

# Spain: Forty Years in NATO

Félix Arteaga

**The year 2022 marks the 40th anniversary of Spain's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1982. For Spain, it was a key step towards its normalization as a democratic country and put an end to its strategic isolation during the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War. For the political leaders in charge of the democratic transition, NATO membership freed Spanish security from its previous dependency on bilateral cooperation agreements with the United States, a situation that exposed Spain to Cold War risks without giving it any direct involvement in the decision-making. For the Spanish Armed Forces, Alliance membership opened a process of internationalization that transformed the military structures, organization, and equipment from a self-defense posture to an expeditionary one. For Spanish public opinion, the referendum on NATO membership created a social divide that was closed over time as NATO became perceived by the majority of society as positive.**

This article describes the evolution of Spanish membership in NATO from its entry to the celebration of the NATO Summit in Madrid in June 2022. First, it describes the implications of NATO membership and the referendum for Spanish strategic culture. Second, it analyzes the Spanish contribution to the Allied collective effort, and third, it addresses the question of NATO's role regarding the Mediterranean and North African security challenges facing Spain. The analysis concludes with the latest political and social perceptions of NATO in Spain after the celebration of the Summit, and the possible scenario of evolution in the immediate future.

## THE REFERENDUM AND ITS LONG-LASTING IMPLICATIONS

Spanish entry into NATO was unilaterally decided by the Government. In response, the opposition, led by the Socialist Party, demanded a referendum to decide on Spain's continued membership in the Alliance. The call for a referendum became a critical issue during the 1982 electoral campaign, and it was held in 1986 under the new Socialist Government. Once in power, the Socialists added several conditions to the referendum to facilitate its approval: reduction in the number of US troops, removal of nuclear forces and the non-integration into the NATO's military structure. The clauses eased most of the public opposition to permanent membership, an opposition based mainly on the association of NATO with the US military bases in Spain and the risk that Spain could be drawn into a war under the article 5 clause.<sup>1</sup>

The referendum confirmed Spain's permanence in the Alliance with 60 percent of the voters voting in favor, a positive democratic support that legitimated Spain's NATO membership once and forever. Once within the Atlantic Alliance, the ending of the Cold War transformed the political and public perception of NATO but not the strategic culture associated with the referendum. Spain had no threat perception during the Cold War given its isolation in Europe, hence the resistance of political leaders and public opinion to expose themselves to risks arising from membership in a military alliance.<sup>2</sup> The fading of the Cold War and the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact diminished the concern about a military conflict. In addition, the Atlantic Alliance's focus shifted from the core task of collective defense to the new one of crisis management, which transformed the biased perception of NATO caused by the ideological debates during the referendum process. The new role of NATO to provide international security through peace-keeping operations helped the Spanish armed forces to deploy troops abroad, join multinational force structures, and accomplish its transformation. Spanish troops became available for NATO missions and operations from the Balkans conflicts to the present, and Spain joined the integrated military structure in 1999.

However, the referendum revealed the existence of a large number of voters opposed to military alliances and expenditures and, what is more worrying, the divisive impact of de-



The year 2022 marks the 40th anniversary of Spain's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1982. Pictured is the Accession of Spain ceremony at NATO Headquarters in 1982. Second from the left is Mr. J.P. Llorca, Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs with NATO Secretary General, Mr. J. Luns seated on his right (photo: NATO photo)

fense debates on public opinion. Therefore, the political and military decision-makers crafted a strategic culture based on the low priority of defense issues, the avoidance of combat missions and the reduction of military expenditures to circumvent such divides (the public controversy over Spanish intervention in Iraq in 2003 confirmed the soundness of the perception). Such elements still predominate in Spanish strategic culture and help to explain the Spanish contribution to NATO in the last four decades.

NATO affairs have been considered a question of state in national politics, and governments of all stripes have received overwhelming support from the political parties excepting only the far left, anti-system, and independent parties. Therefore, national governments have contributed to NATO without difficulties but always within the limits allowed by the national strategic culture. All the key documents of Spanish defense and foreign policies reaffirm the relevance of NATO membership for national security, European collective defense and the alignment of national and Allied military planning systems.<sup>3</sup> Commitment to NATO is kept on equal footing with the development of a European defense within the European Union that Spain considers as a complement rather than an alternative to NATO. In fact, Spain strives for EU strategic autonomy 'without overlapping and in conjunction with NATO' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021, 67).<sup>4</sup>

#### SPAIN AS A RELIABLE PARTNER IN NATO

The Spanish contribution to NATO must be measured against the limitations of the national strategic culture. On the one hand, the abovementioned limitations constrained the potential contribution of Spain regarding combat operations and military expenditure, but, on the other hand, Spain has taken part in all the NATO missions and operations at a level above the Allied average to compensate for its cultural handicap.

Spain has taken part in many NATO missions, most of them with a low military profile: the naval standing forces (Mediterranean and Atlantic), air policing (Baltics), disaster relief (Pakistan), training (Afghanistan and Iraq) and stabilization (Balkans and Afghanistan). Of course, all of them could creep into self-defense actions, but the commitment of Spanish troops was conditioned on limitations on the transfer of authority to the operational commanders (caveats), and, since 2005, it has also been contingent upon the previous assessment of the Congress to authorize the deployment of troops abroad.

Nevertheless, Spanish governments have at times also exceeded the limits of its strategic culture and taken part in NATO's air-combat operations (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo), anti-ballistic missile deployments (Turkey), military campaigns (Libya) and enhanced Forward Presence (Latvia and Bulgaria). In the same way, Spain contributed to the NATO

reinforcement before and after the Russian invasion of February 2022 with land, air, and naval assets to demonstrate its solidarity with the central and eastern Allies.<sup>5</sup>

By 2021 more than 125,000 Spanish troops had participated in 21 NATO operations, with a daily average of 1,500 troops, according to the data of the Chief of Defense Staff, and Spain ranks among the five largest contributors to NATO operations. The former contributions have been possible thanks to the investments in military capabilities of power projection that very few NATO countries have made and that have allowed Spanish troops to take part in highly demanding air, land, and sea military operations.<sup>6</sup>

The former contributions contrast with the small military defense expenditure per capita of Spain. Despite the objections regarding the percentage of the GDP as a comprehensive indicator to measure national contributions to NATO, it remains true that Spain usually ranks among the lowest contributors according to the GDP percentage criteria.<sup>7</sup> The Spanish defense budgets have suffered from the governmental goal of reducing its amount as much as possible. The defense budget has suffered cuts both in periods of economic recession and of growth, investments have lacked

a multi-year program, and the Ministry of Defense has resorted to financial engineering (reduced initial budgets, postponed payments, intra-agencies transfers, and extraordinary budgets among others) to compensate for the shortage of military expenditures.<sup>8</sup>

This pattern of budgetary behavior oriented towards internal politics provoked external criticism in NATO due its negative impact in the burden-sharing debate among Allies. Spanish governments realized the need to bridge the gap, but they postponed any decision until 2014 when NATO agreed to achieve the 2% of the GDP in the Defense Investment Pledge at the NATO Wales Summit. Since then they have maintained this commitment but not increased their budget to achieve the agreed target in 2024, though the Socialist Government announced its accomplishment during the NATO Summit in Madrid.

#### THE SOUTHERN QUESTION: THE SPANISH SOUTH

Well before it acquired NATO membership, the Spanish threat perception considered North Africa, the Gibraltar strait, and the Western Mediterranean as the main sources of concern for its national security.<sup>9</sup> Such perceptions were partially shared with the NATO Allies but not fully, as demonstrated



The 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid will impact in the Spanish relationship with NATO for several reasons. Pictured are NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Pedro Sánchez (Prime Minister of Spain) during the Madrid Summit (photo: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization)



Spain has taken part in many NATO missions, most of them with a low military profile: the naval standing forces (Mediterranean and Atlantic), air policing (Baltics), disaster relief (Pakistan), training (Afghanistan and Iraq) and stabilization (Balkans and Afghanistan). Pictured is Spanish Air Force A400M during exercise EART21 (photo: Flickr / NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

by the case of the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla, the only Allied cities in African territory, being excluded from the area of application of the North Atlantic Treaty. An awareness of strategic fragmentation remained within Spanish military planning despite the increased attention devoted by the armed forces to NATO operations abroad during the last decades.

Concern about fragmentation again gained momentum after the Arab Spring in 2010 and the declaration of the Caliphate in Iraq in 2014. The growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the proliferation of jihadist militias and the failure of NATO in Libya nurtured the feeling of fragmentation in the southern countries of NATO. Such reactions were fuelled by massive flows of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers on the southern borders of NATO. NATO response to these concerns was contrasted with the strong Allied measures taken in the eastern flank after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, hence the interest

of Spain to direct the Allies' attention toward the southern flank.

NATO's strategy of 360° degrees tried to deny the strategic fragmentation by enlarging the global focus, but the concrete measures devoted to coping with the southern threat, such as the Hub for the South at the Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) Naples or the Projection Stability initiative, were much less tangible and significant than the ones adopted against the Russian threat (Readiness Action Plan and Forward Extended Presence). In fact, the South became for NATO a catchword that covered everything but Russia, from Afghanistan to MENA, while for Spain the South includes the southern shore of the Mediterranean, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf of Guinea (NSS 2013).<sup>10</sup>

On the road to the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, the Atlantic Alliance become more assertive regarding the southern challenges. Successive informal and official documents called for

greater cooperation with the southern partners and regional security organizations<sup>11</sup> This assertiveness became connected with the geopolitical confrontation with Russia and China whose growing influence in NATO's south increased during the elaboration of the NATO Strategic Concept. In this way the risks posed by those extra-regional actors got the attention of NATO Allies and increased their interest in the south.

### FINAL REMARKS, SHORT-TERM EXPECTATIONS

The 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid will impact in the Spanish relationship with NATO for several reasons. Some of them have to do with the relevance of its outcomes, the approval of a new Strategic Concept in Madrid and the transatlantic cohesion vis-a-vis Russian aggression. But others have to do with the new approach of the Spanish government regarding Spain and NATO beyond its cultural pattern and the overwhelming support among the Spanish public for NATO.

The Spanish government applied to host the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid when public support for the Atlantic Alliance was around two-thirds of the population.<sup>12</sup> The very concession of the Summit boosted the commitment of the Government and its president to NATO beyond the traditional constraints of the existing strategic culture. The assertiveness of the Spanish authorities with regard to NATO and military affairs gained momentum in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with the government leading political and social reactions in favor of Ukraine. The President and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense led the national response in coordination with the NATO and European Allies to publicly defend the principles and values of the Atlantic Alliance.

Against the expected low profile of Spanish leaders during a military crisis, the president, Pedro Sanchez, and the Socialist members of his cabinet called openly for Spain's greater political, military, and financial engagement with the Alliance. Their assertive posture was even more noticeable because it collided with the posture of the most left-wing sector of the governmental coalition. As a result of the public statements and commitment, the public support for NATO peaked at 83% in June 2022.<sup>13</sup>

Another positive outcome for Spain was the explicit references in the Strategic Concept of Madrid to the southern challenges. The final text acknowledges the existence of particular security risks in the region (the term 'flank' is omitted), a goal that Spanish diplomacy had advocated during the successive drafts of the Concept. Nevertheless, it did not mention any NATO measures for the south, and the explicit measures against malicious activities in cyberspace and space, disinformation campaigns, instrumentalized migration, manipulation of energy supplies or economic coercion were linked to the authoritarian actors of the east and

not to the southern actors as Spanish diplomacy would have preferred.

The current political and social support will help Spanish governments to accomplish their military commitments to NATO's collective defense and almost double the defense budget to achieve the 2% target in 2029 instead of 2024. Spanish engagement with NATO is probably greater now than during any previous time in the last four decades, but the fulfillment of the expectations generated in the heat of the Madrid Summit and Ukraine's war is contingent upon political and economic circumstances beyond the control of the coming governments.

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