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SPANISH GEOSTRATEGIC VISION. LOOKING TOWARDS THE SOUTH

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of Spain's geostrategic vision, shaped by an increasingly unstable international environment and the rise of global challenges. Historically, Spain pursued a low-profile defense strategy, relying on NATO and the EU to safeguard its security. This approach allowed the country to prioritize economic and social development, while minimizing military commitments. However, escalating geopolitical tensions, including the war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East and intensifying global power competition, have compelled Spain to rethink its priorities.

Bridging Europe and Africa and situated along critical maritime routes, Spain is a pivotal actor for projecting influence in North Africa and the Sahel. These regions are essential for addressing pressing security issues coming from the South with direct impact on Spanish security. Simultaneously, Spain's

ABSTRACT relative geographic distance from active conflict zones like Ukraine and the Middle East affords a "strategic calm" enabling it to balance contributions to NATO and the EU with its own national security priorities.

This document highlights Africa's central role in Spain's geopolitical focus. Regions such as the Maghreb and the Sahel are deemed strategic priorities due to their direct impact on Spain's security, particularly in relation to challenges such as mass migration, terrorism and organized crime. To address these issues, Spain emphasizes forging cooperative partnerships in Africa, aiming to foster regional stability and development. Spain's lack of a colonial legacy in the Sahel serves as a key advantage in building trust and collaboration, enabling a pragmatic approach that prioritizes deterrence while tackling the socio-economic factors driving instability.

At the same time, Spain adopts a cautious yet cooperative stance in the Indo-Pacific, steering clear of entanglement in great power rivalries while supporting efforts to maintain regional stability; simultaneously, it advocates for a balanced European security approach, covering 360 degrees and emphasizing the importance of addressing threats from the south alongside challenges from the east.

In conclusion, Spain aims to align its national interests with international commitments through a comprehensive and pragmatic geostrategic approach. By leveraging its geographic advantages and cultivating sustainable partnerships, particularly in Africa, Madrid is playing a constructive role in European and global security. This evolving strategy reflects Spain's transition from a traditionally passive stance to a more proactive and assertive role. At a time when the international order is questioned, Spain is willing to contribute within its means and capabilities to global stability and security, capitalizing on its geopolitical advantages to face security challenges in the southern neighborhood of Europe.

Geopolitics is about power

Geopolitics has traditionally been employed to analyze a state's international behavior and to shape its security policy based on geographical variables. However, in the decades following the end of the Second World War, this academic discipline fell into disuse due to the negative connotations associated with the expansionist theories that dominated its discourse during the early 20th century.

Nonetheless, the weakening of the international system, driven by the relative decline of American power and the emergence of new revisionist powers challenging the global distribution of power, has prompted a renewed appreciation of geography, placing it once again at the core of political decision-making in most nations. Geography matters, and geopolitics re-emerged with renewed vigor as a tool increasingly used to comprehend the world, analyze interactions between states and elucidate how they formulate their security and defense policies.

Furthermore, in an era where industrial wars have returned with their full brutality and violence, the more aggressive dimensions of geopolitics have become increasingly pronounced, transforming the practice of international relations into an intricate and perilous game. Yves Lacoste's famous assertion that "Geography is used, above all, to make war"¹ can

¹ LACOSTE, Y., *Geography, This Serves First of All to Make War*, Translated by David Turnbull. Minneapolis, 1988. p. 1.

today be reinterpreted in an alternative sense: war is used to shape a country's geography. This aligns with what Robert Kaplan describes as "the revenge of geography": states may ignore their geography, but they can never overcome it².

Spain as a sovereign nation is conscious that the foundational principles of international law underpinning the global order have grown alarmingly fragile, to the point where the likelihood of major and medium powers resolving their disputes through force is now higher than ever.

Geography determines Spain's character

Until very recently, geopolitics garnered little interest in Spain, and serious studies on the subject were virtually non-existent. Benefiting from a favorable international context and a geographical periphery composed of partners, allies, or non-aggressive neighboring states, Spain's membership in powerful organizations such as NATO — and, to a lesser extent, the EU — addressed its geostrategic needs. Its security concerns were limited in scope and relatively simple to manage.

As a result, Spain could for decades afford to lack an independent geopolitical vision, based on the understanding that existential threats were virtually non-existent, potential risks were easily manageable and, in the worst-case scenario, allied support would compensate for its limited military capabilities. Within the context of European integration and Euro-Atlantic security guarantees, Spain's typical approach was to align with the majority, adopting a low-profile strategy that generally satisfied its national interests. What was good for the majority was normally good for Spain. In this framework, Spain embraced a bandwagoning approach — as defined by structural realism theorists such as Kenneth Waltz³ — by aligning with the strongest allied, the United States. This behavior, not so different from its European partners, became the cornerstone of Spanish foreign, security, and defense policy for decades, as it was both pragmatic and sensible.

This situation was not unique to Spain but was particularly evident in its case. Following the dominant American power was politically expedient, as it provided security while offering significant benefits, such as access to mutually advantageous trade agreements and advanced technology — technology unattainable through an autarkic foreign policy. Aligning with the strongest power and relying on common security provided by international organizations provided Spain with an acceptable level of security while avoiding excessive risks or burdensome military commitments. Consequently, Spain enjoyed enough strategic reassurance for decades, rendering the development of an autonomous and high profile geostrategy politically and socially unnecessary. Spain maintained adequate security and defense levels at a relatively low cost. Butter was more relevant than Guns.

This attitude of geopolitical passivity served Spain reasonably well for an extended period. The country prioritized economic and social development with the understanding that, if needed, others would provide additional military support. This behavior was not exclusive to Spain; many European nations pursued similar policies and reduced their military capacities to the extent that, over time, European state of defense became dangerously inadequate and excessively dependent on US guarantees.

The high sense of security that Spain experienced during the late 20th century and the early 21st century stemmed from a stable international environment. This was compounded by a public opinion that generally rejected strong geopolitical strategies, perceiving them as favoring external interventionism, which had historically led to detrimental outcomes for Spain. The result was a voluntary political limitation of Spain's national ambition, which fell short of its geopolitical potential. This translated into a low international profile and a preference for crisis management operations with limited scope, minimal military commitments, and high legitimacy, often conducted within the framework of collective security organizations to which Spain belonged.

The Spanish Armed Forces specialized in "out-of-area" operations while drastically reducing their structure and capacity for large-scale military engagements⁴. This characteristic was

² KAPLAN, R.-D., *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, 2012, pp.3-28.

³ WALTZ, KN., *Theory of International Politics*, 1979. Chapter 6.

⁴ ESTADO MAYOR DE LA DEFENSA., *PDC-01(A): Doctrina para el empleo de las Fuerzas Armadas*, Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa, 2020.

shared by most European partners and rooted in pragmatic reasoning: US hegemony made large-scale industrial wars virtually inconceivable, while globalization ensured that security challenges originating in distant regions — such as terrorism, regional conflicts or uncontrolled migration — would eventually impact Europe, facilitated by geographical interconnectedness. Limited intervention in such areas became a rational strategy to prevent these problems from spilling over into Europe.

In military terms, Spain focused on developing relatively simple and low-cost expeditionary capabilities, accepting the possibility of disappointing outcomes, as exemplified by Afghanistan. This security approach, which prioritized crisis management over high-intensity conflicts, was also reflected in the capabilities acquired by the Spanish Armed Forces. Light, expeditionary, and less resource-intensive assets were favored over the expensive, heavy, and operationally demanding equipment required for conventional military operations.

Simultaneously, Spain abandoned any ambition to develop nuclear weapons, despite the strategic autonomy they offer, trusting that its security against such threats would be guaranteed by its nuclear-armed allies, particularly the United States. The strength of the Washington Treaty ensured that the United States would accept existential risks to protect its European allies, in exchange for Europe's acceptance of limited strategic autonomy. Allied nuclear deterrence, in which Spain participated without deciding, thus became the cornerstone of its defense against nuclear threats, as Spain could not address them independently.

A turning point in Spain's geopolitical concerns

Spain's historically low geopolitical profile, a product of the optimistic years at the turn of the 20th century, persisted as long as the American "peace dividend" endured. During this period, Spain was able to channel its efforts and national resources toward strengthening its welfare state, operating under the assumption that in a world dominated by the United States, the major global crises and wars of the 20th century had become relics of the past.

However, this security paradigm began to shift as the international environment deteriorated, and the resurgence of major conflicts between states became an increasingly tangible reality. The war in Ukraine raised the prospect of Spain being drawn into open warfare in Eastern Europe, just as the enduring Israel-Palestine conflict highlighted instability in the Middle East. Such war scenarios could no longer be dismissed outright. Moreover, crosscutting security threats not confined to specific geographic regions — such as mass migration, cyberattacks, and international terrorism — became increasingly salient⁵. These emerging risks, originating predominantly from the so-called "Global South", began to play a significant role in Spain's security equation, demanding greater attention to geopolitics.

This evolving context led to a fundamental shift in Spain's security perception, fostering a greater receptivity to international challenges as it became increasingly difficult for Spain to remain insulated from them. Geography began to reassert its uncompromising influence, forcing Spain to confront the realities of an international system that was becoming ever more geopolitical. In adapting to this new world, governed by the principles of realism, Spain pragmatically began to recognize the risks of disengagement from global challenges. In a world where, as Robert Kagan asserts, "the jungle is back"⁶, Spanish public opinion gradually came to acknowledge that national security was inextricably tied to geography. Geography determines a state's power and shapes its destiny and that is certain for Spain too.

Spain's growing interest in geopolitics is thus rooted in the need to address the risks and threats the country faces, some of which have taken on an existential dimension. The political perspective offered by geography equips Spain to assess how systemic rivalries between great powers, territorial disputes, and radical ideological and religious movements — amid the resurgence of nationalism — pose direct challenges to its territorial integrity, the well-being of its population, and the normal functioning of its institutions. In essence, these are the factors that define Spain's vital national interests.

The alternative to developing a distinct geopolitical vision is to allow external actors to impose their own, an option that is unacceptable for Spain. The dangers of passively aligning with

⁵ GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA., *Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional 2021*, Madrid: Presidencia del Gobierno, 2021. Available at: <https://www.dsn.gob.es>

⁶ KAGAN, R., *The jungle is back*. The Washington Post. 2016, May 23. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

others' interests includes the risk of being drawn into ill-conceived wars. Spain's emerging geopolitical strategy, therefore, emphasizes the importance of formulating a national vision that accounts for geographical imperatives and responds effectively to the specific risks and threats facing the country.

This geostrategy, informed by the fundamental motivations behind state behavior — what Thucydides identifies as 'fear, self-interest, and honor'⁷ — aims to resolve Spain's dual security dilemma. On the one hand, it must ensure the adequate protection of its national interests; on the other, it must fulfill its international commitments responsibly. Finding a proper solution to this equation has become the cornerstone of its current national security strategy. As history demonstrates, a poorly balanced security approach has often condemned nations to irreversible defeats, even to irrelevance.

A singular geographical position

Spain's geographical position is unique, offering significant advantages in shaping its foreign and security policy. A peninsula straddling two continents — Europe and Africa — and bordered by three seas — the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Cantabrian — Spain serves as a strategic bridge. Through the Mediterranean, it connects to the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel, while its Atlantic coastline links it to major global maritime routes and projects it toward America, reinforcing its identity as a predominantly maritime nation.

This maritime character is a key strategic asset when compared to landlocked or continental European states, whose geographical constraints limit their access to global trade routes. In an era of globalization, Spain's ability to access the vast global flows of goods and value chains via its maritime connections enhances its geostrategic position. The Iberian Peninsula's location south and west of Europe facilitates this connection, granting Spain an advantageous position in the global economic and security landscape.

However, Spain's geography has also placed it on the periphery of Europe, a position historically seen as a strategic weakness. Its distance from continental centers of decision-making and the major currents of European geopolitics has, for centuries, left Spain relatively isolated. Geographically, Spain is located in the southwestern corner of Europe and is separated from the rest of the continent by the Pyrenees, a formidable mountain range that historically hindered easy connection with the continent.

Unlike the central European plains, characterized by vast, fertile, and easily navigable lands, the Iberian Peninsula features fragmented and rugged terrain, with a large central plateau, limited rainfall, and numerous mountain systems. Spain's geography makes it the second-highest country in Europe by average altitude, after Switzerland, not because of towering peaks, but due to the sheer expanse and elevation of its central plateau. This singular terrain has historically made Spain almost an impregnable fortress against invasions, while simultaneously accentuating its geographic and political isolation.

The interplay of Spain's geography and its history shaped the independent and resilient character of its people, but it also limited its participation in many major political processes that defined modern European history. Nevertheless, this same geographical position spared Spain from the devastating effects of the two world wars of the 20th century. In recent decades, however, deep internal and external transformations enabled the country to emerge as one of the most cosmopolitan states in Europe, increasingly integrated into the international system. Geography has therefore determined the historical trajectory of Spain as a nation but also shaped the idiosyncrasies of its inhabitants.

In the current context of open warfare in Eastern Europe, the strategic value of Spain's position has become increasingly apparent. Located approximately 3,000 kilometers from Ukraine, 5,000 kilometers from Middle East and, and 2,000 kilometers from Libya and the Sahel, Spain occupies a "favorable corner" of the Mediterranean basin and enjoys a geographically advantageous position on the European continent when considering security.

Spain's quasi-island status means that wars like the one in Ukraine impact its national security, but not with the immediacy or intensity experienced by countries such as Poland or the Baltic states. Similarly, the situation in Libya, while significant, impacts more Italy than Spain. Its

⁷ Interpretations of state motivations (fear, self-interest, and honor) are commonly associated with the "Melian Dialogue" in: THUCYDIDES, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (R. Warner, Trans.), 2006.

relative remoteness from the active conflict zones on Europe's periphery provides it with "strategic depth" in addressing these crises.

While the conflicts surrounding Europe affect Spain's national interests as a European partner and Atlantic ally, they do not pose existential threats to its territory, population, institutions, or economy. Spain's relative geographical distance enables it to approach common European security challenges with a degree of "strategic tranquility" and a lesser sense of urgency compared to most of its European neighbors or transatlantic allies.

Global vision and regional approach

Spain is fundamentally a Euro-Atlantic country situated in a geographical space where it shares values and interests with its partners and allies. This positioning obliges Spain to maintain a comprehensive perspective on global security challenges, analyzing risks and threats and looking for answers in alignment with its partners. At the same time, Spain must calibrate its international behavior based on its own national security priorities, which do not always coincide entirely with those of its allies.

In this context, Spain positions itself as a medium-sized power globally⁸ and a relatively significant player in Europe in terms of size, population, economy, and armed forces. Consequently, Spain approaches security challenges with a global vision, while it prioritizes its external actions through a regional focusing. This approach acknowledges that Spain's interests and security concerns extend across the world and at the same time, it recognizes its limited capacity to have a substantial influence in every world region. As a result, not all geographic areas hold equal importance for Spain, and prioritization becomes necessary⁹. This is not a peculiarity of Spain as it is normal for most states, whether large, medium, or small.

Spain's geographical position and its status as a medium-sized power allow for a strategic classification of global regions based on their relevance to Spanish interests. Generally, the principle of geographical proximity applies, that is the closer a region is to Spain, the more significant are perceived the risks and threats coming from it and the more urgent to provide an answer. While globalization has somewhat mitigated the stark application of this principle by increasing Spain's interests in distant regions, proximity remains the prevailing rule. This simplifies the definition of key strategic objectives for planning purposes and minimizes the likelihood of miscalculations regarding Spain's national priorities.

From this perspective, there are notable qualitative and quantitative differences in the significance of various regions for Spanish national security. For instance, events in the Indo-Pacific — where Spanish security interests are limited, and its capacity to contribute meaningfully to regional security is minimal — are less significant than developments in the Mediterranean and North Africa, particularly its western region. These latter areas are of strategic importance to Spanish substantial interests, and Spain can exert direct influence on its security and stability.

Conversely, from a purely national perspective, the conflict in Ukraine cannot be considered a vital interest for Spain. Ukraine's geographical distance from the Iberian Peninsula means Spain has no territorial claims, no Spanish population at risk, nor critical resources essential to its economy. What elevates Ukraine's importance within Spain's security framework is Russia's aggression against internationally recognized Ukrainian territory, the open and dangerous nature of a major warfare, the potential spillover effects on European territory, and Spain's commitments within the frameworks of NATO and the European Union.

Geography plays however a moderating role in Spain's stance on the war in Ukraine. The physical distance tempers Spain's intensity of interest and fosters a cautious approach toward any interventionist enthusiasm. Spain's contributions to Ukraine's security are adequately addressed within the broader commitments assumed under NATO and EU solidarity, aligning its actions with those of its allies.

Atlantic solidarity places Spain alongside its European partners, which is logical given the shared interests and common security concerns. Nevertheless, the main strategic interest of Spain is to remain vigilant on Europe's southern flank, where its vital interests are

⁸ GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA, *Libro Blanco de la Defensa 2020*, Ministerio de Defensa, Madrid, 2020, pp.55-56. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es>

⁹ MINISTERIO DE ASUNTOS EXTERIORES, UNIÓN EUROPEA Y COOPERACIÓN., *Estrategia de Acción Exterior 2021-2024*. Gobierno de España, Madrid, 2021. Available at the following link: <https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/Comunicacion/Noticias/Documents/ESTRATEGIA%20ACCION%20EXTERIOR%20ESP.pdf>

concentrated, and from which many security threats and risks originate. The aim is to avoid any “strategic surprise”.

Regarding the Middle East conflict, Spain’s geographical position once again plays a critical role in shaping its interests. Broadly speaking, the distance to this region reduces the importance of Spain’s direct interests and limits its capacity to act decisively there. Several factors qualify, however, this general rule including the region’s importance as a source of vital resources such as oil and gas for Spain’s economy. To this, we should add the emergence of terrorist threats originating from the Middle East, and the geopolitical instability that extends from this region into the Mediterranean and Europe. These considerations amplify the relevance of the Middle East in Spain’s geopolitical calculations, though understanding that its capacity to influence developments there remains limited compared to other regional or global powers.

Similarly, in the case of China, Spanish geopolitics adopts a balanced perspective, recognizing both the risks posed by China and the opportunities for cooperation¹⁰. Lessons learned from conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have tempered any enthusiasm for military engagements in the Indo-Pacific — a region where Spain’s interests are limited, and its ability to act independently is constrained in the event of an open confrontation between great powers.

Spain’s geopolitical strategy in the Indo-Pacific is a cooperative one focused on avoiding entanglement in the great power competition between the United States and China or being drawn into belligerent postures in regions they consider their spheres of influence¹¹. After all, Spain remains mindful that its own presence in the Indo-Pacific ended in the late 19th century, and it was not the Chinese who drove it out.

Projection and strategic depth

Of particular relevance to Spain, and closely tied to its geographical position, is the ability to project influence into nearby regions in northern Africa. In this regard, the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands, and the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla play a pivotal role in Spain’s geopolitical strategy.

The autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla grant Spain the unique distinction of maintaining sovereign territory on the African continent — a feature unmatched by any other European nation. While their existence is rooted in historical factors, their strategic significance is paramount. Today, Ceuta and Melilla have acquired new geopolitical importance as “risk thermometers” for European Union security. They serve as gauges for assessing developments in North Africa and the Sahel, facilitating the design of effective national and European response strategies and enhancing Spain’s contribution to European security.

Ceuta also offers an additional strategic advantage. Together with the northern shore of the Strait of Gibraltar, it helps safeguard maritime traffic through the Strait, ensuring the security of navigation between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Spain’s ability to control both sides of the Strait and guarantee the free passage of vessels is a strategic asset in its own right. This capability has grown in significance for European security looking at the vulnerabilities of critical chokepoints like Bab-el-Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Suez Canal to terrorist threats.

The Canary and Balearic archipelagos, meanwhile, provide Spain with strategic depth and enable projection into key regions¹². The Balearic Islands enhance Spain’s ability to influence the central Mediterranean, while the Canary Islands serve as a platform for projecting influence along the West African Atlantic coast. The latter, located at the western edge of the Sahel, play an integral role in Spanish and European Union responses to security challenges originating from West Africa, including the Gulf of Guinea.

Africa as a principal area of interest

Africa’s proximity — especially the Maghreb and the Sahel — confers upon these regions a strategic importance for Spain that surpasses areas that are more distant. Spain’s National Security Strategy identifies them as vital areas for national security, given the implications of

¹⁰ ESTEBAN, M. - ARMANINI, U., *La política informal de España hacia China: un enfoque coherente y europeísta*, Real Instituto Elcano, 2023. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-politica-informal-de-espana-hacia-china-un-enfoque-coherente-y-europeista/>

¹¹ MINISTERIO DE ASUNTOS EXTERIORES, UNIÓN EUROPEA Y COOPERACIÓN.), *A Strategic Vision for Spain in Asia 2018-2022*, Madrid, 2018. Available at the following link: https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/ServiciosAlCiudadano/PublicacionesOficiales/2018_02 ESTRATEGIA%20ASIA%20ENG.pdf

¹² MINISTERIO DE DEFENSA DE ESPAÑA (2020), *Libro Blanco de la Defensa 2000*, op. cit., pp.186-187.

mass migration, terrorism, organized crime, and regional instability¹³. These factors heavily influence Spain's security and defense policy, as significant national security and economic interests are at stake.

Geographical proximity makes African nations de facto strategic partners for Spain. However, these relationships are often complex to navigate due to the inability of many African states to exert full sovereignty over their territories, coupled with regional tensions and power struggles for hegemony in the Maghreb. Spain's main strategic objective is to prevent military escalations that could lead to direct confrontations between regional powers and to promote regional stability through dialogue, economic development, and political integration.

An additional goal of Spanish geopolitics is to mitigate the adverse effects of uncontrolled migration, regional conflicts, and terrorism, ensuring they do not evolve into existential threats to Spain. This entails fostering cooperative relations with North African partners based on shared economic and security interests with a final purpose of reducing tensions and enhancing regional stability.

Nonetheless, Spain is aware that geopolitical competition in the Maghreb, particularly due to the Western Sahara dispute, continues to destabilize the region. This reality underscores the need for deterrence as the cornerstone of any comprehensive and coherent Spanish geo-strategy that incorporates a security dimension. Spain's security policy emphasizes a robust military component, supported by advanced capabilities that ensure defense across the full spectrum of potential conflicts. This approach prevents "strategic surprises" and deters territorial claims on Spain's sovereign spaces. These capabilities are set to expand further with planned increases in defense spending in the coming years.

Further afield lies the Sahel, whose unique geopolitical and security dynamics make it a priority area of interest for Spain, despite the absence of direct geographical continuity with the Iberian Peninsula. The Sahel acts as an advanced frontier for Spanish and European security, where threats like terrorism, organized crime, and mass migration proliferate, ultimately affecting Europe. Spain's position as the European country closer to Africa gives the strait of Gibraltar a crucial role as the natural access route between the Sahel and Europe. While conflicts in Libya have shifted migration routes to the central Mediterranean, the proximity between Spain and Africa — just 14 kilometers across the Strait of Gibraltar — remains a defining factor for current and future migration flows.

In the Sahel and broader West African region, Spain's geographical proximity and historical knowledge provide it with an exceptional opportunity to contribute to Euro-Atlantic security. This is particularly significant at a time when the war in Ukraine has redirected European and NATO strategic focus toward the East of Europe, often to the detriment of Spain's southern security priorities.

Amid this shifting strategic landscape, Spain advocates for a 360-degree approach to European security, highlighting the need to balance the strong focus on Eastern Europe with renewed attention to the South. Spain aims to promote more ambitious initiatives within the EU and NATO enhancing regional stability through economic cooperation and military assistance. The European Union's *Strategic Compass* and, to a lesser extent, NATO's *Cooperative Security* framework might be, in Spain's view, suitable platforms for advancing collaboration with African states and regional organizations.

Rather than adopting a purely military approach, Spain envisions its geopolitical focus in Africa as centering on strengthening security and promoting regional development through cooperative partnerships. Instead of imposing European policies — as was often the norm in the past — the goal should be now to identify common ground on contentious issues such as migration, security management, and counterterrorism. This shift requires building stronger partnerships that avoid paternalistic attitudes, which historically have concurred to alienate African nations from Europe. Such attitudes have also favored revisionist powers like Russia and China to dominate the narrative in African societies.

Spain's lack of a controversial colonial past tends to decrease African skepticism toward European intentions. This advantage enables Spain to foster a degree of cooperation that aligns with African expectations, moving beyond the rhetorical declarations typical of

¹³ This is stated in the *Spanish Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional 2021*, which identifies Africa as a region of great relevance for Spanish security.

European institutions. The focus must be on developing practical partnerships that address African needs and deliver tangible benefits.

Spain has adopted a pragmatic and non-arrogant approach in its dealings with African partners, even when these partners occasionally act in ways that challenge principles such as the rule of law. This realistic approach will require finding new ways to engage with African governments that have contentious perspectives on issues like international criminal justice, sexual orientation, or the death penalty — though not necessarily adopting them.

Spain also recognizes the importance of maintaining an active presence on the ground in critical countries like Senegal and Mauritania, since minimum security conditions exist and the political environment allows a stronger cooperation. This sustained presence in challenging circumstances is the clearest demonstration of Spain's commitment to addressing regional issues and contributing meaningfully to their resolution.

Conclusion. Geopolitics Matters for Spain

Current geopolitical trends suggest that Spain is increasingly aligned with the assertive posture adopted by many countries, seeking to promote its national interests but with a cooperative approach. This new vision marks a significant departure from earlier periods, when Spain relied heavily on the guarantees provided by its membership in powerful political and military organizations such as NATO and, to some extent, the EU. For decades, these alliances offered Spain a high degree of security through collective defense, allowing it to prioritize economic growth and the maintenance of its welfare state over security concerns, under the assumption that any threats would be manageable with allied support.

However, this security paradigm is no longer adequate. In an international context where the rules governing peaceful relations are rapidly eroding, Spain has recognized the necessity of developing its own national geopolitical vision as a fundamental pillar of its defense and security policies. The renewed Euro-Atlantic focus on collective defense — at the expense of less militarily demanding crisis management — has had the positive effect of revitalizing Spain's defense capabilities and reversing decades of military decline. This shift will progressively enhance Spain's deterrence posture by establishing more credible and robust military structures.

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the big powers competition and, in general, the degrading international security environment have underscored the need for an updated security approach placing Spain in a scenario where open conflict in Europe has become a tangible possibility. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has strengthened political and military cohesion within NATO but has also compelled Spain to accept existential risks in Eastern Europe, a region where its direct interests were previously limited to Atlantic solidarity.

Simultaneously, Spain is aware that NATO's prioritization of the Russian threat has diminished the emphasis on a 360-degree security perspective — that Spain has always championed — by discouraging allied focus on security challenges emanating from the South. The possession of sovereign territories in North Africa — territories not covered by NATO's defense umbrella — and the ultra-peripheral status of the Canary Islands grant Spain a distinct geopolitical identity, but at the same time demand a defense policy tailored to Spain's specific circumstances, with deterrence serving as the cornerstone of any security strategy.

Spain's security policy enjoys limited autonomy within global arena but holds substantial potential for assertiveness in Africa. Leveraging its advantageous geographic position, Spain can contribute in a limited way to EU security policy in the East while addressing threats from its southern neighborhood. Spain acknowledges that Europe shares key interests with Africa in areas such as combating climate change and fostering sustainable, job-generating economic growth.

However, the EU has yet to achieve consensus on contentious issues like migration, security management, and counterterrorism, let alone fundamental values. For these challenges, Spain provides a vision of the Mediterranean as a connective space between southern Europe and North Africa, much as it was in ancient times, rather than as a dividing line between two opposing geopolitical regions. This perspective is increasingly necessary at a time when regional security issues are intensifying and an aging, economically strained Europe faces a young, dynamic, and growing Africa.

In a global landscape dominated by a few major powers, the opportunities for a middle power like Spain to act autonomously is constrained. Nevertheless, Spain can capitalize on its

geographic advantages to address in a positive way security challenges in its southern neighborhood. Proximity ensures that the structural weaknesses of many African states — along with their significant political, economic, and social challenges — are of heightened concern to Spain due to their direct impact on its national security and the demands from Spanish society to tackle them. Instruments such as civil and military cooperation, development aid, crisis management, and humanitarian response are well-suited tools for Spain to achieve a more prominent and effective presence in Africa.

Being the closest European country to Africa, and serving as the EU's southwestern border, Spain holds a comparative advantage as a security provider, unburdened by a colonial legacy that provokes skepticism in African societies. Spain is prepared to assume a greater role in addressing challenges originating in Africa, including drug trafficking, terrorism, infectious diseases, illegal migration, resource competition, and the presence of hostile paramilitary groups. These issues are increasingly relevant to both Spanish and EU security frameworks.

This geopolitical vision positions Spain as a prudent and constructive actor in international conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, while prioritizing its role as a leading advocate for African security initiatives within the EU and NATO. In May 2023, Franco-German broadcaster ARTE described Spain as a “discreet power,” though “prudent power” may be a more accurate definition for its international behavior. Spain possesses a significant amount of what Joseph Nye defined as “soft power,” the ability to positively influence its geopolitical environment without relying solely on military force¹⁴. Africa represents a primary theater where Spain is willing to exercise this influence.

Given its geographical position, growing economy, openness to the world and nuanced understanding of international security issues, Spain aims to remain a constructive actor in global affairs and a relevant security provider in Africa. If this ambitious geopolitical framework is successful, Spain will be able to balance its national interests and international commitments with a broader aim of contributing, within its means and capabilities, to European and global security.

¹⁴ NYE, J. S., *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, 2004, p. 4.