

Spain and NATO: 40 years

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Spain's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1982 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 demarcate with mathematical precision Spain's 40 years of membership of the organisation that forms the bedrock of the West's defence system. Taken together, these two events can be used to frame a reflection on what being part of NATO has meant for Spain during this period and on the continued benefits of membership in light of the current geopolitical outlook.

Spain did not join NATO by default, following in the wake of other countries, or as the result of a political decision taken by a government. The consultative referendum on its continued membership of the Alliance, held in 1986, may have generated intense debate among the Spanish public but the result was a favourable majority.

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Those of us who were not old enough at the time to take part in the referendum but who have grown up and lived in the context of Spain's membership of NATO, have always valued the additional legitimacy bravely sought by the Government of Felipe González. Since then, Spain has felt a natural sense of belonging in the Atlantic Alliance, which has supported us in the successful modernisation of the Spanish Armed Forces and in strengthening transatlantic ties.

Our Army, Air Force and Navy have benefited from membership of the Alliance for training purposes and for guaranteeing their interoperability with the Armed Forces of the other allies, developing a shared military and strategic doctrine. Spain has also made a significant contribution to the Alliance, making units available for its response forces and participating in the majority of operations and missions.

Being part of the Alliance has also facilitated Spain's return to the Western world, with which we share not only interests but –perhaps more importantly– principles and values that make us who we are. Together with the European Union, NATO plays a prominent role in defining and defending what Spain stands for as a country.

As a multilateral defence organisation, NATO's value lies in the protection it offers against threats to our security. While some of these come from our immediate neighbourhood, others also stem from our commitments as members of a European and Western community. In these threats pose a challenge to the security architecture on

which this community stands and which guarantees the prosperity and well-being of our fellow citizens.

The current crisis in Ukraine –a flagrant violation of international law, which has led to the indiscriminate use of force with no legal grounding against a non-NATO member– highlights the importance of adopting a broad understanding of potential threats and the key role played by the Alliance in consolidating Europe’s geopolitical structure and in strengthening its security architecture.

These are just some of the factors that have fed into reflections on the future of NATO in recent years. The Alliance is faced with the need to adapt to a new strategic paradigm, to a world once again defined by great power competition, which has moved on from the period ushered in by the end of the Cold War, characterised primarily by transnational threats. This broad reflection has covered a number of specific issues: the need to strengthen the Alliance’s political dimension, reinforcing the transatlantic link; the equitable distribution of its budget between the US and Europe; how to make the Alliance more resilient; how to maintain its technological superiority; the strengthening of partnerships with other powers; and the connection that we must now make between security and climate protection.

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The adoption of a new Strategic Concept for NATO at the forthcoming summit in Madrid will crystallise the arrival of this new age. For Spain, the decision to hold the summit in Madrid, coinciding with the 40th anniversary of our country’s accession to NATO, is an acknowledgement of Spain’s work and commitment to the Alliance over this period. However, it is also a huge responsibility.

The new Strategic Concept that will be adopted in Madrid is not a transition document: it is a major landmark, which will arguably recast the foundations of the Alliance. It is born of a new reality, and it will determine the life of the organisation over the next decade. The old Strategic Concept, which dates back to 2010, was designed to respond to the concerns of the world that emerged from the Cold War, politically unipolar and seemingly without military rivals. First and foremost, the Strategic Concept that will be adopted in Madrid must address the re-emergence of this rivalry, which is no longer limited to the traditional military dimension, and must therefore pay heed to the growing importance of so-called hybrid threats.

Organising the Madrid summit is a huge responsibility for Spain. However, it is also a major opportunity for our country. Firstly, it is a chance to share the positive outcomes of 40 years of membership with our fellow citizens. Secondly, it provides a platform for debate to advance our positions, such as the need to pay attention to all flanks (the 360-degree approach), and the need to achieve greater complementarity between NATO and the European Union in the realm of security and defence.

In June, Madrid will host a historic NATO summit. Forty years after joining the Alliance, Spain will be at the heart of the process needed to transform the organisation to deal with a new international reality and the new challenges it brings. Forty years on, those of us who have taken up the baton of that decision can reaffirm that Spain's membership of NATO is essential to safeguard our security and stability, and to defend the international order that expresses the values, principles and interests we stand for.

NATO defends what Europe defends.