

Spain's Socialist Government Has the Least Responsible Security Policies in NATO

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Spain deserves criticism for being the sole member of NATO to refuse the defense spending targets agreed to at NATO's 2025 Summit in The Hague.

Spain is a wealthy country, and the Spanish military is professional and competent, yet the Sánchez government in Madrid has failed to support it.

Spain's national security strategy should focus on defending Spanish sovereignty and contributing to European collective deterrence, not issues like climate change.

Beginning in 2006 and reaffirmed in 2014, members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were asked to pledge 2 percent of their annual gross domestic product (GDP) to defense spending.

Spain reached its highest military expenditure in 1984, spending 3 percent of its GDP.¹ By 2016, Spain spent a mere 1.1 percent of GDP on defense. Since its 1984 peak, and especially since the end of the Cold War, Spanish defense spending has been insufficient and stagnant, not meeting the previous 2 percent of GDP standard, and falling even further short of the new 3.5 percent core defense spending goal (along with 1.5 percent associated infrastructure spending for a total of 5 percent) announced at the NATO summit in The Hague in July 2025.

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The Spanish government under Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez distinguished itself even among NATO’s lowest spenders at this summit by being the only NATO member to explicitly reject the new minimum of 3.5 percent of GDP on core defense spending, claiming that 2 percent was more reasonable (despite having long fallen short of this goal, as well).²

Sánchez, who is also acting president of the Socialist International, said that meeting the new defense spending target “would be incompatible with our welfare state and our world vision,” and also that it would require scaling back spending on Spain’s green transition.³

Prime Minister Sánchez has repeatedly pledged to meet the NATO 2 percent defense spending standard—but has yet to do so. Originally, Spain set a goal to reach 2 percent spending by 2029, but after pressure from President Donald Trump and from the rest of NATO, Madrid accelerated the timetable and now plans to hit the 2 percent minimum in 2025.⁴

As a percentage of GDP, Spain has been among the lowest defense spenders in the Alliance, having only allocated 1.28 percent—\$21.3 billion—of its GDP toward defense in 2024.⁵ Spain is nevertheless perfectly capable of meeting its defense obligations, given that it is the fourth-largest economy in the eurozone and the 14th-largest economy in the world. In fact, in 2025 Spain became Europe’s fastest growing major economy, with a projected 1.9 percent growth rate in 2026.⁶

New Defense Spending

The Sánchez administration unveiled a \$12 billion military investment plan that would raise Spanish defense spending to \$39 billion for fiscal year 2025, within reach of the 2 percent defense spending standard. The military investment plan included methods for confronting adversarial threats by developing “human and technical capabilities,” making Spain a “central and reliable member of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance,” and reindustrializing dual-use technologies.⁷

Within this plan, 35 percent is allocated for improving troop working conditions, 31 percent will be devoted to cybersecurity and telecom improvements, about 19 percent for defense and deterrence tools, and around 17 percent for emergency and natural disaster support.⁸ However, less than a fifth of the new spending will be used for “the purchase of arms in the traditional sense of the word,” as the prime minister put it.⁹

The \$12 billion investment plan that came to fruition almost overnight is necessary but extremely delayed. The Sánchez administration has stated that the bulk of funding planned for 2025 will come from three different

sources: (1) reorienting items from the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, (2) government savings, and (3) the margin provided from some items in the General State Budget that are “no longer needed.”¹⁰

The investment plan is designed to generate additional funds for the Spanish government. Sánchez estimates that the plan will increase total GDP by 0.4 percent to 0.7 percent. He states that “the objective [of the plan] is to turn this security crisis into a new economic stimulus for Spain.”¹¹ Military capability and contributing more to collective deterrence in Europe are quite clearly not the goal.

Security Strategy

Published in 2021, Spain’s National Security Strategy is intended to set policy for the foreseeable future, as it is only the fourth strategy of its kind in Spain’s democratic history.¹² The strategy presents two prevailing plans, the “Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan” and the “Spain 2050” strategy.

Woven throughout both plans are three pillars: “protecting people’s lives, rights, and freedoms, and the constitutional order; promoting the citizenry’s prosperity and well-being; and participating in the preservation of international peace and security.”¹³ Each of these plans, with the pillars intertwined, provides a road map for Spanish defense strategy. These three pillars are further divided into objectives that improve the crisis management model, favor the security dimensions of technological capabilities, and develop Spain’s capabilities for prevention, deterrence, detection, and response to new adversarial hybrid strategies.

Pillar one incorporates deterrence and defense strategies alongside the efforts to combat terrorism, take action in crisis situations, and conduct counterintelligence campaigns. Pillar two emphasizes cyber, maritime, and aerospace security, economic and financial stability, combating organized crime, organizing migratory flows, and securing energy. Finally, pillar three underscores strengthening multilateralism, European strategic autonomy, a higher profile in NATO, and the conservation of the environment. Spain’s national security strategy also contains a great deal of deeply unserious talk about climate change and other non-defense topics.

Outrageously for a U.S. ally, Spain’s national defense strategy identifies competition between the United States and China as a challenge and appears to blame the United States for the rising tensions. The strategy states that “China’s economic expansion, together with greater US protectionism, have increasingly strained their trade relations” and that “US

efforts to consolidate alliances and regain a certain degree of leadership in global governance are part of this tension between these two powers.”¹⁴

This hardly seems coincidental, given the importance that Sánchez has placed on deepening ties between Spain and China. In April of this year, Sánchez visited Beijing the same week that President Trump launched his tariff initiative, and Xi Jinping took the opportunity to call for China and the EU to “jointly oppose unilateral acts of bullying,” in reference to President Trump’s tariffs.¹⁵ On a previous visit to China, Sánchez noted “the enormous potential for growth in the relationship between Spain and China,” especially in green and innovative industry.¹⁶

Military Capabilities

The Spanish Armed Forces are impressive and professional, and with the full support of the Spanish government and funded at the appropriate level, could easily be among the biggest contributors of security in NATO.

Considering the dearth of Spanish defense spending in recent decades, the Spanish Armed Forces field some impressive capabilities across the land, sea, and air domains.¹⁷ On land, the Spanish Army employs Leopard 2A4 tanks and Pizarro infantry fighting vehicles. The Spanish Navy deploys Aegis-equipped F100 *Álvaro de Bazán*-class frigates, the new *Isaac Peral*-class submarines, and a multipurpose amphibious assault ship-aircraft carrier, the *Juan Carlos I*. The Spanish Air Force fleet fields Eurofighter Typhoon and F/A-18 Hornet fighter aircraft as well as Airbus A400M transport aircraft for strategic and tactical airlift.

The Spanish defense-industrial base designs, develops, and produces air, sea, land, and space systems. Spain’s aerospace sector leads its international defense sales and Spain is involved in several major European aerospace projects, including the A400M, the Eurofighter Typhoon, and the Airbus Helicopters Tiger. Spain is also involved in the production of munitions for European militaries through MBDA, a joint venture between major Western European countries.¹⁸ State-owned Spanish shipbuilder Navantia, the fifth-largest shipbuilder in Europe, builds the *Álvaro de Bazán*-class frigates, the *Isaac Peral*-class submarines, and the *Juan Carlos I*, and is currently building the first of a new class of frigates, the F110 *Bonifaz*-class frigates.¹⁹

Spain contributes to and participates in NATO operations across the continent. The Spanish Air Force deploys fighter aircraft to the Baltic states and to Romania, taking part in the air policing missions. The Spanish Navy is a regular contributor to Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean and other NATO maritime operations.²⁰ Following the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, Spain has contributed to the Enhanced Forward Presence mission in Latvia as part of a multinational battle group deterring Russian aggression.²¹

The unseriousness of the Sánchez government is likely to seriously erode Spanish military capabilities even beyond the chronic underfunding. For example, the recent decision of the Spanish government to cancel its F-35 purchase makes no sense in terms of force planning. There is no fifth-generation alternative to the F-35 in Europe, and there is no suitable replacement with short takeoff and vertical landing (STOVL) capability like the F-35B. Because Spain is set to retire its AV-8B Harrier II fleet by the early 2030s, this will render the Spanish Navy's flagship, the *Juan Carlos I*, purely a helicopter carrier and no longer an aircraft carrier.²² This will severely degrade the Spanish military's capabilities in air superiority, maritime strike operations, close air support, and for power projection, more generally.

The U.S. and Spain jointly maintain a naval facility in Spain at Naval Station Rota, which functions as a hub for the forward deployment of U.S. and other allied vessels in the Mediterranean and beyond. Four U.S. Navy Aegis destroyers are homeported in Rota.²³

The Mediterranean and North Africa

Spain should be spending more on defense to contribute to European collective deterrence—and the Sánchez government is also failing to address significant and ongoing threats to the Spanish homeland from Spain's near abroad.

According to Spain's National Security Strategy, its priorities in the Maghreb are to “promote an area of security, political stability, and development [by] collaborating with countries that are Spain's preferential partners and friends.”²⁴

Integrated within its National Security Strategy, Spain has presented four lines of effort related to combating organized crime and organizing migratory flows. From the perspective of the national security needs of the Spanish people, the most relevant of these lines of effort in the Maghreb region should be strengthening coordination with countries of origin and transit to prevent the illegal trafficking of drugs and people into Spain.

Some of what Spain is doing in this regard makes sense, such as strengthening bilateral military ties with West African governments in an attempt to fill part of the security vacuum left by the general French withdrawal from the Sahel in recent years. Stable governments can help to reduce illegal migrant and drug flows.

Other initiatives make far less sense, such as the signing by Sánchez of circular migration agreements with Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania over the past two years, efforts that are almost certain to result in increases of visa overstays and further contribute to the mass migration problems that Spain (and the rest of Europe) is facing. According to a 2024 survey by the Spanish newspaper *El País*, 57 percent of Spanish respondents believe that Spain has too many immigrants, and 75 percent of respondents associate this surge in migration with negative developments like increasing crime and housing costs.²⁵

In 2024, Spain's Canary Islands alone received 47,000 migrants arriving illegally by sea, and in 2025 the number of boat migrants began to surge in the Balearic Islands as well.²⁶

These unprecedented migrant flows augment security risks connected to drug smuggling. In February, Spanish authorities announced the discovery of a drug smuggling tunnel from Morocco to Ceuta, a Spanish exclave in North Africa. During the initial discovery of the smuggling tunnel, authorities seized 6.6 tons of hashish.²⁷ In addition, Spain has also seen a huge surplus in cocaine smuggling, with innovative new tactics being used by smugglers, such as the routine use of narco-submarines for smuggling drugs into Spain.²⁸

Conclusion

So long as Spain remains an inadequate defense spender with a national security strategy that is both unserious and unaligned with its traditional allies, the security of Spaniards and the success of the nation as a whole remain at risk. Spanish national security strategy should focus on defending the security, prosperity, and sovereignty of the Spanish people and on contributing to collective deterrence within the framework of NATO and the European community. It should do so both by defending Spanish borders and working to stabilize Spain's near abroad, and by spending sufficiently on the Spanish military to sustain Spanish contributions to NATO.

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