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Why does Spain need a geopolitical vision?

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Abstract

Geopolitics has traditionally served to explain the international behaviour of a state and define its security objectives through its geographical variables. Until very recently, geopolitics aroused very little interest in Spain and the studies carried out in this domain were practically non-existent. With a favourable international context and a periphery of partner, allied, or simply non-hostile countries and, at the same time, belonging to powerful security organisations such as NATO and, to a lesser extent, the EU, Spain could ignore geopolitical concerns given that these had limited intensity and simple solution. However, as Spain has rapidly opened up to globalisation, it has begun to understand the risks of disinterest in international issues in an international system that is becoming increasingly geopolitical.

Key words

Geopolitics, interests, power, risks, security, position.

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Resumen:

La geopolítica ha servido tradicionalmente para explicar el comportamiento internacional de un Estado y definir sus objetivos en política de seguridad a través de variables geográficas. Hasta una época muy reciente, la geopolítica despertaba un escaso interés en España y los estudios que se realizaban al respecto eran prácticamente inexistentes. Con un contexto internacional favorable y una periferia de países socios, aliados o simplemente no hostiles, la pertenencia a poderosas organizaciones de seguridad como la OTAN —y en menor medida la UE— permitía a España soslayar las preocupaciones geopolíticas, dado que estas eran limitadas y su solución sencilla. Sin embargo, a medida que se ha abierto rápidamente a la globalización, España ha empezado a comprender los riesgos que comporta el desinterés por los problemas internacionales en un sistema global mundial cada vez más geopolítico.

Palabras clave:

Geopolítica, intereses, poder, riesgos, seguridad, visión, global, regional.

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Introduction. Geography and power

Geopolitics has traditionally served to explain the international behaviour of a state and define its security objectives through its geographical variables. It is an academic discipline that seemed out of fashion in recent decades due to the bad reputation it had gained from the expansionist theories of the early 20th century and the absence of armed confrontation between great powers in the post-Cold War world dominated by what French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine called the American 'hyperpower'¹. However, globalisation and the rise of new powers have 'stubbornly' brought geography back into political reality. Geopolitics has returned with renewed vigour and has become an increasingly popular tool for understanding today's world and explaining how states interact and make foreign and security policy decisions.

Yves Lacoste's famous formula² that 'geography is used, above all, to make war' should also be interpreted to mean that war is also used to make a country's geography. It is what Robert Kaplan calls 'the revenge of geography'; states can forget their geography, but never defeat it. At a time when industrial wars have reappeared on European soil, with all their brutality and violence, the most aggressive profiles of geopolitics have become so accentuated that they have turned international relations into a game that is as dangerous as it is exciting.

Competition between great powers that can lead to open conflict, irredentism of middle powers that believe they have reached the historic moment to claim territories, the struggle for resources and areas of influence, but also the war in Ukraine, or the confrontation in the China Sea and Taiwan have made the foundations of political geography that governed the world order as we knew it until very recently alarmingly weak, to the point that the possibility of open conflict between powers is more present today than ever before.

Until very recently, geopolitics aroused very little interest in Spain and the studies carried out in this domain were practically non-existent. With a favourable international context

¹ Alain Frachon (12 December 2003), 'Face à l'hyperpuissance, textes et discours 1995-2003, by Hubert Vedrine', *Le Monde*.

² Yves Lacoste (2012), *La Géographie, ça sert, d'abord, à faire la guerre*, Paris, La Découverte, p.249.

and a periphery of partner, allied, or simply non-hostile countries and, at the same time, belonging to powerful security organisations such as NATO and, to a lesser extent, the EU, Spain could ignore geopolitical concerns given that these had limited intensity and simple solution.

The consequence was that for decades Spain could afford to relax its security and defence policy on the understanding that threats were virtually non-existent, risks easily manageable and capability shortfalls, if needed, would be provided by others. Spain's habitual position, in the context of European integration and Euro-Atlantic security in which it operated, tended to be to join the majority with a low-profile strategy that was usually favourable to Spain. In these circumstances, 'Bandwagoning', in the sense defined by the classics of structural realism such as Kenneth Waltz, became the main and most sensible behaviour of our foreign, security and defence policy since it provided an acceptable level of security while avoiding excessive risks or unacceptable commitments.

This attitude of geopolitical passivity worked reasonably well for us, and for a long time Spain was able to opt, to use Samuelson's famous expression, for butter, leaving the cannons behind. This came at a price and that was disarmament, so that once the military fat was trimmed, the meat was sliced off, until the bone of our defensive capabilities began to dangerously emerge. This characteristic was not exclusive to Spain, as many countries followed the same policy, but it took on worrying overtones in our country as the years went by.

Today, the security situation has changed as the international environment has deteriorated. The possibility of being drawn into open warfare in Eastern Europe, or drawn into a major power confrontation in the Indo-Pacific region, is changing Spanish perceptions and making them more receptive to international security issues. So does the emergence of a geographical space in North Africa that may become ungovernable because of a jihadist threat in the Sahel with the will to expand as far as the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic coast of Africa.

Spain has rapidly opened up to globalisation and has begun to understand the risks of disinterest in international issues in an international system that is becoming increasingly geopolitical. As Robert Kagan points out, in a world where 'the jungle is back', Spanish citizens are slowly beginning to understand that national security is intrinsically linked to

the power of the state and that the state is a prisoner of its geographical location. Geography marks the degree of security of a country and decides its future.

Recent interest in geopolitics aroused in Spain is therefore due to a growing concern to respond to the risks and threats we face, on the understanding that some of them —a consequence of systemic rivalry between powers, territorial desires, extreme ideological and religious currents, or the rise of nationalism— have acquired an existential character; in other words, they threaten our territory, our population, our institutions, or our economy.

A political view of geography helps to decide whether the situation of instability, and even conventional or hybrid warfare, in large regions of Eastern Europe, the Far and Near East, North Africa and the Sahel has become an existential threat to Spain and to what extent it affects our vital interests. The alternative to having one's own geopolitical worldview is to assume that others will dictate theirs, which is unacceptable, if only because of the dangers of passively following the interests of others, including the risk of being drawn into misguided wars.

Geography as a strategic asset.

However, the need to define national responses requires a careful analysis of risks and threats from a state's own geopolitical perspective that is reinforced by what Thucydides defines as 'fear, self-interest and honour', the trilogy of basic motivations for state behaviour. Geopolitical analysis requires a response to a dual security dilemma: on the one hand, meeting national interests in the face of risks and threats; on the other, guaranteeing the fulfilment of international and national obligations with the capabilities available.

The correct assessment of this dual equation is essential for state security to the extent that, as history shows, many states have never recovered from a poor resolution. It begins by identifying the country's strategic assets in designing a coherent and credible security policy. The first of these assets is its geographical position. Other complementary assets derive from it, such as the capacity to project itself onto other geographical spaces, or strategic influence, understood as its ability to act in areas of power that are not strictly geographical.

Spain has a favourable geographical position in which, in addition to the aforementioned elements, we could add language and the Ibero-American dimension, which are also geopolitical factors that serve to strengthen our international weight. In this sense, the geographical position of our country is unique and privileged, providing us with an important benefit when it comes to defining the essential elements of our international behaviour and establishing the foundations of our foreign and security policy. Situated between two continents, Europe and Africa, and almost an island straddling three seas, the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Cantabrian, Spain opens up through the Mediterranean to the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel, while the Atlantic connects us to the great oceanic communication routes and projects us towards America, making Spain an eminently maritime country.

This maritime condition is an important asset compared to continental European states enclosed by geography, something that, in the age of globalisation, enhances Spain's strategic value given the easy access from the Iberian Peninsula to the great global flows of circulation of goods and generation of value chains that are the seas.

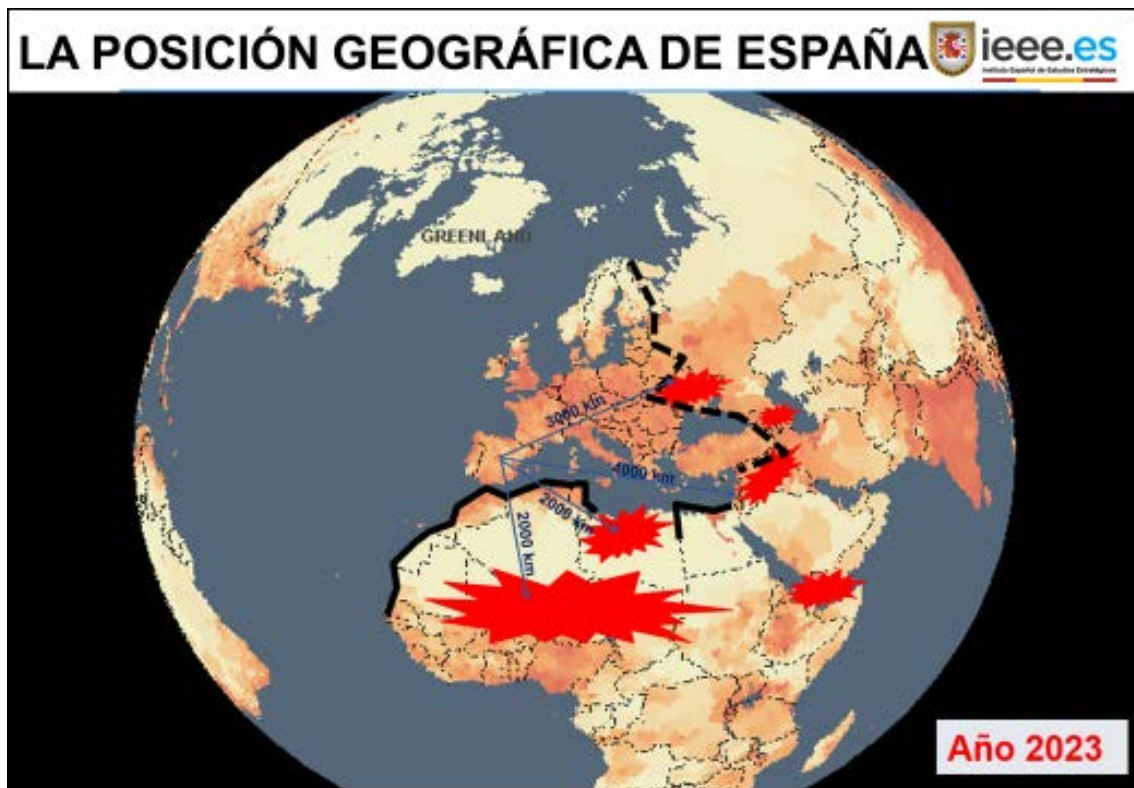
In addition, the state of Portugal to the west, separated from Spain by an artificial geographical 'stripe', which for several centuries has been an invisible, almost insurmountable border between the two countries, has deprived Spain of most of the Atlantic coastline. Lisbon is the port par excellence of the Iberian Atlantic and the natural point of access to and from the inland peninsula, something which only necessity forced to replace by the Galician and Andalusian ports. It was from Lisbon that the great armada set out to conquer England. The city was used by British fleets opposed to the Spanish monarchy as an intermediate point on their route to the Mediterranean.

Relations between the two Iberian countries have traditionally been friendly and are currently in excellent health, which is accentuated by the fact that they belong to the European and Euro-Atlantic area. History took us in different directions with the creation of two states on a single Iberian peninsula and created a feeling of mistrust that marked reciprocal behaviour for centuries. Today, the need to face common geopolitical challenges should allow for the creation of an Iberian geopolitical community based on shared interests that would be equivalent in size to the great European powers, which it would surpass in geographical extension and with which it would be on a par in terms of population, wealth and military power. The synergistic effect of this would make it easier

to defend the interests of both peninsular states in the European area, given their greater capacity for dialogue.

Moreover, geography has placed Spain not in the centre of Europe but on the periphery. Spain's eccentric location has traditionally been considered a weakness, as it distances it from continental decision-making centres and from the great currents that have shaped European geopolitics in recent centuries. This geographical position to the south and west of the European continent has kept Spain isolated, reinforced by the fact that our country is a peninsula linked to the European continent by a mountainous barrier, the Pyrenees, which is difficult to cross. The peninsula's orography, with a vast central plateau, low rainfall and abundant mountain ranges, makes Spain a compartmentalised fortress impregnable to any invasion, but also accentuates its isolation.

Not surprisingly, Spain played a marginal role in Allied strategy during the Cold War, limited to acting as a rear-guard area in the European theatre of operations in the event of a possible Soviet invasion and as a point of entry for potential reinforcements that might arrive from the other side of the Atlantic.



However, Spain's geographical position gained new value in the current context of open warfare in Eastern Europe- Located 4,000 km from Syria, 3,000 km from Russia, 2,000 km from Libya and another 2,000 km from the Sahel, Spain can be said to be

in the 'good corner' of the Mediterranean and in a favourable geographical position in Europe. Its relative remoteness from the conflicts ravaging the periphery of Europe and its geographical 'quasi-island' status mean that these conflicts affect Spain's interests, but without the dramatic intensity that they do for countries closer to the action, such as Poland or the Baltic republics. Even the situation in Libya has a greater impact on Italy than on Spain.

These conflicts affect us generally given our status as European partners and Atlantic allies and are therefore of interest to our geopolitics, but in the current circumstances, none of them pose an existential threat to our territory, our population, our institutions, or our economy. Spain's relative geographical remoteness from conflicts on the periphery of Europe mean it can address its security problems with a certain 'strategic tranquillity' and with a lesser sense of urgency than our European neighbours or Euro-Atlantic partners.

The sense of security that Spain has enjoyed in recent decades because of a stable international environment, coupled with the effects of a collective memory still subject to the traumas of an imperial past, has produced great reluctance to external interventionism in the social body of the Spanish nation. The result has been a preference for crisis management operations of limited scope and a high degree of legitimacy, carried out within the framework of the collective organisations to which Spain belongs.

This is not an exclusive characteristic of Spain, but is shared with its European partners and responds to a logical reasoning: globalisation means that security problems originating in distant scenarios, such as terrorism, regional conflicts or uncontrolled migrations, eventually end up appearing on our borders, taking advantage of geographical interconnectivity. Intervention in these scenarios is a logical way to anticipate the possibility of distant security problems spilling over from the geographical areas in which they originate and affecting our own.

In military terms, this has resulted in relatively simple and low-cost operations, although the results have sometimes been disappointing. This conception of operations that prioritised crisis management was also reflected in the acquisition of the capabilities to equip the armed forces in recent decades. Light, expeditionary means with low demands in terms of personnel requirements and economic cost were favoured over expensive, heavy, operationally and logistically demanding means of conventional military operations.

At the same time, the development of nuclear weapons was renounced despite the strategic autonomy they provide, with the confidence that security guarantees against a nuclear threat would be provided by those allies, primarily North American, that have them. Robust treaties would ensure that the nuclear powers would be willing in solidarity to take existential risks for the benefit of their unprotected allies. Allied nuclear deterrence, in which Spain participates without deciding, becomes the only guarantee of defence against any nuclear threat to which Spain cannot respond on its own.

Global vision and regional approach

Spain is an eminently European and Atlantic country and is therefore part of a geographical space in which it shares common values and interests with its European partners and Atlantic allies. This obliges us to maintain a global vision of security problems in the international environment, in which the analysis of risks and threats is similar to that of our partners and allies but, at the same time, we must adjust our international behaviour in accordance with our national security priorities, which do not always coincide with theirs.

Spain presents itself as a medium-sized power in the international arena and a relatively large power in Europe, in terms of geographic size, population, economy and armed forces, so it views security problems with a global vision, but prioritises its external action following a regional approach. This means assuming that our interests, as well as our security concerns, extend to all regions of the world, but not all of them have the same importance for Spain, something that is also true for all powers, large and medium.



Spain's geographical position and its geopolitical vision allow for a classification of the different regions of the world according to the priorities they represent for Spanish interests and security, with decreasing importance the further away they are from our national territory. The law of distance indicates the need to give greater prominence and therefore provide greater intensity in the response to risks and threats that are closer to our borders.

Although globalisation has qualified this categorical view in the sense that it has brought geographically distant regions closer to our security interests, the rule remains broadly the same. This simplifies the definition of major national strategic objectives and facilitates a better assessment of the chances of success in achieving them, avoiding gross miscalculations.

From this perspective, there is still an important qualitative and quantitative difference in terms of national security concerns between what happens, for example, in the Indo-Pacific—where our interests are limited and where Spain can contribute little added value in the field of global security—and what happens in the Mediterranean, especially in its western part, and North Africa, where Spain has strong interests and can contribute significantly in geographical areas whose stability is a priority.

In the case of Ukraine, its geographical remoteness meant that it was not traditionally considered a vital interest for Spain. From a purely national perspective, a Ukraine as a buffer state between the European space and Russia could be accepted without affecting our security. However, Russia's aggression on internationally recognised Ukrainian territory, the open warfare of the conflict, and Spain's commitments within the framework of allied and European solidarity, have modified its importance in the Spanish security equation.

The possibility that military escalation can lead to an open confrontation between NATO and Russia and the military commitments that this would imply for Spain have turned Ukraine into a relevant strategic objective for Spanish security, a situation that before the invasion was not. Atlantic solidarity makes Spain to align with its partners and allies, something that seems logical as it shares interests and security concerns with them.

However, in doing so, Spain takes existential risks, including the possibility of being drawn into an open conflict in Eastern Europe against a nuclear power. This possibility requires extraordinary care when deciding the scope of the commitments in a scenario with the potential to be potentially catastrophic for Spain. It also demands to avoid "strategic surprises" in southern scenarios, where vital interests do exist. However, geography once again plays a moderating role and the distance from Ukraine tempers the intensity of our security interests and commitments, which are sufficiently satisfied by subordinating them to those generally defined within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union.

With regard to conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian conflict, Spain's geographical position also plays a determining role in understanding the scope of our national interests. Geographical logic generally indicates that the greater remoteness of this conflict zone diminishes the importance of our interests in it. This could obviously be qualified according to parameters that alter the generality of the rule, such as the existence of vital resources for our economy such as oil or gas, the seriousness of the terrorist risks and threats generated there, or historical ties. Nevertheless, none of these parameters is present in this part of the Mediterranean with an intensity comparable to that of other regional or global powers, so Spain's contribution to conflict resolution is limited.

North Africa and, in particular, the Maghreb and Sahel regions, which can be considered vital areas for Spain, as envisaged in the various National Security Strategies that have been approved to date, are even more important from a security perspective. There is, therefore, a gap between the significant geopolitical relevance that derives from geographical proximity and the foreign, security and defence policy that Spain adopts towards the region.

However, the geographical proximity and important economic and security interests that link Spain to the region make the regional actors de facto strategic partners as convenient as they are complicated. Preventing a military escalation that could lead to direct confrontation, fostering dialogue and economic and political integration to facilitate regional stability and preventing the most perverse effects of competition between regional powers from affecting Spanish interests in such sensitive issues as energy, immigration and jihadist terrorism continue to be vital objectives for Spain.

Consequently, regardless of whether strengthening cooperative relations with North African partners, based on common economic and security interests, serves to reduce regional tensions, deterrence is still the cornerstone of any credible national geo-strategy that includes a security dimension and is a permanent condition for defining national defence priorities. This military policy, based on the most advanced military capabilities that allow for self-defence across the entire spectrum of conflict, should be sufficient to avoid a 'strategic surprise' and prevent any territorial claims to our sovereign spaces that go beyond the realm of rhetoric.

Further away geographically is the Sahel, which, although it has no geographical continuity with the Iberian Peninsula, its geopolitical characteristics and security conditions mean that it is one of Spain's priority areas of strategic interest. Problems such as terrorism, organised crime and uncontrolled migration that generates locally in this region, but their effects end up having an impact on our security. Spain's position as the closest European country to the region takes on a relevant role. Geographical logic indicates that Spain is the natural access route from the Sahel to Europe and vice versa; temporary geopolitical alterations produced by conflicts such as Libya in the central Mediterranean or Syria in the eastern Mediterranean have not changed this reality.

In the Sahel, unlike other scenarios of interest, Spain can contribute significant benefit to Euro-Atlantic security, which is particularly interesting at the current time of European strategic withdrawal from this regional scenario. With its own geopolitical vision, Spain could promote and lead more ambitious initiatives within the framework of the European Union or NATO, aimed at improving regional stability. The EU's strategic compass primarily and, to a lesser extent, the Atlantic Alliance's cooperative security strategy, provide adequate frameworks to take them forward, in circumstances where the war in Ukraine has diverted attention from the southern region and shifted allied and European strategic preferences excessively eastwards.

A different case would be that of Gibraltar, which should be considered a geopolitical liability. Its colonial status devalues Spain's geopolitical weight by supporting a colony of a treaty ally on its territory. The geo-strategy followed in recent decades of appeasement based on what has euphemistically been called the 'interest cushion' has not produced the expected result and has given Gibraltar privileges over land and sea areas that the Treaty of Utrecht, which regulates its legal status, does not confer on it.

However, geography once again imposes its laws. Gibraltar is where it is and is what it is, a small exogenous body located in the Spanish geographical space on which it depends and which it parasitizes. Here, time plays in Spain's favour, as the geopolitical differential with the colonial power decreases and increases the convergence of common interests. An energetic and consistent geostrategy that takes advantage of favourable historical circumstances, as would be the case with Brexit, would therefore be enough to revert a situation that should already be resolved to its natural order.

Projection and strategic depth

Closely related to Spain's geographical position is its capacity for projection towards other geographical scenarios. The Canary and Balearic Island archipelagos and the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla play an important role here, not only as integral parts of national sovereignty, but also fundamental elements of Spain's geopolitical vision.

The autonomous cities give Spain the singularity of having a physical presence on the African continent, a characteristic that no other European nation has. They exist for historical, but mainly strategic reasons. Ceuta and Melilla are the result of a historical process that acquires new geopolitical value in the current context. Both cities have

become 'thermometers' that serve to measure the temperature of events in North Africa. Of the two cities, Ceuta has an additional component. Together with the northern shore of the Strait of Gibraltar, it contributes to ensuring maritime traffic through the strait and thus the safety of navigation between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. The fact that this facilitates the design of response strategies and provides significant benefit in terms of Spain's contribution to the security of its European and Atlantic partners. Spain has the potential to control both sides of the strait is in itself a strategic asset of great relevance to Euro-Atlantic security.

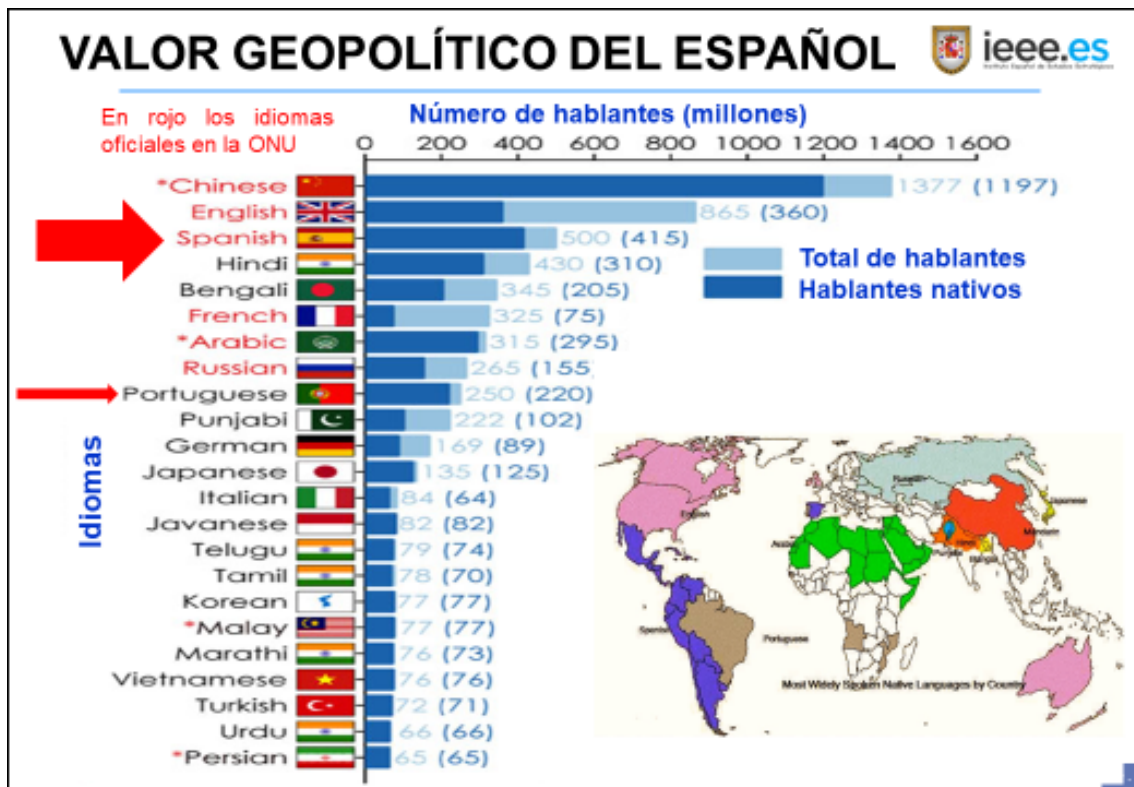
The archipelagos, for their part, provide strategic depth to the Spanish continental shelf and allow us to project towards the central and eastern Mediterranean in the case of the Balearic Islands and towards the African Atlantic coast in the case of the Canary Islands. The latter, located on the western flank of the Sahel, can play an important role in the Spanish and European security architecture in light of growing problems in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea.

However, Spain's geopolitical projection also refers to the Ibero-American sphere, where language plays a fundamental role. As Clausewitz said, if war is the continuation of politics by other means, it is equally true that language is an extension of geopolitics. The Latin proverb, 'he who rules, imposes religion' can thus be reinterpreted as 'he who imposes language, rules' or, at least, has an advantage over other powers. The overwhelming use of the English language by Anglo-Saxon powers is the best proof of the geopolitical value of language as a tool of power.

Geography has provided Spain with the opportunity to project itself across the Atlantic to the American continent. A long history of Spanish presence has meant that Spanish is now the official language of nineteen countries in the Americas, in addition to Spain and Equatorial Guinea, and has a certain degree of recognition in the Philippines and the territory of Western Sahara. With a Spanish-speaking community of roughly 580 million people spread over the five continents, and being the world's second language in terms of the number of native speakers, it can be said that Spain's geopolitics is inseparable from its action in America, where the Spanish language has helped to shape its own model of civilisation with an enormous geopolitical value.

The Spanish language is, therefore, a first-rate geopolitical asset of when it comes to promoting national interests. Language is a lever for boosting Spain's image and capacity for influence in the world, giving it an international weight that it would not otherwise have. The language allows Spain to become the gateway for Ibero-America to Europe and vice versa, an aspect reinforced by the important and growing Ibero-American national communities settled in a Spanish territory that is becoming one of the main economic engines of Ibero-America.

Ibero-America is thus Spain's main geopolitical priority in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, although its relevance in terms of security is less important. This does not prevent the historical and cultural relationship with states in the Ibero-American space from defining the main line of action of any geo-strategy drawn up in Spain, given the permanence of its objectives over time.



This preferential relationship with Ibero-America must also have a pragmatic translation in the field of economic relations, where language can be used as a priority tool to gain and consolidate markets and influence over competitors who have not mastered the language. Maintaining a privileged relationship with Ibero-America, increasing our influence and preventing other powers from displacing us, continues to be one of Spain's greatest challenges, as well as a permanent geopolitical priority.

This process is complemented by the substantial affinity of Spanish with Portuguese, making both Iberian languages the only two major international languages in terms of number of speakers, which are reciprocally understandable to the extent that they are often considered internationally as if they were almost one and the same³. This affinity allows Spain and Portugal to project themselves in a large multinational space of Iberian-speaking countries that spans all continents, made up of some thirty countries and more than 700 million people, a tenth of the planet and the world's leading linguistic bloc.

The growing convergence between the Ibero-American Community of Nations and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries articulates a vast geopolitical space of Iberian-language states. It could be used to increase visibility and international weight of Spain and of the Iberophone world in general, balancing in terms of influence the current preponderance of the English language and providing an alternative geopolitical worldview to the dominant Anglo-Saxon version.

Final considerations. Geopolitics matters for Spanish security

Current geopolitical trends indicate that states are increasingly assertive and geography matters more and more. In a context in which consensus on the rules designed to govern peaceful international relations is rapidly fading, the need for Spain's own geopolitical vision has also become a fundamental element in defining our security policy.

Until recently, membership of organisations with enormous political and military capacity such as NATO and, to a certain extent, the EU, has guaranteed Spain's security based on the collective defence it shared with its partners and allies. The guarantees provided by the Atlantic Alliance under Article V of the Washington Treaty gave Spain great geopolitical reassurance, allowing it to prioritise economic development and the maintenance of the welfare state over security concerns, on the understanding that these were small and, if necessary, the Allies would help us.

However, the possession of territories in North Africa, not covered by the defence umbrella of the Atlantic Alliance, and the ultra-eccentricity of the Canary Islands gives Spain a geopolitical singularity that is reflected in its defence policy. The possibility of military action alone is a specific characteristic of Spain, which does not exist in most of

³ Frigidiano Álvaro Durántez Prados (2016). 'La articulación del «mundo ibérico», una realidad geopolítica para el siglo XXI.' *Nueva Historia*.

our partners and allies and which obliges us to adopt military policies with their own characteristics, with deterrence as the fundamental element of our security strategy.

On the other hand, the war in Ukraine and the possibility of it spreading to the Atlantic territory places us in a scenario of potential open war in Europe that did not exist before the Russian invasion. While this has strengthened political and military cohesion among Atlantic allies and European partners in the face of Russian aggression, it has also devalued the 360-degree vision favoured by Spain, which views threats from the south at the same level as Russia. However, the upside of this renewed European and Atlantic preference for collective defence in the wake of Russian aggression to the detriment of less militarily demanding crisis management operations is triggering a virtuous process of boosting our defence capabilities, reversing decades of military decline. The outcome should be positive, strengthening national deterrence and increasing national security in equal measure.

If Spanish security policy enjoys limited autonomy in Europe, subordinate to those of NATO or the EU, in Africa, by contrast, Spain can play a more autonomous role and make the most of its advantageous geographical position to provide benefit to Euro-Atlantic security. The land of vines and olives that is the Mediterranean should be viewed as a space that links southern Europe and North Africa as it was in the ancient world, rather than a dividing line between prosperous Europe and its former colonies. This is especially necessary at a time when European concerns are focused on the East, while security problems in regions such as the Sahel are beginning to reach worrying levels.

Spain remains the closest European state to Africa and has become its southwestern frontier. Geographical proximity means that African problems stemming from the structural weaknesses of many of its states and their significant political, economic and social challenges are increasingly felt by Spanish society, as they affect its security. For Spain, tools such as civilian and military cooperation, development aid, the reinforcement of African crisis management capacities, and the response to humanitarian disasters are particularly appropriate instruments for achieving a greater and more effective presence in this region.

In order to achieve it, Spain must benefit from the comparative advantage of not being conditioned by a disputed colonial past. It also helps the sense of urgency required to solve problems that originate in Africa but increasingly affect Europe, such as drug

trafficking, terrorism, infectious diseases and illegal immigration, recently been joined by competition for resources and the presence of hostile paramilitary groups.

In an international environment dominated by a small number of major powers, where the geographical spaces in which the middle powers can act autonomously are limited, Spain must leverage its geographical location to gain a better position in order to defend its interests and increase its international weight. This obliges us to have a political vision from our geographical position, which prioritises becoming Ibero-America's natural interlocutor in the European Union and the main promoter of African security initiatives in Europe and NATO.

In May 2023, Franco-German television Arte described Spain as a 'discreet power', but it would have been more accurate to call it a 'friendly power'. Spain has much of what Joseph Nye calls 'soft power', understood as the ability to positively influence its geopolitical environment beyond the exercise of military power. Because of its geographical position, economy, openness to the world and understanding of international security issues, Spain has become a prudent nation, which gives it ample scope to develop its geopolitical potential.

The best way to make the most of this geopolitical capital is to adjust, with our own vision, our behaviour in the international sphere in accordance with our national interests and international commitments, but also with our will to contribute, to the extent of our possibilities and capabilities, to international peace and security. In this way, we can have a reasonable guarantee that if we cannot seat at the table where the new international order is decided, no one will put us on the menu either.

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