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Spanish Navy: Deployment in the Indo-Pacific and Strategic Vision of “Armada 2050”



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The tour along the Chilean coast, completed in March 2025, by the young Princess Leonor de Todos los Santos de Borbón y Ortiz, heir to the Spanish throne, offers an occasion to talk about her country’s position in the Indo-Pacific, a geopolitical reality that Madrid itself has helped to shape, since the inclusion of these oceans in the maps of the known world was largely the accomplishment of the Spanish crown.

The sighting of the South Sea in 1513 by Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1475-1519); the discovery of the interoceanic passage by the Portuguese explorer Fernando

Magellano (15th century-1521), who in 1520 was in the service of Emperor Charles V of Habsburg, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Spain; the first circumnavigation of the globe in 1522 by Juan Sebastián Elcano (1486/7-1526); and the discovery in 1565 of the return route from Asia to America by Andrés de Urdaneta (1498-1568), are milestones in the history of world navigation, which made the “Pacific” a “Spanish lake” between the 16th and 17th centuries, and also allowed Philip II (1527-26-98) to claim to rule “an empire where the sun never sets”.

Knowledge of the coasts, currents and islands was considered a state secret to ensure unchallenged domination, which lasted until other Europeans began to challenge the *status quo* through territorial conquests, privateering or piracy. Then came the process of Latin American emancipation, and the war against the United States of America in 1898, with the consequent losses of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines: events that minimized the Spanish presence in the Pacific, even if the cultural heritage can still be perceived from Tierra del Fuego to California.

Although the *Juan Sebastián Elcano* sailing ship, where Princess Leonor was completing her naval training, is a regular visitor to the Pacific, this time the scenario is different. In fact, the midshipmen on board, at least by age, should be the ones responsible for implementing the Spanish Navy’s *Visión Armada 2050*, a document published at the end of last year .

In its strategic positioning for the future, the Navy has argued that “the world’s economic center of gravity is shifting towards the Indo-Pacific, where the sea will gain importance and it will be necessary to act within the framework of international coalitions”.

For a naval force currently operating in the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and off the African coast, recognizing the importance of this additional theater is exactly in line with what other European countries are doing. With their occasional naval deployments to various areas of the Indo-Pacific, the German, British, and French navies (France is a resident power in the region), interacting with other navies, have demonstrated their global reach, strengthening security regimes and carrying out missions ranging from defending freedom of navigation to humanitarian assistance.

The last time a Spanish ship appeared off the Chilean coast, in 2019, it went unnoticed due to the protests that had broken out in Chile a week earlier. Beginning on October 7, 2019, against the increase in the cost of the subway ticket and, in general, against the high cost of living and corruption, these protests, known in Chile as *Estallido social*, resulted in a series of demonstrations, which lasted until 2020, and which took place mainly in the capital Santiago.

In 2019, the frigate *Méndez Núñez* (named after a famous and heroic rear admiral, 1824-69), a modern anti-aircraft destroyer with the *Aegis* combat system, arrived in Valparaíso as part of a circumnavigation to commemorate Magellan. But it failed to arouse the interest of Chilean citizens, who were preoccupied with other matters at the time. However, if the strategic document *Visión Armada 2050* is implemented consistently, the situation regarding international public opinion should begin to change.

Any insider can testify that Spanish sailors continue to be actively engaged in protecting the global trading system from threats such as piracy and migrant smuggling. The skill of its shipyards, including *Navantia*, in building vessels such as the *F-110* frigates and *Isaac Peral* class submarines is also recognized.

While it is true that Spain's capacity to engage in the Indo-Pacific is limited, if measured in terms of numbers, it is also true that, if Australia, the United States of America, the People's Republic of China, Japan and India are excluded, the other local actors contribute almost nothing to the protection of their neighborhood. That's why sometimes a little is better than nothing, and that's why coalitions exist as force multipliers. In addition, new injections of resources into European defense should somehow be reflected together on the oceans; whereas now everyone is doing their own thing.

On the Latin American coasts bordering the Indo-Pacific in its most extended form, the Spanish navy, the fourth most powerful navy in Europe, should find more than its history. There is also a potential future opportunity if it finds partners aligned with its *Visión 2050*, such as Chile.

Spain is currently returning to the South Seas, and "A shift in the global economic center of gravity towards the Indo-Pacific is taking place, where the sea will become more important and it will be necessary to act within the framework of international coalitions". This sentence is taken from the aforementioned document *Visión Armada 2050*, which the Navy worked on for two years, and which it presented between the end of November and the beginning of December 2024. The sentence essentially summarizes one of Spain's main strategic needs: to play its part in strengthening the coalition of countries that collaborate with NATO in the area: the Republic of Korea (South), Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Japan.

The note contained in the Navy document suggests Spain's upcoming participation in multinational naval groups, both with frigates and other types of ships. The Defense Department is already thinking about what could be the Armed Forces' biggest external mission, also taking into account that Trump's

second term as President of the United States could make the People's Republic of China even more relevant in the region.

However, the document *Visión Armada 2050*, even if it looks at a fairly distant horizon, is much more ambitious. The unclassified aspects of the document were disclosed by the Spanish Navy, in an event chaired by the Minister of Defense, María Margarita Robles Fernández, and by the Admiral Chief of Staff of the Navy, Antonio Piñeiro Sánchez. The second chief of staff, Admiral Gonzalo Sanz Alisedo, presented the general lines of one of the most ambitious reflections of the Spanish naval force since the financial crisis drastically reduced its capabilities in 2008.

In essence, the Navy is expected to have very advanced technology, with a doubled capacity to act on land targets, with full coordination capacity in future combats with a combination of means and human contingents and interpretation of huge amounts of data; this counting on a naval industry and supplies as nationalized as possible, managed by highly qualified sailors, infantry and officers.

The ability to project naval power ashore is the “core capability” that the Navy document ranks in the top three, along with “sea control” and “maritime action.” This ability to act on land is one of the differences between the leading navies and the others. This ambition is contextualized in the current situation, in which “budgets and investments are increasing to modernize and strengthen military capabilities to respond in high-intensity scenarios,” reads the footnote of the Navy document.

And this ability to strike on land is based on three pillars: the possibility of landing more *marines* – the current Third Marine Brigade could evolve in the

future to the size of a large brigade – and increasing their range of action on land; greater investment in the amphibious force and quality of the embarked air force – with an inexorable replacement of the *Harrier* fighters, on the verge of obsolescence; and the availability of cruise missiles capable of being launched from submarines and frigates against targets hundreds of kilometers inland.

The Spanish Navy, said Admiral Sanz Alisedo, will focus on developing its “combat-oriented” capacity and strength, to be “an international reference in the maritime field”.

This strategic intention expressed by the Spanish Navy is fully connected with the national strategies for Security and Defense Technology and creates an ecosystem between industry, universities and public opinion. The aim is to unite political, scientific and industrial efforts to make frigates, aircraft carriers, corvettes, minesweepers, patrol boats and submarines interoperable with the rest of the armed forces, fighters, armored units, infantry, drones... and with an enormous swarm of data in the “combat cloud”.

A significant investment in technology is therefore approaching, which, at least publicly, has not been quantified. In any case, it depends on the expected increase in the defense budget and implies the creation of a “very resilient and highly nationalized” supply chain and the encouragement of the defense industry to bring “the creation of highly qualified jobs”. After all, the Navy chiefs have noted that the phase of investment in capabilities – which the Navy lost when the financial bubble burst in 2008 – is accelerating.

Among the plans mentioned by Admiral Sanz Alisedo, two are essential: research and investment in energy generation and storage systems for “small vessels” and

the creation of a network of smart naval shipyards in Spain based on the effective integration of the Navy, the defense industry and suppliers.

However, all this does not detract from the fact that the priority of the Spanish admirals is to train the entire naval system to “operate in degraded environments where the technological advantage would be totally or partially nullified”, anticipating a scenario – among the possible ones – of high intensity and long lasting war.

The Spanish Navy leadership does not exclude that in the future a new command may be created for a space that is becoming less and less unreachable: the seabed. The seabed is a contested domain, said Sanz Alisedo, who emphasized that it will be a “battlefield for robots, an environment in which 90% of the data we manage on cell phones and 80% of the international financial transactions carried out from Spain will circulate”. But what would seem to be a simple hypothesis could perhaps turn out to be something more significant this time.

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(The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of [World Geostrategic Insights](#)).