

Navigating Security and Defence Dynamics: The Evolving Relationship Between Türkiye and Spain in the Context of NATO and Regional

Arturo Esteban Martínez

Independent Researcher, Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, SPAIN, e-mail: arturoestebanmartinez@gmail.com

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Abstract

The security and defence relationship between Türkiye and Spain has undergone considerable evolution over time, shaped by their shared membership in NATO and mutual interests in regional stability, counterterrorism, and defence cooperation. This report examines the complex dynamics of this bilateral relationship, tracing its historical roots, analysing contemporary challenges and collaborative efforts. The Alliance of Civilizations initiative, which is co-sponsored by both nations, serves as a pivotal platform for fostering intercultural dialogue and enhancing security cooperation.

This essay emphasises the significance of collaborative efforts in the defence sector, particularly in the realms of military technology and joint projects, which have reinforced the strategic partnership between the two countries. The recent developments in defence agreements, including those pertaining to naval shipbuilding and drone technology, illustrate the potential for mutual benefits in enhancing military readiness and operational capabilities. As both countries grapple with persistent challenges such as migration, terrorism, and regional instability, their capacity to collaborate effectively will be pivotal in shaping the future of their security and defence relations.

By analysing the geopolitical dynamics of the Mediterranean and the role of NATO, this study forecasts potential trajectories for bilateral relations in the context of shared security challenges, including terrorism and migration crises. The findings emphasise the importance of mutual defence collaborations in enhancing regional stability and fostering strategic partnerships.

Keywords: Türkiye, Spain, security, defence, NATO, Mediterranean, defence industry.

Introduction

In an anarchic world characterized by complex and multifaceted security challenges, international cooperation emerges as an indispensable element for regional and global stability. In this context, the relationship between Türkiye and Spain holds a uniquely strategic significance, particularly within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Both states, positioned at opposite ends of the Mediterranean Sea, play critical roles in shaping regional security and defence dynamics. They share common interests in regional stability, counterterrorism efforts, and defense cooperation (Danış & Nazlı, 2018, Erdağ, 2020).

This paper aims to explore the multifaceted relationship between Türkiye and Spain in terms of security and defence, examining the main issues, mutual agreements, recent developments, and future forecasts. By analyzing various academic and think tank perspectives, this report seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. To this end, the following hypothesis is proposed, which will be confirmed or refuted throughout the research: "The relationship between Türkiye and Spain in the field of security and defence has been pivotal in shaping a mechanism of mutual cooperation that fosters the development of a mutually beneficial ecosystem, where both actors align their efforts in technological and policy domains. This collaboration strengthens their strategic position within NATO and contributes to regional peace and stability."

This essay employs a comprehensive, qualitative research methodology, analysing various academic and think-tank perspectives in order to provide a thorough understanding of the dynamics at play in the security and defence relationship between Türkiye and Spain.

Background of Spanish Turkish Relations

The diplomatic relationship between Spain and Türkiye has its roots in the mid-19th century, with formal recognition established in 1856. Over the years, the relationship has been shaped by various geopolitical factors, including Türkiye's aspirations for EU membership and Spain's role as a NATO ally. Spain has consistently supported Türkiye's EU accession process, which began in 2005, reflecting a commitment to fostering closer ties between the two nations (Buckingham, 2013).

The historical context of their relationship is further enriched by shared experiences with terrorism, particularly in relation to groups like PKK and ISIS. Spain's own struggles with ETA have created a foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts. This shared concern has led to increased intelligence sharing and collaborative initiatives aimed at enhancing national security (Erdağ, 2020).

Alliance of Civilizations Initiative

The Alliance of Civilizations initiative, co-sponsored by Spain and Türkiye, is a significant diplomatic effort aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding. Launched in 2005, the initiative seeks to address the challenges posed by cultural and religious tensions, particularly in the context of globalization and increasing migration (Bello & Bloom, 2017). The importance of this initiative cannot be overstated, as it reflects both countries' commitment to fostering peace and stability in a world marked by division and conflict (Buckingham, 2013).

The scope of the Alliance of Civilizations extends beyond mere dialogue; it encompasses various programs and projects aimed at promoting education, cultural exchanges, and collaborative initiatives that bridge divides. By emphasizing common values and shared humanity, the initiative seeks to counteract extremism and foster a more inclusive global community. The collaboration between Spain and Türkiye in this initiative is particularly relevant given their historical and cultural ties. Both nations have rich cultural heritages that can serve as a foundation for mutual understanding and respect. The Alliance of Civilizations provides a platform for both countries to engage with diverse communities and promote intercultural dialogue, ultimately contributing to global peace and security (Buhari Gulmez, 2020; Kim et al., 2021).

The Alliance of Civilizations initiative between Spain and Türkiye is intrinsically connected to the evolution of security and defence relations between the two nations. In this context, the Alliance of Civilizations serves as a significant platform that facilitates security cooperation as well as cultural and social interactions. Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly in the post-Cold War era, has undergone a substantial transformation in the realm of public diplomacy and international relations (Yaşar & Özcan, 2023). Throughout this process, Türkiye's security policies have been instrumental in shaping its relationships with regional and global actors. Both countries are also essential actors within the Forum for the Mediterranean, an organization that aims to promote cooperation, dialogue and stability across the coastal States of the Mediterranean.

While the Alliance of Civilizations aims to strengthen Türkiye's role in international relations, it also contributes to the enhancement of relations with Spain. Türkiye's strategic position in international relations is particularly evident in the domains of energy security and military cooperation (Demiryol, 2018). As a significant security actor in Europe, Spain possesses the potential to influence the security dynamics in the Mediterranean region by fortifying its relations with Türkiye (Karakaya, 2023). Security and defence cooperation constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of relations between the two countries. Türkiye's role in

international security organizations such as NATO also influences its military cooperation with Spain. Spain's relations with Türkiye are not solely limited to military cooperation, but also encompass economic and cultural dimensions (Demir, 2021).

This facilitates the deepening of security cooperation between the two countries and the formation of a more comprehensive strategic partnership. In conclusion, the Alliance of Civilizations initiative between Spain and Türkiye is closely associated with the development of security and defence relations between the two nations. This initiative strengthens the strategic partnership between the two countries, fostering not only cultural interactions but also security cooperation. Türkiye's position in international relations and Spain's security policies constitute the primary dynamics of this cooperation.

Main Issues

The security landscape in which Türkiye and Spain operate is shaped by a variety of factors, including geopolitical tensions, migration crises, and the evolving nature of threats such as terrorism. Türkiye's strategic position as a bridge between Europe and Asia places it at the forefront of various security challenges, particularly concerning the Syrian refugee crisis and its implications for European security (Das & Sharma, 2023). Spain, on the other hand, faces its own set of challenges, including the threat of terrorism and the need to secure its borders against illegal immigration (Thevenin, 2021). The migration crisis has been a significant issue affecting both countries. The EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan of 2015 aimed to manage the influx of refugees into Europe, with Türkiye playing a crucial role in stemming the flow of migrants (Das & Sharma, 2023). However, this arrangement has faced criticism for pushing the responsibility of managing migration onto Türkiye, raising questions about the ethical implications of such agreements (Thevenin, 2021).

The security concerns surrounding migration have led to increased cooperation between Türkiye and Spain, as both nations seek to address the challenges posed by irregular migration and its associated secu-

urity risks. Moreover, Türkiye's defence spending and military modernization efforts have implications for its relationship with Spain. Türkiye has been investing heavily in its defence industry, transitioning from a reliance on imports to a more self-sufficient model (Kara, 2020). This shift has not only enhanced Türkiye's military capabilities but has also positioned it as a key player in the global defence market, which may influence Spain's defence procurement strategies and collaborative efforts within NATO (Adaçay, 2023).

Importance of Defence Collaborations

The defence collaborations between Spain and Türkiye are critical for both nations, given their strategic locations and roles within NATO. The Mediterranean region, where both countries are situated, has been a focal point for security challenges, including migration crises, regional conflicts, and the rise of extremist groups. As NATO allies, Spain and Türkiye have a vested interest in maintaining stability and security in this volatile region (Hale, 2016; Yeşiltaş, 2020).

One of the most significant aspects of their defence collaboration is the joint development of military technologies. Spain's advanced defence industry, particularly companies like Navantia, has been instrumental in providing Türkiye with cutting-edge military capabilities. This collaboration not only enhances Türkiye's defence capabilities but also strengthens Spain's position as a key player in the global defence market (Adaçay, 2023). This defence collaboration program is exemplified under the Spanish operation on Turkish soil, "Turkish Support", integrated under the joint multinational framework.

Another example of mutual support in defense matters is the operation "Support to Türkiye," conducted under the framework of "Persistent Effort." This mission is based at the Incirlik Air Base and includes the permanent deployment of a long-range Patriot anti-aircraft missile unit.

Mutual Agreements and Developments

Türkiye and Spain have engaged in various defence agreements and cooperative initiatives aimed at enhancing their security relationship. As NATO allies, both countries participate in joint military exercises and share intelligence on security threats (Erdağ, 2020). The collaboration extends to counter-terrorism efforts, where both nations have recognized the need for a coordinated approach to combat extremist groups that threaten regional stability.

In recent years, Türkiye and Spain have also explored opportunities for defence industry collaboration. One notable initiative is the cooperation in military naval shipbuilding, particularly the Turkish version of Navantia's assault amphibious ship, the Juan Carlos I. This project exemplifies the growing defence ties between the two nations, as it allows for technology transfer and joint production capabilities (Egeli, 2018). The collaboration in naval shipbuilding not only enhances Türkiye's maritime capabilities but also strengthens Spain's position in the defence market by expanding its reach into the Turkish defence sector.

Recent joint defence projects between Spain and Türkiye highlight the growing military cooperation between the two nations. One notable initiative is the design of the TGC Anadolu, an amphibious assault ship for the Turkish Navy by Navantia. This project is significant as it represents a major investment in Türkiye's naval capabilities, enhancing its ability to project power and respond to regional threats (Mevlutoglu, 2017). The amphibious assault ship, designed to support various military operations, is expected to play a crucial role in Türkiye's maritime strategy.

The Turkish shipbuilding industry has historically been a strategic sector, and advancements in this field have strengthened Türkiye's position in the international maritime arena. In recent years, the growth of the Turkish shipbuilding industry has become increasingly evident, particularly through its collaboration with the Spanish company Navantia. Navantia, a globally rec-

ognized shipbuilding entity, cooperates with Turkish shipyards by facilitating technological transfer and enhancing the competitiveness of the Turkish shipbuilding industry. These collaborations enable Turkish shipyards to operate more effectively in the international market (Yılmaz & Önaçan, 2019).

The expansion of the Turkish shipbuilding industry extends beyond the domestic market and is facilitated by initiatives to penetrate international markets. Navantia's collaboration with Turkish shipyards plays a significant role in this context. Through the transfer of advanced shipbuilding techniques and engineering expertise to Turkish shipyards, Navantia contributes to the attainment of international standards by Turkish industrialists (Ergün, 2024). These collaborations enable Turkish shipyards to undertake more substantial and complex ship projects. For instance, by engaging in modern warship projects developed by Navantia, Turkish shipyards enhance their technological expertise and increase their visibility in the international market (Akkaş & Çulha, 2018).

Navantia's contributions to the Turkish shipbuilding industry extend beyond the transfer of technical expertise. The company also implements various training programs to enhance the business processes and management capabilities of Turkish shipyards. These initiatives strengthen the human resources management of the Turkish shipbuilding industry and elevate the quality of the workforce in the sector (Yorulmaz, 2024). Furthermore, the training programs play a crucial role in addressing occupational health and safety concerns, with the objective of reducing workplace accidents (Nam & Nam, 2021).

The relationship of the Turkish shipbuilding industry with Navantia also has important economic implications. Turkish shipyards have the capacity to export more through co-operation with Navantia, which contributes to Türkiye's overall economic growth. In particular, the export figures of the shipbuilding industry are also supported by relations with other industries such as the iron and steel sector (Ergün, 2024). The increase in exports of the Turkish shipbuilding industry increases the country's foreign exchange inflow and positively affects employment (Ergün, 2024).

Navantia's interest in the Turkish shipbuilding industry is closely linked to Türkiye's strategic geographical position and its maritime potential. Positioned at the crossroads of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, Türkiye has emerged as a significant maritime trade hub. This advantageous location enhances the willingness of international firms, such as Navantia, to engage in collaborative ventures with Turkish shipyards (Yılmaz & Önaçan, 2019).

Through these partnerships, Turkish shipyards are able to enhance their shipbuilding capabilities in alignment with international standards, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the global market (Keleş & Kum, 2019). Consequently, the relationship between the Turkish shipbuilding sector and the Spanish company Navantia not only accelerates advancements within the industry but also fortifies Türkiye's standing in the international maritime arena.

These collaborations yield substantial technological and economic benefits. The engagement of Turkish shipyards in larger projects, supported by Navantia, represents a promising development for the future of Türkiye's shipbuilding industry. In this context, sustaining strategic partnerships, such as that with Navantia, is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of the Turkish shipbuilding sector in the international market (Yılmaz & Önaçan, 2019; Ergün, 2024).

Drone Interest

Drone cooperation has emerged as another significant area of collaboration. Türkiye has established itself as a leader in drone technology, with its Bayraktar drones gaining international recognition for their effectiveness in various conflict zones such as Ukraine, Libya, and Armenia, where the renowned Bayraktar TB-2 drones successfully neutralized significant quantities of Russian-origin equipment. Additionally, their widespread use in the Sahel has proven effective against various jihadist groups operating in the region. Notably, several states in the area have recently acquired the new Bayraktar Akıncı, further underscoring the drones' strategic value and operational effectiveness. (Kujawa, 2021).

It is also worth highlighting the advancements made by other Turkish companies in the sector, such as Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI), which offers a wide range of promising products to the competitive Turkish drone market, including the Aksungur.

Spain has shown interest in acquiring Turkish drones, which could lead to joint development initiatives and further integration of defence technologies between the two nations (Ecevit, 2020). This cooperation in drone technology reflects a broader trend of defence collaboration, where both countries can leverage their respective strengths to enhance their military capabilities. Additionally, the geopolitical dynamics in the Mediterranean have prompted Türkiye and Spain to engage in dialogues regarding regional security issues. The increasing presence of Russia in the region, particularly through military partnerships with countries like Libya, has raised concerns for both nations (Petrócz, 2023). As a result, Türkiye and Spain have sought to strengthen their diplomatic ties and enhance their strategic cooperation to address these emerging threats.

Türkiye and Spain occupy geostrategic positions of great importance, as both countries control access to the Mediterranean through their eastern and western straits, respectively. This factor is particularly relevant today, as Russia requires the maintenance of its presence in the Mediterranean through access from the Atlantic and the Black Sea.

Aircraft Defence Projects

Moreover, the Spanish Air Force has expressed interest in Türkiye's advanced trainer fighter jet, which is part of Türkiye's broader efforts to enhance its indigenous defence production capabilities. This interest signifies a potential avenue for collaboration in the aerospace sector, allowing both nations to benefit from shared technological advancements and operational experiences (Strock & Brown, 2008).

The Spanish Air Force's interest in advanced air training aircraft produced by the Turkish aviation industry is an important issue from both a strategic and technical point of view. This interest is directly related to the international prestige and technological capabilities developed by the Turkish aviation industry in recent years. The Turkish aviation industry has shown a significant development, especially in the field of training aircraft, which attracts the attention of other countries. The development of the Turkish aerospace industry has been supported by aircraft designed and built specifically for the needs of the Turkish Air Force. For example, the Turkish Air Force's Hürkuş trainer aircraft, produced by TAI, is a platform designed to meet modern training needs. Hürkuş has features suitable for both basic and advanced pilot training and offers a competitive alternative in the international market (Şenol, 2020; Thian, 2015). The Spanish Air Force's search for high performance and reliability for training aircraft increases the potential of Turkish-made aircraft such as the Hürkuş.

Moreover, the Turkish aviation industry's international co-operation and development of joint projects reinforces the Spanish Air Force's interest in these aircraft. In addition to domestically produced aircraft, the Turkish Air Force also attaches importance to compliance with international standards and certification processes, which increases the reliability of these aircraft (Lewkowicz & Biernacki, 2020; Purton et al., 2014). Taking into account the technical qualifications and air safety standards of training aircraft, the Spanish Air Force evaluates the potential of Turkish-made aircraft. In conclusion, the Spanish Air Force's interest in the advanced air training aircraft produced by the Turkish aviation industry shows a significant development, both from a strategic and technical point of view. The innovative solutions provided by the Turkish aviation industry and compliance with international standards are the main reasons for this interest. The Spanish Air Force's evaluation of Turkish-made aircraft could be a basis for future co-operation and joint projects.

Forecast

Looking ahead, the security and defence relationship between Türkiye and Spain is poised for continued evolution in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. Ongoing challenges such as migration, terrorism, and regional instability will necessitate sustained co-operation between the two nations. As both countries navigate their respective security concerns, they may find common ground in addressing shared threats and enhancing their defence capabilities.

The potential for increased collaboration in the defence industry presents an opportunity to strengthen economic ties while bolstering military readiness. As Türkiye modernizes its defence sector and Spain seeks to enhance its military capabilities, joint initiatives could emerge that benefit both nations (Kara, 2020). Additionally, ongoing discussions within NATO regarding collective defence strategies will likely influence the trajectory of Türkiye-Spain relations, as both countries align their security priorities with those of the alliance (Adaçay, 2023). The geopolitical dynamics in the Mediterranean, particularly concerning energy exploration and territorial disputes, will further necessitate collaboration. Spain's role within the EU and its relationships with other Mediterranean countries will shape its engagement with Türkiye, especially in addressing shared security challenges (Buckingham, 2013). Moreover, Türkiye's defence spending and military modernization efforts will continue to impact the security landscape. As Türkiye seeks to expand its regional influence, Spain may need to balance its support for Türkiye's NATO membership with concerns about regional stability and security (Erdağ, 2020). Ultimately, the future of Spanish Turkish relations will depend on their ability to collaboratively address these challenges while fostering mutual interests in security and defence.

Spain's objective is to maintain its traditional strategic security alliance and cooperation with Türkiye, both within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in other international forums. This is while observing and following Türkiye's growing influence in various regional arenas, including Libya, the Sahel, and Syria. Spain has historically pursued a policy of align-

ment with peaceful conflict resolution and support for international resolutions and multipolar solutions to regional divergences. Consequently, it must seek a balance between this traditional stance and cooperation with Türkiye taking into account the latter's policy, which is characterised by a focus on the defence of its national interests, even more so in conflicts such as those in the Middle East or the Caucasus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the security and defence relationship between Türkiye and Spain is poised for continued evolution in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. Ongoing challenges such as migration, terrorism, and regional instability necessitate sustained cooperation between the two nations. The potential for increased collaboration in the defence industry presents an opportunity to strengthen economic ties while bolstering military readiness. Geopolitical dynamics in the Mediterranean region, particularly concerning energy exploration and territorial disputes, necessitate further collaboration. Spain's role within the EU and its relationship with other Mediterranean countries will shape its engagement with Türkiye to address shared security challenges.

The security landscape in which Türkiye and Spain operate is shaped by a variety of factors, including geopolitical tensions, migration crises, and the evolving nature of threats such as terrorism. It is of utmost importance that Türkiye and Spain collaborate in defence, given their strategic locations and roles within NATO. They have entered into a number of defence agreements and cooperative initiatives, including joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and collaboration in the defence industry.

The Türkiye-Spain relationship exemplifies the integration of cultural diplomacy and defence collaboration. Initiatives such as the Alliance of Civilizations not only promote peace but also provide a framework for addressing broader security challenges. The joint development of military technologies underscores their commitment to strategic cooperation, whereas NATO membership offers a multilateral platform to align their defence policies. However, several challenges remain to be addressed.

Geopolitical tensions in the Mediterranean, coupled with migration and terrorist threats, require sustained diplomatic engagement. Ethical concerns surrounding migration agreements, such as the EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan, necessitate careful consideration to balance security and humanitarian considerations. One noteworthy initiative is collaboration in the construction of military naval vessels, particularly the Turkish iteration of Navantia's assault amphibious ship, Juan Carlos I. This project exemplifies the expanding defence ties between the two nations, as it facilitates technology transfer and joint production capabilities. Furthermore, the Spanish Air Force has expressed interest in Türkiye's advanced trainer fighter jet, indicating a potential avenue for collaboration in the aerospace sector. One of the most pertinent findings of this essay is that Türkiye and Spain assume the role of guardians of the Eastern and Western approaches to the Mediterranean. This led both countries to maintain close security and intelligence cooperation, particularly in tracking and monitoring the activities of Russian naval assets in the region.

However, despite maintaining excellent relations in areas of cooperation and the defence industry, there are certain differences in approach between the two countries regarding the most pressing issues in the Middle East, the Sahel and Libya. Turkish policy is characterised by a focus on the defence of its national interests, whereas Spanish policy is more inclined towards multilateralism and the pursuit of consensual solutions with all relevant parties.

In any case, as this essay has demonstrated, Türkiye and Spain are strategic partners in the security and defence industry, not only under the umbrella of the Alliance of Civilisations initiative. This alliance serves to reinforce their respective roles in the Atlantic Alliance and in The Union for the Mediterranean, which serves to promote their role as key players in maintaining peace and stability in the Mediterranean basin.

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