is a region of great importance to Western interests, where a number of intrinsic threats coexist alongside others imposed by external factors. Numerous and diverse external actors seek to exert their influence from different angles and with various objectives (as in the case of Russia and its military and security influence, or China, which is more focused on socio-economic issues).



Issiyou Djibo/EFE

Spain is not alien to these concerns, being one of the few nations that has shown great interest in trying to stabilise the region, highlighting the importance of the Sahel in all international forums in order to raise awareness among other European countries. With France's departure from this scenario, Spain is proving to be a reliable partner for the countries in the region, present as it is in multiple operations in the security and defence field. Examples include the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in the Central African Republic, EUTM in Somalia, and operational activities on the west coast of Africa and in the Gulf of Guinea. Within the framework of defence diplomacy, Spain has cooperat-

It is imperative to have a comprehensive vision that tackles issues regarding education, governance and development

ed on the African continent with military operations that contribute to Spanish foreign policy. This collaboration has mainly been reflected in the deployments of naval units that carry out maritime security and cooperative security operations with various West African countries. Countries such as Mauritania, Gabon, Ghana, Senegal and Cape Verde are clear examples of this contribution.

A military response alone is insufficient to effectively address the tensions present in this region. It is imperative to have a comprehensive vision that tackles issues regarding education, governance, development efforts and economic progress. The approach should not be from a 'Western' point of view, but rather take into account the idiosyncrasies, culture and traditions of the different peoples living in the Sahel, as well as their values and ways of thinking. In this respect, education and youth involvement are crucial, as is the participation of local communities, which is essential to ensure that these initiatives are effective and sustainable in the long term.

In several countries, young people have already voiced their discontent with the current state of affairs, and their protests have led to some notable political changes. The mobilisations of the so-called "Generation Z" around the world (Indonesia, Nepal, Morocco, Kenya, Peru, Bangladesh) are a factor to be taken into account for regional stability. However, they could also become a highly destabilising factor if the loss of educational opportunities, lack of prospects for the future, internal displacements due to the lack of resources and the growing poverty among families persist. The greatest risk is that this situation will encourage youth to engage in criminal activity and terrorism. The worsening of daily living conditions can only prolong the region's political and security crises and exacerbate its vulnerabilities.

However, not everything is negative, and there are signs indicating that improvement is possible. For example, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal have achieved significant economic growth in recent years. In order for the region's economic improvement to advance, external actors and international financial institutions need to consider the local context and the growing animosity towards externally driven interventions.

Cooperation should be based on prioritising investment and reform in education and vocational training, seeking a future for all those young people and stimulating the local economy (based on agricultural production, livestock farming and the sustainable exploitation of natural resources), thereby avoiding forced movements of people within the region and fostering hope for an attractive future.

SPAIN AND THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

The Chief of Staff of the Army inaugurates a temporary exhibition at the Army Museum

THE Chief of Staff of the Army (JEME), Army General Amador Enseñat, accompanied by the US Ambassador to Spain and Andorra, Benjamin León Jr., presided over the inauguration of an exhibition at the Army Museum (Toledo) on 25 March 2026. Organised to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the United States Declaration of Independence, the exhibition highlights Spain's pivotal support during the conflict, marking the Spanish Army's primary commemorative milestone for 2026. The event was attended by various civil and military authorities, including the Government Delegate for Castilla-La Mancha, José Pablo Sabrido, and the Mayor of Toledo, Carlos Velázquez.

The US Ambassador addressed the attendees, expressing his desire to "acknowledge the Spanish Army for dedicating this year to celebrating Spain's role in the independence of the United States and for its significant institutional commitment to preserving this shared legacy".

For his part, the Chief of Staff of the Army detailed the primary milestones of that historical moment which, more than two centuries later, have paved the way for a fruitful and close cooperative relationship: "This exhibition is not merely a look back at the past; it is also a means to connect the past with the present.

A space where a shared history is recognised and present-day bonds are strengthened," explained Army General Enseñat. He further emphasised that these initiatives "are instruments of knowledge, but also of connection, which allow us to remember where we come from in order to better understand where we want to go".

Subsequently, the various civil and military authorities toured the exhibited collection, which features over 60 items from the Army Museum, private



The Battle of Pensacola (1781), led by General Bernardo de Gálvez, marked the culmination of Spain's effort to recapture the Floridas from British rule.

collections, other units of the Armed Forces and institutions such as the National Library, the General Archive of the Indies and the Bank of Spain. They also received a briefing from the exhibition's curator, Lieutenant Colonel Segura.



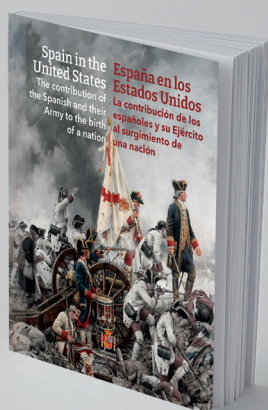
General Enseñat and U.S. Ambassador Benjamin León Jr. at the exhibition's opening ceremony.

The exhibition will be open to the public free of charge from 26 March to 12 October 2026. Visitors will have the opportunity to delve into three historical moments of this close relationship between Spain and the United States. The first section, "A Time of Explorations: Legends behind the Legend", is dedicated to Spanish expeditions into what is now US territory. The second, "A Time of Consolidation: The Difficult Life on the Northern Frontier of the Hispanic World", illustrates the strategy for the occupation and control of a territory that the Spanish sought to defend with limited resources.

The last section, "A Time of Revolutions: The Birth of a Giant", explains the role of the Spanish people and their armies during the American Revolution.

Víctor Hernández

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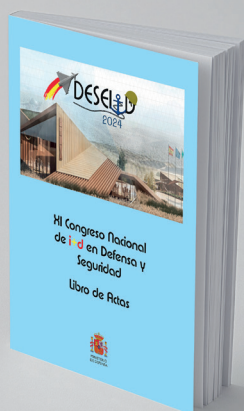
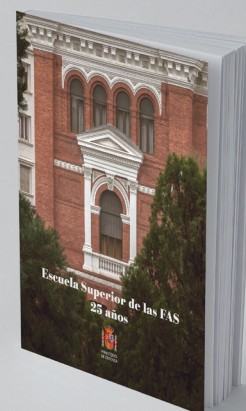
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Autores: Sonsoles Gutiérrez.
Escuela Superior de las Fuerzas Armadas (ESFAS)
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