

REVISTA ESPAÑOLA DE DEFENSA

Exercise MILEX 26

THE EU RAPID RESPONSE CAPACITY

INTERVIEW
Lieutenant
General Aroldo Lázaro,
Commander of Eurocorps





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Towards an increasingly ready European defence

MILEX 26, the European Union's 4th Live Military Exercise, has become one of the EU's primary operational readiness tools. Hosted this year on Spanish soil, the purpose of the exercise was to test the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), the instrument designed to respond rapidly to crises and threats beyond the EU's borders whenever circumstances so require.

The exercise was held at the San Gregorio National Training Centre in Zaragoza, where some 2,500 European troops assembled to practise responses to various crisis scenarios, ranging from initial operational planning to the tactical conduct of operations.

Far from being a mere display of military assets, this exercise served as a tangible demonstration of European military cooperation at a time shaped by new security and defence challenges both within and beyond the continent.

As the framework nation for MILEX 26, Spain spearheaded much of the planning and organisation, facilitating the integration of the various participating contingents.

Alongside Spain, personnel from Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland,

Portugal and Sweden took part in the exercise. The wide variety of participants enabled the rigorous testing of common operating procedures, command systems and joint operational capabilities, all of which are vital to ensuring that disparate units can operate cohesively within highly complex scenarios.

One of the most significant features of MILEX 26 was that it unfolded simultaneously across three distinct levels of command: the strategic level, under the responsibility of the European Union Operations Headquarters in Brussels; the operational level, executed by Eurocorps, one of the most experienced multinational headquarters in Europe, currently under the command of Spanish Lieutenant General Aroldo Lázaro; and the tactical level, assumed by the European Union Battlegroup, whose base unit is the 16th Infantry Brigade 'Canarias'.

Today's threats require European countries to maintain a constant state of readiness. Beyond linguistic or cultural differences, we share a common goal focused on the defence of peace, stability and collective security. Exercises such as MILEX 26 serve to strengthen the development of a European defence that is increasingly coordinated, effective and ready to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

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Portada: Pepe Díaz.

MILEX 26



Spain was the framework nation for the fourth edition of this exercise, the most ambitious ever planned by the EU.

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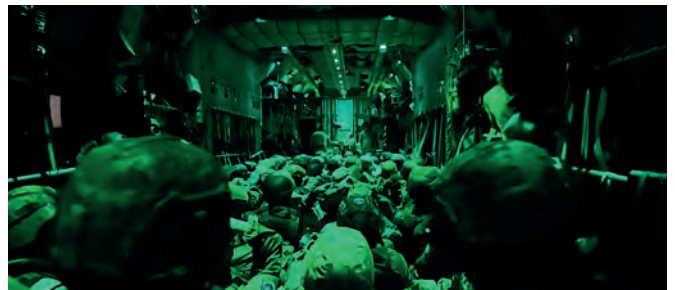
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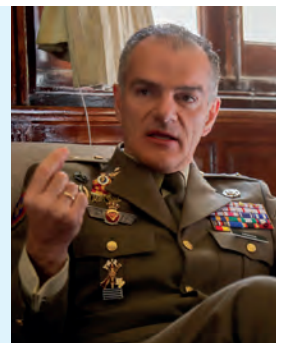
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THE EU TESTS ITS CAPA





RAPID RESPONSE CITY





The EU battlegroup consisted of members of the 16th Brigade 'Canarias' —above, two of its members in the foreground alongside personnel from the Spanish Army Airmobile Force (FAMET)—with the support of helicopters, fighter jets and unmanned aerial systems for surveillance and reconnaissance.





“THIS is the European Union Rapid Deployment Capacity. In May we were ordered to deploy and in just ten days we began the operation”. These were the words of Brigadier General Carlos María Castrillo, commander of a military contingent of over 2,500 troops from 13 European countries, and around 1,600 Spaniards, before a large audience of senior civilian and military EU officials who had travelled from Brussels to Zaragoza on 18 June 2026 to attend the final LIVEX phase of exercise MILEX 26 at the San Gregorio Training Area. The event consisted of a live exercise (LIVEX) involving a simulated joint land and air operation against an insurgent group that had attacked a humanitarian assistance convoy. This exercise is the most ambitious ever planned by the EU, and has been designed and conducted annually since 2023 to test and consolidate the EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC).

The RDC is one of the pillars defined in the Strategic Compass that underpins Europe's aspiration to become a security provider both within and beyond its borders. This strategic autonomy relies on the capability to project a modular, multi-domain force of up to 5,000 troops within ten days across the land, maritime, air, space and cyber domains. Over half of these troops, hailing from Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Spain and Sweden, were mobilised at San Gregorio and integrated into a battlegroup led by the 16th Infantry Brigade 'Canarias', which was further reinforced with units from Portugal and Romania. The battlegroup operated under the command and control of a forward Force Headquarters, also deployed at the San Gregorio training area, and run by the Eurocorps Headquarters with General Castrillo at the helm. For



The flags of the European Union and Spain flew side by side at the Zaragoza training area.

a year, from 1 July 2026 to 30 June 2027, this multinational contingent will remain on standby, ready for immediate action if necessary.

The exercise was set in a fictitious democratic republic supposedly located on the western edge of Africa, an ally of Europe that had requested military assistance from the Union to resolve a separatist crisis ravaging the southern part of its territory. The peace enforcement operation was launched on 24 May 2026 with the projection of the multinational contingent by sea, air and land from various points in Europe “to conduct a joint forcible entry with the objective of creating the appropriate conditions for the subsequent deployment of a much larger group of backup forces,” explained General Castrillo to the authorities present

on 18 June at San Gregorio. The battlegroup's mission concluded one month later, after successfully “restoring a secure environment, ensuring an effective way to combat the MDFL (the alleged separatist rebel group) and enabling the country's security forces to recover its sovereignty and control,” added the commander of the Force Headquarters.

THREE LEVELS

During the Distinguished Visitors' Day, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CHOD), Admiral General Teodoro López Calderón, represented Spain as the host nation of the exercise. It was no coincidence that among the European representatives accompanying the CHOD were three of the most prominent officials linked to the RDC: Ambassador Lene Mandel Vensild, Chair of the EU's Political and Security Committee; General Seán Clancy, Chair of the EU Military Committee; and Lieutenant General Michiel van der Laan, Director General of the EU Military Staff.

These three bodies constitute the cornerstone of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The first is responsible for defining the political strategy and the response to an international crisis requiring the employment of the European Union's Rapid Deployment Capacity. The second provides advice to the members of that body to ensure their decisions are as sound as possible when applied in the military field. The third ensures coherence between the political objectives and the military strategy to be followed. This military strategy is planned and directed by the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), which becomes an Operations Headquarters when this immediate intervention force of up to 5,000 troops is deployed and remains active. At its helm is the Director General of the EU Military Staff, Lieutenant General van der Laan. Currently, the MPCC assumes the command and

Over 2,500 troops and 250 vehicles from 13 different European nations were deployed in Zaragoza

control of the EU's non-executive military missions in Mali, Mozambique, Niger, the Central African Republic, Somalia and Ukraine. During exercise MILEX 26, the MPCC operated from Brussels as the strategic headquarters responsible for directing the military response in an ever-evolving crisis scenario. A response that, at the operational level on the ground, was executed in Zaragoza by the Force Headquarters provided by Eurocorps. Both headquarters form the backbone of the command and control architecture that coordinates, integrates and directs the activities of the battlegroup.

TACTICAL SCENARIO

The live land and air exercise carried out by the manoeuvre units on 18 June took place in a rugged and narrow valley that

is more typical of the Afghan landscape than of the sub-Saharan desert. Under the protection of a huge tent set up to alleviate the intense midday heat, no one missed a single detail of the coordination between the strategic, operational and tactical levels during the development of this lightning-fast operation, which was triggered by an insurgent attack on a convoy of armoured and logistics vehicles on a humanitarian assistance mission. "We have witnessed the integration of various

operational capabilities that enable the battlegroup to respond in a rapid, coordinated and effective manner to an unexpected situation," explained Captain Cristián Fernández, posted to the 49th Regiment 'Tenerife', to the audience watching the exercise from a hilltop located in the Casas Altas area. The battlegroup's response unfolded over approximately 30 minutes through a series of operations. First, Leopard 2A4 main battle tanks and Pizarro infantry fighting vehicles launched a counterattack. After that, F-18 fighter jets conducted two brief sorties, one for reconnaissance and the other for close air support, both led by a Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) team on the ground. Then, a Portuguese infantry platoon launched an air assault using two Super Puma helicopters under the cover of two AB-212s. Finally, a Portuguese



Admiral General López Calderón flanked on his right by General Clancy and on his left by Lene Mandel Vensild and Lieutenant General Michiel van der Laan.



Among the assets of the EU battlegroup, the Leopard 2A4 main battle tanks of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment 'Montesa' featured most prominently. They departed from Ceuta, reached the mainland aboard the logistics transport ship Ysabel and travelled to Zaragoza by rail.



explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team supported by a Spanish engineer unit with Castor sapper combat vehicles carried out a heliborne casualty evacuation (CA-SEVAC) and a route clearance operation.

BATTLEGROUP

The battlegroup's task force was assigned an operational force consisting of members of the 9th Infantry Regiment 'Soria' with its protected infantry battalion 'Fuerteventura', units from the Infantry Regiments 'Tenerife' and 'Canarias'—also from the 16th Brigade—and a Portuguese Army company. In total, a force of 500 troops and 80 combat vehicles was deployed. This task force also integrated a combat support unit of approximately 400 personnel, providing a comprehensive suite of specialised capabilities encompassing combat engineering; fire support; air defence; signal communications; protection against chemical, biological and nuclear agents; unmanned aerial systems (UAS); military police; and military working dogs. These also belonged to the Brigade 'Canarias', as did the logistical support provided by 200 soldiers responsible for the sustainment, supply, transport and maintenance of the force.

Alongside the combat and combat support units, the exercise also involved a Role 2B hospital deployed by the medical task force; a force protection company, the Spanish Army's rotary-wing unit from the 6th Attack Helicopter Battalion; an intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance (ISTAR) task force from the General Command HQ in Ceuta; an information environment support unit made up of civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) teams and the 1st Information Operations Regiment; a platoon from the 31st Electronic Warfare Regiment; and Civil Guard teams specialised in investigation, border control and intervention.

A Romanian preventive medicine team and a Portuguese force protection company provided additional assistance to the Force Headquarters.

As the CHOD pointed out before watching the live exercise at San Gregorio, "while NATO remains the cornerstone of European security, whose core mission of deterrence and collective defence guarantees our security, we recognise that this environment demands greater European strategic



The firepower, mobility and protection of the tracked and wheeled armoured vehicles proved decisive in neutralising a simulated enemy attack on a humanitarian assistance convoy.

autonomy". In this regard, Admiral General López Calderón called for the Union to have "its own active and interoperable capabilities" to undertake "specific missions within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy". According to the CHOD, exercises such as MILEX represent "a vital investment in our collective defence," in which "rigorous planning and precise conduct" are put to the test at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. "Our objective is clear: to achieve the EU's full operational capability, i.e., the capability to deploy without constraints," he added.

In turn, Lieutenant General Michiel van der Laan stated that the RDC "is neither a paper tiger nor a mere concept, but a force with weapon systems and trained soldiers ready to deploy. We will prove to ourselves and to the world that the EU has a Rapid Response Force ready to spring into action".

The Eurocorps Headquarters redeployed to its 'Aubert de Vincelles' barracks in Strasbourg on 19 June, having received official certification as the force provider for the EU Rapid Response Force Headquarters, which is ready to be activated for a year starting on 1 July 2026.

**The Eurocorps
Headquarters
and the Spanish
battlegroup are
ready to be activated
from 1 July 2026**

Following MILEX 26, the Spanish-led Battlegroup had to certify its full operational capability in the framework of exercise Quick Lion 26, for which units of the 16th Brigade 'Canarias' remained deployed at San Gregorio until early July.

"After months of preparation and planning, we have managed to demonstrate two things: first, our ability to project forces. We have deployed more than 2,500 troops and over 250 tactical and logistical vehicles to Zaragoza from the Canary and Balearic Islands, Ceuta, Melilla and various locations on the mainland," emphasised Colonel Andrés García Gallego, commander of the EU battlegroup and of the 9th Infantry Regiment 'Soria'. These forces were mainly mobilised by air, while the materiel was transported either by sea aboard the logistics transport ships *Ysabel* (A-06) and *Camino Español* (A-07), by road, or by rail from the port of Tarragona to San Gregorio on the platforms of the Spanish Army Railway Company of the 12th Engineers and Specialities Regiment. "Furthermore," added Colonel García Gallego, "we have been able to achieve the necessary cohesion amongst all the units in the battlegroup".

"MILEX 26 has been a tangible demonstration of our ability to act, work, plan and respond together. A shared effort that is not an aspiration, but a necessity," declared the Ambassador and Chair of the EU Political and Security Committee before leaving Zaragoza for Brussels. "Today," added Lene Mandel Vensild, "we have taken another important step towards enhancing the Union's unwavering commitment to strengthening our common security and defence capabilities".

J. L. Expósito
Photos: Pepe Díaz

LIEUTENANT GENERAL AROLDÓ LÁZARO SÁENZ, COMMANDER OF EUROCORPS

“EUROCORPS IS AN EFFECTIVE ASSET FOR THE EU AND NATO”

“Eurocorps’ proven capability and extensive experience will continue to be highly useful to its nations”

EXERCISE MILEX 26, through which the European Union has tested the readiness of its Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC) in international crisis scenarios, is critical both for Spain's role in the EU and for Eurocorps, which served as the Force Headquarters during the exercise. This is the view of Lieutenant General Aroldo Lázaro Sáenz, Commander of this unique unit renowned for its dual nature, as it can operate within both the EU and NATO frameworks.

“In these difficult and unstable times, European unity is more important than ever,” he stated when he assumed command as Commander-in-Chief of Eurocorps in Strasbourg on 18 September 2025. Born in Sidi Ifni in 1962, General Lázaro believes that his experience in previous postings, including as Head of Mission and Force Commander of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), where for over three years he led 10,000 peacekeepers from some 50 countries, will help him to “manage future challenges and boost the common ground that will chart the way forward”. A path along which, in his opinion, it is paramount to continue utilising military action to establish “favourable conditions for appropriate diplomatic and political intervention as the only viable solution” to crises or conflicts.

—What does MILEX 26 mean for Eurocorps?

—This exercise is of vital importance both for Eurocorps and for the role Spain plays within this framework and in the wider context of the European Union. Eurocorps is establishing itself as an experienced Headquarters for directing crisis management operations within the European Union. We work hand in hand with the new strategic-level command and control structure to implement the recent EU security and defence strategy known as the Strategic Compass.

Furthermore, as Spain is currently the lead nation of Eurocorps and, at the same time, the country that is spearheading and providing the bulk of the next EU Battlegroup, EUBG 26, we have assumed a prominent role. This effort culminated

last June in MILEX 26 at the San Gregorio Training Area with the participation of some 2,500 troops from Eurocorps and the Spanish and Portuguese armies, among others.

Eurocorps will remain on standby until 1 July 2027, ready to plan and conduct a European Union rapid response operation, from the initial operational planning in coordination with the MPCC (the European Union's military planning body in Brussels) to the deployment of the Battlegroup, whenever and wherever the EU decides.

—How do you approach the responsibility of leading the Eurocorps Headquarters?

—It is a great privilege to have been entrusted with this role and, at the same time, it represents a new challenge that I am facing with a profound sense of responsibility and enthusiasm. A multinational headquarters comprising personnel from six framework nations and five partner nations, governed by a specific governance system based on coordination and consensus among contributing nations, requires maintaining a balance between the objectives assigned, the commitments undertaken and the resources placed at its disposal. This implies finding the necessary common ground to

“The objective is to remain ready to accomplish any mission assigned to us”



Pepe Díaz

serve both national interests and those of the organisations to which contributions are made.

—What are your priorities?

—The main lines of effort were set out in my Planning Guidance for 2026. Priorities focus on maintaining a sound training and preparation strategy to achieve the highest readiness within the framework of that duality, which refers to Eurocorps' capability to operate within the European Union and NATO. This must be complemented by an efficient and appropriate working environment for the Headquarters personnel (around 1,000 people, including military and civilian staff), based

on trust, professionalism, motivation and the necessary initiative within the framework of the established leadership and guidance.

The framework nations' continued support in addressing existing needs and shortcomings in the various functional areas is also a priority. In this regard, achieving the highest effectiveness in the use of the capabilities and resources assigned will be an essential objective.

Since this is an asset provided jointly by six framework nations and placed at the disposal of the European Union and NATO, direct contact and ongoing coordination with these two organisations are critical in order to identify potential scenarios or fields of action.

The close relationship and cooperation with the national and local authorities of the host nation of the Eurocorps Headquarters (France) are a key factor, as it has a daily impact on the functionality, operation, institutional activities, security and well-being of our personnel.

—What operations or exercises are scheduled for the near future?

—At the operational level, Eurocorps adopts a sequential approach when preparing its commitments to the European Union and NATO.

During the first half of the year, the main objective was to train and prepare to achieve optimal command and control capability and the necessary readiness as the EU Battlegroup Headquarters 26/27 (the European Union's military capability for crisis response and crisis management), under the command of a Spanish general posted to Eurocorps for a 12-month period starting on 1 July 2026. Spain will contribute 95% of the Battlegroup's strength while other nations will provide the remainder of the force, primarily Portugal.

During the second half of the year, we will train and prepare within NATO to provide the required military response capability in a non-Article 5 crisis scenario. This period will culminate in a major validation exercise scheduled for December 2027.

—How do you view today's conflicts?

—With concern, and at the same time hoping and expecting that each of them will be resolved as soon as possible, and that the objectives of peace and stability providing the necessary conditions for prosperity and security will be achieved.

As Commander of Eurocorps, my main responsibility focuses on generating and training the necessary capabilities to achieve and maintain the level of readiness required to allow us to act on request and with the consensus of the six framework nations, within the European Union, NATO or any other organisation that may be determined.

With the appropriate adaptation and reinforcement of capabilities for potential fields of action, Eurocorps is a guarantee and an effective asset in the hands of the relevant political authorities that may decide

INTERVIEW



Eurocorps

LTG Aroldo Lázaro talking with the CHOD, Admiral General Teodoro López Calderón, upon his arrival at Zaragoza Air Base to attend exercise MILEX 26.

to activate it. I would like to emphasise here that, in my view, military involvement—in our case, that of Eurocorps—in any crisis or conflict situation is intended to create the right conditions for effective diplomatic and political intervention as the only viable solution.

Remaining ready to accomplish any mission assigned to us is and will be my greatest concern and focus of attention. Short and medium-term exercises and training activities help us to achieve this objective by simulating realistic scenarios, putting tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) into practice, and coordinating the efforts of contributing nations for a potential future deployment.

—Is Eurocorps integrating emerging technologies for such scenarios?

—Technological developments are shaping trends, doctrine and procedures in the military sphere. We must remain constantly informed and up to date on their development and use in today's conflicts, as this gives us a clear and precise insight into the challenges we might have to face.

The integration of technological developments into Eurocorps is both a necessity and an imperative. The capacity to operate within both the EU and NATO implies obtaining the necessary technological capabilities to ensure that this Head-

quarters is interoperable with the two organisations and across the full spectrum of multi-domain operations in the land, air, maritime, cyber and space spheres.

Technologies related to UAV systems, cyber defence and electronic warfare have been incorporated into our MILEX 26 exercise.

This is a challenge on which we will focus our attention and efforts with the support of Eurocorps' contributing nations, through the provision of personnel, financial resources and specific materiel.

—What can a Spanish general bring to Eurocorps that generals from other countries cannot?

—The presence of a Spanish general as part of the national contingent leading Eurocorps is proof of Spain's commitment to shared security and defence interests,

“Leadership of Eurocorps is proof of Spain's commitment to shared security and defence interests”

and also highlights our nation's role as a steadfast and reliable partner of the international organisations of which it is a member.

Men and women in uniform, wherever they serve, share a set of universal values that transcend nationalities, such as honour, discipline, loyalty and a sense of duty. These principles form the basis upon which to build mutual trust, cohesion and operational effectiveness in any multinational environment, as is the case of Eurocorps.

Moreover, Spaniards, due to our history, character and experience in international missions, exercises and operations, have a culture of commitment, integration, cooperation and consensus. This proves especially useful in a multinational headquarters like this one, where, in addition to creating the appropriate working environment, it is essential to reconcile differing national perspectives and interests while working towards the common security and defence objective within the European framework.

—What role does Eurocorps play in the current NATO context?

—NATO remains the cornerstone of Europe's collective defence. Thanks to its dual nature, Eurocorps is placed at the disposal of both the EU and NATO. Over 34 years of experience and numerous previous deployments in various theatres—Bosnia and Herzegovina in Europe, Afghanistan in Asia, and Mali and the Central African Republic in Africa—have proven the great value that Eurocorps provides to these two organisations whenever it has been called upon to serve them. After nine deployments in various operations, it is still one of the corps-level headquarters with proven capability and extensive experience, and is a tool that will continue to be highly useful to its nations.

In the pursuit of convergence, coordination and harmonisation between the EU and NATO, Eurocorps can be regarded as a benchmark and a connecting element in achieving such an objective. The commitment, both conceptual and active, of its structures and governing bodies, as well as the determination of contributing nations, will shape the level of ambition and the effectiveness of the results.

Santiago Fdez. del Vado

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A photograph showing Margarita Robles, Minister of Defence of Spain, in a red jacket, receiving a red box containing the Order of Princess Olga (3rd Class) from Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine. They are standing in a room with the Ukrainian tricolor and the Ukrainian coat of arms on the wall. The text on the left side of the image reads: "Zelenskyy presents the Minister with the Order of Princess Olga (3rd Class) in recognition of Spain's support and commitment."

Zelenskyy presents the Minister with the Order of Princess Olga (3rd Class) in recognition of Spain's support and commitment.

THEIR CAUSE IS OUR CAUSE

Margarita Robles travels to Ukraine to reaffirm Spain's solidarity and commitment to its fight for territorial integrity and democratic values

“UKRAINE is already part of Spain.” With this statement, made during her official visit to Kyiv on 22 April 2026, the Minister of Defence summarised Spain's attitude and sentiment towards Ukraine. Since the beginning of Russia's aggression more than four years ago, Spain has been, is, and will continue to be one of Ukraine's most steadfast allies in supporting its self-defence. This firm commitment is underpinned by a deep sense of closeness and solidarity with a nation that, as Margarita Robles recalled, “endures constant suffering from an unjust war” and represents the defence of democratic values and Europe's stance against barbarism. Spain, like the EU,

has emphasised its message: Ukraine must receive military, political, industrial, and humanitarian support for as long as it takes to ensure a just and lasting peace, proving that national sovereignty, human rights, and freedom cannot be violated.

In line with this policy, during her stay in the Ukrainian capital, Robles maintained a busy schedule, which included a wreath-laying ceremony for fallen Ukrainian soldiers; a visit to the headquarters of the State Border Guard Service; meetings with the Minister of Defence, Mykhailo Fedorov, and the Deputy Minister of Defence for European Integration, Serhii Boiev; and an audience with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who presented the Minister with the Order of Princess Olga (3rd Class) in recognition of Spain's support and commitment.

“What is most important is to convey Spain's solidarity with Ukraine. While terrible events are unfolding in the Middle East, we cannot forget Ukraine. The Ukrainians continue to suffer, and Spain, like any democratic nation, must continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes,” Robles stated. She also announced a new delivery of a significant number of VAMTACs—the Spanish high mobility vehicles—, scheduled to arrive in Ukraine in early May, alongside additional 155 mm artillery ammunition (the materiel most requested by Kyiv). The Minister noted that this materiel support is complemented by humanitarian assistance—Spain hosts wounded front-line personnel and provides rest homes so that the families of combatants can have a safe haven

away from the front line. This is further enhanced by Spain's substantial involvement in the European Union Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM UA)—as of this April, over 9,000 Ukrainian service members have been trained on Spanish soil. "The assistance we receive from Spain is fundamental, and even more so as it has been sustained over so much time. The fact that they stand by us is a source of infinite gratitude," Zelenskyy told Robles, reiterating this in a statement on his official media account (published in Spanish, Ukrainian, and English). The Ukrainian President also highlighted Spain's contribution to air and missile defence and extended his gratitude to the Government "and to the whole of Spain for their support throughout these years."

STANDING BY THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE

The visit—during which the Minister was accompanied by the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Admiral Juan Francisco Martínez Núñez—began with a tribute and a wreath-laying ceremony for Ukrainian soldiers killed in action. Accompanied by the Deputy Minister of Defence for European Integration, Serhii Boiev, Robles laid the wreath at the iconic Mykhailivska Square, in front of the Wall of Remembrance, which displays photographs of the thousands of Ukrainians who have lost their lives at the front. The Minister condemned "the cruelty of an unjust and barbaric war" and praised the resilience, professionalism, and commitment of the Ukrainian service members to their country's territorial integrity.

She also conveyed this message to the members of the Border Guard, a unit that has been particularly hard hit and is proving crucial to Ukraine's defence. The unit's commanders—led by the Head of the State Border Guard Service, Valeriy Vavrynyuk—briefed the Minister on the evolution of the conflict on the ground, and analysed how operational experience is demonstrating the critical importance of capability development in unmanned aerial systems (UAS),

both for interception and reconnaissance. So far in 2026, the Border Guard has intercepted 4,000 drones in contrast to the approximately 1,300 in 2025. However, despite the increase in these capabilities, Ukraine requires continuous support from these and other defence systems.

Spain is aware of this and maintains a steady, practical line of support tailored to the most urgent operational requirements. This is reflected in the newly announced assistance package comprising VAMTACs (the Spanish high mobility tactical vehicles, capable of covering long distances and reaching speeds of 135 km/h) and artillery shells. Days earlier, during the 34th meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group held on 15 April 2026, Minister Robles reiterated that Spain will sustain its efforts and outlined new initia-

es and continue to promote cooperation between the defence industries of both nations, particularly in high value-added technological fields.

Following her working meeting with the Deputy Minister of Defence for European Integration, Margarita Robles held talks in Kyiv with Volodymyr Zelenskyy to review the situation on the ground and the latest developments in the conflict. In this regard, they welcomed the European Union's approval—after resolving Hungary's objections—of a €90 billion loan for Ukraine, which will help meet its priority needs for military and industrial capabilities.

The visit concluded with a ceremony in which Zelenskyy invested the Minister with the Order of Princess Olga (3rd Class), awarded to Robles by the Ukrainian Government last January in recognition of Spain's commitment to defending Ukrainian sovereignty. This civilian decoration honours Olga of Kyiv (a 10th-century ruler and the first woman of the Rus' people to be canonised) and is awarded to women for their outstanding personal achievements in the fields of government, industry, science, education, or culture. Accepting it on behalf of all Spanish and Ukrainian women, Robles stated: "It is an honour to receive this award, which is not a personal recognition but a tribute to the exemplary struggle of resistance of the entire Ukrainian people."

The following day, 23 April, Margarita Robles travelled to Moldova, a country sharing a border of over 1,000 kilometres with Ukraine and facing a continuous Russian threat on its territory. Robles conveyed a message of reassurance to her Moldovan counterpart, Anatolie Nosatîi: "We uphold the same values: human rights, international law, and peace." And, in this vein, she added: "We will continue to provide assistance and, within the framework of the European Union's priority programme, we will continue with our cooperation and explore options for deploying capabilities to Moldova as a state bordering the conflict zone."

Rosa Ruiz



María José Muñoz MDE

Robles and the Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Defence for European Integration, Serhii Boiev, pay tribute to the fallen at the Wall of Remembrance in Kyiv.

tives for 2026, with a particular focus not only on artillery but also on radars and unmanned systems. At the meeting—which brought together over 50 nations—Robles reaffirmed the Spanish Government's commitment to allocate a further €1 billion to bilateral military assistance for Ukraine. This package was initially announced by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez on 18 March 2026 during Zelenskyy's fourth official visit to Spain, bringing Spain's military aid to Ukraine between 2022 and 2026 to €3.79 billion. The Minister also explained to the Contact Group that, within the framework of defence support mechanisms, Spain plans to direct key resourc-

The Patriot battery at Incirlik amid the regional crisis of March 2026

Spain and the missile shield in Türkiye

José Segura Clavell

Former Senator and Former Member of the Spanish Parliament

MY tenure across several legislative terms in the Defence Committees of both the Spanish Senate and Parliament, as well as the Joint Senate-Parliament Committee for the European Union, has prompted me to revisit certain questions regarding our role within NATO. The fact that one of our Army units was stationed on Turkish soil has sparked public inquiry. All of this has encouraged me to offer insights that, regardless of their accuracy, may assist in a better understanding of the facts.

The current reality is that, in a strategic landscape increasingly shaped by instability in the Middle East, air and missile defence has regained a central role in Euro-Atlantic collective security. The combination of ballistic threats, long-range vectors, saturation systems, and regional conflicts with the capacity to project power over Allied territory has, for several years now, forced NATO to bolster its defence architecture on the southern flank. Within this framework, Spain plays a role that, while discreet from a media perspective, holds significant operational and political weight: the deployment of a Spanish Army Patriot battery at Incirlik Air Base (Adana, Türkiye).

The events of March 2026, within the context of a regional escalation associated with Iran and the projection of threats onto Turkish airspace, have brought back into the spotlight an Allied mission that, by its very nature, often operates far from the public eye. The informative interest triggered by those events focuses on a question as understandable as it is technically delicate: Did the Spanish Patriot battery intervene in the defence against missiles launched towards Türkiye?

The answer, as is often the case in integrated air defence matters, requires conceptual precision, rigorous terminology, and a thorough understanding of how the Allied system operates. In this

field, the real protagonist is not just a specific national unit, but the integration of capabilities under a multinational architecture designed to detect, track, identify, and, if necessary, neutralise threats in real time.

With the considerations set out below, I intend to offer an overview of the Spanish mission in Türkiye, its role within NATO's missile defence, and the operational and strategic significance of the March 2026 incidents.

SPAIN'S MISSION IN TÜRKIYE: CONTINUITY, COMMITMENT AND THE SOUTHERN FLANK

Since January 2015, Spain has had a Patriot detachment stationed in Türkiye within the framework of the Allied mission to support the defence of Turkish territory. The deployment follows a logic of deterrence and protection of NATO's southern flank against the possibility of aerial and ballistic threats from potential regional adversaries.

This is not a circumstantial or symbolic presence, but a sustained contribution to collective defence in a particularly sensitive geostrategic area. By virtue of its geographical position, Türkiye is a cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic security system: it borders areas subject to prolonged instability, is exposed to evolving regional conflicts, and acts, in military terms, as a forward platform for observation, reaction, and deterrence.

Air and missile defence has regained a central role in Euro-Atlantic collective security



Javier Lizón/EFE

Spain's presence at Incirlik Air Base aligns precisely with that logic. The mission's objective is not exclusively to protect a specific installation, but to participate in a broader air and missile defence system that protects both critical infrastructure and Allied airspace in southern Türkiye. For the Spanish Army, this commitment represents a tangible manifestation of three fundamental dimensions of Spain's military action abroad: Allied solidarity, expeditionary capability, and multinational operational integration. Above all, it highlights a reality that is sometimes not fully understood: the defence of Allied territory often begins far from our national borders.

THE PATRIOT SYSTEM AND MODERN AIR DEFENCE

Before analysing the Spanish mission in Türkiye, it is important to review the role of the Patriot system in contemporary air defence. While its name is widely recognised, its true relevance lies not only in its interception capability, but in its integration within a complex architecture of command, control, sensors, and targeting.

The Patriot system is not exclusively designed to "shoot down missiles" in a simplistic sense. It is a highly complex air and missile defence capability that operates in a network-centric environment, combining detection and tracking radars, engagement control stations, command and control links, and launchers with specialised interceptors.

Its effectiveness depends as much on the quality of the system itself as on its incorporation into an integrated defence network. This integration is essential within the NATO framework. The Patriots deployed by various Allies do not operate as autonomous national entities, but as nodes within a higher Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) structure. This means that threat identification, risk assessment, response assignment, and interception sequence do not necessarily follow a "national" logic of "my battery,

my target", but rather an Allied logic based on tactical optimisation and the defence of the Alliance as a whole.

In other words: a Spanish battery may be playing a decisive role in a defensive operation, yet it may be impossible or even unfeasible for open sources to identify it as the sole actor responsible for a specific interception. Therefore, a serious analysis of Spain's actions in March 2026 must refrain from both simplification and exaggeration.

MARCH 2026: THE THREAT MATERIALISES

The incidents of March 2026 led to an actual activation of the air defence system in southern Türkiye. Various open-source reports indicated that missiles were launched as part of the regional escalation with Iran, posing a direct threat or risk to Turkish airspace.

Beyond the technical details of each vector, what was most significant from a military perspective was that the threat transitioned from a planning hypothesis to a real operational scenario. In such circumstances, the value of a deployment such as Spain's is no longer measured solely in terms of presence or deterrence but is evaluated by its responsiveness within the Allied system.

The activation of alerts in the vicinity of Incirlik and the subsequent reports regarding interceptions carried out by the NATO integrated air defence are a clear indication that the architecture deployed in the area was put to the test under live conditions.

This fact is of considerable importance. For years, many missile defence capabilities have been perceived in public debates as "contingency" instruments, useful above all for their deterrent or symbolic effect. However, the events of March 2026 serve as a reminder that these systems exist first and foremost to respond

PERSPECTIVE

to specific threats within very tight timeframes and with extreme technical requirements.

In this regard, the experience of Incirlik confirms a fundamental truth of modern air defence: readiness, training, interoperability, and operational discipline are invisible... until they are not.

DID SPAIN REPEL THE ATTACK? THE CORRECT ANSWER

Although this question is understandable, it requires a technically thorough answer. What can be stated with certainty is that Spain had an operational Patriot battery deployed in the area; this battery was integrated into the NATO air and missile defence system; during the crisis, that system was activated to counter real threats; and, therefore, Spain was part of the defensive system that protected Turkish airspace.

However, what cannot be stated with the same certainty is that a particular missile was neutralised by a Spanish interceptor, or that it was shot down exclusively by the Spanish battery.

This caution is not due to the unit's lack of relevance, but rather to the way in which integrated air defence operates. The system's operational logic is not designed to generate a narrative of how a single country shoots down a missile, but to ensure the fastest, most efficient, and well-coordinated response possible.

Therefore, from a doctrinal and professional standpoint, the most accurate statement would be: "The Spanish Patriot battery deployed at Incirlik Air Base was part of the NATO air and missile defence system that responded to the threat of March 2026."

THE SUBSEQUENT REINFORCEMENT: AN INDIRECT CONFIRMATION OF THE DEPLOYMENT'S VALUE

One of the most significant elements of the crisis was the Allied decision to strengthen defence in Adana—capital of the eponymous province and one of Türkiye's most populous cities—by incorporating another US Patriot battery into the existing system.

This fact has significant analytical value for several reasons. First, because it confirms that the perceived threat was real and serious enough to justify an immediate increase in anti-missile coverage. Second, because it implies that the previously deployed system—into which the Spanish battery was integrated—was already an essential component of the defensive shield. And third, because it demonstrates that modern air defence requires depth, redundancy, and resilience.

A single system may be highly effective, but the protection of a strategic hub like Incirlik requires layers, reinforcement, and the capacity to absorb the impact of escalating scenarios.

From this perspective, the subsequent reinforcement does not lessen the relevance of the Spanish deployment; on the contrary, it underscores it. If NATO decides to expand coverage around an



existing system, it is in fact recognising the operational centrality of the defended position and the need to strengthen the system where the threat has proven tangible.

A MILITARY MISSION: A POLITICAL SIGNAL

The Patriot mission in Türkiye cannot be interpreted solely in technical terms. It also has a political and strategic dimension of the utmost importance.

Every military deployment of this kind conveys several messages simultaneously: to the protected Ally, one of assurance and commitment; to the potential adversary, one of responsiveness and cohesion; and to the Alliance as a whole, one of collective credibility.

Against this backdrop, Spain's presence in Türkiye represents a concrete contribution to the principle of collective defence that underpins NATO. This is not a declarative or abstract commitment, but a tangible presence that is technically demanding, sustained over time, and put to the test of operational reality. Furthermore, this mission underscores a fundamental characteristic of the Spanish Armed Forces in recent decades: their ability to take on highly complex responsibilities in multinational scenarios, ranging from air defence to maritime surveillance (aspects of great interest to those of us in the Canary Islands), through forward presence, the training of Allied forces, and enhanced deterrence.



EWAD

THE HUMAN DIMENSION: PROFESSIONALISM, TRAINING AND PERMANENCE

Every technological defence architecture is, ultimately, sustained by people. In a mission such as the one at Incirlik, this human element is decisive.

Operating a Patriot battery in an Allied environment, with constant demands for readiness, interoperability, and alertness, requires a very high level of technical training, operational discipline, and adaptability. It is not just about deploying sophisticated materiel, but about maintaining over months—and through successive rotations—a level of operational readiness compatible with an immediate response to high-speed threats and minimal reaction times.

Multiple factors come into play in this equation: tactical training, logistical sustainment, integration with Allied commands, identification and authorisation procedures, interservice and international coordination, and, no less importantly, psychological and professional resilience given the pressure inherent to the mission.

Seen in this light, the events of March 2026 demonstrate the value of prolonged training and the ongoing effort of a unit that cannot improvise its effectiveness.

STRATEGIC LESSONS

The crisis of March 2026 provides several important lessons for military and strategic reflection.

First, the ballistic threat remains in full force. Far from being a doctrinal remnant of past conflicts, the threat of long-range missiles remains highly relevant today and requires the retention of specialised air and missile defence capabilities.

Second, integration is as important as the platform itself. The effectiveness of a Patriot battery cannot be understood in isolation from the network in which it operates. Sensors, links, command and control, rules of engagement (ROE), and interoperability are as decisive as the launcher itself.

Third, deterrence requires tangible credibility. Political declarations are not enough. Deterrence is only credible when the assets are real, deployed, sustained, and ready to act.

Fourth, the defence of Allied territory is indivisible. What is happening in southern Türkiye is not alien to Euro-Atlantic security nor, therefore, to Spain's own security. Collective defence begins where the threat arises, not where national borders end.

CONCLUSION

The Spanish Patriot battery deployed at Incirlik Air Base represents one of those missions that, precisely because of its discreet nature and continuity, can go unnoticed until strategic reality brings it to the forefront.

The incidents of March 2026 have served as a reminder that air and missile defence is neither a doctrinal abstraction nor a mere forward presence exercise, but a critical capability called upon to operate when the threat comes to fruition. In that scenario, Spain was not a peripheral observer, but an Ally integrated into the system that protected Turkish airspace.

It is therefore important to draw the right conclusions. There is insufficient evidence to claim that "Spain shot down" a specific missile. But there is ample evidence to state something far more important from a military perspective: Spain was where it needed to be, with the appropriate capability, integrated into the right system, and ready to respond when necessary.

And that is essentially the most serious way to assess the value of a military mission.

I will conclude by alluding to the introduction of this article, acknowledging that, as its author, I have drawn these considerations in my capacity as a public servant, an avid reader, and a committed disseminator of what may perhaps be inaccurate statements.

Deterrence is only credible when the assets are real, deployed, and ready to act



Amada

The *Turia* departs from Cartagena Naval Base to recover an exercise mine anchored on the seabed four miles away. Below, the ship's crew manoeuvres the *Pluto Plus* ROV to launch it into the water; two divers prepare to enter the water near the port; and on passage, the CO's orders are executed on the navigation bridge of the *Turia*.



Rubén Somonte/MDE

TRAINED FOR UNDERWATER WARFARE

Mine Countermeasures Force vessels undergo daily training to detect and neutralise explosive devices in maritime spaces

THE sun has barely risen above the horizon, but the crew of the minehunter *Turia* (M-34), based at Cartagena Naval Base, is already hard at work. The vessel will soon get underway to recover a mine laid nearby days earlier during the operational qualification of another minehunter. "Before setting sail, we check that all systems and equipment are working correctly," notes Lieutenant Commander Jesús Remírez de Esparza, Commanding Officer (CO) of the *Turia*, who oversees the engine start-up and machinery trials from the navigating bridge. During this manoeuvre, transit on the gangway is prohibited as the ship may move—albeit slightly—, which could pose a hazard to the crew. The condition of the two propeller shafts and the bow thrusters is also verified. With all checks satisfactory, it is time to ease the vessel off by singling up the storm hawsers that had been kept in place while berthed in case of foul weather, leaving just three lines at the bow and three at the stern. The all-clear is given and the *Turia* sets sail.

This vessel is part of the Mine Countermeasures (MCM) Force. Along with five other ships of the same class, all named after Spanish rivers, the *Segura*, *Sella*, *Tambre*, *Tajo* and *Duero*, they make up the 1st Mine Countermeasures Squadron, a force that has just celebrated 80 years of history. The *Bidasoa* entered service with the Spanish Navy in April 1946, as its first vessel built specifically for mine warfare. In 1953, under mutual assistance agree-

ments with the US Navy, the minesweeper *Nalón* (M-21) was incorporated into the fleet. This was the first unit featuring a wooden hull to enter service, a material selected for its flexibility, which allowed for greater manoeuvrability. Hence the expression "iron men in wooden ships" used to describe these sailors, heirs of the har-

The Mine Countermeasures Force comprises six vessels and a clearance diving unit

dy seafarers who sailed from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The old wooden hulls eventually gave way to more sophisticated materials, such as glass-reinforced plastic, now used in the current *Segura*-class minehunters.

The MCM Force is based at Cartagena Naval Base and trains daily to track down and neutralise the explosive devices that any adversary or malicious group might deploy in a maritime area of interest to Spain or its Allies. Once a mine is located, it is typically neutralised, although it may also be recovered for intelligence purposes.

MINEHUNTERS AND DIVERS

"Our primary mission is minehunting, which we conduct mainly as part of NATO," explains the CO of the *Turia*. In fact, on 23 April 2026, one of her sister ships, the minehunter *Tambre* (M-33), operating in the Mediterranean as part of the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 (SNMCMG2), located two torpedoes and a Second World War mine. The ship's sonar detected the devices, whose appearance and position on the seabed led operators to classify them as such, and this was duly confirmed by visual identification using the *Pluto Plus* remote operated vehicle (ROV).

"However, we have another fundamental task: the protection of our own ports," adds the CO of the *Turia*. "We must know at all times what lies at the entrance and exit of our ports in the event of offensive mining, and maintain a clear picture of what lies on the seabed to ensure free access and exit for any type of vessel."

The MCM Force maintains a continuously updated database of all seabed objects that might resemble a mine. Every six months, two or three Spanish ports are inspected, "in case we find something new or something that should not be there. It could be anything, such as a washing machine giving off a metallic echo that might be misidentified as a mine. In that case, we would recover it to prevent that contact from causing confusion," explains Lieutenant Commander Remírez de Esparza.

ARMED FORCES

Minehunters are designed to be unaffected by these explosive devices. Built from glass-reinforced plastic, they present a reduced magnetic signature, great flexibility, and high resistance to the shock waves generated by underwater explosions. "They are very quiet vessels with a very shallow draught, allowing us to operate close to the coast, which is precisely where mines are most commonly found," explains the CO of the *Turia*.

The ships are fitted with two electric thrusters at the bow which, together with Voith-Schneider propeller blades at the stern, generate sufficient thrust to enable them to turn within their own length in confined waters, allowing them to hold a precise position to investigate a potential mine or explosive.

The vessels are equipped with an AN/SQQ-32 variable-depth sonar (VDS). "This is the cornerstone—the most important piece of equipment on board," says the CO. This device operates in two modes: detection and classification. The detection mode operates on a wider surveillance arc and an extended detection envelope. "If we detect an object, we switch to the classification sonar, which provides higher resolution. It can even reveal the exact shape of the device," he adds.

The MCM Force is complemented by a clearance diving unit. "It supports us whenever we operate in a mined area," explains the CO. "In that case, there are usually three clearance divers on board." This unit joined the Force in 1982 and, in addition to supporting the ships, operates as an independent minehunting unit, responsible for deactivating and neutralising explosive ordnance within its designated area, which extends from Cabo de Gata (Andalusia) to France, including the Balearic Islands. It also escorts the projection force, clearing ports or landing zones and securing the area before the arrival of the rest of the fleet.



On the deck of the *Turia*, the crew carries out pre-launch checks on the *Pluto Plus* before launching it into the water

Members of this unit undergo extensive training. All have completed the basic diving course and qualified as mine clearance specialists. Training is conducted at the Army Engineers School in Hoyo de Manzanares (Madrid) and subsequently at the Military Diving School, where they qualify as underwater Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) specialists. Some are also paratroopers, while others are heavy vehicle

drivers tasked with transporting deactivation equipment. Officers additionally hold a complementary qualification as diving technologists.

Underwater, divers use a semi-closed circuit rebreather that recirculates their breathing gas, cleans it and injects fresh oxygen. This equipment has a very low acoustic and magnetic signature and allows divers to remain submerged for up to three hours.

MINED AREA

The *Turia* continues her training exercise and, based on her data, is close to the sector where the mine is to be recovered. She is four miles off Cartagena Naval Base;

however, before entering the minehunting area, she shuts down the diesel propulsion engines used for transit, which provide greater speed—and shifts to electric motors to minimise acoustic signature. "During these operations, the noise we radiate externally is critical. That is why we enforce combat silence; we also switch off certain equipment to virtually eliminate our magnetic signature and reduce any possibility of



Once located, the *Turia*'s crew recover the cylindrical mine they were seeking and hoist it aboard using the lines previously rigged by the divers.



A diver from the MCM Force approaches a suspicious object and confirms it is an underwater mine.

being located." Noise can also affect the sonar; so minimising it ensures optimal performance.

Clearance divers are already working in the area where the mine is believed to be located. They have dived to attach a cable to a buoy indicating the exact position of the device to the vessel so that she can approach, throw them a line to shackle it, and recover it. There is, however, a setback. The divers report that they have descended to 20 metres and cannot locate the mine. They request the *Turia* to attempt detection by sonar.

The task is then handed to the Combat Information Centre (CIC), the nerve centre of minehunting operations. There, in a virtually dark room, in front of the sonar displays, operators work diligently to locate the device, which has likely moved due to sea conditions. They first employ the detection sonar, which indicates whether an object is resting on the seabed—though without sufficient resolution to determine whether it is a mine. Interpreting the sig-

nals on the screens is no easy task, as to the untrained eye the displays resemble a lot of green television static. Learning to read them "requires many hours and a great deal of patience," notes Lieutenant Cristina Martínez-Mellero, Executive Officer (XO) of the *Turia*. "Our operators are highly skilled and have spent a considerable amount of time in front of the screens to develop this expertise."

On this occasion, they know they are searching for a cylindrical mine, one me-

Minehunters are low acoustic and magnetic signature vessels with a shallow draught to approach the coast

tre long and fifty centimetres in diameter. They also have an approximate idea of its location, and yet it is difficult to find. This task requires intense concentration and places significant strain on the eyes. "When we notice that the operators are starting to get tired, we replace them with fresh personnel. This way, we prevent fatigue from compromising safety," she adds. "If we have no idea where the mine is, we have to be even more patient, because every contact we detect must be scrutinised to confirm its nature. Ours is not a dynamic war."

An object appears on screen that may be the mine they are seeking. They then pass the signal to the classification sonar, which produces a more detailed view. However, it will still take some time before they are certain. When the operators are sure, it is time to launch the *Pluto Plus* ROV into the water, which will allow visual inspection via its onboard camera.

The crew verifies that the vehicle is in communication with the CIC and that



OPV *Audaz* despatches a sea boat with two people to assess the condition of minehunter *Turia*, which has transmitted an emergency call.

weather conditions in the area are suitable, as there are strict operating limits, namely, conditions cannot go beyond 20-knot winds or one-metre high waves. They are right at the limit, but the *Pluto* can operate. A crane lifts the vehicle, suspends it over the side, and lowers it very slowly until it is submerged for one minute to check its watertightness. Once verified, the *Pluto* proceeds to where the mine has been detected. For the first 40 metres it is controlled from the *Turia*'s quarterdeck and from there onwards from the CIC.

"We cannot confirm that the object on the seabed is a mine until it has been visually identified, either by a diver or by the *Pluto*. Regardless of the technology available, the human eye must be the final means of identification," states Lieutenant Martínez-Merello.

While the *Pluto* carries out its search, the divers remain in the area in case intervention is required. The ROV reaches the device; the CIC confirms it is the mine

they have been seeking and relays its position to the divers so they can prepare it for recovery. The crew returns the *Pluto* to the ship and, once back on deck, it is rinsed out with fresh water and blown dry with compressed air.

In a real mission, the *Pluto*'s lower buoyancy ballast would have been replaced by an explosive charge, and the vehicle would be launched back into the water to deposit it next to the device. The

vehicle would then be recovered, the ship would move away from the area, and the explosive would be detonated. To neutralise moored mines, the *Turia* also carries the Minesniper system. This is a single-use system, as it approaches the device, collides with it and explodes.

COLLABORATION WITH THE AUDAZ

As the *Turia* prepares to hoist the mine onto the deck, she commences coordinated operations with OPV *Audaz*, which had been providing force protection throughout the minehunting operation. Minehunters always operate under the protection of another vessel, as their own defensive capability is minimal. The *Audaz* is currently undergoing the operational qualification process that will validate her to serve as the flagship of SNMCMG2 during the first half of 2027. This assessment is being conducted by the Combat Operational Assessment and Qualification Centre in Cartagena, which has instructed

**Final identification
of a mine is
confirmed visually,
either by the Pluto
Plus ROV or by a
diver**

Spanish Navy minehunters regularly join the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group in the Mediterranean

the *Turia* to simulate a critical situation to which the *Audaz* must respond appropriately. "We have an emergency on board involving the thrusters. The vessel is taking on water, we cannot go down there, it is very dangerous. We require assistance," is the radio message transmitted from the *Turia* to the *Audaz*. The simulated emergency deteriorates as time passes. The minehunter loses all electrical power and is plunged into blackout; the throttle lever has jammed at full speed, leaving the vessel with no propulsion control and unable to correct her course...

“During operational qualifications, the ship conducts serialised exercises, meaning the vessel being qualified knows exactly what is going to happen. They knew we were going to be in the mine-hunting area and that we required their protection, but they knew nothing about this incident. This is what is known as a free-play window: everything is going according to plan, but suddenly they have to react to the unexpected,” explains Lieutenant Commander Remírez.

From the *Audaz*, they request the number of personnel on board, casualty status, crane availability, whether the ship's plans are available to access the flooded area, risk of cargo shifting, point of embarkation, dimensions of the fire mains, and so on. This way, they can get a clear picture of the emergency they are facing.

For an initial assessment of the situation, the OPV despatches a sea boat with two people. External assistance teams follow, equipped with personal protective equipment, calibration gas cylinders—in case the atmosphere is unbreathable—, thermal imaging cameras, etc. They then proceed to plug the hull breach through which water is entering, but cannot fully fix the damage, and the *Audaz* is instructed to tow the *Turia* back to Cartagena.

While the OPV prepares to simulate the tow, the *Turia* resumes the minehunt and proceeds to the area where the divers have already prepared the device for recovery. En route, however, the minehunter must deal with another simulated emergency: a crew member has fallen over-

board and must be rescued, which further delays the recovery of the mine.

Once the rescue has been completed, they finally recover the exercise mine they set out to find eight hours earlier. It is a cylindrical mine containing no explosive charge, fitted with rings and mechanisms to facilitate its recovery. In addition to these mines, there are also Manta mines—triangle-shaped with a flat top, designed to blend into the seabed, rendering them difficult to detect—, mines that resemble

not always the case,” notes the CO of the *Turia*. “Some are deployed there intentionally, even though it is prohibited, and sometimes—particularly with moored mines—the mooring chain breaks over time due to corrosion or fouling by fishing gear. The mines then end up adrift, although this is not the intention.” In any case, those responsible for removing them once a conflict ends are those who laid them there.

These minehunters are in constant training. In fact, from 27 April to 8 May 2026,



An external assistance team from the Audaz boards the *Turia* to repair damage on the minehunter—an exercise simulated as part of the OPV's operational qualification.

rocks, and moored mines, the familiar spiked spheres of the Second World War, which are attached by a chain to a sinker on the seabed.

Naval mines are legally accepted weapons, and their use in armed conflicts is governed by international conventions. Modern mines are designed to discriminate what passes overhead: be it a tanker, an ocean liner, or an amphibious landing ship. However, the area where the mines are laid must be marked out and mariners warned so they know they cannot pass through. Mines must be anchored to the seabed, not left to drift. "However, this is

they took part in the annual minehunting exercise organised by ESP MINEX and led by the Spanish Navy in the Mediterranean. "We conduct many exercises throughout the year. Each country holds its own exercises and invites foreign units," explains Lieutenant Cristina Martínez-Mellero. "We must integrate with other forces because we will never deploy on a mission alone. The aim is to train, train, and train," she concludes, "so that every crew member is confident enough to know what to do when they are actually needed."

Elena Tarilonte

Photos: H  l  ne Gicquel

The Arctic: Intense Competition and an Uncertain Future

Captain Francisco Javier López Fuster (Spanish Navy)
Division of Coordination and Security and Defence Studies (SEGENPOL)

GEOPOLITICAL rivalries between the major powers are intensifying in an increasingly competitive international environment. In this context, control over maritime spaces and strategic chokepoints is becoming ever more crucial. The Arctic represents a unique case within this dynamic, combining strategic rivalry and geo-economic transformation. For centuries, it was considered a peripheral and hostile region. Today, accelerated ice melt, the rising value of resources and increased military activity have turned it into a high-stakes strategic region.

Regarding natural resources, it is estimated that the Arctic holds a significant proportion of the world's oil reserves, concentrated mainly in Russian sovereign territory, particularly in the Timan-Pechora, Yenisei-Khatanga and Barents Sea basins. There are also substantial deposits in Alaska, in the Norwegian sector of the Barents Sea, in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and off the coast of Greenland.

Something similar occurs with natural gas. The largest reserves are also located in Russia, particularly in the Kara Sea and the northern part of the Barents Sea, which accounts for around 39% of the Arctic's gas potential. In addition to these reserves, Norway, Alaska and Canada possess substantial deposits. As for mineral resources, these are mainly concentrated in Russia, although there are also smaller deposits in Sweden, Finland, Canada and the United States.

This frozen ocean, traditionally dubbed the 'world's refrigerator', is undergoing a profound climate transformation. This region

is warming four times faster than the global average, a rate that is altering its ecosystems, its geography and its role as the planet's thermal regulator. At the same time, the melting ice is opening up new sea lanes that could transform global trade. It is estimated that certain areas of the Arctic could be virtually ice-free by 2050.

ROUTES AND RESOURCES

There are currently two navigable routes, primarily during the summer months. Running along the Eurasian continent is the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which follows the Russian coastline. Compared to the traditional route via the Suez Canal, this corridor, which is roughly 5,600 km long, can shorten transit times between Europe and Asia by seven to ten days. On the opposite side, skirting the American continent, lies the Northwest Passage, which crosses the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Historically blocked by ice for most of the year, the gradual summer thaw has made it more viable for commercial shipping, although it remains navigable for only a few weeks a year without the assistance of icebreakers.

Accelerated ice melt, the rising value of resources and military activity have turned the Arctic into a high-stakes strategic region



Henri K.S. Andersen/Forsvaret

Arctic routes should be approached with caution because, despite their growing accessibility, formidable obstacles remain: seasonal navigation, high operational costs, and scant infrastructure. Consequently, even though maritime traffic will increase as the ice melts, there will be no massive exploitation of resources or significant competition with traditional trade routes in the near future. The Arctic's growing strategic importance has heightened competition between states and diminished international cooperation in the region. Below is a brief analysis of the main actors involved, their interests and the role they play in the region's geopolitical dynamics.

GOVERNANCE IN TURMOIL

The Arctic Council is the main platform for international cooperation. It is an intergovernmental forum whose primary objective is to promote cooperation among the eight states with territory in the Arctic: Canada, Denmark, the US, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Russia. In addition to this core group of states are six organisations representing Arctic indigenous peoples. They participate as Permanent Participants, ensuring that local communities' perspectives and needs are taken into account in the Council's policies and projects.

The Arctic Council's work focuses exclusively on non-military issues, with particular emphasis on environmental protection, scientific research, climate change, sustainable development, emergency management, and the conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, seven of the eight member states—known as the Arctic Seven (A7)—suspended their

formal cooperation with Russia, bringing approximately one-third of the Council's 130 active projects to a standstill. Although the organisation has not collapsed, its ability to act as the primary platform for regional cooperation has been severely curtailed. This rupture has fuelled the emergence of parallel structures that further fracture relations between actors in the region, intensifying cooperation between Russia and the BRICS+ countries. This suggests that Moscow may be seeking alternative avenues to promote the development and commercial exploitation of its Arctic zone outside the Arctic Council.

MILITARISATION AND STRATEGIC COMPETITION

From a military standpoint, the region has acquired growing strategic importance for NATO. The rise in Russian military activity, particularly in the GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) corridor, and the growing presence of Chinese maritime assets, have made the Arctic a key area for surveillance, deterrence and Allied coordination. This corridor is also a strategic chokepoint for tracking Russian Northern Fleet submarines transiting toward the Atlantic. In order to counter this threat, NATO launched the Arctic Sentry initiative, a multi-domain operation led by the Joint Force Command Norfolk (JFCNF) with the aim of strengthening Allied surveillance and improving operational capabilities in polar environments, where it acts as a link for exercises such as Cold Response, Trident Juncture, Dynamic Mongoose and Steadfast Defender.

Other pillars of this presence include Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1), the NATO Air Policing mission, and the NATO E-3A early warning aircraft (AWACS) that conduct surveillance missions from



Vanessa Andreea Vagstor/MDN

Allied bases to monitor air and maritime movements in the North Atlantic. As is evident from the Alliance's activities, the Arctic has become a central hub for Euro-Atlantic stability. Its interest in the region is not driven by one-off operations, but by a sustained presence focused on surveillance, deterrence and the protection of the transatlantic sea lines of communication.

The European Union acknowledges that the Arctic has become a strategic space where the interests of the major powers converge. To this end, it has developed its own strategy—set out in the Joint Communication on “An integrated European Union policy for the Arctic”, released in 2021 by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs—which outlines its priorities around three pillars: the fight against climate change; sustainable development; and international cooperation in the region. Although the European Union has not yet been granted full observer status in the Arctic Council, it seeks to play a significant role in the region

in the future by promoting sustainable policies based on multilateral governance and diplomacy. However, in the field of security and defence, its capacity to take action is more limited, as it does not have military forces of its own, thereby reducing its direct influence on the strategic dimension of the Arctic.

The United States considers the Arctic an integral part of the security of the ‘Western Hemisphere’, as set out in its National Defense Strategy (NDS). The region also serves as a strategic corridor to Europe, essential for protecting the sea lines of communication between North America and the European continent. From this perspective, the Arctic is vital both for the defence of US territory and for fulfilling its collective defence commitments to its Allies.

The US strategy in the region is based on a “surveillance and response” approach. The aim is to obtain ‘early warning’ and be able to deploy joint forces whenever and wherever necessary. Initiatives

such as the so-called Golden Dome—conceived as an integrated air and space missile defence system— underscore Greenland's importance as a platform for the deployment of advanced radars, sensors and interceptors.

From a political standpoint, one of the most significant factors behind US interest in the island could be the fear that Greenland's eventual independence might bring it closer to China's sphere of influence—with Russia as a potential partner. This fear would explain the increasingly hardline stance adopted by the Trump administration towards the island. This attitude has not been without controversy and has raised concerns among some European Allies.

On the other side of the “Western Hemisphere”, Russia possesses the longest Arctic coastline and regards this region as a crucial strategic pillar, both for its national security and its economy. Not surprisingly, the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF) covers approximately five million square kilometres.

This significance can be explained by three main reasons. First, Russia is the Arctic state with the largest share of population, coastline and territory in the region; second, its economy depends heavily on Arctic energy resources, which account for 90% of its gas production and 60% of its oil production; and third, the Arctic and sub-Arctic play a key military role as a strategic stronghold for deterrence and defence.

Resource extraction in polar environments is extraordinarily costly and requires advanced technologies that Moscow cannot fully develop on its own. As a result of the war in Ukraine, Western sanctions have limited its access to technological developments, funding and specialised knowledge, forcing it to seek alternative partners. Against this backdrop, Russia has turned to countries such as China, India and various emerging economies in Latin America and Africa to attract investment and technological support for the development of new sea routes and the exploitation of critical minerals. In response to Western sanctions, Russia has tightened its control over the Northern Sea Route and restricted the passage of foreign military vessels. This could lead to tensions with the United States or NATO in defence of freedom of navigation, increasing the risk of incidents, particularly given the growing military presence in the Arctic. At the military level, it is worth noting that there are ballistic missile submarines operating there, constituting an essential component of Russia's nuclear triad. Consequently, the militarisation of the Arctic is not solely driven by the protection of resources or sea routes, but also by the need to

ensure the survival and credibility of its deterrent capability vis-à-vis the Atlantic Alliance.

Furthermore, for China, the Arctic has become a region of growing strategic importance over the last decade. Beijing describes itself as a ‘near-Arctic state’, a political category used to explain its interest in an area in which it lacks territory but has economic, scientific and geopolitical ambitions.

One of the main attractions is its potential as a trade corridor, which explains China's push for the ‘Polar Silk Road’. For an economy deeply integrated into global maritime trade, having shorter routes that are less vulnerable to tensions in the Strait of Malacca or the Suez Canal represents a major strategic advantage. Although, for the time being, navigability is seasonal and dependent on the

ice breaking up, China seeks to play an active role in the exploitation and control of the new trade routes and transport networks that may emerge in the future. In the economic sphere, Beijing is also interested in the potential exploitation of the region's natural resources, and views the region as crucial for obtaining critical minerals that are essential for its technology industry and energy transition.

Although the Asian giant insists that its presence in the Arctic is peaceful and focused on scientific cooperation, its behaviour reveals broader ambitions. Investment in infrastructure under the umbrella of the ‘Polar Silk Road’, the deployment of research vessels

with dual-use technology and the presence of submarines in the area, indicate that Beijing is seeking greater geopolitical influence in the region. While it does not maintain a permanent military presence, its strategy aims to secure a significant role in an increasingly accessible and contested Arctic.

SOURCES OF INSTABILITY

The above analysis reveals that economic and geopolitical factors, rather than a single cause, are responsible for the growing tension in the Arctic. Four main sources of instability are analysed below in order to better understand this issue: territorial disputes; the Greenland crisis; the challenges associated with resource exploitation; and the progressive deterioration of circumpolar cooperation.

The main territorial disputes in the Arctic fall within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which allows states to extend their exploitation rights beyond 200 nautical miles if they demonstrate the geological

NATO's interest in the region stems from a sustained presence focused on surveillance and deterrence

continuity of their continental shelf. Progressive ice melt has transformed the region into a new economic and strategic frontier, increasing the value of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and claims over the continental shelf, leading to several significant disputes.

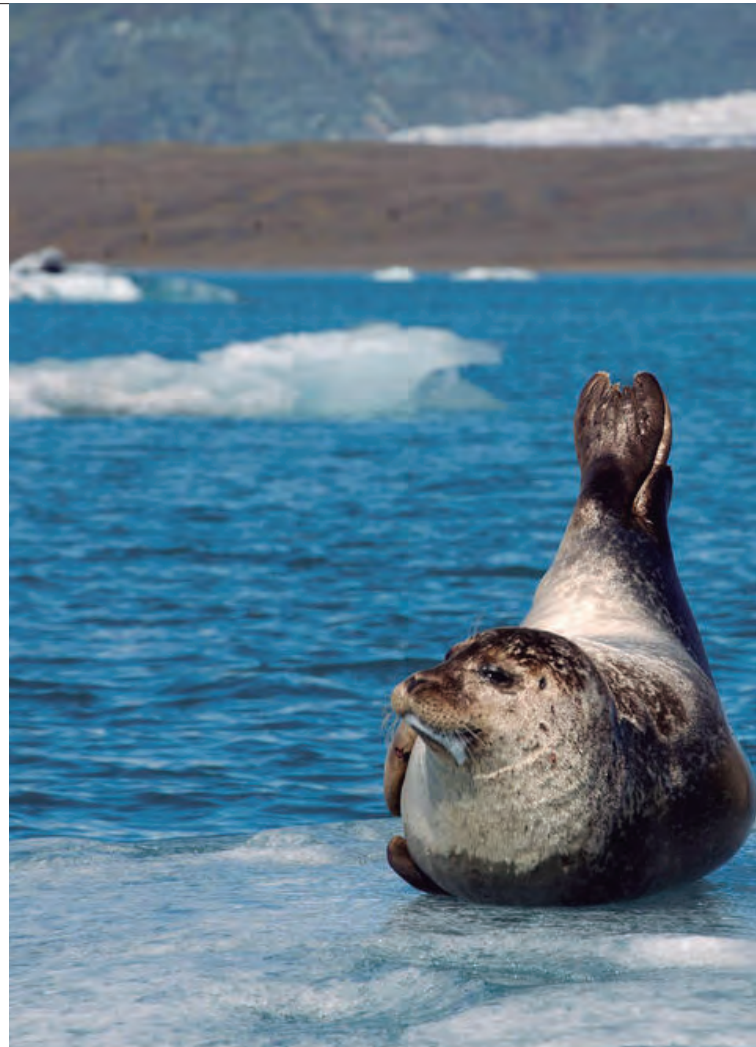
One of the most prominent examples is the Beaufort Sea, where the United States and Canada are engaged in a delimitation dispute which, although not officially resolved, is being managed cooperatively. The dispute over the Lomonosov Ridge, which is claimed by Denmark, Canada, and Russia, is even more complex since it has the potential to extend the continental shelf beneath the North Pole and provide access to hydrocarbon resources. Also noteworthy is the dispute in the Lincoln Sea between Canada and Denmark/Greenland over maritime delimitation and the extension of the continental shelf north of Ellesmere Island and Greenland.

The Svalbard Treaty (1920), which recognises Norway's sovereignty over the archipelago but guarantees equal access to resources for the signatory states, is another subject of contention. Potential reinterpretations of the treaty—regarding resource exploitation, the militarisation of the archipelago or control of its adjacent waters—are an additional source of friction. As previously mentioned, the National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS), which regard Greenland as essential for the defence of the Western Hemisphere, contextualise the United States' interest in Greenland.

The island holds immense strategic value. On the one hand, it offers military advantages against Russia's expansion and China's growing interest in the Arctic. Furthermore, it is estimated to possess significant natural resources, such as strategic minerals and potential energy reserves. These minerals are essential for both the defence industry and energy transition, and would enable the United States to reduce its dependency on China, which now controls worldwide production of several of these resources.

However, the most significant factor driving this interest is likely to be domestic politics. Greenland is an autonomous region of the Kingdom of Denmark that has enjoyed extensive self-government since 2009. Around 80% of its population supports full independence, and only the lack of political consensus on how and when this should happen has slowed the process. For the United States, the real interest in the island is strategic rather than economic: although its mineral resources have potential, their large-scale exploitation is limited by logistical difficulties, severe weather and a lack of infrastructure. In this regard, Washington's primary concern is probably to prevent Greenland from falling under the influence of strategic competitors such as Russia or China in the event of independence, as it would upset the geopolitical balance and jeopardise US interests in the circumpolar region.

Resource exploitation in the Arctic faces enormous difficulties that go far beyond the apparent abundance of these materials. Al-



though the region is often imagined as a rich and strategic territory, most of the available data comes from estimates based on small-scale surveys. This reality is coupled with an adverse climate and a limited communications infrastructure. These conditions not only make daily life challenging in permanent settlements, but also drive up the costs and logistical challenges associated with resource exploitation.

The North Pole, in general, lacks the basic infrastructure needed to sustain any large-scale economic development project. It has no roads or railways, so transport relies exclusively on ships or aircraft. Nor is there any agricultural or industrial production, which means food and building materials must be imported, and the sparse population severely limits the available workforce.

As a result of all of this, any economic initiative, in particular resource exploitation, entails extremely high costs that are difficult to calculate. For example, the oil sector estimates that extracting oil would cost around \$80 per barrel, about ten times more than in Saudi Arabia and two to three times more than in Texas.



Mark Garten/UN

Finally, the issue of Arctic governance is worth highlighting. The region lacks a robust institutional framework capable of managing the growing geopolitical tensions, which have been exacerbated since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022.

The Arctic Council, a body created specifically for this region, limits its role to dialogue and cooperation among its members, with no powers to resolve sovereignty disputes or security issues, and throughout its history it has barely promoted two legally binding treaties. Since 2022, its activity has been virtually paralysed, with minimal interaction between several of its members, which has further weakened coordination and stability mechanisms in the area. Given this governance vacuum, the future of the Arctic is uncertain and could take very different paths.

FUTURE SCENARIOS

The Arctic is no longer a peripheral region and has become one of the most contested geopolitical spaces in the world. Rapid ice melt is reshaping the global strategic landscape by opening up new trade routes, increasing the value of previously inaccessible natural resources and multiplying the points of friction between the major powers.

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the strategic value of the Arctic far outweighs its immediate economic potential. Estimates of natural resource reserves are attractive; however, their profitable exploitation remains a venture subject to logistical, climatic and infrastructural challenges. The same applies to Arctic Sea routes, whose navigability remains seasonal and whose competitiveness compared to major traditional corridors is still limited. The narrative of the Arctic as a new El Dorado must therefore be viewed with caution.

On the other hand, rivalry between major powers has become a structural feature of the region. Given that Russia has the greatest territorial and economic presence in the Arctic, it sees the region as an uncompromising strategic stronghold. The United States, for its part, has become more interested in the region—with Greenland at its epicentre—not so much for its resources as for the need to contain the influence of Moscow and Beijing. China, with no Arctic territory of its own, has adopted a progressive presence strategy that combines economic investment, scientific research and geopolitical ambition—all of which are hard to separate from one another.

Another defining feature of the region is the lack of governance. The Arctic Council, the only specific multilateral forum for the area, has been severely weakened following the rift caused by the war in Ukraine, with no alternative mechanism capable of replacing it. This governance vacuum is perhaps the most underestimated risk in the Arctic landscape.

Based on the above analysis, three possible scenarios for the future of the Arctic can be envisaged: first, Cooperation and Mod-

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erate Competition: Unlikely in the short term, involving the diplomatic resolution of disputes, where states would continue to defend their interests but maintain governance mechanisms and resolve their differences through diplomatic and legal channels; second, Fragmented Rivalry: Considered the most plausible, involving limited cooperation and growing rivalry and militarisation among powers such as the United States, Russia and China, increasing the risk of incidents; and third, Open Conflict: A breakdown of the regional balance, the weakening of international law and greater competition for resources and maritime routes.



TESTING THE FUTURE

Spanish Army and industry test advances in battlefield robotics and sensorisation

IN technology, those who fall behind lose. As Colonel Alberto Quero, Head of the Future Force Centre, put it: “Combat has changed and continues to change, and the Army needs to adapt very quickly.” He made this statement during the 3rd Tactical Experimentation Campaign organised by his centre. The event took place from 7 to 16 April 2026 at the Álvarez de Sotomayor training area in Viator, Almería. It was attended by King Felipe VI and supported by the 2nd Legion Brigade “Rey Alfonso XIII”, alongside other Army units that assessed proposals from thirty civilian companies and research institutions.

As Colonel Quero explained, “we bring the latest technologies here and test the newest tactics, techniques and procedures currently being used—above all, in the war in Ukraine—in order to transform the Army and adapt it to new forms of combat.” In other words, what was seen at Viator represents the absolute cutting edge, and yet, as Colonel Quero emphasised, “what we learned six months ago is not necessarily worthless, but it has already been overtaken by new lessons.” As an example, he cited the guidance of ground-based robotic systems. “We learned that it is not viable for an operator to guide them solely via a console be-

cause, although they carry their own camera, it does not give the operator a clear enough picture of where to go. What the Ukrainians are doing—and what we are testing here—is combining the ground-based system with drones to provide them with situational awareness.”

The Future Force Centre is part of the Planning Division of the Army General Staff (DIVPLAN), “which is tasked with looking to the future in the Spanish Army,” explains Major Joaquín Peralta. “In this Division,” he adds, “there are no isolated working groups—rather, cross-functional sections that meet frequently to avoid duplicating efforts during missions.” The

INDUSTRY AND TECHNOLOGY



Military personnel from the Experimental Brigade and technicians from companies and universities demonstrated the use of drone and counter-UAS systems. The Alakran mortar carrier by NTGS was also put to the test.

Army is, in short, strongly focused on the future, coordinating extensively with industry and academia toward that end. Beyond these tactical experimentation campaigns, other events are promoted, such as the 2E+I Forum organised each autumn by the Logistic Support Command, where military personnel exchange ideas with companies and universities.

Major Peralta highlights that they are working on the Force 2035 project, a transformation process launched in 2018 with the objective of fielding technologically advanced forces by 2035. "Although modernisation is a continuous process, milestones were established to structure

it, culminating in 2035 with the achievement of what we call the Advantage Force."

The Legion was designated as the 2035 Experimental Brigade (BRIEX). For this reason, many of those testing the equipment are legionnaires from Viator military base. As Colonel Quero notes, "a significant proportion of the capabilities being tested here will go to Slovakia, to a NATO experimentation exercise led by Spain, and where we hope we can demonstrate our capabilities in new forms of combat." Undoubtedly, these involve remote-controlled systems, both ground-based and aerial.

DRONES: THE DISRUPTIVE WEAPON

In the First World War, tanks broke the static lines of trench warfare; in the Second World War, air power enabled deep strikes behind enemy lines. Today, the weapon that has shattered established schemes is the drone. No one is safe from them. For this reason, the event devoted considerable attention to Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS).

Iván González is a founding partner of Asedios Group, a Spanish manufacturer of drones for attack, surveillance and transport tasks. "On the battlefield," he explains, "there are units cut off from their supply points, and anyone attempting to resupply



King Felipe VI observes an Aunav robot by EM&E Group equipped with a light machine gun. In the photo on the right, a soldier aims at the sky with an electronic counter-drone shotgun.

them would be an easy target. That is why we have drones capable of carrying up to twelve kilogrammes of supplies or ammunition over a distance of thirty kilometres.” González highlights that “80% of their components are manufactured in Spain.”

The origin of the equipment matters enormously because, as Colonel Quero notes, “the fact that most of the participating companies are small and medium-sized—and Spanish—gives us tremendous agility. It allows us to make changes very quickly, which is quite often the case.”

UAS have transformed the nature of warfare because they are highly effective, low-cost weapons, in part because manufacturers can offset some of their technology costs in the civilian sector. A drone used to deliver ammunition to a combatant, for instance, can equally be used to deliver assistance to a hiker in difficulty in the mountains.

As Iván González points out, “proportionally, the cost of an interceptor missile can be eight to ten times more expensive than an attack drone. The latter is cheap to produce and requires no highly qualified personnel—either to manufacture or to operate. An Iranian attack drone like the Shahed, for

example, which has a range of 2,500 kilometres and carries a 40-kilogramme explosive payload, can cost a few thousand dollars, compared to the one million dollars of its interceptor missile.” The result is that a swarm of attack drones can overwhelm a defensive system through sheer saturation, as the defender simply cannot afford to produce enough interceptor missiles.

Drones attack, but they also defend. This tactical experimentation campaign therefore tested drones designed to intercept and neutralise attack drones. From the company Destinus, Carlos Sancha explains that their UAS are capable of de-

tecting a kamikaze drone, closing on it at 300 km/h, positioning themselves a few metres below the enemy’s tail, and detonating its explosive payload to neutralise it. “70% of the drone is manufactured in Spain, and then the engine is integrated elsewhere. Crucially, it costs only 10% more than the drone it destroys—minimal compared to a missile system.”

Systems that physically destroy a drone are known as hard-kill; however, soft-kill systems were also on display at Viator. Rather than destroying the drone, these use a large radio-frequency gun to seize control of its guidance signal. Effective at ranges of up to a kilometre, they can force a drone to descend vertically or redirect it back to its point of origin—thereby revealing the enemy’s position.

Loitering munitions were also tested during the experimentation campaign. One example is the Q-Slam 40 anti-tank drone developed by Arquimea, which was operated by Legionnaire Salas and costs around €30,000. “It is still experimental. We noticed, for instance, that very strong winds make it difficult to handle, so we reported this to the manufacturer so that they can take note and work on improvements.”

**Around thirty
companies
participated
in the tactical
demonstration
at Viator**

In this regard, Major Joaquín Peralta clarifies that many of the weapons being tested are not part of the Army's inventory. "We engage with industry on capability planning. We tell them what we need, see what they can offer, find common ground and refine the systems on the training area." In any event, other departments decide whether to procure this equipment after these trials.

INVISIBLE COMMAND CENTRES

Weaponry changes from one conflict to the next, but one factor remains constant: the most important target is always the enemy command centre. However, what if it were "invisible"? That would be its greatest defence. Technically, this is known as a "transparent battlefield." Lieutenant Colonel Francisco Pérez Martín, Head of the Electronic Warfare and Connectivity Experimentation Teams at the MADOC (Training and Doctrine Command), puts it plainly: "On the transparent battlefield, anything that can be detected can be engaged. We must therefore reduce not only the number of command personnel but also their electronic signature." Visitors at Viator were indeed able to observe the operation of a rear-echelon support command post deployed beneath a multi-spectral camouflage net designed to reduce both thermal and electromagnetic signatures.

However, communication or signal transmission is critical to command forces in the field. To minimise this signal as much as possible, dedicated communication networks are established, meaning the antenna moves with the soldiers on the battlefield. As Lieutenant Colonel Jesús Aparicio Oliver, from the Cyberspace and Technical Assistance Directorate, explains: "We set up a private 5G network where we control coverage, keeping power low so that the enemy cannot detect us. For longer distances, we create separate bubbles for each deployed unit and interconnect them all. In fact, this system is already operational in Slovakia and was developed by a Spanish SME, Atika." Communications are, obviously,



Launch of a Q-SLAM 40 tactical loitering system (kamikaze drone) developed by Arquimea at the Legion's Álvarez de Sotomayor training area in Viator, Almería.



A military operator tests the control system of an unmanned vehicle during the tactical experimentation campaign.

encrypted, and furthermore, "they do not transit via satellite; we maintain our own private network with all our users."

The 3rd Experimentation Campaign also featured trials of UGVs (Unmanned Ground Vehicles), ranging from heavy-payload carriers capable of transporting up to 400 kg—well beyond what an aerial drone could manage—to armed variants.

Yet the true protagonist of the event was invisible to the eye, despite being, as Colonel Quero pointed out, "present in absolutely everything we do: artificial intelligence. It is the glue that holds everything together. In modern combat, with thousands of sensors generating data, the volume of incoming information is immense, and we need artificial intelligence to process it and support decision-making." However, as he explains, above all these combat technologies there is one element that depends solely on the human factor: "great adaptability—because whatever lies ahead will be unexpected."

Gabriel Cruz

Photos J. M. Dueñas/DECET

Redeployment of NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)

Why nothing is easy in Iraq

By Brigadier General Pedro M. Sebastián de Erice Llano

THREE distinct quotes have resonated with me ever since, on 4 July 2025, I took over as Chief of Staff of NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) in Baghdad, under the command of an excellent French general (ComNMI). At that time, our only objective—apart from the mission of advising the Iraqi Ministries of Defence and of the Interior—was Enabler Transition Planning, which involved NMI assuming authority over Forward Operating Base Union III on 1 October 2025, thereby relieving US forces from the Coalition's operation Inherent Resolve. Planning had been initiated by the preceding team and was extremely detailed and professional. My task was to finalise the plan and start its implementation—the first critical milestone being the handover of the base's defence one month later. Supported by my staff, I dedicated myself to this task with all the impetus of a newcomer.

As soon as we began executing the operations order, the first of these quotes appeared like a neon sign in a dark alley. I recalled the words of the esteemed Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke: "No plan survives first contact with the enemy." The difficulties increased as a result of delays in issuing visas or landing clearances, the early withdrawal of US forces, national restrictions limiting access to specific databases, etc. However, by August, we had successfully assumed control of the security of Union III Camp. Over the remaining two months leading up to the target date, our sole task was to take on all day-to-day logistical support responsibilities—referred to in NATO military terminology as Real Life Support (RLS). Once again, and despite countless problems, we managed to get a handle on all the minor activities that made our lives a bit more comfortable—or, quite simply, sustained our very existence. However, relieving US forces at Union III did not mean the base was entirely independent of this powerful nation, a reality we were soon to discover.

While assuming the management of Union III, two developments in US foreign and defence policy hit us hard. The first was their accelerated redeployment to the north of the country (Iraqi Kurdistan), thereby abandoning federal Iraq, as agreed with the Iraqi government in 2024. Consequently, throughout 2025 and early

2026, there would be a progressive drawdown of forces and the transfer of bases to the Iraqi Government, so as to finally start a new phase in September 2026 marking the transition to strictly bilateral relations between the Coalition nations and Iraq. The second was the drastic budget reduction in the US Department of State for its installations in Iraq. These two facts fundamentally redefined the scope of Enabler Transition. It was no longer merely about taking over the management of Union III; it required NATO to absorb all the enablers previously supplied by the Americans. And what did that involve? For the Coalition, it meant losing the counter-rocket, artillery, and mortar (C-RAM) defence systems; the screening and vetting system for all local interlocutors and personnel entering the base; dedicated medical evacuation helicopters; and Role 2 medical support (emergency surgical capabilities) established at the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Centre (BDSC). As for the US Department of State, it meant we would have to deal with the imminent closure of the BDSC—the primary logistics hub through which all military flights entered Iraq and cleared customs—and take on more than 30 RLS contracts, ranging from water and food supplies to waste management and laundry services. A monumental undertaking that significantly exceeded our capabilities, as authority rested primarily with Allied Joint Force Command Naples (JFCNP) and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).

Against this backdrop, the second quote sprang to mind with crystal clarity. It was Dwight D. Eisenhower who said: "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." And so we set to work using the limited resources of a non-combat headquarters such as NMI. We flooded JFCNP with proposals to resolve, minimise, substitute,

65 Spanish military personnel remain at JFCNP, ensuring NMI continues to support the Iraqi Armed Forces



A/I XXIII Force

mitigate, or even accept the risks associated with the loss of those enablers. However, among all of them, the one I considered of paramount importance was the contingency plan for the emergency evacuation of Union III, as this plan provided for both the drawdown of forces and the termination of the mission. This plan assumed responsibility for keeping Union III Camp open to Coalition forces, which would no longer be there after 1 October 2025. Consequently, under the leadership of a Spanish lieutenant colonel, on 14 October we submitted for formal approval our proposed plan for what was to be our responsibility, namely, the movement between Union III and the BDSC. Not only did we plan it—in line with Eisenhower's maxim, the initial plan proved worthless because the second phase of the air movement outside the theatre of operations had not been updated—but, over the following months, we continued to rehearse, plan, and improve every single aspect. By the time the decision for a "deliberate temporary redeployment" of the entire NMI was taken on 13 March, we were about to conduct Exercise Anabasis, a rehearsal of the entire withdrawal operation from Union III.

Along with that order came the third and most painful quote, because I did not understand why a "minimum force" was not left behind—as suggested by the mission, aware of the situation on the ground—to maintain the entire communications system and equipment of NATO and the nations at Union III. This third quote is from General Colin Powell and states: "The commander in the field is always right unless proved otherwise." It is obvious that higher headquarters have information unavailable to us in Baghdad, and although it will take us months to rebuild everything we were forced to destroy, the fact that we did not understand this decision did not mean we did not execute the orders with utmost discipline and efficiency. In any event, due to the higher HQ's shift in perspective, we were ordered to relocate the mission.

On 18 March, we started to move to the BDSC. It was not a quiet night. In addition to receiving nine attack warnings—we shared a warning system with the US Embassy located across the street, which was the actual target of the attacks, not us, although

our response was the same—we had to hastily redo the complete list of Union III personnel to be evacuated, as it had been "accidentally" misplaced amidst the nervousness and tension of the situation. The process was simple, at least on paper: lists were compiled in cohorts of 100 evacuees; they were assembled via their senior national officers at designated times at the base canteen, where they were accounted for and processed for check-out; they then boarded the convoys that transported them on the 20-kilometre journey separating Union III from the BDSC, and, upon arrival, they were again accounted for and accommodated in the secure areas available. Responsibility for flight allocation and boarding lay with the Coalition, but the NMI personnel on duty rendered all the assistance possible. By the end of that day, over 850 people—plus five military working dogs—departed the camp on five US flights. Our Force Protection team drove for over ten hours non-stop, enduring, alongside our liaison detachment at the BDSC, fourteen different drone and mortar attacks; however, these hostile actions did not prevent them from doing their job.

The morning of 19 March brought the heaviest rainfall of the past year. Although the weather spared us from enemy attacks, it significantly complicated the identification of the last 400-plus people to be evacuated and the drive to the BDSC. To make matters worse, we were informed upon arrival that our vehicles—over 40—could not remain at the base after the extraction. We then made the urgent decision for our Deployable National Intelligence Element to hastily rent four vans, which, after numerous adventures through a flooded and heavily fortified Baghdad, managed to reach their destination by early evening. The last evacuees from Union III entered the BDSC before midnight and departed by air the following morning.

Currently, 65 of us based at JFCNP, plus another 24 operating remotely from home, continue working towards returning to Baghdad as soon as possible under a new, leaner force structure, which we hope will be equally effective and efficient. This is still the main challenge for Spanish Brigadier General Ramón Armada Vázquez, who assumed command of NMI on 19 May 2026.

UN Human Rights Council

Two decades fighting for the most vulnerable

Colonel Fernando Bueno Caballero

Coordination Division for Security and Defence Studies – General Secretariat for Defence Policy (SEGENPOL)

THE UN Human Rights Council was established in 2006 in response to a serious crisis of legitimacy within the international human rights protection system. Its predecessor, the UN Commission on Human Rights, which had been operating since 1946, became gradually discredited during the 1990s and early 2000s, amid accusations of political selectivity, manipulation by Member States, and a growing loss of credibility.

The immediate context for the replacement of the Commission on Human Rights by the new Human Rights Council—as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly but holding a higher institutional rank—was the institutional reform process driven by then Secretary-General Kofi Annan. In his 2005 report “In Larger Freedom”, Annan explicitly warned that the Commission had increasingly undermined its credibility due to its politicisation and selectivity. This assessment reflected an emerging consensus: the body responsible for safeguarding human rights had ended up being viewed as a forum where States with questionable records could shield one another from criticism.

The election of countries with a record of serious systematic human rights violations to the Commission—such as the case of Libya, elected chair of the body in 2003—became a symbol of this dysfunction. The criticism was not solely moral, but structural, as the Commission operated under an institutional design that failed to establish sufficiently rigorous accountability mechanisms for its members, or effective procedures to guarantee impartiality in scrutiny. Against this backdrop, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 60/251, adopted on 15 March 2006, formalised the creation of the new Human Rights Council. This organ was established with

the intention of rectifying the shortcomings of the previous model through significant institutional innovations. Among them, three key elements stood out: the direct election of its members by an absolute majority of the General Assembly, the establishment of a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism, and the possible suspension of Member States that commit gross and systematic violations.

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR), conceived as the central pillar of the new system, introduced a principle of universality hitherto absent: all States, without exception, would be regularly assessed on human rights issues. This shift responded to the structural criticism regarding the functioning of the Commission, which had been accused of selectively focusing on certain countries, often from the Global South, while ignoring violations in other contexts. However, from its inception, the Council was marked by an inherent tension: the coexistence of an ambitious regulatory mandate with a state-based composition that inevitably reflected the power dynamics and geopolitical rivalries of the international system. This dilemma, far from being resolved, conditioned its evolution over the following two decades.

MANDATE AND MEMBERSHIP

The Human Rights Council is an intergovernmental body of the United Nations responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection

The Council has institutionalised mechanisms that have transformed the global human rights architecture



Jean Marc Ferré/UN

of human rights around the world, addressing situations of human rights violations and making recommendations on all matters in this area. It operates on a permanent basis and is headquartered at the United Nations Office in Geneva. The Council is composed of 47 Member States, which are elected by a majority of the members of the United Nations General Assembly by direct and secret ballot. The General Assembly takes into account the contribution of candidate States to the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as their voluntary pledges and commitments in this regard.

The election of Council members is based on equitable geographical distribution, with seats apportioned among regional groups: the Group of African States (13 seats); the Group of Asia-Pacific States (13 seats); the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States (8 seats); the Group of Western European and other States (7 seats); and the Group of Eastern European States (6 seats). The members of the Council serve for a period of three years and are not eligible for immediate re-election after two consecutive terms. The General Assembly can vote to suspend membership rights in the event of gross and systematic violations of human rights. Membership of the Council entails the responsibility of upholding the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, a criterion that the States themselves clearly underscored when they adopted Resolution 60/251 in March 2006 to establish the Human Rights Council.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism that periodically assesses the human rights situation in all UN Member States, undoubtedly represents the Council's most significant contribution to the current international architecture for the defence of human

rights. Since its first round in 2008, the UPR has reviewed all UN Member States, generating an unprecedented volume of recommendations, voluntary commitments and follow-up processes. Although its effectiveness largely depends on the political will of Member States, this mechanism has contributed to normalising the idea that no country is exempt from scrutiny.

Cases such as that of Myanmar illustrate the potential, but also the limitations, of the UPR. Persistent recommendations regarding the situation of the Rohingya minority, made across several rounds, helped to establish an international record of concern that subsequently fuelled other initiatives, including independent investigations and proceedings by international courts. Although the UPR did not prevent the escalation of violence in 2017, it did play a role in building an international consensus on the seriousness of the events.

Another relevant achievement has been the strengthening of the Special Procedures system, comprising rapporteurs, independent experts, and thematic and country-specific working groups. These mechanisms have significantly enhanced the international system's capacity to monitor and report on human rights. Council investigations, such as those concerning freedom of expression or extrajudicial executions, have produced reports that have influenced both policy debates and national legislative reforms.

The Council has also been a key forum for the progressive development of international human rights law. Resolutions adopted in Geneva have contributed to the consolidation of emerging standards in areas such as digital rights, the impact of climate change on human rights, and the protection of human rights defenders. The growing attention to the implications of environmental respect and

human rights, for instance, culminated in the UN General Assembly officially recognising the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in 2022.

Likewise, the Council has demonstrated its capacity to respond to specific crises by establishing investigative mechanisms. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, established in 2011, has systematically documented gross violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, generating evidentiary records that could be relevant for future accountability processes. Similarly, the mechanisms created to investigate situations in Eritrea or North Korea have helped to bring visibility to systematic abuses in highly closed contexts.

In terms of participation, the Council has broadened the engagement framework for other civil society actors. Non-governmental organisations, human rights defenders and victims have found a platform in its sessions to present information, report violations and put pressure on States. This openness has been crucial in partially counteracting exclusively intergovernmental dynamics.

Finally, the Council has helped to keep human rights at the heart of the international agenda, even in contexts of growing geopolitical fragmentation. Its very existence as a permanent forum has made it possible to sustain debates, generate diplomatic pressure and formulate standards in an environment increasingly hostile to multilateralism. In short, the Council has institutionalised and consolidated mechanisms that have transformed the global human rights architecture.

OUTSTANDING ISSUES

However, the Council's achievements coexist with structural limitations that have fuelled recurring criticism, the most persistent of which is the politicisation of its deliberations, a dynamic which, far from disappearing with the transition from the Commission, has assumed new shapes. The voting pattern in the Council often reflects geopolitical alignments rather than objective assessments of human rights situations. Regional blocs or political alliances, such as the Group of African States, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation or the Group of Western States, tend to act in a coordinated manner, which conditions both the adoption of resolutions and the handling of certain crises.



Oliver Chassot/ONU

The case of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories is emblematic. The Council has devoted considerable attention to this crisis, with a number of resolutions and special sessions far exceeding those dedicated to other comparable crises, or even more serious ones in terms of casualties. This selectivity has been used by some States to question the impartiality of the body.

At the same time, the Council has been criticised for its inability to effectively address serious violations in countries with significant geopolitical weight. Situations in China, particularly in the Xinjiang region, or in Saudi Arabia, have highlighted the limitations of a system built upon the will of Member States. In 2022, for instance, the refusal to discuss a report on Xinjiang underscored the capacity of certain actors to block uncomfortable initiatives.

Another structural problem is the composition of the Council. Although the founding resolution establishes eligibility criteria based on respect for human rights, in practice, these criteria have been applied loosely. States with questionable records are still elected as members, which raises doubts about the coherence of the system. Libya's suspension in 2011, as a result of the repression by Muammar Gaddafi's regime, remains the exception rather than the rule.

Practical limitations also affect the effectiveness of the Council's mechanisms. UPR recommendations are non-binding, and their implementation depends on the political will and institutional capacity of States. In many cases, the commitments made result only in marginal changes or legislative reforms with no real impact in practice.

Furthermore, investigative mechanisms, although valuable in terms of documentation, lack coercive power. The absence of effective links with international justice mechanisms limits their impact in terms of accountability. The Commission on Syria, for example, has produced comprehensive reports for over a decade; however, the lack of consensus within the UN Security Council has prevented the referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court.

Finally, the Council faces mounting pressure concerning the activities of certain human rights defenders within civil society. Some States have attempted to restrict the participation of non-governmental organisations or to intimidate defenders that cooperate with the system. This phenomenon, known as "reprisals", constitutes a direct threat

to a foundational element of the Council's operational framework.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

On this twentieth anniversary, the Council finds itself in an international environment that is significantly more complex than at the time of its creation. Increased competition between major powers, the erosion of the liberal international order and the rise of sovereigntist narratives pose structural challenges to the way it operates.

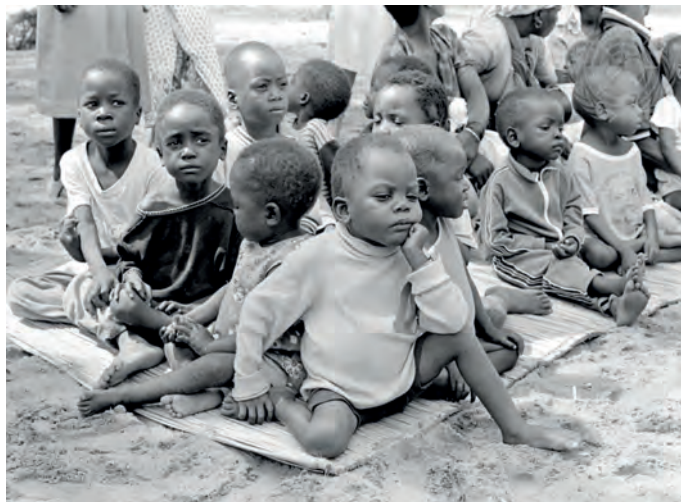
One of the main challenges is growing geopolitical polarisation. The rivalry between the United States, China and other powers has brought confrontational dynamics to the Council that hinder the adoption of consensus. In this context, the risk is that this body will become a forum for rhetorical confrontation rather than an effective mechanism of protection.

Universality, one of the founding principles of the Council, is also under pressure. Some States question the legitimacy of international standards because they believe them to be imposed or culturally biased. This debate, while not new, has intensified in a context where national and regional identities are being strongly asserted.

Another key challenge is the implementation of the resolutions and recommendations adopted. The gap between norms and practice remains one of the main problems of the international human rights system. Bridging this gap requires not only political will, but also resources, institutional capacities and more robust follow-up mechanisms.

In this regard, one possible line of action would be to strengthen the links between the Council and other actors in the international system, including international financial institutions, development agencies and regional actors. Integrating human rights into economic, climate and technology policies could extend the Council's impact beyond its traditional sphere.

Likewise, digitalisation poses new challenges and opportunities. The use of surveillance technologies, disinformation and the control of digital space (cyberspace) by States and private actors require regulatory responses that the Council has begun to explore, but which are still at an early stage.



Paul Heath Hoeffel/UN

Climate change represents another critical area. The relationship between environmental degradation and human rights is becoming increasingly evident, but international governance in this field continues to be fragmented. The Council could play a more active role in articulating standards and raising awareness of the impact on vulnerable communities, particularly those most at risk.

Finally, the legitimacy of the Council will largely depend on its ability to consistently address violations,

regardless of the identity of the perpetrator. This entails moving towards more objective criteria in the selection of situations, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and ensuring a composition that reflects a genuine commitment to human rights.

CONCLUSION: AN INDISPENSABLE INSTITUTION IN TODAY'S TURBULENT WORLD

Twenty years after its creation, the Human Rights Council stands as a paradoxical institution. On the one hand, it has contributed significantly to the institutionalisation and expansion of the international human rights system, introducing innovative mechanisms and drawing greater attention to human rights violations worldwide. On the other, it remains caught up in the political dynamics that limit its effectiveness and call its legitimacy into question.

Far from being a failure, the Council reflects the tensions inherent in an international order based on state sovereignty and multilateral cooperation. Its future will depend more on the evolution of the geopolitical context and the willingness of States to honour their commitments than on formal reforms.

In a world characterised by multiple crises—armed conflicts, authoritarianism, growing inequalities, the climate emergency—, the need for a global forum dedicated to human rights is more important than ever. The question is not whether the Council should exist, but rather how it can adapt to better address the challenges of the 21st century.

With its pros and cons, the UN Human Rights Council is an international body that would have to be created if it did not exist, and which is called upon to play an indispensable role in the future of the global geopolitical landscape. A future in which the major conflicts currently afflicting humanity could hopefully come to an end and give way to a world in which respect for human rights is a universal requirement.

**ANTONIO ARMADA VÁZQUEZ, DIRECTOR FOR INDUSTRY, SYNERGIES AND ENABLERS (ISE)
AT THE EUROPEAN DEFENCE AGENCY (EDA)**

“EUROPE CANNOT OUTSOURCE ITS SECURITY AND DEFENCE”

“Technological sovereignty is vital to ensuring Europe’s survival in an increasingly unstable and competitive world”

MAJOR General Antonio Armada Vázquez (Madrid, 1968) was appointed Director for Industry, Synergies and Enablers at the European Defence Agency (EDA) on 1 June 2026. His appointment—the result of a highly competitive selection process involving over one hundred candidates from across the EU—places a Spaniard in a high-level position at a time of profound transformation in the European security architecture, where the EDA seeks to establish itself as the connecting hub linking Member States with an industrial base that must become more agile and resilient.

For the Agency’s new director, there has been a paradigm shift: “Europe cannot outsource its security and defence,” and he states that, in the current climate of geopolitical instability, industry is no longer just a supplier of materiel, but rather a “defence capability in its own right,” the sovereignty of which is “vital to the survival of the European way of life.”

He warns that innovation cycles have shrunk “from years to weeks” and that it is now crucial to ensure that these technologies quickly and effectively become real military capabilities on the field. He suggests, among other things, “integrat-

ing the energy of start-ups and SMEs with large corporations.” He claims that “generosity and overcoming national self-interest” are key to building a true innovation ecosystem with universities and research centres.

He considers it crucial that both society and industry professionals view defence as “a noble service” essential “for the protection of our way of life, rights and values.” In his view, improving defence capabilities is also a moral duty, “providing the best possible equipment to those who put their lives at risk to defend society.”

Before going to Brussels, General Armada handed over command of the Army War and Leadership College—the final chapter in a distinguished 39-year career. After graduating top of his class, he

served in The Legion and participated in missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan. He joined the NATO Joint Headquarters Southwest (JHQ Southwest) and served as a liaison officer in the United Kingdom before returning to Spain to head the Infantry School. He was posted to Mogadishu as Chief of Staff of the European Union Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM Somalia) and, upon his promotion to general, he was appointed Director for Support and Enablers of Eurocorps. This experience in Strasbourg was undoubtedly decisive in his selection for the EDA, to which he also brings extensive language skills (he speaks English, French, German and Italian).

His profile is further enhanced by his outstanding work as a researcher in cutting-edge technologies. He has won two Defence Research Awards (2006 and 2011) and, in 2018, was awarded the Hernán Pérez del Pulgar Prize for a study on autonomous and robotic systems, in which he predicted the importance of drones and robotisation in future conflicts, a prediction confirmed by the war in Ukraine.

In this interview, conducted in his office at the War and Leadership College a few days before joining the EDA, General Armada speaks with the enthusiasm of

**“The EDA is at a
crucial juncture in
its history and is
set to play a central
role in European
defence”**



someone who feels ready to face great challenges.

—What is the future for European defence?

—You only need to watch the news a couple of times to realise that global geopolitics is changing at an exponential speed and that the world is already governed by new rules. Unfortunately, we are heading towards an increasingly competitive and hostile scenario. In light of this, Europe is the ship that provides Spain with the best guarantees in the medium and long term to navigate the turbulent seas ahead.

We are at a crucial juncture in our history and, to answer your question, I do not know what the future holds for European defence because it is still being written; it will depend entirely on what we do. But I do know the future we must strive for: one in which every EU Member State provides itself with the necessary capabilities to guarantee the security of its people and its national interests.

Thus, following the principle of the “single pool of forces”, we will be able to contribute to a common defence that is and will continue to be pivotal to face future challenges.

The key point is to ensure that this common defence is coordinated through NATO for certain threats and through the European Union for other challenges. The latter is what we have yet to build, although it is already provided for in Article 42(2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).

We still have a long way to go to accomplish this, and it will require adapting the EU's security and defence architecture. However, the new White Paper on European Defence is a source of hope that points in the right direction.

In short, I believe that Europe must take responsibility for its own security in order to attain our long-awaited strategic autonomy. However, this autonomy needs to be clearly understood so that it is not perceived as an estrangement from our non-European Allies or a weakening of the Alliance, but rather as a strengthening of NATO's European pillar. Through a more capable and responsible Europe, we will achieve a more robust and balanced Alliance.

—What role does industry play in this commitment to strategic autonomy?

—There is no doubt that without a defence industry there is no strategic autonomy. Polemology (the study of war) teaches us that the technological and industrial base of a warring party is decisive for the outcome of any armed conflict. We are now seeing this in the wars of attrition: industrial replacement capacity is just as important as cutting-edge technology. Having the best missile in the world is insufficient if you only have ten; you need the manufacturing capacity to produce thousands of missiles and the agility to constantly adapt to the adversary's technological countermoves.

In a war of attrition, the industrial base of one side engages in a genuine “combat” against that of the opponent, a battle that is decisive for the overall outcome of the war. That is why industry is more than just a supplier of materiel; it constitutes a strategic capability in its own right, essential for the defence resilience of the European Union.

Apart from the fact that the defence industry is yet another capability of defence itself, we must understand another aspect of this symbiotic relationship between defence and the defence industry. The former is the user of the capabilities provided by the latter, and the latter is a capability that must be defended by the former, not only in the sense of fostering and promoting it, but even physically protecting it, especially when there is an existential threat. The reason I am saying this is because in the delicate balance that must exist between the interests of defence and those of industry, the greater the likelihood of a conflict, the more importance must be given to purely defence interests.

Thanks to the aforementioned symbiosis, the vast majority of interests are shared by defence and its industry. However, in a high-tension scenario, commercial profitability considerations typical of peacetime must be subordinated to operational requirements. This encompasses critical decisions such as guaranteeing security of supply, having the ability to quickly scale up production, ensuring technological sovereignty, adopting open architectures, spearheading innovation, boosting resilience, shortening develop-



ment times or protecting sovereign technologies that are not dual-use.

In short, industry is essential for achieving sovereignty, but it is insufficient for it to be profitable, create jobs or act as an economic driver. Furthermore, defence criteria must come first in order to create a fully integrated industrial ecosystem that is superior to that of our opponents.

—What role does the EDA play in securing future European defence capabilities?

—The short answer is that the EDA plays an absolutely central role. To fully understand our role, we must start from an unquestionable legal and sovereign premise enshrined in the Treaty itself: defence is an exclusive competence of the Member States. Each country in the Union is in charge of its own armed forces and its strategic decisions.

However, the current geopolitical reality calls for a great deal of pragmatism. We are fully aware that, individually, no Member State—no matter how big or powerful its industry and its armed forces may

be—has the necessary capacity to face the global challenges ahead of us.

This is precisely where the EDA's *raison d'être* lies. Our mission is not to impose anything from Brussels, but to help Member States provide themselves with the necessary capabilities, prioritising a collaborative approach. We simply act as a bridge.

We are the “intergovernmental defence nexus” at EU level. The word “nexus” says it all. It means we are the structure in charge of ensuring coherence. We align the EU's institutional and financial initiatives with the real sovereign needs of the Ministries of Defence.

We help to identify the shortfalls of the European armed forces, seek synergies between different nations and coordinate efforts so that they can develop projects together. This way, we avoid inefficient duplication and achieve economies of scale.

But, in order to develop those capabilities, an integral part of the EDA's mission is to promote the strengthening of the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB).



In summary, the EDA provides highly effective support to Member States, enabling them not only to acquire essential capabilities for common European defence but also to meet their specific sovereign security and defence requirements by encouraging systematic collaboration.

—What are your responsibilities as head of the Industry, Synergies and Enablers Directorate?

—Rather than talking about my personal responsibilities, I would rather explain what this Directorate actually does and the value it brings to Member States. To give you an idea, the Directorate is divided into four units.

Firstly, the Industry Strategy and EU Policies (ISP) Unit. Here we contribute to strengthening the EDTIB so that the defence industry becomes a core pillar of military capability. How? On the one hand, as an “intergovernmental defence nexus” that gives nations a voice vis-à-vis the other EU institutions, we contribute to key documents such as the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS), the Euro-

pean Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) or the EU Defence Industry Transformation Roadmap (EDITR), and we lobby to ensure that co-legislators take defence requirements into account.

For instance, we have managed to introduce specific exemptions and deregulation to ensure civil laws do not constrain defence-related aspects (Omnibus V), mitigating the impact of REACH+/CLP legislation among others. We also develop projects that foster alignment with the Circular Economy (IF CEED).

On the other hand, through Key Strategic Activities (KSA), we identify which critical technologies we must master on European soil to avoid depending on third parties. We have also organised, with the support of the Member States, the Security of Supply Network (SoS Network 2.0).

We are also in charge of collaborating with the defence industry, providing them with valuable information on our portals, such as “Industry Engagement” or “SME Corner”, coordinating their interactions with the rest of the EDA and fostering synergies between the companies themselves through the Business-to-Business Networking (B2B) Platform.

However, what is truly decisive is how we support corporate financing. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) financial criteria were severely penalising the sector. Therefore, this ISP Unit spearheaded the Defence Ministers Declaration, which forced a review of the European Investment Bank’s (EIB) lending policy, and broke the long-standing taboo that defence was incompatible with sustainability.

Following the review of its lending policy, the EIB recognised that the defence industry is an essential pillar for European resilience and security because “no sustainability is possible without security.”

**“It is important
for the defence
industry to view
itself as a
noble service
to society”**

In order to consolidate this step forward, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with the EIB. As a result, the EDA is currently acting as the Bank’s defence advisor. This makes it possible to apply ESG criteria to the realities of the sector, preventing important projects that need private funding from being turned down by civilian financial committees that are ignorant of the peculiarities of the defence industry.

It is also worth highlighting the signing of the Financial Framework Partnership Agreement between the EDA and the European Commission, under which the European Commission can delegate to the EDA the management of funds such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) for mobility, research or air transport programmes, among others.

The IdentiFunding online tool is another way we assist businesses to obtain funding. What is it? It is a tool that acts as a financial radar. It helps our industries—in particular SMEs—to identify which European funds are available for their defence projects, allowing them to access millions of euros in EU funds that they would otherwise not know existed.

I am aware that I am going into too much detail, I will therefore be more concise about what the other three units do.

The Critical Enablers (CRE) Unit. The primary mission of this unit is to establish the technical framework required to streamline joint procurement and reduce acquisition costs, while treating genuine interoperability between our armed forces as its overriding strategic priority.

The best example of this is the European Defence Standards Reference (ED-STAR) system. A central database that unifies military standards to enable countries to procure compatible equipment from day one.

Additionally, we manage the Defence Test and Evaluation Base (DTEB), which serves as the central coordinating network for European military testing and evaluation centres. We coordinate a network of 343 national centres and agencies so that Member States can share their testing laboratories instead of duplicating multi-million-euro costs. Or the EDA’s Military Airworthiness Authorities (MAWA) Forum, which allows Spain, for instance, to recognise the military

certification of an aircraft manufactured by France, saving years of red tape and ensuring that our fleets can operate together seamlessly.

The Single European Sky (SES) Unit. European airspace is becoming increasingly congested. Therefore, we work with other agencies to enable military aircraft to use this airspace in a flexible and secure manner, and we encourage the integration of remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS) into the general air traffic.

And finally, the Operations, Training and Exercises (OTE) Unit, which oversees the joint acquisition of critical services that would be too costly for a single nation.

A great example of this is the EU Sat-Com Market, a contract worth up to €250 million through which we centralise the procurement of commercial satellite communications. Another example is the provision of tactical aeromedical evacuation services for international missions.

On the other hand, we standardise the training of transport aircraft and helicopter crews so that they can work together in a live operation with full mutual trust.

—What initiatives would you highlight within the EDA's work programme and, in particular, within the Industry Directorate, for the next few years?

—The next few years are going to be absolutely decisive for the future of European defence, while the non-negotiable strategic objective is going to be to achieve Defence Readiness 2030.

In this new context, the EDA is set to play a central role in European defence, as requested at the latest European Councils. To achieve this, the EU countries decided at the last meeting of Defence Ministers to further strengthen the Agency so that it can continue to grow and increase its support to Member States in the development of their military capabilities.

This reinforcement will make it possible for our Industry, Synergies and Enablers Directorate to undertake a major internal reorganisation, whose great novelty is the establishment of a Collaborative Defence Procurement Centre to enhance the capability to jointly procure military materiel and contract services. This Centre will be very useful to EU nations as it saves costs and stimulates interoperability.

—How is Spain's Defence Technological and Industrial Base (DTIB) positioning itself within this restructuring of European defence?

—It is in an excellent starting position. Our industry ranks fourth in the EU and tenth in the world. A solid basis that is at a key moment of consolidation and international projection. The Spanish Ministry of Defence is doing its homework rigorously. Not only through key strategic frameworks, such as the Defence Industrial Strategy (EID 2023), the Defence Technology and Innovation Strategy (ETID) and the Industrial and Technological Plan for Security and Defence, but also through decisive and bold initiatives. Examples of this include the creation of the DIGEID (Directorate-General for Strategy and Innovation of the Defence Industry) and the significant investment effort embodied by the 35 Special Modernisation Programmes (PEM).

“We need to overcome national self-interest by collaborating in a generous and cooperative manner”

All this represents a unique opportunity for Spanish industry. And when I say unique, I do not only mean that it has no recent precedent, but also that there are no second chances in life, and an opportunity like this may never arise again. It is therefore a window of opportunity that needs to be seized with boldness.

To do so, industry must prove that it is up to the task, meeting the milestones of the Special Modernisation Programmes (PEM) in a timely and appropriate manner to provide our armed forces with the best capabilities, while at the same time undertaking an essential transformation. In my opinion, the key word in this process must be integration. This integration must operate on two simultaneous levels. First, at

the national level, to reduce fragmentation in the sector and make the most of combining large corporations with scale-ups, start-ups and SMEs—the new players in the defence sector.

Large companies must act as a real driving force for these younger and more dynamic enterprises, while also integrating universities and research centres to complete the R&D&I ecosystem. We must banish the old “zero-sum competitive mindset” and replace it with a truly collaborative win-win culture.

However, this concept of integration must go one step further. We need total integration between the defence industry and the end-user—our militaries. The armed forces cannot be mere recipients of capabilities at the end of the production line. A process of constant feedback is crucial before, during and after the development of each programme.

In this regard, joint experimentation is the best tool to ensure that the manufacturing base delivers precise and agile solutions adapted to the real needs of combatants on the ground.

In order to achieve this highly advanced ecosystem, we must also face one of today's greatest challenges, both in Europe and especially in Spain, attracting and retaining talent.

We are suffering from a shortage of engineers and scientists largely due to an unjustified negative image of the defence industry, born out of sheer ignorance. This is very similar to what happened to the European Investment Bank before the change in perception towards our sector.

It is therefore our duty to explain the importance of our work. Defence research is a direct service to the common good. It means providing our Armed Forces with the best capabilities to defend our society, our rights and freedoms, our way of life and our values. If we manage to convey this truth, our brightest young people will want to contribute their talent and will feel deeply proud of what they do.

As I was saying, integration must operate on two simultaneous levels, the second one being the European level. This is the natural and necessary step forward. The Spanish DTIB must seize this golden opportunity to accelerate its internationalisation and enhance its cooperation in Europe, overcoming the inertia of only competing

“Industry is not just a supplier of materiel; it constitutes a strategic capability in its own right”

for the local market. At the EDA's Industry Directorate, we are designing tools precisely for this purpose. Structures such as the future Collaborative Defence Procurement Centre, the SAFE plan or the IdentiFunding tool are designed to enable companies with the talent of Spanish corporations to take that European step forward with all the necessary guarantees.

Given the geopolitical and economic direction we are facing, ensuring the resilience of the supply chain and remaining competitive on a global scale is no longer simply a matter of improving our efficiency. In the medium and long term, European transformation and integration will be a matter of sheer survival.

Spain has a great deal to contribute and to gain in the Europe of Defence. If our industry takes this step forward, offering innovative, competitive and technologically advanced solutions, its projection in the global market will be guaranteed. However, if it fails to take this step now, isolation will eventually cause it to become irrelevant even in its own local market.

—What are the main challenges that European cooperative defence programmes will have to face?

—Cooperating in defence has never been an easy task, but in the current landscape it is no longer just a political option: it is a necessity to achieve Defence Readiness 2030.

In my view, the greatest challenge is to overcome national “self-interest”, which seeks to prioritise each country's interests at all costs—whether industrial or regarding specific technical requirements—instead of focusing on what each country excels at.

This lack of cooperation is a result of not being fully aware of the seriousness of the situation in which we live and of the pressing urgency of the moment.

Europe's strength lies in its unity and that can only be achieved with generosity, accepting that if we sacrifice certain specific aspects, we will all gain much more as a whole.

In this regard, I mentioned earlier the balance that must exist between the in-

terests of defence and those of its industry, especially at a time in which we are desperately seeking to achieve that readiness.

All stakeholders, and most notably companies within the sector, must demonstrate strategic vision and be guided by values. It is time to demonstrate a genuine commitment to society and its security, prioritising effectiveness and punctual delivery over the mere maximisation of economic profit.

20th-century bureaucracy. There is an urgent need to make European and national procurement legislation more flexible in order to speed up the acquisition of armaments. This is precisely one of the challenges we are boosting from our Directorate.

Furthermore, let us not forget that there are key areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber defence and the space domain in which it is simply impossible to develop



General Armada with the President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, and the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, at Eurocorps headquarters on 7 May 2025.

Another major challenge for cooperative programmes is the need to remain agile in the face of obsolescence. Future programmes cannot take a decade to come to fruition. In Ukraine, we are seeing that the cycles for introducing technology—from its invention to its actual implementation on the battlefield—and the emergence of counter-technologies are becoming increasingly shorter, now taking as little as three weeks. Cooperative projects must be based on open and modular architectures that allow innovation to be absorbed immediately. Nor can we respond to 21st-century threats with

competitive capabilities at a purely national level. To avoid dependence on giants such as the United States or China, the only way forward is to join forces and cooperate at a European level.

In other words, making progress in cooperative programmes requires shifting from a culture of self-interest and mistrust to one of generosity and urgency. I hope that the Collaborative Defence Procurement Centre we are designing at the EDA will make a decisive contribution, with the help of the nations, to achieving that agility and joint procurement required by the geopolitical landscape.

INTERVIEW



—How does the recently approved Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument benefit the implementation of common European projects?

—It is, in fact, the great financial catalyst designed by the European Commission to promote common projects.

Through SAFE, the Commission will issue debt to mobilise a historic potential of up to €150 billion in loans for Member States. This represents an unprecedented injection of financial stability to boost the defence industry.

However, for a project to be eligible, the regulations require it to form part of a joint procurement involving at least two countries. In order to meet this requirement, nations can use our G2G online platform. It is a secure digital portal where Ministries of Defence share their acquisition plans in real time and coordinate joint procurements among themselves.

Moreover, we act as the key technical and intergovernmental liaison to help nations aggregate demand, harmonise their requirements and shape those projects eligible for SAFE funding.

—Will it be possible to achieve a truly integrated European defence market?

—Of course it is possible! It will depend on what we do. It will not be a quick or easy process, but if we fail to do so, we will pay a very high price, because in the long run it

is an absolute necessity for geopolitical and economic survival.

Thus far, the European market has been deeply fragmented because each nation zealously protected its own domestic market. However, the rules of the game have changed dramatically. The pressure of war on our borders and the urgency to achieve Defence Readiness 2030 are acting as a catalyst for integration. For that integration to become a full reality, we must harmonise requirements and aggregate demand—two core tasks facilitated by the EDA.

As long as governments continue to procure in isolation, the market will remain fragmented. Real integration will begin when nations make extensive use of the €150 billion through the SAFE instrument. As soon as defence ministries present a unified front to the market, the industry will spontaneously restructure itself to meet that massive demand.

“Through a more capable and responsible Europe, we will achieve a more robust and balanced NATO”

As I said before, we must banish national self-interest and replace it with strategic generosity. Nations must understand that integrating the market does not mean their national industry will disappear, but that it will specialise and compete on a much larger and more powerful playing field, creating truly resilient supply chains in the face of industry giants such as the United States or China.

In short, if we are able to maintain that strategic vision, be guided by values and seize this unique moment, by 2030 we will not only have a more integrated market, but a much more secure and sovereign Europe.

—How do you see the evolution of the relationship between NATO and European defence?

—I see a natural evolution towards a more robust and balanced NATO, in which Europe takes responsibility for its own defence and contributes more decisively to Atlantic security. All this while being aware, as I mentioned earlier, that we are heading towards an increasingly hostile and competitive world that forces us to act with greater realism.

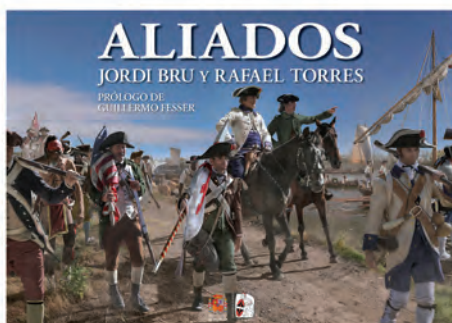
To understand this relationship, we must assume a fundamental fact: 23 of the 27 EU countries are NATO members. This means that more than 95% of the EU's population is protected by the Alliance and, in turn, contributes to its collective defence.

With these figures on the table, and under the principle of the “single pool of forces”, the logic is clear: the greater the defence capabilities of the countries belonging to both organisations, the more effectively we will contribute to both NATO and common European defence.

That is why when talking about the EU's strategic autonomy, I always insist that we must remember that strategic autonomy does not mean strategic independence. It simply means moving from dependence to choice: having the capacity to cooperate closely with NATO and the United States whenever necessary, but also having the muscle to act autonomously when a 360-degree challenge directly affects us as the EU. It means being a stronger partner, not a more distant one.

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