
Spearhead?: Spain, Europe and the battle for the global South

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Executive summary¹

The war in Ukraine came as a geopolitical shock to Europe and a cultural shock to the EU. It reminds us that the use of force continues to be a determining factor in international (and European) relations and challenges the idea that economic ties with powers such as Russia (or China) contribute to their political liberalisation. The war has lent credibility to European leaders' recent calls to 'rediscover geopolitics' and the 'language of power', encouraging Europe to transcend an excessively legalistic or normative conception of foreign policy and security and to align economic policies and strategic priorities. Specifically, the resurgence of interstate rivalry and Russian and Chinese challenges to the international order at the regional and global levels seem to have established themselves as the main elements structuring European foreign policy and transatlantic relations. Meanwhile, the leadership exhibited by the US amid the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the widening of the economic gulf between the US and EU in the last two decades and the perennial intra-EU discrepancies on questions of security and defence point to the existence of major obstacles in the path towards greater European 'strategic autonomy'. However, doubts surrounding Washington's commitment to Ukraine over the short and medium term and the US decision to prioritise rivalry with China over the long term may oblige the Europeans to take on greater strategic responsibility.

The war in Ukraine seems also to have hastened and accentuated other significant trends in the international system, such as the growing assertiveness of regional powers (India and Brazil, for instance), which are reluctant to align themselves in the context of political rivalry between the West and Russia or China, and are seeking alternatives to the 'liberal' international order that emerged in the wake of the Second World War. It is also worth highlighting the growing disaffection of the so-called 'global South' towards the West, as the recent resurfacing of instability in the Middle East demonstrates. The West is accused of double standards and of failing to pay the same attention to their wars and crises as it does in the case of Ukraine. For their part, Russia and above all China seek to tap into this disaffection and exploit the (historical) sense of grievance in the global South to undermine the West's and Europe's image there. That said, the global South operates within a space of geopolitical non-alignment and ambiguity and is guided by pragmatism (depending on the circumstances, which great powers can deliver the most benefits?). The battle for the global South cannot therefore be reduced to its simple overall alignment with Russia (or China) or the West/Europe; rather, small changes and nuances in the stances of various actors in the global South could have major geopolitical consequences across a range of geographical and functional arenas.

¹ This analysis emerged from discussions at a meeting of the Working Group on 'Foreign policy, security and defence', held at the Elcano Royal Institute's offices in Brussels on 14 June 2023. The author is grateful to Guillermo Ardizzone, Félix Arteaga, Mario Esteban, Raquel García, Rubén Díaz-Plaja, Álvaro Imbernón, Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, Enrique Feás, Elena Gómez Castro, María Lledó, Mira Milosevich, Ignacio Molina, Miguel Otero Iglesias, Nereo Peñalver, Charles Powell, José Juan Ruiz, Fidel Sendagorta, Pedro Serrano, Federico Steinberg, Federico Torres Muro and Camilo Villarino for their comments on earlier versions of the analysis. The author is solely responsible for the content of this Policy Paper and for any errors or omissions.

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Against such a backdrop, Spain aspires to act as a 'spearhead' in the Western and European battle for the global South, by virtue of its status as a geopolitical bridge between Europe, America and Africa; by virtue of its cultural and economic ties with a significant part of the global South, especially Latin America and, to a lesser extent, Africa; and by virtue of a relatively positive image in regions such as the Middle East and Asia. To achieve its 'spearhead' aspiration, Spain needs to convince three key audiences: itself; Europe and the West; and the global South.

First, Spain needs to convince itself that it can play a proactive role on the international stage, something that requires a change of strategic culture and mentality. Specifically, it needs to overcome the excessively normative and copycat reflex (letting Europe do the thinking on its behalf) that has frequently beset Spanish foreign policy and reconcile itself with the concept of its own (national) interest. The transition towards a world characterised by the resurgence of interstate rivalry requires Spain to replace a conception of international relations where attempts are made to solve problems of a transnational nature (terrorism, organised crime, climate change, etc) by means of conciliatory multilateralism with a conception of Spain as a 'nodal' country, one that aspires to weaving relationships on all sides without clearly discriminating between partners, allies and competitors.

The spearhead metaphor is intended to evoke a proactive and assertive rather than belligerent attitude, one that would start from the recognition of interstate rivalry as the main driveshaft of international relations and from a clear diagnosis of Spain's geopolitical lodestars (Europe and the West) as well as its geopolitical competitors, while retaining from the 'nodal country' idea the importance of building bridges towards a global South whose alignment is fluid and disputed. Such a 'cultural' or conceptual transition requires underpinning the foundations of national power and significantly increasing the resources devoted to its foreign presence, especially in regions such as Latin America and Africa, where Spain has either withdrawn or punches below its weight and aspirations. In this regard, and without denying the existence of internal political divisions, it should be pointed out that unlike other countries in Spain's orbit, foreign policy enjoys widespread domestic consensus—its relations abroad have historically been, and continue to be, one of the main factors in contributing to Spanish cohesion—. It should also be emphasised that this assertion of national interest is by no means at odds with its pro-European stance. On the contrary: a strong Europe requires strong and proactive states that help to stoke and develop European foreign policy.

Spain also needs to convince both Europe and the West and the global South of its ability to act as a spearhead. First, assimilating the resurgence of interstate rivalry and articulating a clear public narrative about the challenges represented by China and Russia are indispensable for Spain's strategic credibility in Europe and elsewhere in the West. Spain has made major headway in this regard in recent years. Secondly, Spain should promote a strategy and a narrative towards the global South that starts from an understanding of its own dynamics and needs and goes beyond the requirement to adopt Western frameworks.

1 Introduction

Support for Ukraine and the need to confront Russian revisionism have come to occupy a central position in the EU's foreign policy, security and defence debates, to the detriment of other priorities.² That said, the re-emergence of instability in the Sahel and Russian influence in this region, in North Africa and in the Middle East underline the growing interdependence between the South and the East, as well as the need to adopt an integrated geostrategic outlook towards Europe's neighbours, while avoiding falling into the trap of viewing the South exclusively through the prism of rivalry with Russia.³ Secondly, the global character of the war and the importance of marshalling (or neutralising) diplomatic and economic support for Ukraine (or for Russia) underscore the importance of not neglecting other strands of European foreign policy, beyond its immediate neighbours.⁴ Although traditional US allies in the Indo-Pacific (for example Japan, Australia and South Korea) have expressed support for Ukraine, it is worth pointing out the relative absence of support in the so-called 'global South' (particularly in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and southern and South-East Asia),⁵ where there are signs of growing disaffection towards the West, Europe and the international order that emerged from the Second World War.⁶ While China and Russia are well placed geopolitically to capitalise on this disaffection towards the West, there are also symptoms of scepticism evident in the global South towards both Russia and China, something that offers opportunities to the West.⁷

The war has shown the EU's ability to maintain a high degree of cohesion around support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia,⁸ but the spectre of a stalemate in the conflict raises questions about the EU's ability to preserve the levels of cohesion shown so far.⁹ Added to

2 Heidi Maurer, Richard G. Whitman & Nicholas Wright (2023), 'The EU and the invasion of Ukraine: a collective responsibility to act?', *International Affairs*, vol. 99, nr 1, p. 219-238.

3 See, for instance, Josep Borrell (2023), 'Together for the security, stability and development of the Sahel', *European External Action Service*, 8/VI/2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/together-security-stability-and-development-sahel_en; Mira Milosevich (2023), 'Rusia en África y las posibles repercusiones para España', Elcano Royal Institute, 11/VII/2023; and Pierre Morcos & Luis Simón (2022), 'La OTAN y el Sur tras Ucrania', Elcano Royal Institute, 6/VI/2022.

4 Francis Ghilès (2023), 'Global South does not buy western stance on Ukraine', *CIDOB Opinion*, May.

5 On the concept of the 'global South' and its limitations see: 'What does "Global South" actually mean', *Time Magazine*, 7/IX/2023. Some analysts prefer the term 'plural South' to emphasise the diversity that characterises the group. See, for instance, Miguel Otero Iglesias (2023), 'El G20 de Nueva Delhi sitúa a la India en el centro del tablero geopolítico', Elcano Royal Institute, 15/IX/2023.

6 The very concept of the global South continues generating dissatisfaction; for the unwillingness in large parts of the global South to align itself see: Matias Spektor (2023), 'In defence of the fence sitters: what the West gets wrong about hedging', *Foreign Affairs*, 18/IV/2023; and Sarang Shidore (2023), 'The return of the global South: realism, not moralism, drives a new critique of Western power', *Foreign Affairs*, 31/VIII/2023. See also 'China's message to the global south', *The Economist*, 6/VI/2023. For a critical analysis of the possible challenges to the international order see, for example, Alexander Cooley, Daniel Nexon & Steven War (2019), 'Revising order or challenging the status quo? An alternative typology of revisionist or status quo states', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 45, nr 4, p. 689-708.

7 See, for instance, (2023), 'War brought Putin closer to Africa. Now it's pushing them apart', *The New York Times*, 26/VII/2023; Carlos Malamud, José Juan Ruiz & Ernesto Talvi (Eds.) (2023), '¿Por qué importa América Latina?', Elcano Royal Institute.

8 Ivan Krastev & Mark Leonard (2023), 'Fragile unity: why Europeans are coming together on Ukraine (and what might drive them apart)', European Council on Foreign Relations, 16/III/2023.

9 Ivan Krastev & Mark Leonard (2022), 'Peace versus justice: the coming European split over the war in Ukraine', European Council on Foreign Relations, 15/VI/2022.

this is the challenge of managing an open conflict on its immediate borders, something that involves a scenario of instability in neighbouring countries, many of them candidates for accession, and requires greater coordination between the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and other policies, such as the migration and enlargement policies.¹⁰

The need to respond nimbly to an increasingly competitive and volatile international environment has in turn reignited debates about the governance of EU foreign policy and the possibility of abandoning the unanimity rule.¹¹ In this context, the war has upset the internal balances within the EU, strengthening the roles of Poland and the Baltic and Nordic states, which have become the main bastions of Europe's commitment to Ukraine.¹² In turn, these countries' growing protagonism in shaping the EU's foreign policy could have secondary political consequences, such as strengthening the diplomatic influence of the US and the UK in the EU or hampering hypothetical efforts from Paris or Berlin to de-escalate the conflict with Russia.¹³

The war has also come as a shot in the arm for the transatlantic relationship, particularly given the leadership and constructive attitude evinced by the Biden Administration. However, the emerging consensus in Washington regarding the need to prioritise the Chinese challenge in the Indo-Pacific, the possibility of endemic instability taking hold in Ukraine and Eastern Europe and the way domestic politics in the US are evolving (bearing in mind the impending election and the doubts being voiced about Ukraine in Trump-supporting circles and among some in the Republican Party) raise questions about the sustainability of the US commitment to Ukraine (and Europe) and could favour a resurgence of political support for greater European autonomy in the security and defence arena in the medium term.¹⁴

Beyond Europe's shores it is worth highlighting China's 'tacit support' for Russian aggression.¹⁵ While China has been at pains to emphasise that its position on Ukraine is not one of support for Russia, the comment regarding China's 'pro-Russian neutrality' from Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-president of the Commission, is revealing; lack of support for the victim (Ukraine) is equivalent to implicit support for the aggressor (Russia).¹⁶ Specifically, the fact that China is helping to sustain Russia's assault on the European security architecture diplomatically and economically has undoubtedly contributed to a deterioration of Beijing's image in Europe.¹⁷ The diplomatic

10 See, for example, Ignacio Molina (2023), 'La ampliación de la UE: la luz que vuelve a brillar', *El País*, 29/VIII/2023.

11 Daniel Fiott & Giulia Tercovich (2023), 'Qualified majority voting in EU foreign policy: a cost of non-Europe report', European Parliamentary Research Service, May.

12 See, for example, Pierre Haroche (2023), 'Poland can strengthen the EU's geopolitical role against Russia', *Euractiv*, 10/V/2023.

13 Richard Whitman (2023), 'The war on Ukraine's impact on Europe', Council on Geostrategy, 1/III/2023.

14 Robert M. Gates (2023), 'The dysfunctional superpower: can a divided America deter China and Russia?', *Foreign Affairs*, 29/IX/2023; Michael J. Williams (2023), 'Shut down: is the United States still a reliable ally?', CSDS Policy Brief, 3/X/2023. See also Carlota García Encina (2022), 'EEUU y Europa: ¿convergencia o divergencia?', Elcano Royal Institute, 11/X/2022; and Carlota García Encina (2023), 'Washington y la fatiga de la guerra', Elcano Royal Institute, 24/IV/2023.

15 See, for instance, Mario Esteban (2022), 'Contorsionismo chino en Ucrania', *El País*, 28/II/2022; and Miguel Otero (2023), 'China y la guerra en Ucrania', *El Confidencial*, 25/VI/2023.

16 Josep Borrell (2022), 'On China's choices and responsibilities', European External Action Service, 4/IV/2022.

17 Andrew Small (2023), 'How China lost Europe', *The New Statesman*, 6/III/2023.

and economic cover that China has provided to Russia has more far-reaching consequences; by facilitating other countries' decisions to support Russia or at least to remain neutral it would also weaken the European and Western position in the global South. In this regard it is worth noting that the battle for the global South is not reducible to a simple question of whether it will end up being generally aligned with Russia (or China) as opposed to the West/Europe; instead, attention must be paid to small or gradual shifts in positioning capable of having major geopolitical ramifications.¹⁸

In addition to Beijing's stance on Russian aggression towards Ukraine there are the distortions created by Chinese intervention in the economic sphere –which gave considerable impetus to the adoption of an economic security strategy by the European Commission in July 2023– and the suggestion that China is the only great power capable of altering the liberal principles sustaining the international economic and political order that emerged after the Second World War.¹⁹ Beyond such considerations, the growing European dependency on Washington in the security, energy and technology domains, the pressure exerted by the US for greater transatlantic alignment regarding Beijing and the lack of consensus between member states all tend to complicate the intra-European debate surrounding China.²⁰

Lastly, the war has also brought about major upheavals in European defence policy. Apart from having contributed to a significant rally in European military spending and the re-energising of NATO, the war has aided significant measures such as the implementation of the European Peace Facility as a vehicle for channelling military aid to Ukraine, and has also induced the EU to pay more attention to the development of military capabilities and technologies designed to strengthen deterrence and defence against major powers.²¹

Taking the suggestions sketched out above as a starting point, the remainder of this paper examines the opportunities and challenges that the war in Ukraine and the new international scenario pose for European foreign policy and for Spain's position in Europe. First, there is an analysis of the impact of the war and an increasingly competitive international environment on European foreign policy. Next, attention turns to the implications this environment has for Spain, highlighting the opportunities and challenges associated with the vision of Spain as a spearhead in the Western and European battle for the global South.

18 For the importance of incremental changes in the battle between great powers for the alignment of secondary players see: Timothy W. Crawford (2021), *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*, Cornell University Press, New York, Ithaca, p. 205.

19 Félix Arteaga, Enrique Feás, Ignacio Molina, Miguel Otero, Luis Simón & Federico Steinberg (2023), 'La seguridad económica en Europa', Elcano Royal Institute, 13/VI/2023.

20 Bernhard Bartsch & Claudia Wessling (Eds.) (2023), 'From a China strategy to no strategy at all – Exploring the diversity of European approaches', *A Report by the European Think Tank Network on China*, July.

21 Luis Simón (2022), 'European strategic autonomy and defence after Ukraine', Elcano Royal Institute, 28/XI/2022.

2 Towards a geopolitical Europe?

One of the main consequences of the war in Ukraine for the future of European foreign and security policy has surely been of a 'cultural' order. The war has torpedoed the EU's rules-based 'herbivore' DNA by challenging such claims as that wars (particularly in Europe) are things of the past or that international relations (not excluding European relations) are fundamentally governed by norms, rules and laws. The use of force continues to be a central component of international relations and the European continent, far from being an oasis of peace and stability, is no exception in this respect.²² Furthermore, the war has cast doubt on the *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade) maxim, which sought to justify the strengthening of commercial and economic ties with regimes such as Russia and China by arguing that these would lead to social and political changes. While it is generally associated with Germany, this maxim has affected a large part of Europe, including Spain.²³

The war would thus lend weight to the recent calls upon European leaders to 'rediscover the language of power' (in Borrell's words) or acquire 'geopolitical' awareness (to quote the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen), and encourage the EU to think beyond challenges of a transnational variety (terrorism, organised crime, piracy, the climate-security nexus, etc), which had hitherto been the main focus of European foreign and security policy. In line with this rationale, the EU would transition towards a concept of security in which threats of an interstate nature and the revisionism shown by the major powers would play a central role at both the regional and global levels.

Specifically, it is worth noting two challenges that are increasingly structuring debates on European foreign and security policy: the urgency of confronting the Russian menace to the architecture of European security; and the need to address the security implications of the rise of China. Both debates transcend the foreign policy arena (more clearly in the case of China, given that it has major economic, technological and global governance implications). However, bearing in mind the proclivity of China and Russia to instrumentalise economic relations, it ought to be a security and foreign policy criterion that structures the European (and Spanish) debate on how to address both challenges, including in their 'economic security' aspects. The subjects of Russia and China should moreover play a central role in debates about European strategic autonomy and responsibility and of course about the future of the transatlantic relationship.²⁴

22 Josep Borrell (2023), 'Europe in the Interregnum: our geopolitical awakening after Ukraine', European External Action Service, 24/III/2023.

23 See, for example, Mario Esteban (2023), 'Una mirada hacia el futuro de las relaciones España-China', Elcano Royal Institute, 7/III/2023.

24 See, for instance, Hugo Meijer & Stephen Brooks (2021), 'Illusions of autonomy: why Europe cannot provide for its own security if the United States pulls back', *International Security*, vol. 45, nr 4, p. 7-43; Barry Posen (2020), 'Europe can defend itself', *Survival*, vol. 62, nr 6, p. 7-34; Josep Borrell (2020), 'The Sinatra doctrine: how the EU should deal with the US-China competition', *IAI Papers*, nr 20, 24/IX/2020; and Sven Biscop (2019), *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power*, Routledge, Abingdon; and Luis Simón (2021), 'Subject and object: Europe in Sino-American competition', Robert Schuman Centre, September.

In any case it is necessary to emphasise the important differences between the Russian and Chinese challenges. The former is more acute and immediate, but also more localised, mainly in Eastern Europe and in the military sphere, although Russia's willingness to resort to disinformation and energy as a geopolitical weapon, its activities in other parts of the European neighbourhood (especially in Africa and the Middle East) and its presence in other parts of the world make it advisable to conceive of the Russian challenge in broader terms. The second challenge, posed by China, is less conspicuous and acute, but more systemic, given China's critical mass and its ability to combine its economic, technological, political and military power to challenge the West's global position and the liberal foundations of the international order laid down in the aftermath of the Second World War.

2.1. Geopolitical Europe: between autonomy and alignment?

The concept of European strategic autonomy, introduced and mainly promoted by France, has traditionally been associated with the need to reduce dependencies on the US and NATO in the security and defence arena.²⁵ While this narrow definition of autonomy has historically not had many devotees, the doubts generated by the Trump Administration about the US commitment to Europe and episodes such as Brexit helped to create more political support for security and defence autonomy in the EU (particularly in Germany, persistent scourge of the Trump Administration). Indeed, aspiration to greater 'strategic autonomy' grew to the point that it became a central strand of the EU's 2016 Global Strategy and from then on moved to centre stage in the debates surrounding Europe's foreign and security policy.²⁶

The pro-autonomy agenda in security and defence would continue garnering substantial political support within the EU even during the early days of the Biden Administration, particularly given the lack of coordination between the US and its European allies in the decision and implementation of its military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the European perception that the Biden Administration would centre its foreign and security policy around China.²⁷

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had a disruptive impact on the EU's pro-autonomy agenda. First, the war underscored the US's centrality to the European security architecture, by virtue of its leadership in political and military support for Ukraine and the efforts of the Biden Administration to share intelligence and coordinate its actions with its European allies. This fact has undoubtedly dampened the calls for European strategic autonomy in the security and defence arena.²⁸ It is also worth noting the increasing economic

25 Jolyon Howorth & John T.S. Keeler (2023), *The EU, NATO and the Quest for European Autonomy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

26 Nathalie Tocci (2016), 'The making of the EU global strategy', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 37, nr 3, p. 461-472; and Pol Morillas (2019), *Strategy-Making in the EU: From Foreign and Security Policy to External Action*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

27 See, for example, Riccardo Alcaro & Nathalie Tocci (2021), 'Seizing the moment: European strategic autonomy and the Biden Presidency', *Instituto Affari Internazionali*, 20/II/2021.

28 Jeremy Shapiro & Jana Puglierin (2023), 'The art of vassalization: how Russia's war on Ukraine has transformed transatlantic relations', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 4/IV/2023; and Judy Dempsey (2023), 'Is European strategic autonomy over?', *Carnegie Europe*, 19/I/2023.

gulf between the US and the EU, whose GDPs were on a par in 2008 but have diverged since then to such an extent that US GDP is now approximately 50% greater than that of the EU.²⁹ Added to this is the growing industrial and technological gulf between the US and the EU, as well as the increasing European dependence on the US for energy supplies. All these trends represent structural hindrances on the road towards greater European strategic autonomy.³⁰

On the other hand, the war has triggered greater military spending in Europe, indispensable for autonomy, although it is true that the fragmentation of spending continues to represent a major hurdle in this regard.³¹ This is joined by the perception –increasingly widespread in Europe– that the strategic priority the US assigns to the Chinese threat in the Indo-Pacific will ultimately limit the attention it pays to Europe; this is also combined with the uncertainty that the US’s political future generates in Europe and, specifically, the possibility that a future President Trump or one of his followers revives tensions in the transatlantic relationship. This certainty (regarding the prioritisation of China) and uncertainty (regarding the political future of the US) may constitute additional elements favouring greater autonomy in security and defence or at least greater European strategic responsibility.³²

America’s renewed influence on Europe has in turn meant that a considerable number of European countries –especially in Central and Eastern Europe– are increasingly disposed to align themselves with the US perception and priorities regarding China.³³ The calculation is that the greater the ‘geostrategic return’ the US perceives in its security investment in Europe, the more likely it is to continue to invest.³⁴ This sort of issue linkage –a widespread concept in the academic literature on international relations–³⁵ between the Russian and Chinese cases seems not to apply in Western Europe, or at least not the same degree as in Central and Eastern Europe. Although France and Germany are at odds on various foreign policy questions –and the so-called Franco-German axis has certainly seen better days– it seems that Paris and Berlin are in agreement on the idea that European policy towards China should be set autonomously.

29 Gideon Rachman (2023), ‘Europe has fallen behind America and the gap is growing’, *Financial Times*, 19/VI/2023.

30 Shapiro & Puglierin (2023), *op. cit.*

31 See, for example, Bastian Giegerich & Tim Lawrenson (2023), ‘The guns of Europe: defense-industrial challenges in a time of war’, *Survival*, vol. 65, nr 3, p.7-24.

32 Edward Lucas (2023), ‘Get ready, Europe: Trumpism is coming’, *Center for European Policy Analyses*, 3/III/2023; and Luis Simón, Daniel Fiott & Octavian Manea (2023), ‘Two fronts, One goal: Euro-Atlantic security in the Indo-Pacific age’, *The Marathon Initiative*, August.

33 Ivana Karásková (2022), ‘How China lost Central and Eastern Europe’, *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, 22/IV/2022.

34 Luis Simón, Linde Desmaele & Jordan Becker (2021), ‘Europe as a secondary theater’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 15, nr 1, p. 90-115.

35 See, for example, Ernst B. Haas (1980), ‘Why collaborate? Issue linkage and international regimes’, *World Politics*, vol. 32, nr 3, p. 357-407; and Paul Poast (2012), ‘Issue linkage and international cooperation: an empirical investigation’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 30, nr 3, p. 286-303.

In fact, the concept of European strategic autonomy –which does not mean equidistance– is increasingly linked to the need to find the EU's own voice and pathway in a world that is more and more structured around the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China.³⁶ It is highly unusual to hear European leaders advocating autonomy when it comes to deterring or defending against Russia. But they regularly invoke autonomy and unity in the context of US-China rivalry, a much more transversal and structuring issue in international relations, encompassing everything from diplomacy and security to the economy and technology, and which manifests itself in the arenas of the main international institutions (the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, etc) as well as in the battle of ideas, putting forward opposing visions of the international order.³⁷ This links to an important development: the widening of the European strategic autonomy concept (or concepts that are more or less related to it, such as sovereignty and resilience) beyond the scope of security and defence and beyond the US context, to include the need to reduce dependencies in areas as diverse as technology, energy and other critical materials and economic security in general.³⁸

Specifically, the need to reduce dependencies relating to Russia and China –major revisionist powers that do not hesitate to use their energy assets and investments for coercive ends– has acquired an ever more central role in the debates surrounding European strategic autonomy, at the same time as the idea of reducing dependencies on the US in the security field has gradually diminished to the extent of going into hibernation (although it could be reawakened). In this regard, the concept of 'open strategic autonomy' –promoted by the European Commission and countries such as Spain and the Netherlands– seeks to reconcile two tensions.³⁹ First, the tension between the EU's traditional reflex of liberalisation –and its adherence to liberal economic principles both internally (competition policy) and externally (trade policy)– and the need to apply a strategic or security criterion to industrial policy and to control inbound and outbound investments. Secondly, open strategic autonomy seeks to reconcile the need for greater European cohesion, resilience and responsibility (including in the security and defence field) with a strong transatlantic relationship.

We are therefore venturing into an international scenario characterised by a resurgence in the language of power, geopolitical competition and the importance of interstate rivalry, in which the need to address the challenges posed by Russia and China at the regional and global levels of the international order, respectively, will come to play a role that structures

36 Borrell (2020), *op. cit.*; and Simón (2021), *op. cit.* See also Fidel Sendagorta (2019), 'The triangle in the long game: rethinking relations between China, Europe, and the United States in the new era of strategic competition', Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 19/VI/2019.

37 Josep Borrell & Thierry Breton (2020), 'For a united, resilient and sovereign Europe', *European Commission*, 10/VI/2020; and Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères (2020), 'Emmanuel Macron speaks at the UN General Assembly (22/IX/2020)', <https://www.diplo-matie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/news-and-events/united-nations-general-assembly/unga-s-75th-session/article/emmanuel-macron-speaks-at-un-general-assembly-22-sept-2020>. See also John M. Owen (2021), 'Two emerging international orders? China and the United States', *International Affairs*, vol. 97, nr 5, p. 1415-1431.

38 Federico Steinberg (2020), 'La construcción de la autonomía estratégica de la UE', *Elcano Royal Institute*, 15/VII/2020. See also European Central Bank Eurosystem (2023), 'The EU's Open Strategic Autonomy from a Central Banking Perspective', March.

39 See, for example, 'Spain-Netherlands Non-Paper on Strategic Autonomy while preserving an open economy', 24/III/2021, <https://www.permanentrepresentations.nl/documents/publications/2021/03/24/non-paper-on-strategic-autonomy>.

European foreign and security policy (as well as transatlantic relations). This comes in a world that highlights the centrality of the US for the security of Europe and Spain, but simultaneously raises questions about the evolution of the US role in Europe. It is also a world in which major parts of the global South refuse to align themselves with the West against Russia or China and display significant signs of disaffection with the 'liberal' international order that arose from the Second World War. What implications does this new international scenario have in store for Spain?⁴⁰

40 For a recent analysis of the state of Spain's foreign policy, see Ignacio Molina & Jorge Tamames (Coord.) (2023), 'España en el mundo en 2023: perspectivas y desafíos', Elcano Royal Institute, 19/1/2023.

3 Spearhead: Spain amid the return of strategic rivalry

In an increasingly competitive and uncertain international context, Spain aspires to act as a 'spearhead' in the Western and European battle for the global South by virtue of its status as a geopolitical bridge between Europe, America and Africa; by virtue of its cultural and economic links with a large part of the global South, especially Latin America and, to a lesser extent, Africa; and by virtue of a relatively positive image in places such as the Middle East and Asia.⁴¹ Realising this 'spearhead' aspiration requires that Spain convinces itself, Europe and the West, and the global South.

3.1. From nodal country to spearhead?

Spain needs to start by convincing itself that it can play a more proactive role in an increasingly competitive international context. This requires a change of strategic culture and mentality; transcending the normative and copycat reflex (let Europe do the thinking for me!) that in large measure has characterised Spanish foreign policy over recent decades and reconciling itself with the concept of national interest. This accounts for the 'spearhead' metaphor, which evokes a proactive and outward-facing stance, and is based on acknowledgement that interstate rivalry constitutes the main driveshaft of international relations, as well as a clear identification of Spain's main geopolitical lodestars (Europe and the West) and what these lodestars' and therefore Spain's main challenges are (Russian and Chinese revisionism). While self-interest may be the main compass in an increasingly competitive world, Spain's economic dependence on Europe and Spain's and Europe's economic dependence on the US underscore the importance of couching Spain's foreign policy –and its outreach to the global South– within the European and Western framework.

Alternative concepts, such as the 'nodal country' idea (included in the 2021-24 Foreign Action Strategy) encourage Spain to forge relations throughout the world with the goal of building an integrating multilateralism as a solution to problems and challenges of a mainly transnational nature (terrorism, organised crime, climate change, etc).⁴² The spearhead metaphor would retain the need to build bridges towards a global South whose geopolitical positioning is a bone of contention, without abandoning dialogue with competitors or multilateralism, but would acknowledge the growing tension between the resurgence of interstate rivalry and the concept of integrating multilateralism and would be based on clear discrimination between partners, allies and competitors.⁴³

In a world characterised by the resurgence of interstate rivalry, the spearhead metaphor would therefore serve as a more apt guide for Spanish foreign policy than that of 'nodal country', conceived for a more cooperative world in which the main focus would be

41 See, for example, Elcano Royal Institute & RepTrak Company (2021), 'La reputación de España en el mundo', 7/X/2021.

42 Government of Spain (2021), 'Estrategia de Acción Exterior 2021-2024', 28/VI/2021. See also Pol Morillas (2020), 'Una política exterior nodal', *El País*, 6/III/2020.

43 Félix Arteaga & Luis Simón (2020), '¿Más allá del multilateralismo? COVID-19, autonomía estratégica europea y política exterior española', Elcano Royal Institute, 5/V/2020.

challenges of a transnational nature. It is in any case worth noting that the spearhead idea does not invoke bellicosity but rather the need to affirm and state Spain's own interest, something that entails strengthening the bases of national power. Notable in this regard is the importance of increasing the provision of resources earmarked for strengthening the military machine (as is the importance of greater investment in those capabilities needed for deterring threats of an interstate nature and for strategic presence); industrial and technological modernisation; the Spanish diplomatic and intelligence network abroad; promotion abroad of Spanish culture and language; and economic and political investment in the global South, especially in such regions as Latin America and Africa, where Spain has either taken a step back or punches below its ambitions. Without overlooking the existence of internal political divisions, unlike in some of Spain's counterparts, foreign policy enjoys widespread domestic consensus –its outward projection has been and continues to be one of Spain's most unifying factors–.

As well as convincing itself, Spain must also convince Europe, the West and the global South of its capacity to act as a spearhead. Here, the internalisation of strategic rivalry and the articulation of a clear public narrative about the Russian and Chinese challenges are indispensable for strengthening Spain's credibility in the West and in Europe. In addition, comprehension of the global South's own dynamics, the cultivation of special relationships and the adoption of a non-patronising agenda based on shared interests is indispensable for ensuring European and Western success in the global South.

Spain therefore needs to acknowledge the structural character that the Russian and Chinese challenges have come to play in the European and transatlantic debate, and develop its own strategic concept and a clear public narrative about how to address such challenges. Yielding centre stage to other states in order to focus on its traditional priorities (the instability in its southern neighbourhood, relations with Latin America, etc) seems a suboptimal option, for at least two reasons. The first is the enormous impact that the Russian and Chinese challenges have on Europe's security architecture, the Euro-Atlantic space and the international order, elements upon which Spain's security, political stability and economic prosperity rest. The second is that 'looking the other way to concentrate on one's own business' runs the risk of leaving Spain sidelined on questions set to play a key role when it comes to shaping the perception and policies of Europe and the West towards regions of traditional Spanish interest.

Specifically, the challenge that Russia and –especially– China represent for the position and influence of Europe and the US and the appeal of an open international order in the global South would highlight Spain's added value when it comes to leading the Western and European battle for the global South, by virtue of its properties of a bridge between America, Europe and Africa.⁴⁴ Spain therefore needs to enter 'headlong' into issues that structure the strategic European and Western debate, with a clear public narrative and stance on how to tackle the Russian and Chinese challenges, and use this entry as a hook when it comes to promoting its specific priorities on the European (and transatlantic) agenda. Here it is worth pointing out the importance of such regions as the southern neighbourhood and

⁴⁴ See, for example, Luis Simón (2017), '¿España como potencia atlántica?', Elcano Royal Institute, 7/XII/2017; and Emilio Lamo de Espinosa (2017), 'Is Latin America part of the West?', Elcano Royal Institute, 4/XII/2017.

Latin America in the context of the challenges that Russia and China pose for Europe and the West, confirmed by Russia's presence and influence in the Sahel and North Africa,⁴⁵ the value of Africa and Latin America as sources of energy and economic diversification and diplomatic support, and the challenges associated with the presence and influence of China in Africa and Latin America.

If Spain is successful in capitalising on such 'hooks', it should also prevent Europe and the West from falling into the trap of seeing Africa and Latin America exclusively through the prism of strategic rivalry with Russia and China. First, there is clearly a need to bear in mind that the various regions constituting the global South have their own economic, political and strategic dynamics, upon which the power games of the major powers rest. It is worth noting the importance of regional powers such as Brazil in South America; Algeria, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in North Africa, the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea; and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East, but also the dynamics of a transnational and substate nature. In this context, the more or less special relationships Spain can cultivate with some regional powers (such as Turkey and Brazil) may be deliberately deployed in support of a European strategy towards the global South. Secondly, Spain should promote a European and Western strategy towards the global South that takes the priorities and pluralities of these regions into account and revolves around areas of joint interest, rather than trying to co-opt them only when it serves some specific Western interest (as in the case of Ukraine).⁴⁶ In the same vein, Spain should ensure that the EU's foreign policy distances itself from patronising or paternalistic stances as a means of reducing rejections and enabling it to make headway both in terms of the global South and with Central and Eastern Europe.

3.2. Spain, Ukraine and Russia: from 'closing ranks' to its own vision?

In terms of how to tackle the Russian challenge to Europe's security architecture –currently focused on the war in Ukraine–Spain has proved itself to be a credible partner and ally over the last two years, showing its solidarity and leadership in offering homes for Ukrainian refugees and its political commitment to the defence of Ukraine and the sanctions on Russia, having closed ranks in NATO and the EU and thereby dispelling any doubts regarding its attitude towards Russia.⁴⁷ Here it is worth noting the decision of the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, to launch the Spanish Presidency of the European Council with a visit to Kyiv on 1 July 2023, which, combined with the course that Spanish diplomacy has charted over the last two years, undoubtedly helped to bolster Spain's credibility in relation to this structural issue, enabling it to overcome its traditional image as a country locked in the zero-sum game of the southern neighbourhood vs the East dialectic.

45 For a detailed analysis of the evolution of the Russian position in Africa, see Mathieu Droin & Tina Dolbaia (2023), 'Post Prigozhin Russia in Africa: regaining or losing control?', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 20/IX/2023.

46 Mario Esteban (2015), 'China en América Latina: repercusiones para España', Elcano Royal Institute, 21/X/2015. For an analysis about the importance of the southern neighbourhood and Latin America to Spain and Europe see, respectively, Félix Arteaga (2014), 'España mirando al sur: del Mediterráneo al Sahel', Elcano Royal Institute, November; Carlos Malamud, José Juan Ruiz & Ernesto Talvi (2023), *¿Por qué importa América Latina?*, Elcano Royal Institute, June.

47 See, for example, Charles Powell & Carlota García Encina (2023), 'Spanish responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine', Elcano Royal Institute, 28/II/2023; and Luis Simón & Félix Arteaga (2021), 'La OTAN se actualiza: el Concepto Estratégico de Madrid', Elcano Royal Institute, 13/XII/2021.

The challenge for the coming months and year(s) will be to clarify the Spanish and European political-strategic objectives in the conflict and to devise a homegrown viewpoint that goes beyond 'supporting Ukraine' and 'sanctioning Russia'. The Ukrainian government has clearly stated its interest in 'expelling' Russian armed forces beyond its internationally recognised borders (including Crimea); an objective that is shared in large parts of Central and Eastern Europe. For its part the US government has recognised the difficulty of returning to the status quo prior to 2014 and has let it be known that the US objective is, in the words of Defence Secretary Austin, 'to weaken Russian militarily'.⁴⁸ This chimes with the doubts expressed by General Milley (US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) regarding the likelihood of a Ukrainian counteroffensive leading to an expulsion of Russian armed forces from the country, bearing in mind their high degree of fortification.⁴⁹ This diagnosis seems to be shared by countries such as France and Germany, which are also concerned about how Russia will fit into the European order in the future and about the future of the European commitment to Ukraine and Europe.⁵⁰

In the emerging debate about how and when to seek a way out of the war,⁵¹ Spain should establish its own stance. From the comfort afforded by the transatlantic framework, Spain is in a suitable position to reconcile the instinct for dialogue that seems to characterise France and Germany with the calls for resolve and security from a large number of Central and Eastern European partners, and to promote the idea of negotiating from a position of strength and security, taking the bolstering of deterrence in Central and Eastern Europe and commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine as the starting point. Thus, deriving support from its relationship with the US, and bearing in mind the difficulties that confronting a hostile and militarised Russia in the years ahead would entail, Spain should be well placed to align positions among the various EU member states towards a strength-based strategy of dialogue, which in any event would require an increase in NATO's military spending, a strengthening of military and political cooperation with Ukraine and a European and Western strategy of containment as steps prior to a possible pact for European security. Moreover, a roadmap of this sort could be strengthened by the support of such countries as Turkey, with which Spain enjoys special bilateral relations, and win the endorsement of other important actors in the global South.

Apart from this, the transatlantic dimension supplies Spain with the credibility to insist on greater European responsibility in the security and defence field. On such a basis, Spain should focus on contributing ideas about how the EU can add value to NATO's deterrence and defence agenda thanks to its competitive advantage in the industrial and technological aspects of defence.⁵² Specifically, a Europeanisation of the European allies' industrial and

48 'US wants to see Russia weakened, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin says after Ukraine Visit', *The Wall Street Journal*, 25/IV/2022.

49 'Gen. Mark Milley on seeing through the fog of war in Ukraine', *CBS News*, 10/IX/2023.

50 Judy Dempsey (2022), 'Are France and Germany wavering on Russia?', *Carnegie Europe*, 8/XII/2022.

51 See, for example, François Heisbourg (2023), 'How to end a war: historical lessons for Ukraine', *Survival*, vol. 65, nr 4, p. 7-24; Samuel Charap & Miranda Priebe (2023), 'Avoiding a long war: US policy and the trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine conflict', RAND Corporation, January.

52 For an analysis of European defence policy and the role Spain plays in it, see Luis Simón, 'European strategic autonomy and defence after Ukraine'; Félix Arteaga & Luis Simón (2019), 'El Fondo Europeo de defensa y el futuro de la industria española', Elcano Royal Institute, January; and Daniel Fiott (2023), 'Investing and innovating? Spain and the European Defence Fund', Elcano Royal Institute, 28/VIII/2023.

technological contribution to the NATO deterrence and defence strategy –and an alignment of NATO’s and the EU’s priorities in terms of capabilities– would benefit Spain, given its greater influence over the EU’s foreign policy than over NATO. This would moreover reap a threefold dividend by: (1) helping to politically bulletproof any Spanish proposal designed to strengthen the EU’s role in the security and defence field; (2) creating a significant ‘diplomatic dividend’ in a large part of Europe (especially Central and Eastern Europe) and in NATO; and (3) offering Spain a chance to strengthen its own military and industrial capabilities in key areas, given the context of resurgent interstate rivalry, such as anti-missile and air defences, short-, medium- and intermediate-range precision-guided missiles and munitions, drones and emerging and disruptive technologies.

3.3. Spain and the Chinese conundrum

It is in relation to the Chinese challenge that Spain has furthest to travel. The US 2016 National Security Strategy identified China as a ‘strategic competitor’ and the 2022 edition as ‘the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do it’.⁵³ This perception of China as a systemic threat has also gained ground among the main European powers.⁵⁴ Indeed, the question of how to tackle the geopolitical implications of China’s rise has been acquiring more urgency both in the EU and in NATO in recent years.

In a 2019 communication the European Commission defined China as a ‘negotiating partner’ an ‘economic competitor’ and a ‘systemic rival’.⁵⁵ Since then, however, the European sanctions on China for its treatment of its Uygur minority (and China’s reprisal sanctions on MEPs and European experts in 2020), the crackdown in Honk Kong, questions about the Chinese management of COVID-19 and, above all, China’s tacit support for Russian aggression against Ukraine, have led to a significant deterioration in EU-China relations. As things currently stand, economic competition and systemic rivalry dominate perception of China in the EU and cooperation has taken a back seat, although there continue to be significant differences between member states.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, US pressure and the progressive engagement between China and Russia have contributed to NATO’s designation of China as a strategic and security challenge.⁵⁷

53 Luis Simón & Carlota García Encina (2022), ‘La Nueva Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional de EEUU’, Elcano Royal Institute, 8/XI/2022.

54 Hugo Meijer (2022), *Awakening to China’s Rise: European Foreign and Security Policies Towards the People’s Republic of China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

55 European Commission and HRVP (2019), ‘EU-China – A strategic outlook’, *Joint contribution to the European Council*, 12/III/2019.

56 Janka Oertel (2020), ‘The new China consensus: how Europe is growing wary of Beijing’, European Council on Foreign Relations, September. See also Mario Esteban (2023), ‘¿Hacia una nueva y consensuada estrategia de la Unión Europea hacia China?’, Elcano Royal Institute, 26/VI/2023. For the persistent differences of the member states in relation to China see Bernard Bartsch & Claudia Wessling (2023), ‘From a China strategy to no strategy at all: exploring the diversity of European approaches’, *A report by the European Think Tank Network on China*, July.

57 Luis Simón (2023), ‘NATO’s China and Indo-Pacific conundrum’, *NATO Review*, forthcoming.

The Spanish stance on China has recently been evolving.⁵⁸ Specifically, the Eurozone crisis post-2008 paved the way to an explosion of Chinese investment in Spain –most notably major purchases of Spanish public debt– and a substantial increase in trade between the two countries. Apart from this, China particularly valued Spain as a political partner, by virtue of its position in the Ibero-American space and its propensity to take less confrontational stances on China's positions than most Western countries.⁵⁹ Spain's (unsuccessful) attempt to lift the embargo on arms sales to China during its rotating presidency of the Council of the EU in 2010 is particularly revealing in this regard.

Spain has been nuancing its attitude towards China, however, and recently adopted a more selective approach. For one thing, Chinese financing is no longer as attractive as it was at the peak of the Eurozone crisis. For another, the growing scepticism in the US and EU towards China has left its mark on Spain, which has signed up both to the EU's reference to the threefold Chinese character (competitor, partner and rival) and NATO's references to China as a strategic and security challenge to the international order, the transatlantic community and Europe.⁶⁰ Having said that, Spain has dragged its feet on important issues, such as the European Commission's calls to strengthen the security of 5G networks amid fears of the Chinese company Huawei's possible involvement in espionage and even sabotage, not to mention US calls to impose an outright ban on Huawei.⁶¹ Moreover, Pedro Sánchez was one of the first European leaders to visit China this year, a visit that he used to underscore his rejection of economic decoupling and the need to maintain space for political cooperation.⁶² Here it is also worth pointing out that both the 2021 National Security Strategy and the Foreign Action Strategy acknowledge the existence of a geopolitical conflict between the US and China and describe the US and EU outlooks on the subject, but do not take a clear stance towards China.

Although Spain's posture on China is evolving and is characterised by a plurality of perceptions among various public and private actors, the economic and trading importance of the Asian giant and the perception that it does not represent a direct or first-order security threat either to Spain or to Europe continue to hold significant sway. The importance (and even centrality) of cooperation on economic matters and the fight against transnational and global threats (such as climate change) continue to stand out, while the suggestion of China as a competitor, systemic rival or strategic and security challenge tends to play a more secondary role. The existence of an 'accommodating mercantilist' reflex towards China is by no means exclusive to Spain;⁶³ it affects to a greater or lesser degree almost the whole

58 For a detailed analysis of Spain-China relations see, for example, Mario Esteban (2023), 'Una mirada hacia el futuro de las relaciones España-China', Elcano Royal Institute, 7/III/2023. See also Mario Esteban (Coord.) (2021), 'España ante la rivalidad estratégica entre China y Estados Unidos', Elcano Royal Institute, 22/VI/2021.

59 Esteban (2023), *op. cit.*, p. 3.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also Mario Esteban (Coord.) (2021), 'España ante la rivalidad estratégica entre China y Estados Unidos', Elcano Royal Institute, 22/VI/2021.

61 See, for example, Mario Esteban & Miguel Otero (2020), 'Washington's war on Huawei is causing angst in Madrid', *Foreign Policy*, 20/II/2020.

62 Mario Esteban (2023), 'Tres claves del viaje de Pedro Sánchez a China', Elcano Royal Institute, 3/IV/2023.

63 For an identification of Spain with 'accommodating mercantilism', see John Fox & François Godement (2019), 'A power audit of EU-China relations', European Council on Foreign Relations, April; and François Godement & Abigaël Vasselier (2017), 'China at the gates: a new power audit of EU-China relations', European Council on Foreign Relations, December.

of Europe, particularly Germany, although Germany too has recently been modifying its position and veering towards a more critical approach on China.⁶⁴

Spain needs to embark upon a profound strategic reflection that helps to define a clear public narrative and position regarding how to deal with the Chinese challenge. First because a sober diagnosis of the Chinese challenge would contribute to reducing Spain's vulnerability to potential disruptions in the supply of certain critical goods and materials.⁶⁵ And secondly because Spain's clarity and credibility with regard to the Chinese strategic challenge is a necessary –albeit not sufficient– condition for attaining its aspiration of acting as a spearhead in the Western and European battle for the global South.

When it comes to determining Spain's public position and narrative on China, it is worth bearing in mind at least two types of consideration. The first is related to the need to devise a clear diagnosis as to where China is heading, as well as the nature and possible evolution of relations between China and the West on the one hand and China and Europe on the other (as the main lodestars of Spanish foreign policy). Here, the attractiveness of narratives in Spain such as 'there is no deglobalisation and international relations will continue being affected by significant economic interdependence in the years ahead' or 'the cooperation of China when it comes to tackling global challenges' (such as climate change) seem to help to muddy the perception of China in Spain and give impetus or hope to the expectation that the cooperation-rivalry pendulum will soon swing towards the former. This in turn runs the risk of stifling current efforts to reduce the possibility of disruption in the supply of critical goods.

Without wanting to deny the antecedent, or question the possible importance of economic interdependence⁶⁶ or even the utility of cooperating with China or transnational challenges such as climate change, it is worth emphasising that these facts do not 'cancel out' China's status as the West's geopolitical and strategic rival, and still less the US's. A good example of this is the considerable interdependence (not only economic but also cultural) between Bismarckian Germany and the UK in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, confounding the expectations of people like the British historian Norman Angell, who claimed that 'the economic cost of war was so great that no one could possibly hope to gain by starting a war the consequences of which would be so disastrous'.⁶⁷ Interdependence thus did not impede the geopolitical and, finally, military confrontation between Germany and the UK, and may even have hastened it.⁶⁸

64 Janka Oertel (2023), 'The end of Germany's China illusion', European Council on Foreign Relations, 15/IX/2023.

65 Lucía Salinas Conte (2021), 'La dependencia de China en las cadenas de suministro españolas', Elcano Royal Institute, 30/XI/2021. The recent report by the Spanish Presidency on how to strengthen European resilience and autonomy is a positive step in this direction by underscoring the importance of supply chains in such critical areas as health, energy, digitalisation and food. See Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU (2023), 'Resilient EU 2030', 15/IX/2023.

66 While it is true that trade flows between China and the West remain high, there are notable and significant decoupling dynamics in the area of mutual investments, above all in advanced technology. See, for example, Chris Miller (2022), *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology*, Scribner, New York.

67 Norman Angell (1909), *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage*, McClelland & Goodchild Policies, Toronto.

68 For an analysis of the interaction between economic and strategic factors in relations between Germany and the UK in the first half of the 20th century see, for example, David Calleo (2009), *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Furthermore, any effective global strategy on climate change, the fight against pandemics or other challenges of a transnational nature will require major economic and political adjustments, something that, particularly in the context of growing geopolitical rivalry, would cause the parties to be concerned about who emerges best and worst off.⁶⁹ In this regard, European fears about depending upon China for supplies of 'clean' energy sources and the recent complaints from the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, about Chinese subsidies for electric cars, illustrate the impossibility of separating the fight against climate change from economic and political considerations.⁷⁰ Spain needs, therefore, to reflect on how to reconcile its commitment to push ahead with renewable energy and digitalisation without becoming dependent on Beijing, something that requires an in-depth analysis into which Chinese investments are in its interests and which are not.

While economic interdependency and dialogue with revisionist powers will undoubtedly continue to form part of the international relations 'landscape', they seem unlikely in the short to medium term to mitigate –still less reverse– the perception of China as a strategic rival, which has firmly taken root in the US, is increasingly widespread among the main European powers and increasingly evident in the security strategies and concepts of NATO and the EU.

Another important point to bear in mind for Spain is that the battle being waged by the US and China for Europe is being won by the US.⁷¹ This is due to shared values, but also because the influence infrastructure and 'levers' the US exerts over Europe are significantly greater than China's, as was clearly shown when the Trump Administration successfully influenced most Central and Eastern European countries regarding Huawei despite Chinese economic and political pressures.⁷² In the context of such evidence, and bearing in mind the crucial role played by transatlantic and European relations in Spanish foreign policy, pragmatism alone should convince Spain to devise a clear public narrative about the challenge China represents to the free international order and the Euro-Atlantic community.

The second type of consideration is related to values and interests. China has been capitalising geopolitically on the grievances of the so-called 'global South', exploiting sentiments of historical injustice related to colonialism, slavery, endemic poverty and other vulnerabilities.⁷³ Although the main targets of this Chinese narrative strategy are, first and foremost, the US and the 'West', China's global anti-grievance narrative encompasses not only Europe but also affects Spain in particular. Especially important is the fact that the resurgence of indigenous movements in Latin America has had a negative impact on Spain's image and even on its relations with some of its key partners in the region.⁷⁴

69 See, for example, Andrew S. Erickson & Gabriel Collins (2021), 'Competition with China can save the planet', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June.

70 See, respectively, Alexander Brown (2022), 'Net-zero Europe risks a heavy dependence on China', Mercator Institute of China Studies, 31/X/2022; and 'EU risks trade war with China over electric vehicles', *Politico*, 13/IX/2023.

71 See, for example, Mario Esteban & Miguel Otero Iglesias (Coords.) (2020), 'Europe in the face of US-China rivalry', Elcano Royal Institute, January.

72 'Trump turning more countries in Europe against Huawei', *Foreign Policy*, 27/IX/2020.

73 Hoang Thi Tha (2023), 'China's grievances with the West are heard by the Global South', *Nikkei Asia*, 9/VII/2023.

74 See Carlos Malamud (2008), 'Los riesgos de España frente a los bicentenarios: populismos, nacionalismos e indigenismos', Elcano Royal Institute, 16/VII/2008; and Carlos Malamud & Rogelio Núñez (2022), 'La Cumbre de las Américas y América Latina en el nuevo escenario geopolítico', Elcano Royal Institute, 3/VI/2022.

China's exploitation and promotion of the global South's historical grievance narrative also meshes with the 'non-interference' offer advanced by Beijing and with its denouncement of new forms of Western paternalism, such as tying investment and development aid to an improvement in economic and political governance.⁷⁵ The Chinese model and experience in areas like Latin America and Africa thus represent a direct challenge to the Spanish model and interests in these top-priority regions. This is first because Spain has linked its economic and development investment in Latin America and Africa to advances in the economic and political governance of these regions, whereas China offers an alternative model in which investments, loans and development are not linked to better governance and in some countries may even induce tendencies towards corruption. This incurs the twofold problem of bringing instability to the region and squarely challenging a model that Spain has been promoting and trying to extend to European foreign policy. Secondly, the concerted Chinese arrival has displaced Spain's position in these regions and particularly perhaps in Latin America.⁷⁶ The two issues are related and constitute a clear instance of how, far from being theoretical, the Chinese challenge is something that strikes to the very heart of Spain and its companies and has clear political-strategic and economic costs.

Although Spain's Foreign Minister, José Manuel Albares, refers to Latin America as the most 'Euro-compatible' region in the world,⁷⁷ the Chinese model threatens this 'Euro-compatibility'. Something similar applies to Africa, another top-priority region for Spain –and even more so for the EU– where the Chinese campaign challenges the European and Spanish economic position and relationship model. Spain must explicitly acknowledge this strategic threat and promote policies that help to counteract it, both within the EU and on the transatlantic stage. This would reap the threefold dividend of; (1) highlighting Spain's role as a bridge between Europe, America and Africa; (2) helping to reinforce European and transatlantic interest in Latin America and Africa; and (3) counteracting a specific challenge to Spain's political and economic interests.

75 For this debate see, for example, Iliana Olivie & María Santillán O'Shea (2023), 'Ayuda al desarrollo, influencia y gobernanza. Una hoja de ruta', Elcano Royal Institute, 9/III/2023.

76 For an exhaustive analysis see Carlos Malamud, José Juan Ruiz & Ernesto Talvi (Eds.) (2023), '¿Por qué importa América Latina?', Elcano Royal Institute, June.

77 José Manuel Albares (2023), 'Los gobiernos y ministros pasan, pero no los lazos entre Europa y Latinoamérica', *Euractiv*, 13/VII/2023.

4 Conclusions

The war in Ukraine underscores the centrality of the use of force in international (and European) relations as well as the idea that economic interactions are increasingly bound up with security and geopolitical rivalry. We are thus immersing ourselves in an international context characterised by the language of power and the importance of interstate rivalry, in which the need to tackle the challenges posed by Russia and China at the regional and global levels of the international order respectively have come to play a structural role in Europe's foreign and security policy and in transatlantic relations. We are also witnessing the growing assertiveness of regional powers (such as Brazil and India), which resist aligning themselves in the rivalry between the West and China or Russia, and the questioning in a large part of the global South of the international order that emerged following the Second World War.

Against such a backdrop, Spain aspires to act as a spearhead in the European and Western battle for the global South. This requires internalising the centrality of interstate competition in contemporary international relations, which in turn requires Spain to acknowledge the logic of power and its own interest as the main framework of reference in its foreign and security policy, and to transcend the predominantly normative and legalist conception that has characterised Spanish foreign policy in recent decades. Meanwhile, the competitive and geopolitical shift in the international and European landscape should encourage Spain both to take the military instrument more seriously and to align its economic policies and strategic priorities.

Given the structural role that the Russian and Chinese challenges have come to play in the European and transatlantic debate, Spain should devise its own strategic concept and a clear public narrative about how to tackle such challenges with the goal of acquiring strategic credibility as well as attracting European and transatlantic attention towards specific Spanish priorities. Specifically, Spain should underscore the importance of regions such as the southern neighbourhood and Latin America in the context of the Russian and Chinese challenges, while avoiding falling into the trap of seeing the South and Latin America exclusively through the prism of strategic rivalry with Russia and China. Spain aspires to lead the 'battle for the global South' in Europe and the West, counteracting the Chinese anti-grievance narrative and reformulating relations with Africa and Latin America around areas of shared interest and special importance for these regions, rather than trying to co-opt them only when it serves a specific Western interest (as in the case of Ukraine).

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