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.

SNOW 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.

Román Ríos/EFE

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.

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 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, SPMARFOR's operations commander.

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

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 *Anadolu*, 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

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".

Pepe Díaz

—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.

"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.

Imane Rachidi/EFE

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

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 FAMET deployed two NH90 *Sarrio* transport helicopters.

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

Once in Germany, the units began their Reception, Staging and Onward Movement (RSOM) phase, during which the units moved to the Trauen and Hohne 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 Spanish 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.

"Spain was the first Ally to offer special operations capabilities to NATO"

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.