



THE CURRENT

SECURITY AT THE MARGINS: THE SPAIN–MOROCCO RELATIONSHIP

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While regional security complex theory provides a useful framework for analyzing security interactions within distinct regions, it proves inadequate for addressing transregional and indirect threats that emerge at regional margins, such as Spain's complex relationship with Morocco, and thus, Madrid's southern threat outlook.

INTRODUCTION

Regional security complex theory (RSCT) has emerged as a valuable analytical tool for assessing security issues. [Grounded](#) in the anarchic structure of the international system and balance-of-power dynamics on the one hand and the pressures of geographical proximity on the other, RSCT offers an analytical framework at the regional level in which national and global security converge, thereby enabling more nuanced security assessments.

Because the theory [emphasizes](#) that internal security interactions among the units within a given regional security complex (RSC) are not only more analytically relevant than others but also mutually exclusive, the theory is insufficient for analyzing security challenges arising at the peripheries of established RSCs.

Using Spain's southern threat outlook, and in particular the Spain–Morocco relationship, as a case study reveals that focusing solely on the dynamics of the RSCs to which these countries

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belong fails to adequately capture the nature of their security interactions.

SPAIN-MOROCCO SECURITY RELATIONSHIP

Although the term “[middle power](#)” is not a fixed concept, as it evolves alongside changes in the international system, Spain can be considered as such. In economic and military terms, Spain ranks [sixteenth](#) among the world’s largest economies by GDP and [seventeenth](#) in terms of military strength. From a regional perspective, Spain can be considered a relatively significant power due to the size of its territory (505,305 sq. km), its population (approximately 49 million), and its economy (\$1.7 trillion GDP in 2024), which makes Spain the [fourth-largest](#) economy of the EU. This positioning implies that while Spain must remain attentive to global security dynamics, its external action [prioritizes](#) a regional approach. Understanding these priorities and the rationale behind them requires a geopolitical assessment of Spain’s

strategic position and surrounding environment.

Located in the southwest of Europe, Spain sits at the intersection of the European and African continents. Uniquely it is the only European state that shares a land border with an African country, through its autonomous cities, Ceuta and Melilla, situated on the northern coast of Morocco, together with the so-called *plazas de soberanía* (sovereign territories) such as the Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera, the Alhucemas Islands, the Chafarinas Islands, and the islet of Perejil. Moreover, Spain is bordered by three bodies of water—the Mediterranean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Cantabrian Sea—and is separated from the rest of continental Europe by the Pyrenees mountain range. Additionally, two archipelagos form part of Spain’s territory: the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean and the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean Sea (fig. 1).

These geographical factors carry significant strategic and political implications. On the

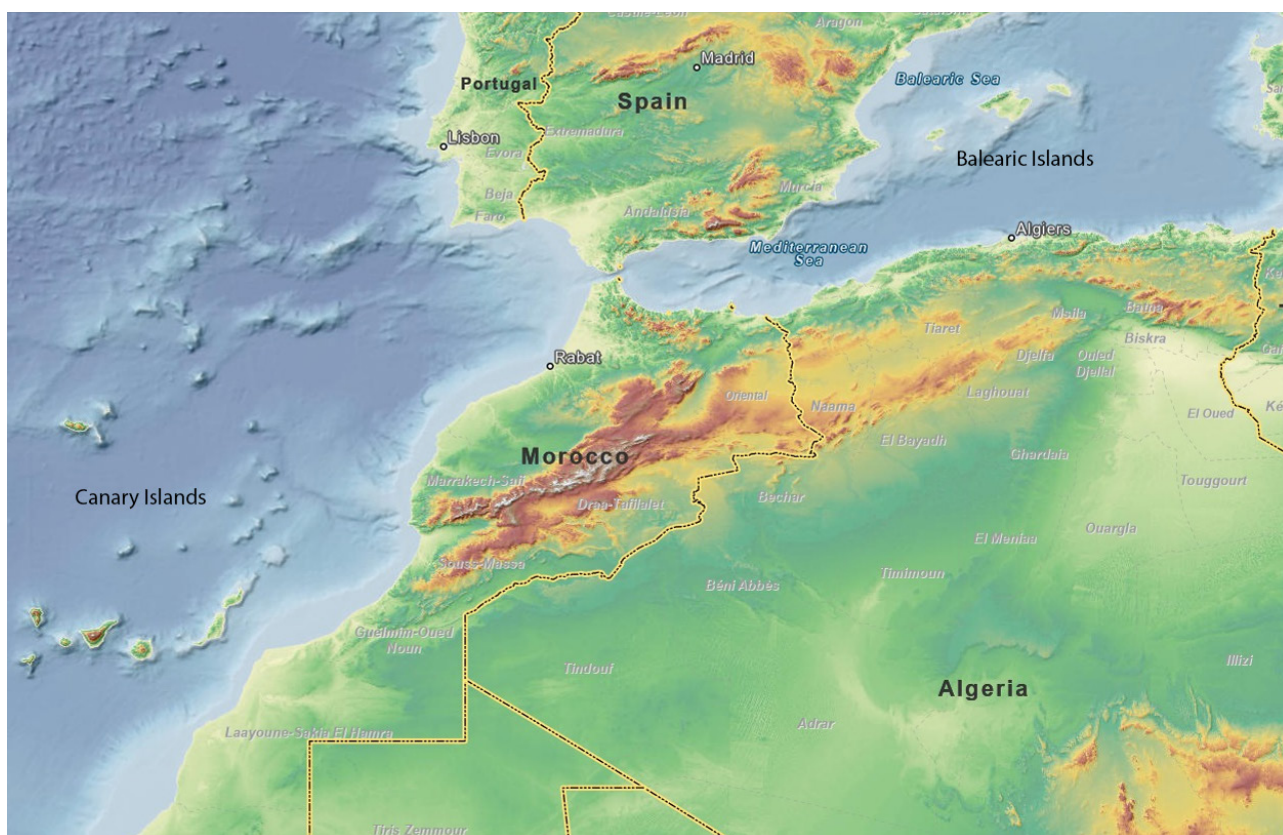


Fig 1. Southern Spain and Morocco with Spanish archipelagos (Source: National Geospatial Agency World Maps, 2025)

one hand, they shape a Spanish identity that is, simultaneously, European, Mediterranean, and Atlantic—an identity that geographically influences Spain’s foreign policy [priorities](#). On the other hand, Spain’s geography and orography create a degree of strategic insularity that determines its own political and security dynamics.

Due to geography, Spain’s security is not directly affected by ongoing or recent conflicts that threaten other European allies, including Russia’s illegal war on Ukraine, the war in Gaza, or the destabilization of countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, or even Libya. However, Spain’s relative isolation does not prevent it from experiencing the consequences of these crises, due to globalization and the country’s political and military alliances—primarily the EU and NATO. As a result, Spain shares a common threat assessment with its Allies such as the one provided by the [2022 NATO Strategic Concept](#) or the [2022 EU Strategic Compass](#). But Spain is not impacted with the same degree of intensity as the other member nations, as the current conflicts do not pose an existential threat to the state.

The same can be said of Spain’s Atlantic flank. Although Spain maintains historical and cultural ties with countries across the Atlantic and benefits from transatlantic commercial routes, the attendant security issues—particularly drug trafficking—do not constitute existential, or even highly significant, threats to Spanish national security. According to a [2021 report](#) by Europol and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on the illicit cocaine trade, although the Iberian Peninsula has traditionally been an important entry point for cocaine produced in South America—mainly in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia—Belgium, notably through the port of Antwerp, and the Netherlands, through the port of Rotterdam, have emerged as the primary cocaine gateways for Europe.

As a result of its geographical proximity, North Africa—specifically the Maghreb—is considered a vital region in Spanish policy, as emphasized in all Spanish national security strategies published to date. According to these documents, the primary threats emanating from this region include terrorism and illicit trafficking, particularly of drugs and people. In this regard,

it is worth noting that the [2023 Spanish National Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#) highlights the existing links between organized crime groups and terrorist organizations. These connections provide African affiliates of Al-Qaeda and Daesh with enhanced financial and logistical resources, as well as opportunities to infiltrate highly radicalized individuals into Spain and, more broadly, into Europe. However, even these threats do not represent an existential threat to Spain.

In fact, Spain’s most relevant source of geopolitical tension stems from its relationship with Morocco. Spain views Morocco as a strategic ally, particularly in relation to controlling migratory flows, combating illicit trafficking, and cooperating in counterterrorism efforts. However, from the Moroccan [perspective](#), Spain is not only a strategic partner but also a geopolitical rival. The resulting tension arises from Spain’s role as an obstacle to the revisionist foreign policy agenda of Morocco’s Alaouite kingdom, which includes territorial claims over Spanish sovereign territories in North Africa—most notably the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla—as well as in the so-called *plazas de soberanía*. Additionally, Morocco seeks to [expand](#) its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone in the Atlantic Ocean, a move that directly clashes with Spain’s maritime interests in the waters surrounding the Canary Islands.

In pursuit of its political and territorial goals, Morocco employs hybrid tactics aimed at exploiting Spanish vulnerabilities. The Hybrid Centre of Excellence [defines](#) hybrid threats as actions “conducted by state or nonstate actors whose goal is to undermine or to harm a target by influencing its decisionmaking at the local, regional, state or institutional level ... through the use of a wide range of tools ... designed to remain below the threshold of detection and attribution.” Among these tools, which [include](#) political, legal, diplomatic, economic, social, and cognitive activities, the weaponization of migration along the Spanish-Moroccan border has emerged as particularly effective.

For example, from May 17–18, 2021, [more than 8,000](#) immigrants, including approximately 1,500 unaccompanied minors, crossed into Ceuta, triggering a humanitarian crisis

that overwhelmed Spain's immediate response capacity. This influx occurred shortly after the Moroccan authorities publicly expressed strong disapproval of the Spanish government's [decision to admit](#) Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front—a political and military organization seeking independence for Western Sahara—for Covid-19 treatment. However, this incident served merely as a pretext to pressure Spain into shifting its stance on the Western Sahara issue. The [pressure ultimately proved effective](#): in March 2022, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, officially endorsed Morocco's plan to grant limited autonomy to Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty.

In addition to the hybrid tactics employed by Morocco in the pursuit of its national interests, another key concern for Spain is Morocco's rearmament process that has been underway since 2017. Although the [primary rationale](#) behind the estimated \$20 billion investment is to surpass Algeria as the dominant military power in the region, the expansion and modernization of Morocco's military capabilities could also encourage a more assertive and potentially confrontational foreign policy posture.

SPAIN AND MOROCCO UNDER RSCT

[According to](#) regional security complex theory, the world can be divided into distinct regional security complexes, defined as “set[s] of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.”

Consequently, Spain is situated within the European RSC, while Morocco is typically considered part of the Middle Eastern RSC. These RSCs present some peculiarities that warrant closer examination.

Europe RSC

Buzan and Wæver categorize Europe as a centered RSC that has undergone a process of integration not driven by a superpower or a great power but rather by a set of collective institutions—the EU. This unique form of integration could suggest that EU member states would have established among themselves a political structure characterized less by anarchy

“as centeredness [comes](#) not from the domination of a single pole of power” and more by the hierarchical nature of such a political structure. As a result, the EU may be seen as moving beyond the typical RSC model, potentially [functioning](#) as a single, unified actor in the realm of security. This interpretation aligns with the national-level analysis presented in the previous section, where no significant security threats were identified as originating from Spain's European counterparts.

Middle East RSC

According to [Buzan and Wæver](#), the First Gulf War (1990–91) altered some of the fundamental structures of the Middle East RSC, reinforcing the identity of three distinct subcomplexes within it: the Gulf, the Arab–Israeli (or Levant), and the Maghreb. Indeed as they observe, the Maghreb—of which Morocco is a part together with Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya—could be considered an independent RSC for three main reasons: its growing detachment from broader Arab issues, particularly the Arab–Israeli conflict; its increasing focus on domestic security concerns, particularly the tense relationship between Algeria and Morocco; and economic relations with the EU.

Although RSCs are mutually exclusive by definition, the RSCT highlights cases of interregional asymmetry, in which a neighboring great power—in this case the EU—projects influence over an adjacent RSC, as an analytical factor for addressing ambiguous border cases between regions. Therefore, assessing the EU's approach toward the Maghreb may shed some light on the security dynamic among the two regions.

Since the EU ruled out the possibility of membership for North African countries, its [strategic approach](#) has centered on interregional boundary management through the establishment of regional and bilateral agreements. Under the umbrella of the [1995 Barcelona Declaration](#), the EU launched a multilateral cooperation with Mediterranean countries aimed at addressing economic, social, human, and cultural issues as well as matters of common security—a framework that was renewed in 2021.

Morocco has benefited not only from this regional partnership but also from an Association

Agreement [signed](#) in 2000 and a range of financial instruments, through which it has received over €11.5 billion in investment since 2007. However, despite the EU's economic leverage in its southern neighborhood—and particularly with Morocco—it has not been able to decisively influence the region's political and security dynamics. In fact, the EU's growing dependence on North African countries to manage migration and secure its external borders has been perceived as a vulnerability and exploited by neighboring countries. In this regard, it is estimated that Morocco [received](#) approximately €13 billion in development funds between 2007 and 2021 in exchange for its border management efforts. However, this has not prevented it from using migration as a tool of political pressure against Spain and hence the EU.

US INVOLVEMENT

The RSCT explains the involvement of global powers in regional dynamics through the mechanism of penetration, which [occurs](#) “when outside powers make security alignments with states within an RSC.” By focusing primarily on how penetration affects the internal balance of power within a specific RSC, the theory overlooks the indirect effects this mechanism may generate in neighboring RSCs, as is evident in the present case study.

In the context of RSCT, the 2020 [Abraham Accords](#) Declaration that led to a series of bilateral agreements brokered by the United States in order to normalize relations between some Arab States, namely United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, and Israel and ultimately to bolster a common regional approach against Iran, can be understood as the way the United States has penetrated into the Middle Eastern RSC, relaxing the identification of the Maghreb as a quasi-independent RSC.

The signing of the Accords marked a significant shift in Morocco's foreign policy, as it normalized diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. This development reinforced Morocco's ambition to position itself as a regional power and strengthened its strategic ties with both the United States and Israel, particularly in the areas of defense and technology. In 2021, Israel and Morocco [signed](#)

a memorandum of understanding on military cooperation—the first agreement of this kind between Israel and an Arab country—which [led](#) to a series of arms deals, including advanced drones, air-defense systems, and intelligence satellites. Furthermore, according to the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency, since the signing of the Abraham Accords, the United States has expanded its military cooperation with Morocco, approving significant arms sales and defense agreements. These include, among others, 24 Apache [helicopters](#), 600 Stinger short-range [air-defense missiles](#), 612 Javelin [anti-tank missiles](#), 40 joint [stand-off weapons](#), 18 high-mobility artillery rocket systems ([HIMARS](#)), and a still-unconfirmed acquisition of 32 stealth F-35 [fighter jets](#).

While Morocco's acquisition of increasingly sophisticated military capabilities is primarily aimed at modernizing the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces in order to counter Algeria and consolidate its control over Western Sahara, it also contributes to narrowing the military gap between Morocco and Spain. In this context, it is important to note that Spain would not be automatically entitled to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in the event of an armed attack on Ceuta or Melilla. According to Article 6, for collective defense to be automatically triggered, an armed attack [must occur](#) “on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France, on the territory of or on the Island under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer.” Ceuta and Melilla do not fall within this geographic scope, similar to other NATO Allies' territories such as Greenland or the overseas departments and regions of France. Therefore, in the event of an armed attack against these territories, the North Atlantic Council would have to decide, on the basis of unanimity and common accord, whether NATO would collectively respond to such aggression.

Spain remains a close ally of the United States. It is home to Morón Air base and Rota Naval Station, US military bases [critical](#) to American power projection in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. However, bilateral relations have faced strains arising in part from Spain's

[recognition](#) of Palestinian statehood in 2024, and its [low](#) defense spending, which was 1.28 percent of GDP in 2024, the lowest among NATO members. These realities have complicated its alignment with current US strategic priorities. As a result, US support for Morocco not only has shifted the geopolitical balance in North Africa but also has complicated Spain's foreign policy calculations. It has created a growing asymmetry in the Spain–Morocco–US triangle, thereby weakening Spain's diplomatic leverage in regional affairs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that regional security complex theory, while useful for analyzing regional security dynamics, proves insufficient

when applied to security challenges emerging at the peripheries of established regional security complexes. Through the case study of Spain's southern threat outlook—particularly its complicated relationship with Morocco—it becomes evident that RSCT's rigid regional boundaries and emphasis on internal balance-of-power dynamics fail to account for the transregional and indirect effects that shape security realities. The case has also illustrated how global power involvement—such as US support for Morocco following the Abraham Accords—can disrupt regional balances and produce consequences beyond the RSC where the alignment occurs, thus highlighting a blind spot in RSCT's conceptual framework. ~ Σ

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