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

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# “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

**L**T. 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

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

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



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.