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Mechanisms for Legitimizing Interventions in Spain's Foreign Policy

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Abstract. The “end of history” proclaimed at the close of the 20th century, alongside the rise of the humanitarian agenda, globalization, and the redistribution of centers of power, has significantly influenced the reorganization of the post-bipolar world order. A key focus has been the discourse on whether states may violate the sovereign borders of another in order to prevent mass civilian casualties. This study examines illegitimate military interventions involving Spain, initiated and led by the United States, and the factors that influenced Spain's decisions to join military campaigns not sanctioned by the UN Security Council. By identifying the distinctive approaches to the use of force within realism, liberalism, and structuralism, and by incorporating insights from the behavioral approach to international relations, the article analyzes the evolution of foreign policy decision-making in democratic Spain. Using Spain's first humanitarian interventions in Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003) as case studies, it reconstructs the opportunistic and structural factors that shaped the political decisions to deploy Spanish troops to these countries in violation of international law. The study concludes that support from civil society and inter-party consensus remain crucial for Spain when deciding whether to participate in interventions. The goals of such interventions must be consistent with considerations of responsibility for peace, rather than a demonstration of force that risks escalation and regional destabilization.

Key words: humanitarian interventions, national interests, security, humanism, Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Syria, post-bipolar world order

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Механизмы легитимации интервенций во внешней политике Испании

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Аннотация. Конец истории, провозглашенный на исходе XX в., гуманистическая повестка, глобализация, а также перераспределение центров силы оказали существенное влияние на реорганизацию постбиполярного миропорядка. Особое место занял дискурс о том, могут ли государства нарушить

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суверенные границы другого, чтобы предотвратить массовую гибель мирного населения. Объект исследования — нелегитимные военные интервенции с участием Испании, инициированные США и реализуемые под их руководством, предмет исследования — факторы, оказавшие влияние на принятие Испанией решения о присоединении к военным кампаниям, не санкционированным Советом Безопасности (СБ) ООН. Выявляя особенности подходов к применению силы в реализме, либерализме и структурализме, а также учитывая наработки бихевиоралистского подхода к международным отношениям, автор анализирует механизм эволюции процесса принятия внешнеполитических решений в демократической Испании. На примере первых гуманитарных интервенций Испании в Косово (1999) и Ираке (2003) воссозданы конъюнктурные и структурные факторы, которые повлияли на принятие политических решений по отправке испанских войск в эти страны в нарушение норм международного права. Сделан вывод, что поддержка гражданским обществом внешнеполитических решений, а также партийный консенсус сохраняют ключевую значимость для Испании при принятии решения об участии в интервенциях. При этом цель интервенций должна согласовываться с соображениями ответственности за мир, а не демонстрировать силу, которая может привести к эскалации и дестабилизировать региональную обстановку.

Ключевые слова: гуманитарные интервенции, национальные интересы, безопасность, гуманизм, Косово, Ирак, Ливия, Сирия, постбиполярный миропорядок

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Introduction

The driving forces of foreign policy are one of the traditional themes of international relations theory (IRT). In classical realism, states are the primary actors in international politics, striving to wield maximum power. Another distinctive term in the realist vocabulary is related to the concept of power. According to H. Morgenthau, it is power that guides states towards their goals, with security being the primary goal (Travis, 1952). Power and security formed the basis for realists' understanding and interpretation of national interests, which serve as the defining principles of foreign policy planning.

By contrast, for idealists, the state became the purveyor of social values. One of the most notable currents of this school—the idealism of US President Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921)—is based on an a priori interpretation of liberal democracy as the best form of social organization, as well as the conviction that trusting relations between states can emerge insofar as those states are democratic. According to idealists, the foreign policy of states is consistent with

the pursuit of peace based on international law, multilateralism, and the mediation of international organizations (Tovar Ruiz, 2014, p. 139).

Due to the unconvincing arguments regarding agency in international relations, as well as the reasons underlying foreign policy decisions (Is the foreign policy agenda limited to security issues? Are there objective national interests?), new directions emerged in the field of international relations at the intersection of scholarly knowledge, in which researchers attempted to combine and complement the ideas of realists and idealists.

In the mid-1950s, the behavioral school introduced the psychological aspect as a criterion for analyzing foreign policy. Behaviorists no longer perceived the state as an abstract concept. Decisions were made by specific individuals responsible for foreign policy. The school's key achievements include the development of a rational choice model based on J. von Neumann's game theory (1944), the identification of the influence of parties' perceptions of each other on the likelihood of war (Kim & Bueno de Mesquita, 1995),

an explanation of the misinterpretation of facts (Fearon, 1995), the role of public opinion (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 208) and “bureaucratic politics” (Welch, 1992), as well as the identification of an individual (or group) with the structure whose interests they represent (Suchkov et al., 2020, pp. 66–68).

In an attempt to move away from state-centric models, the structuralist school, in turn, proposed to consider international relations within the framework of horizontal (between states) and vertical (the highest levels of international relations) structures. In his concept of system linkage, J. Rosenau (1969) suggests that in the overwhelming majority of countries, power rests not with states, but with international agents who are able to influence foreign policy decision-making centers. Through this concept, the author attempts to explain the dynamics of international conflicts by linking domestic and foreign policy, thus weaving ideas of transnationalism and complex interdependence into his theory (Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 300).

The theory of J. Nye and R. Keohane proposes to look at the issue of interests through the prism of their convergence. It is the commonality of interests and the network of organizations, norms, procedures, and rules (regimes) that supports them that determines the behavior of states, enabling them to maintain a monopoly on power in international affairs. Initially, international regimes were associated with aid to poor countries, environmental protection, media regulation, and so on. In the works of Hasenclever, Mayer & Rittberger (1996), regimes were developed in the context of the idea of multilateralism, or the discourse on the need to reform multilateral mechanisms of international cooperation caused by the decline of US hegemony. Subsequent developments in regime theory lost references to transnationalism and transformed into variations on the theme of “post-hegemony,” when the hegemon loses traditional leverage through the demonstration of military

power. This state still retains power, but due to a monopoly on other forms of it (for example, within the framework of influence on international financial and economic issues).

Despite over 30 years of criticism of the core ideas of realism, their popularity has remained largely unaffected. Since the 1990s, theorists have actively refined their approaches to the concepts of security and world order. These updated theories of security were based on the idealists’ antithesis about the impossibility of developing an effective formula for peace. Instead, scholars have assumed that the concept of security—the search for minimizing harm from potential risks that threaten individuals, groups, or society—possesses universality. Accepting the fundamental realist thesis that security is a fundamental condition for the functioning of states and their primary interest, Buzan & Wæver (2003) argue that foreign policy is built on the principle of “strength” or “weakness.” Consequently, the level of uncertainty and danger in international affairs increases. To achieve relative advantages within a complex world order, states can profitably exploit the interdependence of interests. By acting through a system of alliances, they guarantee their sovereignty and legitimacy, while also reducing the risks and costs of maintaining them. This type of system has been dubbed a “regional security complex.”

The rapidly changing nature of trends in international relations has become a leitmotif of research on world order. Among these theories, J. Rosenau’s concept of turbulence stands out. The author’s central thesis is that turbulence in international affairs manifests itself in technological revolutions, crises of authority, and increased levels of conflict—similar to how “meteorological turbulence manifests itself in hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods” (Rosenau, 1990, p. 480). Turbulence represents a profound structural crisis of the system, in which the structures and relationships that support international politics begin to crumble under the pressure of excessively strong and spontaneous fluctuations.

Since the end of the 20th century, globalization, the humanization of the international agenda,¹ and the redistribution of global centers of power have become characteristic phenomena of world politics. These phenomena have had a profound impact on the development of international relations, conflict, and the means of achieving peace through nonviolent means, as well as through coercion. United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations have evolved into more comprehensive ones, and due to the organization's lack of technical and financial resources, regional security institutions have been brought in (for example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Bosnia in 1994–1995).²

The genocides in Srebrenica (1994) and Rwanda (1995) had a significant impact on the development of peace enforcement practices, when it became clear that the capabilities of UN peacekeepers were seriously limited by the principle of using force only for self-defense. In search of an alternative solution, leading global powers (primarily the United States) proceeded from the notion that preventing a humanitarian catastrophe was a goal of the utmost importance. This gave rise to humanitarian interventions, which sometimes violated the principle

of sovereignty and impartiality of intermediaries (Bellamy, 2018, p. 956).

In legal practice, there is no universally accepted definition of humanitarian intervention. The term appeared in the L. Brahimi report (2000)³ and in the subsequent report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001).⁴ Humanitarian intervention is defined as interference in the internal affairs of a state without the consent of the official government, with the aim of preventing mass loss of life (Seybolt, 2008). Recent history offers numerous examples of various humanitarian interventions, making their classification difficult. There are precedents where the organizers of such operations violated Chapters VI and VII of the UN Charter (the consent of all parties to the conflict and the approval of the UN Security Council), as well as where a request was received from legitimate authorities (the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1960⁵ and Sierra Leone in 1999⁶).

Based on the above, it can be concluded that, when interpreting the legitimacy of humanitarian interventions, the emphasis is shifting from the legal and formal realm (legality) to a narrative (legitimacy). The first narrative is the idealistic notion of the supreme value of human rights, for the sake of whose protection a violation of state

¹ Contrary to realist interpretations, the 1994 UN Human Development Report proposed understanding security through the prism of two categories: freedom from fear and freedom from want. In 2000, the L. Brahimi report was published. Its authors continued to develop the idea of the centrality of the individual in politics and recommended considering the protection of citizens (and not only their own) from war crimes and genocide a state responsibility.

² Security Council Unanimously Authorizes Multinational Military Implementation Force to Ensure Compliance with Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina // The United Nations. December 15, 1995. URL: <https://press.un.org/en/1995/19951215.sc6143.html> (accessed: 17.01.2024).

³ Identical Letters Dated 21 August 2000 from the Secretary-General to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, A/55/305S/2000/809 // The UN Peacekeeping. August 21, 2000. URL: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a_55_305_e_brahimi_report.pdf (accessed: 17.01.2024).

⁴ The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001 // Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. December 1, 2001. URL: <https://www.globalr2p.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2001-ICISS-Report.pdf> (accessed: 17.01.2024).

⁵ See: Cable Dated 12 July 1960 from the President of the Republic of the Congo and Supreme Commander of the National Army and the Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence addressed to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, S/4382 // The United Nations Digital Library. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/619887?ln=ru&v=pdf> (accessed: 01.12.2024); Resolution Adopted by the Security Council at Its 873rd Meeting on 13 July 1960 [Calling upon Belgium to Withdraw Its Troops from the Congo (Capital Leopoldville)], S/4387 // The United Nations Digital Library. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/619961?ln=ru&v=pdf> (accessed: 01.12.2024).

⁶ Resolution 1270 (1999) Adopted by the Security Council at its 4054th meeting on 22 October 1999, S/RES/1270 (1999) // The United Nations. URL: [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1270\(1999\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/1270(1999)) (accessed: 01.12.2024).

sovereignty can be tolerated (Baranin, 2014). The second narrative resonates with J. Rosenau's concept of the interplay of domestic and foreign policy, interdependence, and security, when a conflict in a neighboring state has the potential to destabilize the situation in the region. In the face of a potential threat to national security, states cannot passively observe the development of a conflict. The third narrative is the discourse of regime theory regarding the regulatory properties of a system in relation to international order.

The latter idea is closely linked to criticism of the UN's work due to its excessive bureaucratization, which prevents the organization from responding promptly to rapidly changing realities (Spirin, 2010). On the contrary, the countries of the "collective West," at the forefront of the "end of history" described by Fukuyama (1989), in a unique interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel, appealed to their moral right to build a new world order based on the principles of liberal democracy and universal values (Lyzhina, 2010, p. 59). In conditions where civil society is one of the mechanisms of the system of checks and balances on executive power in liberal democracies, concerned public opinion, rather than international law, has become the main legitimizing instrument of intervention (Sánchez, 2003).

Spanish sociologist N. Michavila Núñez (2011) offered a critical assessment of public opinion. According to his research, support for such operations is a product of political technologies rather than a rational public understanding of international processes and historical progress. His conclusions are based on the triad of "unity of political elites, control of the media, and public opinion." This formula is heavily influenced by the so-called "CNN effect," or the artificially fueled public

excitement surrounding a particular event and the media's imposition of a predetermined narrative. The task of conveying to citizens the threat of a humanitarian catastrophe and the noble motives of the interventionists is particularly important.

Unity among key parties has an equally powerful impact on popular sympathies. Citizens support government decisions when consensus is reached between the ruling party and the opposition. This phenomenon is known as a "rally around the flag." The split between political elites is expressed by a split in public opinion based on proximity to the position of the political party or ethnic group with which citizens identify (Michavila Núñez, 2011, p. 54).

Given Spain's resource base and its political will to participate in NATO military missions,⁷ the formula used at the national level to legitimize US-led interventions that violate international law is of particular interest, especially given the fact that adherence to principles such as the peaceful resolution of disputes, multilateralism, and support for the UN have been the consistent imperatives of Spain's foreign policy since 1984.

This study examines illegitimate humanitarian and military missions involving Spain, conducted under US auspices. It also examines the formation and evolution of democratic Spain's foreign policy.

Russian science has developed its own school of Spanish studies, the centers of which are, first of all, the Institute of Latin America of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ILA RAS), the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IE RAS), the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IWH RAS), MGIMO University, the Higher School of Economics, and RUDN University. Numerous monographs and articles have been devoted to Spain's foreign policy, with leading

⁷ According to the World Bank, Spain's share of the global GDP in 2022 is 15th in the world, corresponding to approximately 1.4% of the global GDP. According to NATO, Spain spent 1.04–1.09% of its GDP on defense in 2021–2022. According to the Spanish Ministry of Defense, as of January 2024, the country's army was participating in seven active alliance operations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and the Suez Canal. See: GDP (Current US\$) — Spain // The World Bank. URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=ES> (accessed: 12.02.2025); Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2022). P. 8 // NATO. URL: https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/2023/3/pdf/230321-def-exp-2022-en.pdf (accessed: 12.02.2025).

experts in this field including Yakovlev (2011), Borzova, Volosyuk (Borzova, Volosyuk & Nikolashvili, 2022), and others. Spain's peacekeeping and military-technical cooperation have been addressed by Andreeva (2019), Prokhorenko (2020), and Rostov (2019). The topic of party struggle in Spain is reflected in the studies of Kurakina-Damir (2020) and Khenkin (2023).

At the same time, it is difficult to find works in Russian scholarship devoted to the processes of foreign policy decision-making regarding illegitimate military operations and answering the questions of why Spain participated in these missions, under what conditions, and what internal and external processes influenced such decisions. Therefore, this study aims to partially fill this gap by analyzing the conditions of the country's involvement in US-led missions in Kosovo (1999), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and Syria (2014).

Spain's Foreign Policy Strategy: Principled or Unprincipled Pragmatism?

Spain's modern foreign policy began to take shape during the transitional period of representative democracy (1975–1978). However, its general contours were outlined in 1984, when the then Prime Minister, Felipe González (1982–1996), presented the Decalogue—a 10-point foreign policy strategy—to Parliament. Its key ideas—normalizing relations with the United States, European integration, and an active yet relatively independent policy in Latin America, North Africa, and the Mediterranean—remain relevant to this day.

Spanish foreign policy planning has long been characterized by inertia and a slow process of understanding the qualitative changes in the structure of international relations that have occurred since the late 20th century,⁸ including the collapse of the bipolar world and the spread of US hegemony, the humanization of the

international agenda, the rise of new centers of power, and the transition to multipolarity (or non-polarity) in global politics. The normative constructs of Spain's foreign strategies were not clearly enshrined in law, but were constructed orally and *ad hoc* (Molina, 2015).

This “tradition” emerged from the non-confrontational approach adopted during the transition period, when parties avoided discussing issues that could upset the fragile political balance. The situation changed after the 1982 elections, during which the Socialists, led by F. González, capitalized on the polarization of society caused by the decision of the Calvo Sotelo cabinet (1981–1982) to join NATO (Yakovlev, 2011).

Nevertheless, the NATO issue did not change the situation with regard to the in-depth development of Spain's foreign policy strategy. The contours of this strategy continued to be vaguely formulated in the parties' election platforms. De facto, specific decisions continued to be made behind the scenes and depended on the prevailing circumstances and the leadership qualities of individual party leaders (Molina, 2015). Khenkin argues that such political dirigisme has become a natural phenomenon in Spain (Khenkin, 2023, p. 46). Moreover, the personalist (caudillista) style of governance of party leaders is a characteristic feature of both left- and right-wing parties.

A major revision of foreign policy guidelines and planning occurred during the brief second term of J.M. Aznar (2002–2004) and was associated with a departure from the practice of parliamentary consensus and public support, a shift in foreign policy orientations, and a violation of the principles of multilateralism and global governance in favor of bilateralism and US hegemony. C. del Arenal attributes Spain's neoconservative course to objective causes related to changing structural factors, such as the increasing negative effects of cross-border threats (crime, terrorism, illegal migration), as well as the redistribution of power and priority agendas within the European

⁸ The National School of International Relations was established as a department at the Complutense University of Madrid in 2008, and the first Foreign Policy Strategy (not counting the Decalogue) only came into force in 2015.

Union (EU) due to its expansion. In the latter case, Euroscepticism gained more supporters from Eastern European countries, which tended to view the EU primarily as an economic rather than a political and military institution. Moreover, France's blocking of an EU resolution on the conflict between Spain and Morocco in 2002 demonstrated that Madrid was struggling to change its perception of itself as a "state with limited resources."⁹

J.M. Aznar's ambitious policies were aimed, on the one hand, at compensating for the inevitable deterioration of Spain's political position in the EU, and on the other, at securing its status in the new world order led by the United States (Calduch Cervera, 2006). The foreign policy experiment ended unsuccessfully: after the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, the terrorist threat in Spain increased sharply. Citizens were unwilling to pay such a price.

J.L. Rodríguez Zapatero's (2004–2011) idea of the role of civil society as a legitimizing instrument of state activity became a distinctive principle of foreign policy.¹⁰ This thesis was further developed under M. Rajoy (2011–2018). At least *de jure*, Spain's first foreign policy strategy (2015)¹¹ declared concern for human needs through the protection of human rights and the fight against poverty a priority. However, *de facto*, the Conservative government significantly reduced development funding, and the most frequent topic of diplomacy became

the development of bilateral trade relations (Molina, 2015).

The foreign policy of the current Prime Minister, P. Sánchez, is being implemented without significant changes to the main lines of his predecessors and is distinguished by a particularly de-ideologized pragmatism. On the one hand, the discourse on human rights has been supplemented by a narrative of inclusiveness for groups traditionally excluded from political decision-making (women, people with disabilities, LGBT people¹²).¹³ Madrid adopted a unique stance on the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that occurred in October 2023. Contrary to most EU and NATO partners, P. Sánchez condemned Israel's actions, stating that the right to self-defense cannot be used as a pretext for the imposition of disproportionate collective punishment.¹⁴ On the other hand, Spain continues to supply weapons to countries in conflict (Ukraine¹⁵ and Israel until the imposition of an embargo in 2024¹⁶), thereby contributing to the prolongation of the diplomatic resolution process.

Spain's Formula for Participation in NATO Interventions: Alliance Solidarity and Reputational Costs

The country's national brand, based on "moral prestige," embraces the peaceful dissemination of democratic values, the principles

⁹ Arenal del C. Consenso y disenso en la política exterior de España. Documento de trabajo // Real Instituto Elcano. 2 de junio de 2008. URL: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documento-de-trabajo/consenso-y-disenso-en-la-politica-exterior-de-espana-dt/> (accessed: 20.10.2025).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Estrategia de acción exterior. Resumen ejecutivo // Ministerio De Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación. 2015. URL: https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/ServiciosAlCiudadano/PublicacionesOficiales/2015_RESUMEN%20EJECUTIVO_%20ESTRATEGIA%20DE%20ACCION%20EXTERIOR%20ESP.pdf (accessed: 19.01.2025).

¹² The organization is recognized as extremist in the Russian Federation.

¹³ Estrategia de acción exterior 2021–2024 // Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación. URL: https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/Comunicacion/Noticias/Paginas/Noticias/20210128_MINISTERIO13.aspx (accessed: 19.01.2025).

¹⁴ Losada A. Pedro Sánchez ha dicho tres verdades // El Diario. 26 de noviembre de 2023. URL: https://www.eldiario.es/opinion/zona-critica/pedro-sanchez-dicho-tres-verdades_129_10719571.html (accessed: 12.10.2023).

¹⁵ Litnarovych V. Spain Supplied Nearly Half of Its Ammo Production in 2023–2024 to Ukraine // United24Media. March 25, 2025. URL: <https://united24media.com/latest-news/spain-supplied-nearly-half-of-its-ammo-production-in-2023-2024-to-ukraine-7032> (accessed: 10.05.2025).

¹⁶ The Government of Spain Strengthens the Arms Embargo on Israel, and Bans Imports from Illegal Settlements in Palestinian Territories // La Moncloa. September 23, 2025. URL: <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/councilministers/paginas/2025/20250923-council-press-conference.aspx> (accessed: 12.12.2025).

of multilateral diplomacy and the equality of all actors in international relations, political ethics, respect for international law, and the protection of global governance mechanisms.¹⁷ In practice, however, these principles were not always upheld and even contradicted reality when Madrid decided to participate in illegitimate humanitarian interventions and military missions led by the United States.

The first such interventions were the bombing of Serbia in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The participation of Spanish troops in both operations was approved by J.M. Aznar, whose leadership style, as explained earlier, is a textbook example of the caudillo type of party leadership. Public reactions to both operations varied depending on the declared goals and results of the campaign. The bombing of civilian targets in Serbia, according to its organizers, was intended to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians and force the Serbian side to sign peace agreements. The agreements reached, as well as the absence of violence against Kosovo civilians, became arguments in favor of the operation's success, and consequently, the initial protests in Spain soon gave way to widespread public support (Avilés Farré, 2000).

The intervention in Iraq, which also began with public protests in Spain, ended a year later in complete failure, both in terms of its mission objectives and its domestic propaganda. No evidence of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's (1979–2003) nuclear program was found, and the Socialist opposition sharply criticized the government of J.M. Aznar's unilateral decision to participate in the Iraqi campaign. Public opinion was divided over the operation's second

pretext—to put an end to the Iraqi regime's systematic human rights violations.

The terrorist attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004, orchestrated by radical Islamists, marked the end of the debate (Barrenechea, 2017). The threat to the country's internal security, posed by the country's involvement in the illegal military intervention, became the main argument for holding early parliamentary elections.

The Iraq campaign also influenced the development of Spanish peacekeeping legislation (Pérez Muínelo, 2009). The 2005 Organic Law required the approval of either the UN Security Council, NATO, or the EU in order to launch an operation. In the latter two cases, an additional condition was imposed: the operation must not violate the principles of international law. Furthermore, the government pledged to secure parliamentary support.¹⁸

In the context of checks and balances, a clear example of the ethical oversight mechanisms at play is the intervention in Libya (2011), which, despite the UN Security Council resolution and the unity of Spanish political parties (336 out of 340 deputies voted for the start of the military campaign), ended for Madrid six months later due to the assassination of M. Gaddafi.¹⁹ The change of political regime during the implementation of UN Resolution 1973 of 2011 served as the basis for accusations that peacekeepers had become an instrument for promoting the national political and energy interests of European states, which had nothing in common with the declared humanitarian goals of the intervention.²⁰

The situation in Syria in 2014 proved more challenging for Madrid. Due to Russian

¹⁷ Estrategia de acción exterior 2021–2024 // Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación. URL: https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/Comunicacion/Noticias/Paginas/Noticias/20210128_MINISTERIO13.aspx (accessed: 19.01.2025).

¹⁸ Ley Orgánica 5/2005, de 17 de noviembre, de la Defensa Nacional // Agencia Estatal Boletín Oficial del Estado. URL: <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/2005/11/17/5/con> (accessed: 12.12.2024).

¹⁹ España se niega a una mayor implicación en Libia tal como le reclama la OTAN // TeleMadrid. 9 de junio de 2011. URL: <https://www.telemadrid.es/noticias/internacional/Espana-implicacion-Libia-reclama-OTAN-0-1252974727--20110609043049.html> (accessed: 06.11.2025).

²⁰ La Armada Española en el conflicto de Libia // Ministerio de Defensa. Gobierno de España. URL: <https://armada.defensa.gob.es/ArmadaPortal/page/Portal/ArmadaEspañola/conocenos/especiales/prefLang-es/05actividades--97operacion-libia> (accessed: 15.02.2025).

and Chinese vetoes, the UN Security Council was unable to adopt a resolution to launch a peacekeeping mission (2012, 2014). Meanwhile, within NATO, the United States formed an anti-terrorist coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.²¹ The Rajoy government was faced with the dilemma of which principle took precedence: allied solidarity or respect for state sovereignty.

Despite the fact that the fight against terrorism has been a long-standing security issue for Spain, parliament was unable to reach a unified decision, and the deployment of Spanish troops to Syria did not take place. In all likelihood, the costs and benefits of assisting the NATO anti-terrorism coalition for Madrid could have resulted in a repeat of the 2003 Iraq campaign, leading to a significant increase in the terrorist threat from radical Islamists (Caballero Díez, 2020). Therefore, Moncloa decided to support its allies by providing logistics and counter-terrorism training programs for Arab states, but on the condition that local governments cooperate (López-Jacoiste, 2015, p. 75).

Diplomatically, the country adopted an ambivalent stance. On the one hand, Madrid verbally supported the strikes against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces carried out by the US and its allies in Syria under the pretext of protecting the local population from the ruling regime's "atrocities," calling these strikes "legitimate, proportionate, and pursuing tactical objectives." On the other hand, the Spanish government emphasized that peace in the Middle East could not be achieved without the participation of Moscow and

Beijing, and therefore called—albeit not very actively—on its allies for a compromise.²²

The current situation in the Red Sea, involving attacks by Yemeni Houthi rebels on international commercial vessels, poses similar dilemmas for Spain's foreign policy, given Yemen's lack of cooperation with NATO in the fight against the rebels. In late December 2023, Madrid blocked Brussels' proposal to amend the mandate of the current EU counter-piracy mission in the Indian Ocean (Operation Atlanta) to allow EU countries to participate in US-led operations to protect ships in the Red Sea region.²³ Instead, the Spanish delegation recommended organizing an independent operation of European states to ensure peaceful navigation in the region.²⁴

On January 12, 2024, the day Yemen's sovereignty was violated by US and UK strikes on Houthi positions, Spanish Defense Minister Maria Robles announced that the country would not participate in the US-led *Guardian of Prosperity* mission, despite the Kingdom appearing on the list of participants in the operation circulated by Washington. No detailed official explanation for the refusal was provided. Robles limited herself to general statements about the cabinet's decision being guided by considerations of responsibility for peace.²⁵

Instead of a Conclusion: *Quo vadis?*

Spain is a member of the "collective West," a member of its central institutions—NATO and the EU. The country's official leadership's focus on active participation in international affairs, while lacking substantial economic (the country

²¹ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

²² Qué papel juega España en el ataque de EE UU a Siria // 20 minutos. 14 de abril de 2018. URL: <https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/3313887/0/ataque-siria-que-papel-juega-espana/> (accessed: 16.12.2023).

²³ Spain Blocks EU Participation in US Operation in Red Sea — Newspaper // TASS. December 22, 2023. URL: <https://tass.com/world/1725277> (accessed: 24.02.2025).

²⁴ Spanish PM Open to Creation of New EU Mission to Protect Vessels in Red Sea // Reuters. December 27, 2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/spanish-pm-open-creation-new-eu-mission-protect-vessels-red-sea-2023-12-27/> (accessed: 14.03.2025).

²⁵ Soto R. Operación Guardián de la Prosperidad en el Mar Rojo: España asegura que "no participará" en la misión de EEUU // Newtral. 16 de enero de 2024. URL: <https://www.newtral.es/espana-operacion-guardian-prosperidad/20240116/> (accessed: 18.01.2025).

has been a regular borrower of European aid funds since 2008), military,²⁶ and diplomatic support (it is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and during the 2010s, it was unable to lobby for an increased importance of the anti-terrorism agenda in NATO amid the Alliance's concern about the "Russian threat," (Andreeva, 2022, pp. 108–109), etc.), forces Madrid to navigate between allied solidarity and its own narrative, which qualitatively distinguishes it from other major international actors. The latter is based on a humanistic approach, legitimacy, a social agenda, inclusiveness, and equality. Spain's diplomacy regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which escalated again in October 2023, is based on the conviction that peace in the Middle East is impossible without the creation of a Palestinian state. This is the country's first independent initiative in decades, openly contradicting the views of most EU countries. However, the cynical pragmatism of this initiative is noteworthy: during the months of the conflict, while the Spanish leadership was discussing justice, peace, and security, and proposing a plan for conflict resolution to Middle Eastern countries, Spanish arms continued to flow to Israel right up until the imposition of the embargo.

The Spanish government's main argument for motivating civil society to support the country's peace and security initiatives is to end the suffering of people whose rights are systematically and grossly violated during conflicts. Madrid's participation in illegitimate missions has been prohibited by law since 2005. This decision was influenced by the negative consequences of the Iraq campaign (2003), which led to the emergence of the threat of Islamist terrorism. Party consensus and public support became key elements in the decision to send troops to Iraq. Therefore, Spain's operation in Libya ended with the death of Muammar Gaddafi, when the interventionists' real goals came under widespread public criticism. US missions in Syria and the Red Sea, which violate sovereignty of Syria and Yemen, operate without direct assistance from Spain. Madrid's official position is that the true goal of the intervention is the search for a lasting peace, not a show of force that leads to an escalation of the conflict.

Using these variables, one can interpret and predict the country's future involvement in military missions, as well as Spain's response to interventions by other countries.

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²⁶ In 2022, amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Spain significantly increased defense spending. By 2029, Spain plans to increase defense budget funding to 2% of GDP. See: Spain Will Gradually Raise Spending on Defence to 2% of GDP by 2029 // Reuters. June 30, 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/spain-will-gradually-raise-spending-defence-2-gdp-by-2029-2022-06-30/> (accessed: 12.11.2025).

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