

# Towards a reconfiguration of relations with the Global South

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**Iliana Olivé, Mario Esteban,  
Cristina de Esperanza  
& Lucía Fernández**

**July  
2025**



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& Lucía Fernández**

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C/ Príncipe de Vergara, 51  
28006 Madrid  
[www.realinstitutoelcano.org](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org)

ISSN: 225-5293

Depósito Legal: M-8692-2013

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# Executive summary<sup>1</sup>

The growing presence and proactivity of the Global South represents a structural change in the international system, requiring a strategic overhaul of relations between Spain and the European Union (EU) and this heterogeneous group of countries. The evidence shows that these relations go beyond development aid and are already substantial and growing, not only in trade and direct investments, in scientific and technological cooperation but also in terms of diplomacy and security. This reconfiguration must therefore be extended to all dimensions, and a more integrated approach is called for.

First, it is essential to jettison reductionist attitudes that conceive of the Global South as a homogenous bloc or that simply address geographical criteria. Instead, a strategy that is sensitive to the political, economic and social characteristics of each country, region and interregional grouping needs to be devised.

Secondly, it is advisable to construct these new relations on the basis of recognising shared interests and values and the strategic potential of such alliances in a more fragmented global landscape. The growing assertiveness of the Global South in international forums and its greater economic and political protagonism underscore the need for a more structured and sustained political dialogue on the part of Spain and the EU.

Lastly, it is crucial to move towards more coherent governance of foreign policy towards the Global South, achieved through greater governmental and multilateral coordination and by abandoning an exclusively donor-recipient mentality. Spain benefits from a unique portfolio of assets – historical, cultural, institutional and economic– that enable it to play a key role in this new scenario.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to extend their sincere thanks to Ana Ballesteros, Marta Driessen, Miguel Otero and María Santillán O’Shea, whose comments have resulted in significant improvements to the analysis.



# 1. Introduction

Within a few weeks of taking office, the Trump administration has imposed tariffs on its main trading partners, suspended the activities of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), announced the end of support for Ukraine in its war with Russia and flirted with the idea of leaving both the UN and the NATO. These are just some of the measures that, if they were to be implemented in full, would do away with the multilateral system created at the end of the Second World War; a system in which the US, as well as being a cornerstone of the system, constituted a structural ally for Europe.

For at least the last three terms, the US has been becoming a less multilateral international actor. This became pronounced during the terms of Donald Trump, who has moreover made the country a markedly hostile power, even towards some of its traditional partners.

In parallel, new regional and global powers, largely non-Western and without exception developing countries up until the end of the last century, have been consolidating themselves in recent decades. Obvious cases in point are China, a new world power, and Brazil, a clear regional power. India is another regional power that, after decades of an economic development model focused on its domestic market, is now seeking a greater international role.

Europe, or more specifically the EU, with its traditional liberal and free-market approach, for obvious reasons operates (or operated) more assuredly in a multilateral system of a firmly Western character, which many of its Member States helped to build. Moreover, the current priorities set out by the Union, such as the construction of a more tech-driven productive base, the digital and green transitions, strategic autonomy and protecting its territorial integrity and borders require, as well as a greater level of integration within the EU, that the Union actively participates in the international system and thereby helps to shape it. Put another way, the EU cannot afford to withdraw. Nor can Spain, which finds itself facing very similar dilemmas to those of the Union, having joined this political and economic project almost 40 years ago.

In the context of (what seems to be) the loss of a strategic ally in the US, still distant relations with India, complex relations with China and overt confrontation with Russia, it is essential, for Europe in general and Spain in particular, to locate strategic allies in the Global South, to which end it is necessary to reconfigure its relations with them. The reconfiguration of

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Europe and Spain's relations with the Global South requires, first, deeper understanding of this complex, diverse and very wide group of countries. The Global South, which may be said to contain 173 territories and countries<sup>2</sup>, with a population of almost 7 billion people (86.5% of the total) and economies that represent 43% of the world total<sup>3</sup>, is much more than China, India, Brazil and Russia. They have moreover been organising themselves in multilateral configurations, in many of which the countries of the north have not been taking part, at least since 1955 when the Bandung Conference was held. Secondly, there is also a need for a more granular analysis of Spain and Europe's economic and political relations with the Global South.

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2 For the purposes of this work the Global South is defined as: (1) all the countries of the Americas, with the exception of Canada and the US; (2) all Asian countries, with the exception of Japan; (3) all the countries of Oceania, barring Australia and New Zealand; (4) all African countries; and (5) in Europe, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, North Macedonia, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine.

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3 Authors' own calculations based on World Bank data (World Development Indicators). Accessed 5/III/2025.

# 2. What is the Global South?

The emergence of two global blocs in the wake of the Second World War gave rise to the expression ‘Third World’, a residual category for labelling the countries and regions that formed part of neither the First (similar to the Western bloc) nor the Second (defined as the Soviet bloc). However, the process of decolonisation that ran from 1950 to 1970 and later the fall of the Berlin Wall meant that a term defining this group of countries by exclusion made less sense. Thus it was increasingly replaced by the terms ‘emerging countries’ and ‘developing countries’.

The ‘developing countries’ label, which is the most widely used in the academic literature (Figure 1), incorporates the idea of development as a progressive (never regressive) and, to an extent, linear process. However, this Rostovian view of development fails to align with a reality in which some of the countries that were developing in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are now rich nations, one of the most striking cases being that of South Korea. Meanwhile, other countries seem to be stuck at low levels of development, as in the case of the least developed countries (LDCs) in central Africa.

Figure 1. Terms and concepts of the Global South

(number of Web of Science results in which terms are included in the topic)

	1950-90	1990-2000	2000-10	2010-20	2020-25	No period stated
Third World	3.861	3.521	2.140	2.521	1.250	13.079
Developing countries	7.993	12.769	30.187	72.494	52.485	174.537
Emerging countries	36	38	437	2.434	2.323	5.273
Global South	0	6	426	4.705	9.945	15.465

Source: Clarivate, Web of Science, accessed 6/III/2025.

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## What is the Global South?

It is possible to find academic publications in the social sciences referring to the Global South from mid-way through the 1990s (Paul & Paul, 1995; Montagnes, 1997). Like the other labels mentioned above, the term is used as a 'symbolic designation with political implications' (Grovoqui, 2011) or even in a metaphorical sense (Klob, 2017), rather than in its geographical sense. Although no universally accepted definition of the term exists, various authors concur in its explanatory capability in the current global context. According to Klob, it 'has great potential to consolidate and empower the various social actors that consider themselves to be subaltern(ised) positionalities of global networks of power' (Klob, 2017: 1). In any event, the elasticity of the term induces Schneider to give it three possible readings: geographical, that of global subalternism and a flexible metaphor (Schneider, 2017). For the purposes of this analysis, the authors will adopt the latter definition, the flexible metaphor that locates the Global South, in the words of Sparke (2007), 'everywhere, but always somewhere: [...] embodied and highly heterogeneous'. In other words, the Global South will be taken here to refer to a transnational concept that manifests itself in local realities that can moreover exhibit marked differences between each other.

The Global South has spent decades organising itself in multilateral forums in which the north has had no participation. At the 1955 Bandung Conference (Indonesia), convened by five newly independent countries –Burma, Sri Lanka, Egypt, India and Indonesia– 30 African and Asian countries took part. Emerging from this conference, notable for its markedly post- and anticolonial character, was the Bandung Declaration, which set out several of the ideas and principles that still continue to guide the position and/or narrative adopted by the Global South, or part of it, in its international relations. These include respect for fundamental human rights and the acknowledgement of the United Nations as the legitimate forum for international accord, non-interference in member countries' internal affairs, territorial integrity and respect for justice and international obligations ('Outcome document of the Third South Summit', 2024).

Bandung was followed, with similar policy objectives and content, by the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (1961), the G77 (1964) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (1964), as well as the Tricontinental Conference held in Havana (1966), which brought together more than 500 delegates from 82 African, Asian, Latin American and Caribbean countries.

However it was in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the presence and proactivity of the Global South became evident in various spheres of international relations. It went from generating 23% of the world economy in 2000 to 44% in 2022, from receiving 19% of foreign direct investment (FDI) to 53%, from being the source of 11% of outgoing FDI to 34%, from producing 30% of the world's exports to 45%, from receiving 27% of imports to 42%, and from contributing 21% of gross fixed capital formation to 51%.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Authors' own calculations based on World Bank data (World Development Indicators), accessed 7/III/2025.

South-south cooperation has also been rising in recent years. For example, in 2023 Turkish development aid amounted to \$6.84 billion and Saudi aid totalled \$5.47 billion, surpassing the aid spending that year of the 20 so-called traditional donors (members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee), the latter including Spain, Australia and Denmark.<sup>5</sup>

As well as the more traditional groupings such as the G77 and the various forums in the United Nations system, multilateral organisations with a more themed or geographical emphasis have been set up; these include the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (1967), the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) (1991), the African Union (2002), which is now also a member of the G20, BRICS (which first gathered in 2009) and its recent enlarged version, BRICS+, created in 2024.

Multilateral, regional and national development banks have grown in tandem, with CAF becoming consolidated as the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, the Islamic Development Bank significantly enlarging its portfolio in Africa and, more recently, new institutions being established such as the New Development Bank (under the BRICS framework) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, under the auspices of China. Moreover, countries of the Global South exercise considerable leadership within the United Nations system. Seven of the UN's 15 Specialised Agencies, two of the six Funds and Programmes and four of the eight Entities are currently led by countries of the Global South.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly notable in institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which has been continuously headed by countries from the Global South since 1976.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, four of the last five UN secretary generals have come from the Global South (Peru, Egypt, Ghana and South Korea). In the area of global security, countries of the Global South play a highly active role, leading eight of the 11 active peace missions<sup>8</sup> and consistently being the main providers of personnel deployed in the last 20 years.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of all the

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5 Data taken from the OECD, accessed 7/III/2025.

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6 Countries of the Global South lead the following specialised agencies: the International Labour Organisation (ILO, Togo), the FAO (China), the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO, Colombia), the World Health Organisation (WHO, Ethiopia), the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO, Argentina), the International Maritime Organisation (IMO, Panama) and UN Tourism (Georgia). Global South countries lead two of the six Funds and Programmes: the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, Panama) and the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat, Brazil) and four of the UN's Entities: UN Women (Jordan), the International Trade Centre (ITC, Jamaica), UNAIDS (Uganda) and UNCTAD (Costa Rica). Source: UN System Documentation, accessed on 18/III/2025.

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7 The directors general of the FAO since 1976 have been: Edouard Saouma (Lebanon, 1976-93), Jacques Diouf (Senegal, 1994-2011), José Graziano da Silva (Brazil, 2012-19) and Qu Dongyu (China, since 2019). Information taken from UN System Documentation on 1/IV/2025.

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8 The eight UN peace missions led by the Global South are: UNISFA (Ghana, as acting head of mission), MINUSCA (Ruanda), MONUSCO (Guinea), UNSOS (Ruanda), UNMISS (South Africa), MINURSO (Russia), UNMOGIP (Mexico), UNMIK (Lebanon) and UNDOF (Ghana). Information taken from *UN Peacekeeping* on 1/IV/2025.

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9 Based on the monthly December analysis (2001-24) of the *Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries (by Ranking)* report, which includes mission experts, constituted police units, individual police officers, general staff officers and troops. Information taken from *UN Peacekeeping. Troop and Police Contributions* on 13/III/2025.

## What is the Global South?

above, the Global South's international presence grew from 28% of total global presence in 1990 to 40% in 2023, according to the Elcano Global Presence Index.<sup>10</sup>

This increased presence in all areas of international relations and the proliferation of supranational institutions in line with its political needs and objectives has also translated into the Global South becoming more assertive in international forums, both old and new (Baumann *et al.*, 2024). For example, in 2023 the G77, using the opposition and abstentions of OECD countries, managed to transfer the international fiscal cooperation negotiations from the context of the OECD to the United Nations (Garcimartín, 2025). Moreover, amid the current scenario of geopolitical fragmentation, this assertiveness comes in a tense climate characterised by a lack of trust between the parties (Olivié *et al.*, 2024), in which the north<sup>11</sup> and particularly the West are frequently accused, by a range of Global South groupings, of breaching their international commitments, of interfering in other countries' domestic affairs and of applying double standards in their stances on international affairs, for example, the different positions the EU and several of its Member States have adopted on the Ukraine conflict and in the Middle East.

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<sup>10</sup> The authors based on data taken from the Elcano Royal Institute (Elcano Global Presence Index), accessed on 7/III/2025.

<sup>11</sup> The north is deemed to refer to Australia, Canada, the US, Japan, New Zealand, the EU and the rest of the countries located in western and central Europe.

# 3. Spain, the European Union and the Global South

## 3.1. Trade relations

The trade ties that the EU and Spain maintain with the Global South are, in the case of goods, of equal or greater importance compared to those they maintain with their non-EU partners in the north (Figure 2).

However, trade with the Global South is distributed among a much greater number of countries. For example, almost 40% of the EU's exports in goods to the non-EU north are accounted for by three partners –the US (19% of total exports), the UK (14%) and Switzerland (7%)– whereas the 10 largest export markets in the Global South do not even account for 30% of exports. This diversification, which in principle benefits Spain and the EU's economic security, also represents a more complex network of institutional trading relations. Thus, the EU has 17 countries and territories among its 10 main trading partners (exports and imports, goods and services) in the Global South, to which Spain adds another nine, all of them distributed among Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South Asia, East Asia, the Caribbean, North Africa and the Middle East.

Moreover, the fact that the Global South is a major source of the goods and services (in part involving medium and high technology) consumed in Spain and the EU challenges the preconceived idea that the role of the South in international production chains is necessarily secondary to the role played by European countries.

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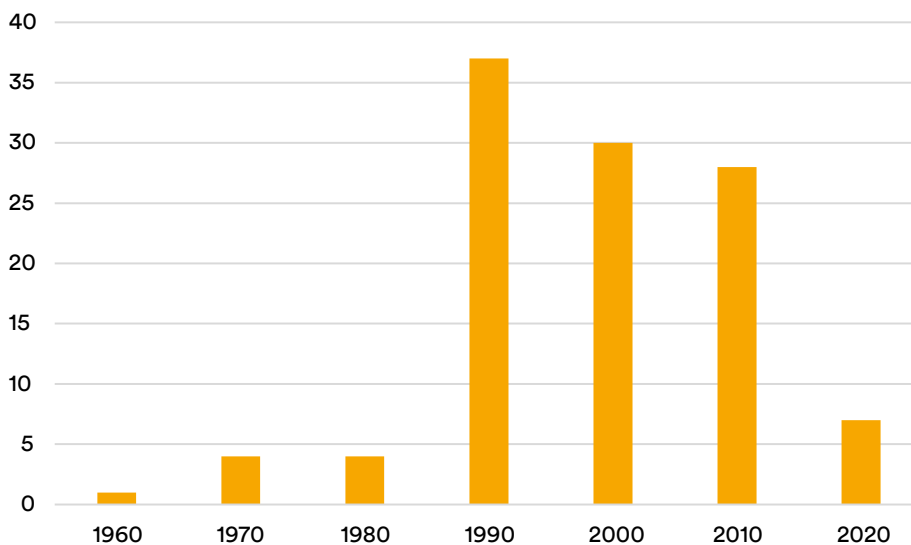
Figure 2. **The EU and Spain's trade ties with the Global South**

(average of the last five years as a percentage of total non-EU trade)

<b>EU</b>				
	Goods exports	Goods imports	Services exports	Services imports
North	48,9	34,5	63,7	64,1
Global South	48,1	64,0	36,3	35,9
Top 10 Global South	29,0	43,1	21,2	21,1
	China	China	China	China
	Turkey	Russia	Singapore	Singapore
	Russia	Turkey	India	Bermuda
	South Korea	South Korea	Russia	India
	Mexico	India	UAE	Barbados
	India	Vietnam	Brazil	Turkey
	Brazil	Taiwan	South Korea	UAE
	UAE*	Brazil	Brazil	Cayman Islands
	Singapore	Malasya	Mexico	Russia
	Ukraine	Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia	South Korea
<b>Spain</b>				
	Goods exports	Goods imports	Services exports	Services imports
North	42,4	24,7	62,5	56,0
Global South	57,6	75,3	37,5	44,0
Top 10 Global South	34,0	47,1	20,3	23,8
	Morocco	China	Mexico	China
	China	Turkey	Colombia	Morocco
	Turkey	Morocco	Brazil	Mexico
	Mexico	Brazil	Morocco	Singapore
	Brazil	Nigeria	UAE	Turkey
	Saudi Arabia	Algeria	Chile	Colombia
	UAE	Mexico	China	Brazil
	South Korea	India	Argentina	India
	Israel	Russia	Peru	UAE
	Chile	Saudi Arabia	Russia	Dominican Rep.

The growing strength of the EU's trade with the Global South runs parallel to an increase in the number of trade agreements between the two groups of countries. Since 1965, when the trade and technical cooperation agreement was signed between the then European Economic Community (EEC) and Lebanon, 111 trade agreements or agreements with trade content have been struck.<sup>12</sup> Following the end of the Cold War a veritable explosion took place, with 37 deals signed in the 1990s, 30 in the 2000s and 28 in the 2010s (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Total number of trade agreements signed between the EU and the Global South**



Note: the data refer to the signing of agreements, regardless of how long they remain in force.

Source: the authors, based on EU data.

Most trades deals negotiated in the 1990s were signed with European countries, which is unsurprising given the fall of the Berlin Wall and the thawing of relations between western Europe and its neighbours in central and eastern Europe, in the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Several of these countries (such as North Macedonia, Moldova and more recently Ukraine) now rank as candidates for joining the EU. Similarly, almost a quarter of the agreements signed in that decade were with Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). Continuing to give priority to its neighbours in matters involving trade relations, the region with which the EU signed the third largest number of agreements was the Middle East and North Africa, specifically with the Palestinian National Authority, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Tunisia and Turkey.

While a trade policy focused predominantly on its eastern and southern neighbours has persisted to the present day, the first agreements with

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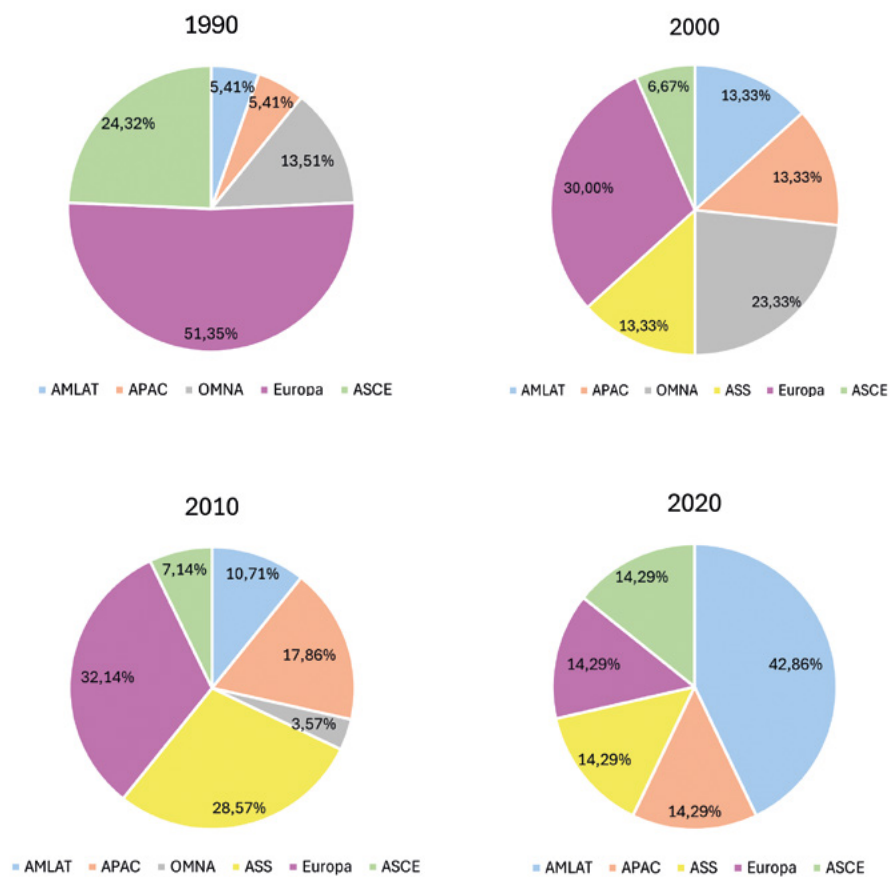
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<sup>12</sup> By contrast to the analysis set out below regarding scientific and technological agreements and security and defence pacts, in the case of trade policy, which is the exclusive prerogative of the EU, the deals struck by the EU and the institutions that preceded it (such as the EEC) are considered and analysed. The data is derived from the EU Itself.

## Spain, the European Union and the Global South

Sub-Saharan Africa were signed in the decade of the 2000s (one with Ghana, three with South Africa), followed by another eight in the 2010s (with Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Liberia and three regional agreements with West Africa, East Africa and the Southern African Development Community). Trade relations with the Asia-Pacific region have also extended (Cambodia, South Korea, Laos and Vietnam in the 2000s, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam and the Pacific States in the 2010s).

Figure 4. **Geographical distribution of all the trade agreements signed between the EU and countries of the Global South**



Note: LATAM = Latin America; APAC = Asia-Pacific; MENA = Middle East and North Africa; SSA = Sub-Saharan Africa. The data refer to signed agreements, regardless of how long they remain in force.

Source: the authors, based on EU data.

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## 3.2. Productive and financial relations (FDI)

The growing importance of the Global South to the EU and Spain becomes even more striking in the data for outbound and inbound non-EU FDI (Figure 5). Most of the FDI in the EU and Spain, both incoming and outgoing, has its source and destination in other countries in the north (52%-73.5% of the total).

In recent years however, the Global South's share among the main investors in Spain has risen and now accounts for 35% of inbound non-EU FDI (26% of the total). In parallel, the 10 largest investors also account for a greater share (50% of the non-EU inbound investments compared to 24% of the total). In this regard, Costa Rica, Qatar, South Korea and Bermuda seem in recent years to have displaced countries with a major portfolio of assets in Spain such as the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Russia and Panama.<sup>13</sup>

The pivot from the north to the Global South is even clearer in the case of the EU. In a pandemic and post-pandemic context, and the subsequent reconfiguration of international production chains, both the EU and its partners have reduced FDI in recent years. As a result, the net inflows of non-EU FDI into the EU totalled, on average, -€78.352 billion between 2019 and 2023 and the EU's outbound FDI in its non-EU partners -€2.101 billion.

These figures are the outcome of two opposing trends. Whereas there has been a very significant disinvestment on the part of the north in the EU, ties with the Global South have strengthened. Between 2019 and 2023, northern European partners disinvested, on average, €151.346 billion in FDI assets in the EU, while the EU did likewise with €87.682 billion. In the same period, the Global South invested €72.994 billion in the EU; and the EU €85.581 billion in the Global South.

Changes also took place in terms of the main sources and recipients of FDI among Global South countries, with greater roles being played by the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Israel among the main investors, and Turkey, Israel and Chile among the main recipients.

The fact that the Global South has become an important source of productive capital for Spain and the EU runs counter to the preconceived idea that the most sophisticated productive capabilities are necessarily located in the north; an idea that underlies the frequently paternalistic attitude prevailing in relations with the south.

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<sup>13</sup> The presence of tax havens among the main FDI partners can be explained by the growing difficulty of the current balance of payments accounting system to differentiate productive investment (which is reflected by FDI) and other portfolio financial assets.

Figure 5. The EU and Spain’s productive and financial links with the Global South

(average of the last five years as a percentage of total non-EU FDI)

EU				
	Outbound investments ***	Inbound investments ***	Outbound total	Inbound total
North	-4.174,0	-193,2	65,4	70,9
Global South	4.074,0	93,2	34,6	29,1
Top 10 Global South	4.252,1	136,2	22,7	19,5
	Cayman Islands	Singapore	China	Brasil
	Brazil	UAE	Singapore	Bermuda
	Singapore	South Africa	Brazil	Russia
	China	Cayman Islands	Russia	China
	India	Brazil	Bermuda	Mexico
	BVI ***	Russia	UAE	Cayman Islands
	Turkey	Saudi Arabia	Mexico	Singapore
	Israel	South Korea	Cayman Islands	Bahamas
	UAE	Bahamas	India	BVI
	Chile	Israel	BVI	Barbados
Spain				
	Outbound investments	Inbound investments **	Outbound total	Inbound total
North	28,7	65,1	52,0	73,5
Global South	71,3	34,9	48,0	26,5
Top 10 Global South	66,6	50,3	41,7	23,9

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Mexico	Mexico	Brazil	Mexico
Brazil	China	Mexico	Uruguay
Turkey	Uruguay	Argentina	China
Argentina	Costa Rica	Chile	UAE
Colombia	Qatar	Colombia	Singapore
Uruguay	Curaçao	Uruguay	Brazil
China	Singapore	Turkey	Russia
Honduras	Colombia	China	Colombia
Chile	South Korea	Peru	Panama
Panama	Bermuda	Ecuador	Curaçao

\* The figures are preceded by a minus sign because the total net inflow of non-EU FDI investments was negative in the period concerned.

\*\* The value of the top 10 exceeds that of the Global South total because there were negative net movements for other countries included in the aggregate.

\*\*\* British Virgin Islands.

Source: Eurostat and the authors, data accessed on 14/III/2025.

### 3.3. Development aid

European and Spanish international development aid policies encompass a large number of partners in the Global South, some of which are not included among their main trading and financial partners. As far as EU institutions are concerned, this is the case for Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Serbia, Syria, Georgia and Afghanistan and as far as Spain is concerned for El Salvador, Bolivia, Guatemala, Gaza and the West Bank, Venezuela and Nicaragua (see figure 6). Such international relations moreover broaden the number and type of agents involved: while the private sector dominates trade and productive relations, in the case of development aid, public administrations, civil society organisations, multilateral bodies and development banks all come into play.

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Figure 6. **Main recipients of official development aid (ODA) from European and Spanish institutions**

Figure 6a. Main recipient countries of ODA from European institutions (in millions of USD)

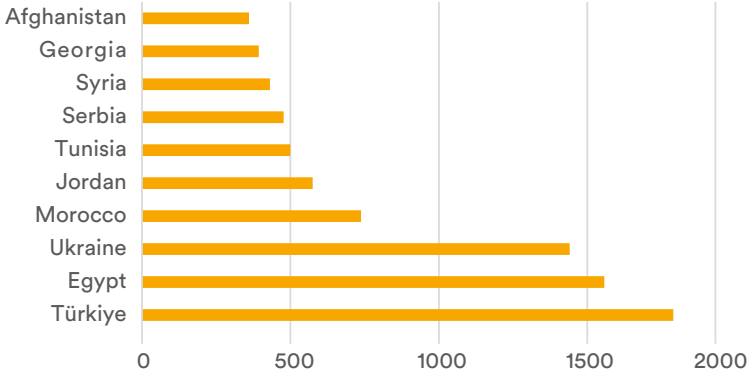


Figure 6b. Main regions receiving ODA from European institutions (in millions of USD)

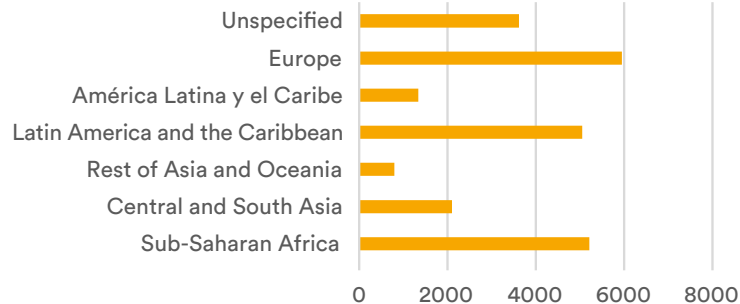


Figure 6c. Main recipient countries of Spanish ODA (in millions of USD)

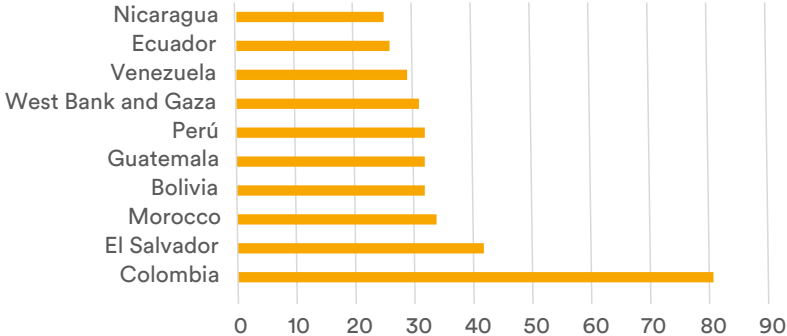
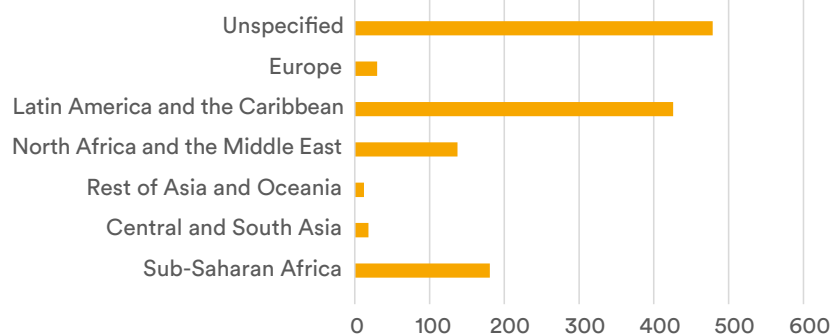


Figure 6d. Main recipient regions of Spanish ODA (in millions of USD)



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Source: OECD, data accessed on 13/III/2025.

## 3.4. Cooperation in the field of science and technology

The growing economic attractiveness of the Global South goes hand in hand with its recent advances in the field of science and technology. Although the technological cutting edge has traditionally been dominated by high-income countries, the gap has started to narrow. Countries in the Global South are establishing themselves as dynamic hubs of economic growth and innovation (Lin & Rosenblatt, 2012).

It is important to bear in mind that, despite the scientific and technological rise of the Global South, the distribution of scientific output continues to be uneven, with significant gaps between these countries. This emerges clearly from both the SciVal data, based on the total number of publications indexed in the Scopus database, and from the Nature Index Share<sup>14</sup> indicator, which measures the proportions of participation in high-impact publications in the fields of natural sciences and health. Both indices enable similar trends to be spotted in the concentration of scientific output.<sup>15</sup> In Latin America, Brazil leads with approximately 46% of all regional publications, while each of the 15 countries with a smaller number do not even reach 1%, according to the SciVal data. In the Nature Index, Brazil (376.82), Chile (128.21) and Argentina (100.65), take the lion's share of high-impact regional participation, whereas the other countries combined fail to attain a Share of 50. In Africa, Egypt, South Africa and Nigeria contribute more than 50% of the region's scientific output according to SciVal, while the rest is divided between 55 countries. Africa's total Share is 317.19, led by South Africa with a score of 113.84, while the rest is divided between 50 countries. In the Asia-Pacific region, the concentration is even more marked by the domination of China, which accounts for almost 49% of the regional publications total in SciVal, while the other half is split between 58 countries. China heads the world Nature Index ranking with a Share of 33,554.82 and is home to seven of 10 of the world's leading scientific institutions, consolidating an outstanding position in the production of high-impact international science.

Despite these disparities, many countries in the Global South, including some with a more modest record of scientific output, show growing activity in the field of innovation. This is evident from the Global Innovation Tracker, published by the World Intellectual Property Organisation, which offers a detailed analysis of the state of innovation on a global scale. According to its 2024 Global Innovation Index (GII),

14 The Share indicator is a fractional count that assigns a proportional credit to every institution or country for each author affiliated with it for a given article. To calculate the score, it is deemed that each author has contributed to the article equally. The value given to each article is 1.0. For more information see A brief guide to the Nature Index.

15 The SciVal data measure the total volume of publications in the 2019-23 period. Nature Index covers the period between February 2024 and January 2025. Although the regional classification criteria used are not strictly equivalent, the two sources offer complementary data that enable the distribution and concentration of scientific output to be analysed at a regional and global scale.

which covers 133 countries, two countries from the Global South appear in the top positions: South Korea appears in sixth place in the ranking, and China occupies 11<sup>th</sup> position. The report notes that, in the last five years, countries such as Indonesia, Mauritius, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Brazil and Pakistan have been the ones that have jumped most positions in GII. Moreover, it highlights 19 economies that exceed expectations in innovation compared to their level of development, headed by India, Moldova and Vietnam, which have remained leaders for 14 consecutive years (Dutta *et al.*, 2024). The scientific and technological presence of the Global South is even greater than that suggested by the data for the countries' own institutions, owing to the fact that the presence of researchers originally hailing from the Global South but working in northern countries' innovation centres is much greater than the other way round.

As a result of this new scenario, countries of the Global South are emerging as strategic partners for Europe in the science and technology areas. There is growing acknowledgement on the part of European actors of the benefits of collaborating with Global South countries in areas where cooperation with the traditional science and technology powers has traditionally been preferred. Between 1972 and 2024, Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU<sup>16</sup> signed a total of 60 science and technology cooperation agreements (Figure 7)<sup>17</sup> with the 10 G20 countries belonging to the Global South, not including Russia.<sup>18</sup>

The data suggest that it is a developing dynamic that is likely to gain momentum in the near future. Whereas 13 agreements were negotiated in the entirety of the 2010s, 11 have been signed in just the first four years of the 2020s.

Spain stands out as the most active player in terms of tapping into this associative potential in the countries of the Global South, leading the signing of science and technology cooperation agreements with a total of 22. It is followed by the EU (16) and Italy (15), with Poland bringing up the rear (7). The greater momentum in this rising trend is particularly evident in Spain and the EU. Comparing the three-year period before (2017-19) and after (2022-24) the COVID-19 pandemic, a very significant increase in the number of agreements emerges: between 2017 and 2019 both Spain

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16 This report focuses chiefly on Spain, so Italy and Poland were taken as comparable yardsticks due to the fact that they are the EU Member States with the most similar population sizes.

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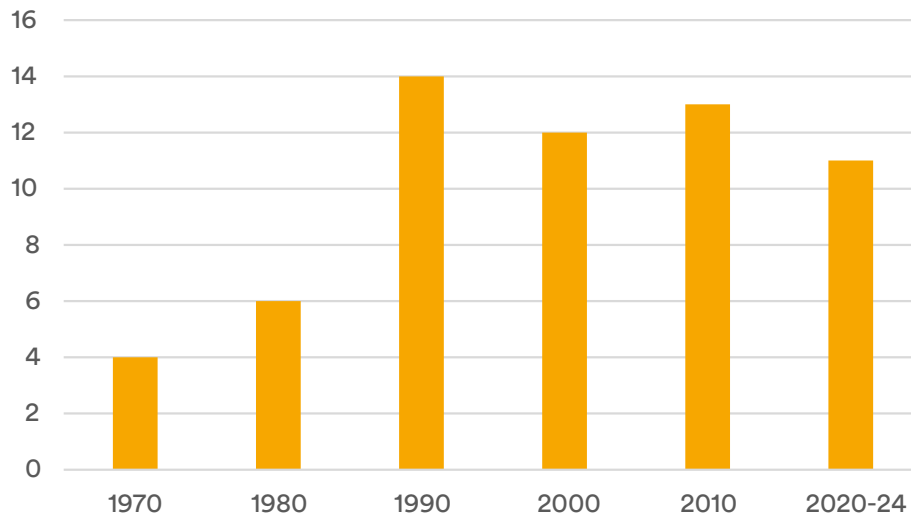
17 Only formal instruments involving intergovernmental bilateral cooperation making an explicit undertaking on the subject of science and technology have been included in this database. This encompasses memorandums of understanding, letters of intent and framework agreements. In the case of the EU, implementation agreements with national agencies are deemed to be bilateral science and technology cooperation agreements.

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18 The total number of agreements negotiated between Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU and G20 countries belonging to the Global South, excluding Russia. This includes Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Korea and South Africa. The information is drawn from official ministerial sources and other official organs of the countries concerned, and was completed with information taken from the press.

and the EU signed one agreement each, whereas in the 2022-24 period Spain signed five and the EU three.

**Figure 7. Agreements signed between Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU and selected Global South countries (by decade, until 2024) in the science and technology area**



Total number of science and technology agreements negotiated between Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU, on the one hand, and G20 countries pertaining to the Global South, excluding Russia, on the other. The data refer to signed agreements, regardless of how long they remain in force.

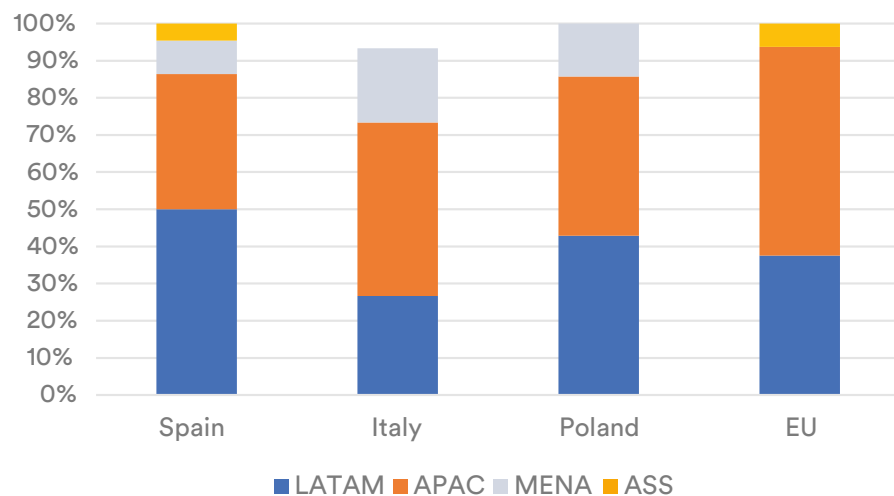
Source: official data and information extracted from the press.

It should also be borne in mind that the nature of these agreements has changed over the decades. The oldest deals tended to be scientific and technical cooperation agreements, which laid the foundations for what was generally vertical development cooperation. The most recent science and technology cooperation agreements by contrast have a much more horizontal character. This is exemplified by the deals signed by Spain and the EU in the 2022-2024 period.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The five science and technology agreements signed by Spain between 2022 and 2024 are: Agreement to give impetus to cooperation between Argentina and Spain in bilateral development and technological innovation projects, especially in strategic areas such as health, the environment and climate change, the energy transition, food, new resources for industry 4.0 and sustainability (with Argentina, March 2022); Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation of the Argentine Republic, the National Agency for the Promotion of Research, Technological Development and Innovation of the Argentine Republic, the Centre for Industrial Technological Development of the Kingdom of Spain (Argentina, June 2022); Letter of intent in Science, Technology and Innovation (with Brazil, 2023); Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities of the Kingdom of Spain and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation of the Federal Republic (with Brazil, 2024); Memorandum of understanding to promote the execution of joint research activities, as well as the participation of scientific and technical staff in high-impact national research projects (with China, 2024). Official sources (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Union and Cooperation) and information drawn from the press. The three science and technology agreements signed by the EU between 2022 and 2024 were: Administrative agreement for the 2021-2024 period with the goal of establishing a Cofinancing Mechanism to support collaborative research projects within the framework of the two emblematic initiatives agreed: Food, Agriculture and Biotechnology (FAB) and Climate Change and Biodiversity (CCB) (China, 2022); Memorandum of understanding on semiconductors (India, 2023); Digital Association Agreement (Korea, 2022). Official sources and data drawn from the press.

Unsurprisingly, Spain is the actor that made the firmest commitment to Latin America, a region with which it signed 50% of its agreements (Figure 8). By contrast, both the EU and Italy directed their science and technology cooperation largely towards the Asia-Pacific region, with 56% and 46% of their agreements respectively. For its part, Poland had a balanced distribution, with 43% of its agreements directed towards both Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region.

Figure 8. **Geographical distribution of the total science and technology agreements signed by Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU with 10 selected Global South countries**



LATAM (Latin America: Argentina, Mexico, Brazil), APAC (Asia-Pacific: China, South Korea, India, Indonesia), MENA (Middle East and North Africa: Saudi Arabia and Egypt) and SSA (Sub-Saharan Africa: South Africa). The data refer to signed agreements, regardless of how long they remain in force.

Source: official data and information drawn from the press.

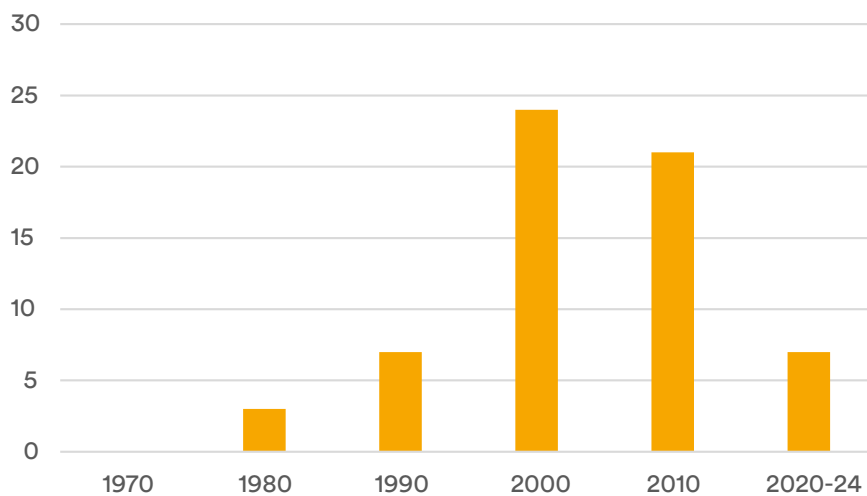
### 3.5. Cooperation on security and defence

These more strategic relations between European actors and countries of the Global South have also translated into an increase in cooperation in the areas of security and defence. This is reflected in the growing number of deals struck with the 10 G20 countries pertaining to the Global South, excluding Russia.<sup>20</sup> Although this dimension started to gain momentum later than its science and technology counterpart, since the year 2000 security and defence has consolidated itself as a major area

<sup>20</sup> Only formal, intergovernmental, bilateral cooperation agreements setting out an explicit commitment on the subject of security and defence have been included in this database. This encompasses memorandums of agreement, letters of intent and framework agreements. In the case of the EU, implementation agreements with national agencies and framework or specific agreements for third-party countries' participation in crisis-management operations are deemed to be bilateral agreements. General cooperation policy agreements have been excluded.

of cooperation. Between 1989 and 2024, Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU signed a total of 62 agreements in these areas, with a larger cluster during the two decades running from 2000 to 2020, comprising 45 agreements (75% of all those signed). Spain again emerges as the most active player in this area, with 24 agreements signed, followed by Italy (22), the EU (11) and Poland (5).

**Figure 9. Agreements signed between Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU and selected countries of the Global South (by decade, until 2024) in the area of security and defence**



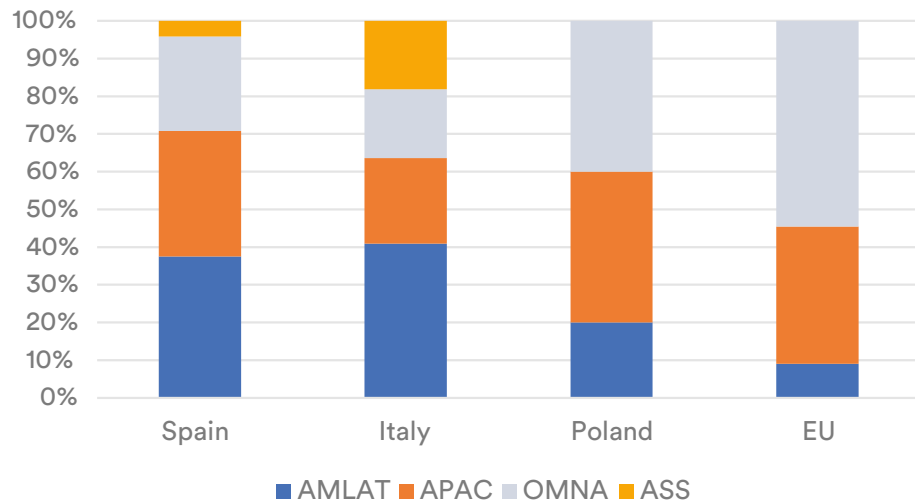
Total number of security and defence agreements negotiated between Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU, on the one hand, and G20 countries pertaining to the Global South, excluding Russia, on the other. The data refer to signed agreements, regardless of how long they remain in force. Source: official data and information extracted from the press.

In the security and defence arena, Italy is the country that focuses most on Latin America, with almost 41% of its agreements geared towards this region. Spain also shows a preference for Latin America, with 37.5% of its agreements signed with Latin American countries, although its portfolio is more balanced: 33% are with the Asia-Pacific region and 25% with the Middle East and North Africa. By contrast, the EU predominantly focuses on the Middle East and North Africa, which accounts for 54% of its agreements, followed by the Asia-Pacific region with 36%. Poland meanwhile focuses equally on the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East and North Africa, with 40% of its agreements signed with each region, but, like the EU, it has focused less on Latin America.

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Figure 10. Geographical distribution of the total security and defence agreements signed by Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU with 10 selected Global South countries



LATAM (Latin America: Argentina, Mexico, Brazil), APAC (Asia-Pacific: China, South Korea, India, Indonesia), MENA (Middle East and North Africa: Saudi Arabia and Egypt) and SSA (Sub-Saharan Africa: South Africa).

Source: official data and information drawn from the press

Relations between European actors and their partners in the Global South in security and defence matters are not restricted to the bilateral sphere. Given the growing role of the Global South in multiple aspects of the international system, interaction within the United Nations framework takes on an ever-increasing importance. In the General Assembly, its votes are decisive: 153 of the 193 member countries (almost 80%) belong to the Global South, which makes their support essential if any initiative is to be passed. Moreover, the Global South does not act as a homogeneous geopolitical bloc, which offers major opportunities for political cooperation in multilateral forums.

A case in point is provided by the UN General Assembly resolutions on the two wars under way that have the most bearing on Spain, Russia’s war against Ukraine and the war in Gaza. In the first case, EU Member States acted as a geopolitical bloc, whereas countries in the Global South were much more divided. Analysing the voting pattern of the nine G20 members that form part of the Global South and are not permanent members of the Security Council<sup>21</sup> on Ukraine-related motions before the UN General Assembly between February 2022 and February 2025<sup>22</sup> (10 in total) reveals that the average percentage of voting alignment of such countries on the 10 resolutions was 69%, compared to the unanimity shown by the EU Member States.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the alignment in terms of the nine Global South countries’ voting direction (Figure 11) on these resolutions with that of the

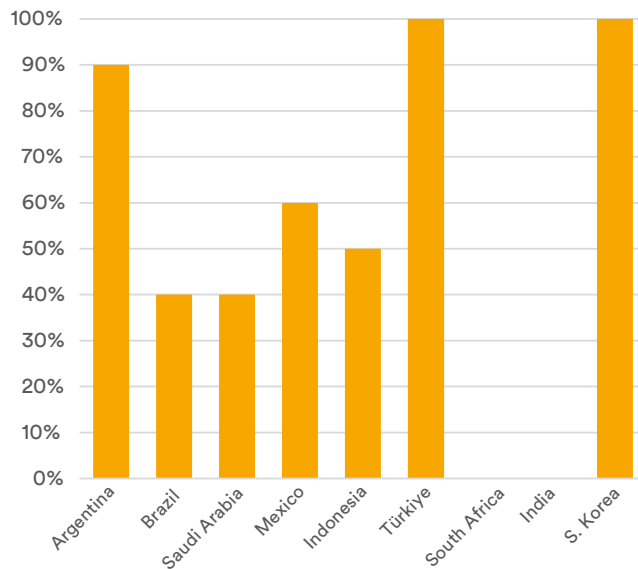
21 These countries are: Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Brazil, South Korea, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Türkiye and South Africa.

22 Data accessed on 26 March 2025.

23 Authors’ own calculations based on the following resolutions: 77/229, 78/221, 78/316, 79/184, ES-11/1, ES-11/2, ES-11/4, ES-11/5, ES-11/6, ES-11/7. See: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/?ln=en>

EU members (53%)<sup>24</sup> is only 15 percentage points less than that with the rest of the Global South scrutinised. And three of them –Argentina, South Korea and Turkey– had a much higher voting alignment percentage with the Europeans (respectively 90%, 100% and 100%) than with the other Global South countries scrutinised.

Figure 11. **Spain’s alignment with selected Global South countries on Ukraine-related votes (Feb. 2022- Feb. 2025, as a percentage of alignment)**



Based on the authors’ own calculations on the voting patterns of these countries in resolutions 77/229, 78/221, 78/316, 79/184, ES-11/1, ES-11/2, ES-11/4, ES-11/5, ES-11/6 and ES-11/7. Source: UN Digital Library, data accessed on 26/III/2025.

From the Spanish viewpoint the search for diplomatic allies in the Global South is also of great importance in matters where the EU does not act as such a homogeneous geopolitical entity and the Spanish authorities take stances closer to some Global South countries than those of their European allies. In the 21 resolutions on Palestine passed by the UN General Assembly between December 2023 and December 2024, Spain had a 90% voting alignment with seven of the nine Global South countries scrutinised, attaining as much as 100% alignment with Mexico (see Figure 12). By contrast, of the four European partners analysed, it was in full alignment only with France and 90% with Poland, whereas alignment with Germany and Italy was 76%.<sup>25</sup>

These data show, first, that defending a rules-based international order and human rights is not by any means the exclusive preserve of either Europe or democratic governments. And, secondly, that there are countries with

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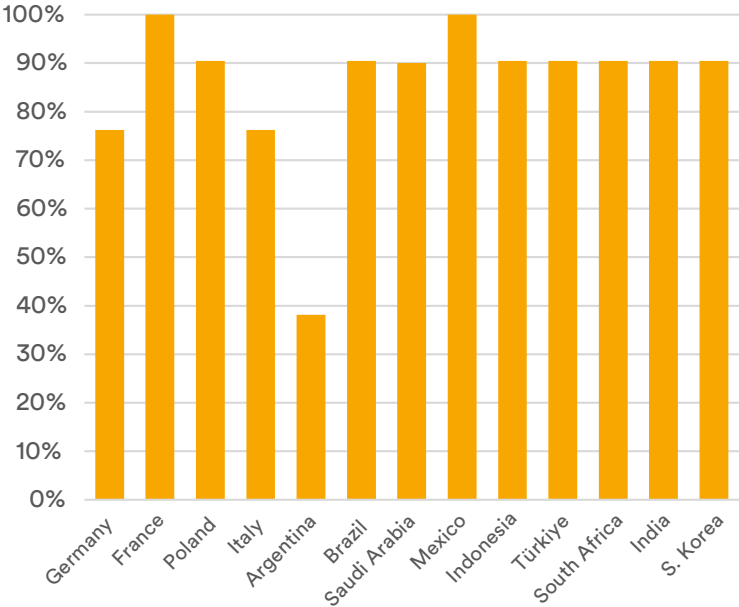
24 Two indicators are used to measure the alignment between countries: the coincidence percentage, which reflects the proportion of pairs of countries that voted the same as the majority on a resolution, and the percentage of coincidence probability, which expresses the same score as an average probability of coincidence between two countries in the same group

25 The 21 resolutions were: 78/73, 78/74, 78/75, 78/76, 78/78, 78/170, 78/192, 10/21, 10/22, 79/81, 79/82, 79/88, 79/89, 79/91, 79/229, 79/163, 79/232, 10/23, 10/24, ES-10/25, ES-10/26.

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extremely high levels of respect for human rights, both within their own borders and in their foreign policy, that are nonetheless capable of falling into flagrant contradictions and double standards. Moreover, the positioning of European and Global South countries does not necessarily reflect a bloc mentality; instead it is determined by a much more fluid framework, frequently influenced by domestic political changes. This is exemplified by the case of Argentina, with which Spain has only 38% alignment, but with a clear change between 2023, when the two countries’ votes were the same in eight of the nine resolutions that year, and 2024, with 0% alignment, after Javier Milei took office.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 12. Spain’s alignment with selected Global South countries on Palestine-related votes (Dec. 2023-Dec. 2024, as a percentage)**



Authors’ own calculations based on the voting patterns of these countries in resolutions 78/73, 78/74, 78/75, 78/76, 78/78, 78/170, 78/192, 10/21, 10/22, 79/81, 79/82, 79/88, 79/89, 79/91, 79/229, 79/163, 79/232, 10/23, 10/24, ES-10/25, ES-10/26.

Source: *Compilation of UN Resolutions and Decisions on the Question of Palestine Adopted in 2023 and 2024*.

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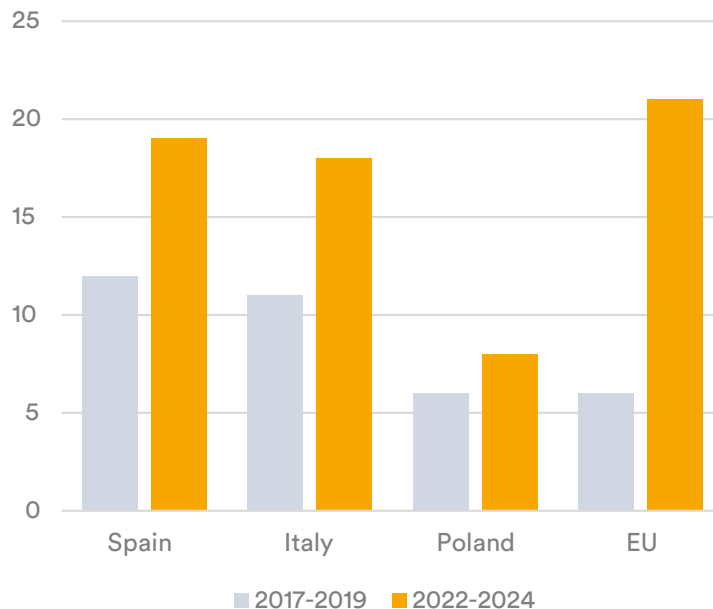
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<sup>26</sup> Authors’ own calculations based on data drawn from *Compilation of UN Resolutions and Decisions on the Question of Palestine Adopted in 2023 and 2024*. See <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/2023compilation-of-unresolutions-add45-20feb2024/> and <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/compilation-of-un-resolutions-and-decisions-on-question-of-palestine-adopted-in-2024-dpr-publication-a-ac-183-l-2-add-46/>.

### 3.6. Official visits

This greater collaboration between European actors and members of both the Global South and the G20, barring Russia, is also reflected in a major number of bilateral visits, which also provide evidence of the regional priorities of the various actors. It is evident from Figure 9 that, after the pandemic, both Spain and Italy, the EU and to a lesser extent Poland have bolstered their diplomatic efforts in these countries, with a significant increase in the dispatch of high-level delegations. The case of the EU is especially striking, going from six visits in the 2017-19 period to 21 during 2021-24.

Figure 13. **Number of high-level visits undertaken by Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU to selected countries of the Global South**



Source: official data and information drawn from the press.

When the high-level visits involving Spain, Italy, Poland and the EU either to or from the 10 Global South countries concerned over the last 10 years (2015-2024) are classified by region, Latin America emerges as the region preferred by Spain (49% of visits), whereas for the other European actors first place is taken by the Asia-Pacific region with, respectively, 42% of visits for Italy, 51% for Poland and 45% for the EU.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Data derived from ministerial sources and other official organs of the countries concerned and supplemented with information drawn from the media. The regional categorisation is as follows: Latin America includes Argentina, Mexico, Brazil; the Asia-Pacific includes China, South Korea, India and Indonesia; the Middle East and North Africa includes Saudi Arabia and Egypt; and Sub-Saharan Africa includes South Africa.



# Conclusions

The growing protagonism of the Global South is a structural trend within the international system, a phenomenon that forces us to redefine our relations with the countries concerned to attain many of our objectives in the international arena, especially in a context as volatile as the current one. Spain and the EU need to adopt a more ambitious, coherent and strategic approach to these actors, and to this end a series of recommendations are put forward:

**1. Jettison the idea of the Global South as a homogeneous bloc.**

The diversity and endless evolution of the Global South demand differentiated responses. Although some actors use a narrative of opposition to the West, the fact is that multiple possible alignments exist, both in terms of shared interests and values. The recent evolution of positions in international arenas such as the United Nations illustrates this diversity and volatility and, at the same time, provides scope for new forms of dialogue and cooperation.

**2. Reject stereotypes and ideological confrontation.**

Global South countries represent a significant percentage of the world's democracies (more than 50% of the countries classified as free by Freedom House). Furthermore, as the Bandung Declaration (1955) indicates, from the start of their coordinated mobilisation as political actors within the international community, democracies possess no monopoly on the defence of such values as respect for fundamental human rights, recognition of the United Nations as the legitimate arena for international dispute resolution, non-interference in countries' internal affairs, territorial integrity or respect for justice and international obligations.

**3. Avoid rigid geographical approaches.**

Addressing the Global South exclusively from the perspective of traditional regional blocs (Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, etc) is inadequate in a context characterised by re-globalisation and the diversification of alliances. There is a need to build adaptive strategies that are sensitive to the specific dynamics of each country and region, as well as their political, social and economic trajectories.

**4. Transcend a reductionist outlook based on development**

**cooperation.** It is essential for Spain's relations with the Global South to continue receiving reinforcement beyond the traditional framework of development aid. The inclusion of strategic, technological, economic and political dimensions should be underpinned, acknowledging that many countries in the Global

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South no longer can or wish to be treated exclusively as recipients of aid. Relations need to rest on shared interests and the recognition of a new international equilibrium.<sup>28</sup>

- 5. Make progress towards more coherent and coordinated governance.** In this regard, the current institutional fragmentation restricts Spain's capacity to respond and influence. It is crucial to improve interministerial coordination (between cooperation, trade, climate, finances, etc) and between the various levels of the administration (subnational, national and European). A more integrated and effective architecture is required that enables a shared perspective on relations with the Global South to be devised.
- 6. Strengthen direct political dialogue.** For the EU's Member States, such as Spain, it is fundamental to maintain or establish high-level channels of political dialogue with the main countries of the Global South, ensuring that this political dialogue is coherent and consistent with the one emanating from the EU.
- 7. Tap into the potential of the multilateral system.** The United Nations in particular –although the same applies to other multilateral platforms, too– continues to be a fundamental arena for nurturing relations with the Global South. Spain and the EU should continue bolstering the roles they play in these forums, fostering a transformative and multilateralist agenda that reflects the interests and values shared with these countries. A good example in this regard is Spain being chosen to host the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development.
- 8. Recognise and strengthen recent advances.** Spain has shown willingness to make progress in this direction, as the growing number of signed accords and the intensification of institutional contacts in recent years have shown. This momentum should be consolidated in an integrated strategy, without losing focus on Latin America, but broadening the outlook to include other regions and key countries.

In short, a genuine reconfiguration of Spain's relations with the Global South involves acknowledging its diversity, jettisoning paternalist attitudes and building connections that reflect global challenges on the basis of joint responsibility, mutual respect and strategic cooperation.

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<sup>28</sup> See recent analyses on the financing of development and on the future of aid in Olivie & Santillán O'Shea (2025) and Olivie (2025), respectively.

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# Authors

**Iliana Olivié**, Senior Fellow, Elcano Royal Institute

**Mario Esteban**, Senior Fellow, Elcano Royal Institute

**Cristina de Esperanza**, Research Assistant (Indo-Pacific Region),  
Elcano Royal Institute

**Lucía Fernández**, Research Assistant, Elcano Royal Institute

## Recommended citation

Olivié, O., Esteban, M., Esperanza, C. de & L. Fernández (2025), 'Towards a reconfiguration of relations with the Global South', *Elcano Policy Paper*, Elcano Royal Institute.

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