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SPAIN'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN THE SAHEL:

SECURITY AND INFLUENCE ADAPTATION IN A REGION OF DIMINISHING WESTERN INFLUENCE AND GROWING RUSSIAN PRESENCE

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Spain's Strategic Role in the Sahel: Security and Influence Adaptation in a Region of Diminishing Western Influence and Growing Russian Presence

Since 2018, Russia has expanded its influence across the Sahel through a combination of military partnerships, private security contractors, disinformation campaigns, filling the void left by Western retrenchment. This growing presence, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has reshaped local security dynamics and redefined international power dynamics in the region.

While this shift poses significant risks to European interests, it also presents a critical opportunity for Spain to recalibrate its southern security strategy. The Sahel forms the southern perimeter of Spain's security environment, directly linked to key concerns such as terrorism, migration flows and the security of energy supply routes.

Spain is well-positioned to support regional stabilization efforts and counterbalance external influence, by leveraging its geographic proximity, diplomacy and growing defense cooperation through EU-led missions such as GARSI Sahel III. This would also strengthen its standing within both the EU and NATO, supporting a broader European strategic autonomy.

This research aims to evaluate: **How can Spain's engagement in the Sahel simultaneously serve to safeguard its southern security and to enhance its strategic influence within the European security landscape?**

Building on offensive realism, hybrid warfare concept, and European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) project, the analysis focuses on defense and strategic priorities. Methodologically, it combines regional conflict analysis, policy review, and expert interviews in European or African security policy.

The final section will develop a policy-oriented strategic plan proposal for Spain, outlining concrete measures to reinforce its southern security and enhance coordination with regional partners.

Keywords: Sahel, Russia, Spain, national security, strategic opportunity.

ABBREVIATIONS

EU: European Union

AES: Alliance des États du Sahel

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

CSDP: Common Security and Defense Policy

EAE: Estrategia de Acción Exterior 2025-2028

ESA: European Strategic Autonomy

JNIM: Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin

MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

EUTM Mali: European Union Training Mission in Mali

AFISMA: African-led International Support Mission to Mali

EUMPM Níger: European Union Military Partnership Mission in Niger

FIAP: Fundación para la Internacionalización de las Administraciones Públicas

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1. Introduction

Approximately over 2,000 kilometers from Spain's southern border lies one of the world's most volatile and strategically significant regions: the Sahel. Over the past decade, the region has experienced a convergence of security, political, and governance crises, including the expansion of jihadist organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the erosion of state authority, a succession of military coups, large-scale population displacement, and growing competition among external powers. As instability has intensified, the Sahel has evolved from a peripheral concern into a strategic challenge with direct implications for European and Spanish security, affecting issues ranging from terrorism and irregular migration to geopolitical influence and regional stability.

A turning point came with the wave of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023, which brought sovereigntist military juntas to power. These juntas proceeded to expel French and European military forces. In addition, the three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) in 2023 and withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), ending over a decade of Western-led security engagement.

The security vacuum left by Western retrenchment was rapidly filled by alternative external actors whose engagement models differ widely from European ones. Russia has emerged as the primary security partner for the AES countries, primarily through the Africa Corps. Meanwhile, China has pursued a complementary economic strategy, providing infrastructure investment, and even the United States has sought to restore intelligence cooperation channels with AES governments, driven by mineral access strategy and the containment of Russian and Chinese influence (The Africa Report, 2026).

This multipolar realignment has transformed the strategic environment in which European and Spanish engagement operates.

Spain occupies a highly exposed position within this landscape. Its geographic proximity to North and West Africa, the vulnerability of its southern borders in Ceuta, Melilla, and the Canary Islands to migration pressures linked to Sahelian instability, and

its sustained operational presence in the region make it a key potential actor (Gogny, Universidad de Salamanca, 2024).

The existing academic and policy literature agrees that the Sahel has become a region of high relevance to European and Spanish security, due to persistent instability, high levels of violence, the proliferation of non-state armed actors, and its centrality to migration routes toward Europe, with Spain consistently identified as a strategically significant actor given its proximity to North and West Africa and its position as a principal entry point for African migration into the EU (Mateos, Renteria, & Torrella Jauger, 2024). Spain's operational contributions to CSDP missions have been acknowledged, and the concept of European Strategic Autonomy has generated growing analytical attention (Borrell, 2020).

More recent scholarship reframes the region as a contested, multipolar arena in which France's traditional dominance is challenged by the economic presence of China and the expanding security role of Russia through actors such as the Wagner Group, a shift that has prompted a realist turn interpreting the Sahel as a space of great-power competition and survival in which the EU's effectiveness is questioned by the divergent interests of its member states (Gogny & De Castro, *International Critical Thought*, 2025).

However, significant tensions remain unresolved, including the persistent gap between the rhetoric of local ownership and top-down intervention models, and ambiguity over Spain's strategic autonomy given its close alignment with French priorities. This has led the literature to propose "Transformative Pragmatism", a less intrusive, more dialogical and context-sensitive approach (Mateos, Renteria, & Torrella Jauger, 2024).

The novelty of this thesis revolves around the fact that no existing study integrates Spain's Sahel engagement, the European Strategic Autonomy framework, and the analysis of the possibility of leveraging peripheral security for institutional influence within the EU. Beyond its academic contribution, this research is relevant to current policy debates. At a moment when the European Union is being forced to rethink its approach to defense, security, energy, and rare minerals dependencies, the question of which member states can assume credible southern security leadership, and through what instruments, is not merely theoretical anymore.

The central research question guiding this thesis is:

How can Spain's engagement in the Sahel simultaneously serve to safeguard its southern security and to enhance its strategic influence within the European security landscape?

To address this question, the thesis pursues four specific research objectives:

1. To contextualize the Sahel as a relevant security space to Spain and the EU, mapping structural threats and the transformation of the external actor landscape.
2. To construct and justify a theoretical framework combining Offensive Realism and the concepts of hybrid warfare and European Strategic Autonomy.
3. To critically analyze Spain's national security strategy, examining how the Sahel is framed, how hybrid threats are incorporated, and what analytical gaps the document contains.
4. To evaluate the mechanisms through which Spain's is engaged in the Sahel and how they can translate into institutional influence within EU security governance.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 establishes the analytical foundations of the study in two stages. It first develops the theoretical framework, articulating Offensive Realism as the primary explanatory lens, complemented by European Strategic Autonomy as the institutional framework through which the realist pursuit of power is channeled at the EU level, and incorporating hybrid warfare as the structural threat environment shaping the region. Additionally, it sets out the methodology, justifying the qualitative, theory-driven single-case study design and detailing its complementary methodologies: the literature review, the semi-structured expert interview, secondary data analysis, and the interpretive document analysis, while specifying the independent and dependent variables and the four indicators that are carried as analytical threads throughout the empirical chapter. Chapter 3 constitutes the empirical analysis and tests whether observable changes in the regional security environment between 2020 and 2026 correspond to observable changes in Spain's strategic behavior. Section 3.1 reconstructs the Sahel as Spain's southern strategic environment, tracing the Western withdrawal and the expansion of Russian hybrid influence through the indicators of disinformation operations and political violence. Section 3.2 examines Spain's current engagement in the region, analyzing the dismantling of the central-Sahel mission architecture between 2020

and 2026 and Spain's operational and institutional positioning within EU security governance. Section 3.3 then turns to the framing of the Sahel, undertaking the interpretive analysis of official national security documents and integrating the expert interview and secondary data to evaluate the mechanisms through which security engagement is translated into institutional influence. Chapter 4 concludes explicitly by answering the research question, assessing the thesis's theoretical and policy contributions, and identifying the study's limitations.

2. Theoretical Framework

This thesis adopts Offensive Realism as its main theoretical framework, combined with the concepts of European Strategic Autonomy and hybrid warfare as the structural threat shaping the region's behavior. This approach is appropriate because it simultaneously captures:

1. The external logic of security maximization under anarchy.
2. The internal logic of influence accumulation within EU institutional governance.
3. The transformation of contemporary conflict through new ways of insecurity.

The research question of this thesis (*How can Spain's engagement in the Sahel simultaneously serve to safeguard its southern security and to enhance its strategic influence within the European security landscape?*) requires a framework capable of explaining both physical security incentives and institutional power dynamics.

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* Mearsheimer argues how that same anarchic structure incentivizes states to maximize relative power. As national intentions cannot be known with certainty, rational states pursue regional hegemony where possible, assuring security through power accumulation instead of restraint. (Mearsheimer, 2001).

This thesis adopts Mearsheimer's offensive realism as its primary explanatory lens as it captures the proactive dimension of Spain's Sahel engagement that defensive realism can't account for. Under defensive realism, Spain's involvement in EU CSDP missions and bilateral security cooperation would be explained as a reactive response to proximate threats or a necessary security investment, but not a strategic choice. Under offensive realism, Spain's engagement is interpreted as a deliberate positioning strategy: by

establishing itself as the EU's primary southern security provider, Spain maximizes its influence within European governance structures, shaping collective security priorities in ways that serve its national interests.

Under the offensive realism framework, the concepts of anarchy, self-help and power maximization are essential to understand the approach and how it applies to the Sahel and Spain. Mearsheimer defines anarchy as the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing rules among states (Mearsheimer, 2001). In such system, survival is the primary objective. This can be applied in a regional level to The Sahel and its acceptance of Russian presence as the region represents a zone of weak governance and regional volatility.

The *self-help* logic of offensive realism holds that states can't ultimately outsource their security to collective institutions; they must retain autonomous capacity. This explains Spain's operational investment in bilateral security cooperation, using alliances as instruments of convenience. For example, the Gar-SI Sahel initiative, which goes beyond the requirements of EU multilateral missions as it is developing independent institutional expertise, regional relationships, and operational credibility that serves its autonomous security interests.

Regarding power maximization, Mearsheimer argues that states seek regional hegemony where structural conditions allow. In this case, the logic of power maximization applies at the European security governance level. By positioning itself as the indispensable southern security actor, Spain pursues a form of institutional hegemony, becoming a key reference point for EU southern security policy. However, it is important to consider that offensive realism was developed to explain the behavior of great powers, not medium-sized states within supranational institutions, such as Spain. This thesis addresses this tension by complementing realism with the concept of European Strategic Autonomy, which provides the institutional framework through which realist search of power is channeled at the EU level.

Middle powers operate under different constraints and can't be expected to behave in exactly the same way as major powers. The literature on middle powers provides a useful framework for addressing this issue. Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal argue that middle powers should not be defined solely by their material capabilities, but also by the way they pursue their interests. Instead of relying on overwhelming military or economic

power, they tend to favor multilateral cooperation, coalition-building, and what the authors describe as "niche diplomacy" or the concentration of limited resources in policy areas where they can exercise disproportionate influence (F. Cooper, A. Higgott, & R. Nossal, 1993). This perspective helps explain Spain's approach to the Sahel. Spain lacks the capacity to shape European security policy across all domains, but it can seek influence in a more limited area where it possesses geographical proximity, long-standing engagement, and operational experience. In this sense, the Sahel represents a policy niche through which Spain can enhance its influence within the broader European security framework.

Viewing Spain through the lens of middle-power theory also helps refine the expectations of offensive realism. Mearsheimer argues that states seek to maximize their relative power whenever opportunities arise. However, middle powers face more significant resource constraints and therefore must be selective in the goals they pursue. This helps explain why Spain has devoted significant attention to instability in the Sahel while playing a more limited role in confronting Russia directly. Although Russia represents a major challenge to European security, Spain's ability to influence that theatre is relatively limited, whereas developments in the Sahel have a more immediate impact on Spanish national interests.

Work on the alliance security dilemma further clarifies Spain's position within both NATO and the European Union. Allies constantly balance two competing concerns: the fear of abandonment and the fear of entrapment. States seek reassurance that their partners will support them, when necessary, while simultaneously avoiding commitments that could draw them into costly conflicts that do not serve their interests (H Snyder, 1997). Spain's behavior reflects this balancing act. It must contribute sufficiently to collective security efforts to remain a credible and influential partner, while avoiding an excessive burden that larger allies may be unwilling to share.

The same logic can also help explain the behavior of the AES states. From this perspective, the growing relationship between several Sahelian regimes and Russia can be interpreted as a form of bandwagoning, through which local governments seek external support, regime security, and international legitimacy from an alternative partner.

If offensive realism explains why states seek to maximize power under anarchy, hybrid warfare explains how they pursue power while minimizing escalation risks in a

structurally competitive international environment. Much of the literature on hybrid warfare has focused on its operational features, however, this approach risks reducing hybrid warfare to a checklist of tactics. This thesis draws primarily on reconceptualization of hybrid warfare as the operational manifestation of strategic ambiguity in conditions of renewed great power competition (Mumford & Carlucci, 2022). This conceptualization reveals that hybrid strategies and grey-zone strategies are designed to accumulate strategic advantage while avoiding the escalation and accountability that conventional military action would entail.

Hybrid strategies undermine this domestic or external threat distinction by operating simultaneously in both domains: disinformation campaigns erode domestic social cohesion; proxy forces create security vacuums that generate refugee flows; the weaponization of irregular migration generates internal political pressure in receiving states. More specifically, the EU Sahel strategy literature highlights the securitization of violence, migration, and climate change (Mateos, Renteria, & Torrella Jauger, 2024). Thus, hybrid warfare theory reveals that Sahel constitutes a grey zone rather than a conventional conflict theatre. The concept of the grey zone refers to holistic application of civilian and military tools to achieve gradual progress toward political objectives in environments where the formal rules of international law are ambiguous, attribution is difficult, and state and non-state actors overlap (Mazarr, 2015). In grey zones, conventional deterrence and legal enforcement mechanisms lose their effectiveness, creating structural advantages for actors willing to operate below the threshold of armed conflict. For the purposes of this thesis, the grey zone definition of the Sahel explains why engagement strategies based exclusively on military capacity-building or development cooperation are inadequate as they address only certain dimensions of a multi-domain threat environment.

The thesis recurrent definition of the Sahel as Spain's southern strategic environment needs to be explained through regional security theory. Buzan and Waever argue that security is often clustered regionally within complexes of states whose security concerns can't be analyzed separately because of their interdependency (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). On this view, the Sahel is the southern tier of a Euro-Saharan security complex in which instability, migratory pressure and violence transmit directly across the Mediterranean. The Copenhagen School conceptualizes security not as an objective condition but as a speech act through which an issue is elevated above normal politics

and rendered amenable to exceptional measures (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This is directly relevant to the document analysis pursued in Chapter 3: when Spanish strategy frames the Sahel as a source of terrorism, migration, and energy vulnerability, which is describing threats but also constructing the region as a security space and thereby legitimizes specific responses.

Offensive Realism and Hybrid Warfare explain state behavior in anarchic interstate competition. Spain, however, pursues power maximization not only against external rivals but within a supranational institution whose member states share collective institutions, pooled sovereignty, and institutional hierarchies that realism alone cannot fully account for. The self-help logic and power-accumulation dynamics that realism predicts must therefore be channeled through European governance structures. This is where European Strategic Autonomy becomes essential as the institutional framework that explains how Spain translates forward security engagement into influence within the EU's collective decision-making.

Josep Borrell defines strategic autonomy as Europe's "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary" (Borrell, 2020), explicitly clarifying that autonomy does not mean isolation, but the development of the capabilities required to defend European interests in the international environment. Similarly, Tara Varma conceptualizes European strategic autonomy as "the capacity to act independently in an interdependent world" (Varma, 2024). Thus, strategic autonomy does not reject interdependence, it seeks to ensure that interdependence does not translate into strategic vulnerability.

European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) has evolved from a contested political slogan into a structured strategic objective embedded in the European Union's foreign and security policy framework. The drivers of this evolution have been primarily external shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed Europe's dependence on third countries for critical goods, triggering what Varma describes as a strategic reckoning. Shortly thereafter, Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a strategic awakening, forcing the EU to extend autonomy beyond economic resilience into the realm of hard security (Mateos, Renteria, & Torrella Jaeger, 2024). More recently, the return of US foreign policy under the Trump administration has raised questions about the reliability of the transatlantic security guarantee, accelerating European debates on self-sufficiency regarding defense.

Simultaneously, instability in the Middle East has reinforced Europe's vulnerability to energy price shocks and supply disruptions. The EU's dependence on imported critical minerals, essential for the green and digital transitions.

The EU Strategic Compass constitutes the authoritative institutional expression of ESA as a security policy framework. The 2024 Report is analytically significant for this thesis: it explicitly acknowledges the strategic dilemma posed by the Sahel, warns against disengagement on the grounds that rival actors would fill the resulting vacuum, and calls for a recalibrated EU approach that is more flexible and demand-driven (EEAS Press Team, 2024). Within this institutional context, member states that make sustained contributions to collective security objectives acquire credibility as security providers, a form of institutional capital that translates into influence over agenda-setting, priority-definition, and resource allocation within EU governance structures.

To this thesis, ESA functions as a governance framework that shapes the incentives and opportunities available to EU member states seeking to translate national security engagement into collective capacity and political influence. The thesis does not assess whether the EU has achieved strategic autonomy in any sense, nor does it evaluate ESA as a normative ideal. ESA is employed analytically to explain the mechanism through which Spain's forward engagement in the Sahel generates institutional returns within EU security governance.

The mechanism through which sustained contributions translate into political influence requires further clarification. Scholarship on European security and defence has highlighted the existence of a capability–expectations gap (Hill, 1993), a mismatch between the international role the European Union seeks to play and the resources and political cohesion available to support those ambitions. Strategic autonomy emerged as an attempt to address this problem. However, the concept remains contested, and scholars disagree on what it should mean in practice.

This debate is important for the thesis because it suggests that influence within EU security governance does not come only from providing military capabilities. It also comes from shaping how strategic autonomy is understood and implemented. States that can offer a clear strategic vision are therefore likely to exercise greater influence than those that contribute personnel and resources but play a limited role in defining broader strategic priorities.

The question of how states convert contributions into influence is further explored in the literature on European integration and international leadership. Liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1998) views EU decision-making as the result of bargaining among member states. From this perspective, influence depends largely on a state's ability to build coalitions, secure support from partners, and shape negotiations. Applied to the Sahel, this suggests that Spain's influence will depend less on the size of its deployments and more on its ability to persuade other member states that instability in the region constitutes a shared European security challenge.

A related body of literature examines how states exercise leadership within international institutions. It argues that even actors without significant material power can shape outcomes through coalition-building, mediation, and the ability to provide ideas and strategic direction (R.Young, 1991). This distinction is particularly relevant in the case of Spain. Even though Spain doesn't possess the economic or military weight of the EU's largest member states, it can still exert influence by acting as a bridge-builder among partners and by providing expertise on issues related to the Southern Flank and the Sahel.

These perspectives suggest that the relationship between contribution and influence is not automatic. Operational engagement can create opportunities for influence, but those opportunities only translate into political leverage when they are accompanied by a clear strategy and effective coalition-building. This framework therefore supports the central argument of the thesis: Spain's long-term influence within European security governance will depend not only on its presence in the Sahel, but also on its ability to shape debates, build partnerships, and provide strategic direction within the European Union.

2.1 Methodology

2.1.1 Case-study

This thesis adopts a qualitative, theory-driven single-case study design aimed at explaining how the post-2020 transformation of the central Sahel's security order has shaped Spain's security posture and its influence within European Union security governance. Instead of merely describing Spain's foreign policy behavior, the study seeks to analyze the causal and interpretive processes linking forward security engagement to institutional influence accumulation.

Research design constitutes the logical structure that connects theoretical propositions, research questions, data collection strategies, and analytical procedures (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019). The present study is structured as an explanatory single-case design, with Spain's security engagement in the central Sahel as the unit of analysis. Case study designs are particularly appropriate when the objective is to explore mechanisms in depth rather than to produce statistical generalizations (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019). The selection of Spain is justified by its structurally exposed position relative to the Sahel while simultaneously operating within EU security structures, making it analytically suitable for examining the interaction between national security engagement and supranational influence.

The case is defined in space and time to ensure analytical tractability. In terms of space, "the Sahel" is restricted to the central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), the three states that experienced the 2020–2023 wave of coups and formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Temporally, the case spans from 2020 to 2026: 2020 marks the first Malian coup and the onset of the regional rupture, while the analysis extends to the most recent data available at the time of writing (early 2026).

Epistemologically, the thesis is situated within an interpretivist framework while remaining informed by theory-driven explanatory reasoning. Interpretivist qualitative research emphasizes the analysis of meaning-making, institutional behavior, and contextual interpretation rather than the measurement of strictly quantifiable variables (J. Taylor, Bogdan, & L. DeVault, 2015). Core concepts of this thesis "influence," "credibility," and "strategic autonomy" are not directly observable or reducible to numerical values, they require contextual, discursive, and interpretive examination. Accordingly, where quantitative indicators are employed below, they serve to establish the empirical context.

To structure the analysis, the thesis specifies one independent and one dependent variable.

The independent variable is the post-2020 transformation of the central Sahel's security order, operationalized as the combination of Western/European military withdrawal and the expansion of Russian hybrid influence. The dependent variable is Spain's strategic response, operationalized along two dimensions:

- a) its discursive-strategic framing of the Sahel, how official strategy names threats, actors, and the autonomy agenda.

b) its operational-institutional positioning within EU security governance.

Following the principle that abstract concepts can be analyzed through observable indicators (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019) the thesis tracks four indicators consistently across the empirical analysis.

Table 1 Case-study variables and indicators

Indicator	Definition	Data sources
Russian disinformation operations	Volume and AES-targeting of Russian-linked influence campaigns in the central Sahel	Africa Center for Strategic Studies; African Digital Democracy Observatory
Political violence and civilian fatalities	Annual fatalities from political and one-sided violence in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	ACLED; Global Terrorism Index
Strategic framing in Spain's policy discourse	How Spain constructs the Sahel, Russia, hybrid threats, and strategic autonomy across strategy documents	EAE 2025–2028; Estrategia España-África 2025–2028
Spain's operational / institutional engagement	Spain's security commitments to the region and to EU/CSDP frameworks	EEAS CSDP mission factsheets; Spanish MAEC and Defense records; EUTM/EUCAP/GAR-SI reporting

Source: self-made

2.1.2 Literature Review

The literature review constitutes the first methodological pillar of this research. In political science, a literature review is not a descriptive summary but a structured and critical engagement with existing scholarship. It is defined as the systematic identification, evaluation, and synthesis of scholar work in order to contextualize a research question within ongoing theoretical debates (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019).

Importantly, literature reviews must move beyond summary to identify disagreements, theoretical tensions, and unresolved questions (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019). Qualitative research methodology further stresses how literature review constructs the analytical lens through which empirical data are interpreted (J. Taylor, Bogdan, & L. DeVault, 2015).

In this thesis, the literature review fulfills this analytical function by:

- Engaging with debates between structural and offensive realism;
- Tracing the evolution of European strategic autonomy;
- Examining academic documents on EU and Spanish engagement in the Sahel.

Through comparative synthesis, the review identifies a gap in the literature: while substantial research exists on European strategic autonomy and EU missions in the Sahel, there is limited analytical integration of middle-power (Spain) engagement as a mechanism of influence accumulation within EU governance structures.

2.1.3 Semi-Structured Interview

A central qualitative instrument employed in this thesis is the semi-structured interview. Interviews are particularly appropriate when the objective is to understand strategic reasoning, institutional dynamics, and interpretive frameworks. Semi-structured interviews follow a set of key topics but allow flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore complex issues in depth while keeping the discussion focused (J. Taylor, Bogdan, & L. DeVault, 2015). Unlike structured interviews, which prioritize standardization, semi-structured interviews allow for probing and clarification, enabling the researcher to capture nuanced interpretations of security dynamics and institutional positioning.

In this thesis, a semi-structured interview is conducted with Emna Memmi, a specialist in Middle East studies and geopolitics, with advanced academic training in Diplomacy and International Relations, as well as International Relations and African Studies. Her academic profile and research expertise make her a particularly relevant interlocutor for three main reasons:

First, the Sahel can't be understood in isolation from broader geopolitical transformations affecting North Africa, the Mediterranean, and adjacent regions. Emna Memmi's background in African Studies provides regional expertise that situates Spain's engagement within a broader transregional security context. In addition, her knowledge about MENA countries allows for a comprehensive analysis of the security dynamics in the Sahel region regarding terrorism.

Second, as a scholar of geopolitics and defense, she is positioned to interpret Spain's strategic behavior not merely as development assistance or crisis management, but as embedded within power competition and evolving European defense debates.

Third, her expertise in diplomacy allows for reflection on how influence operates within institutional frameworks such as the European Union, addressing the second dimension of the research question.

The interview is designed to explore interpretive and strategic dimensions that can't be fully captured through document analysis alone. The thematic structure of the interview aligns with the theoretical framework developed and includes the following analytical dimensions:

- Spain's strategic threats and opportunities in the Sahel
- The perception of hybrid threats and their implications for European security
- The relationship between national engagement and European strategic autonomy
- The mechanisms through which security contribution may translate into influence within EU governance.

The semi-structured format allows these topics to be explored, and it provides space for elaboration, contestation, or unexpected insights. This flexibility is essential in elite interviews, where rigid question formats may constrain the emergence of valuable analytical nuance (J. Taylor, Bogdan, & L. DeVault, 2015).

Methodologically, the interview contributes to interpretive triangulation. The literature review establishes theoretical expectations, and the document analysis examines institutional framing, however, the interview introduces an expert perspective which will either corroborate or challenge theoretical assumptions. This strengthens research validity by reducing dependence on a few sources of evidence (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019).

It is important to take into account that the purpose of the interview is not to generalize from one respondent to the broader policymaking community. It aims to provide an informed expert assessment that enhances analytical depth. Within qualitative research studies, depth of insight is prioritized over statistical representativeness (J. Taylor, Bogdan, & L. DeVault, 2015).

In conclusion, the semi-structured interview constitutes a theoretically aligned and methodologically justified component of the research design. It allows direct engagement with expert interpretations of Spain's Sahel engagement, hybrid threat dynamics, and strategic autonomy debates, thus strengthening the explanatory capacity of the thesis.

2.1.4 Secondary Data Analysis

The third methodological component is qualitative secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis refers to the systematic use of existing materials, such as official reports, mission records, and policy documents, to address research questions. In political science research, such materials provide empirical grounding when direct access to decision-makers is limited (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019).

Conceptual measurement in qualitative research does not necessarily require numerical quantification. Johnson et al. emphasize that abstract concepts can be measured through observable indicators (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019).

Accordingly, this thesis operationalizes strategic autonomy through qualitative indicators such as Spain's:

- Participation levels in EU missions
- Leadership roles in CSDP operations
- Alignment with autonomy discourse
- Policy positioning within European security debates.

2.1.5 Document Analysis

The final methodological pillar is textual analysis of Spain's National Security Strategy 2025- 2028. Qualitative research defines textual analysis as the systematic examination of documents to identify recurring themes, patterns, and categories (Buttolph Johnson, D. Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019). Strategic documents are not neutral descriptions, they can reflect institutional priorities, threat perceptions, and strategic self-understandings.

The decision to analyze two documents rather than one responds to the structure of the research question itself, which links Spain's southern security to its influence within European governance. The EAE operates at the level of Spain's general foreign and security posture, defining the country's overarching strategic priorities, its threat hierarchy, and its positioning within the European Union and the wider international

order. The *Estrategia España-África 2025–2028*, presented by the Government in December 2024 under the subtitle "Trabajando juntos a través de una relación estratégica," is the sectoral and regional framework that articulates Spain's relations with the African continent. It is thus the document in which the Sahel is most directly named, contextualised, and operationalised as a policy space.

However, this thesis moves beyond descriptive textual analysis and adopts interpretive policy analysis orientation. While traditional approaches focus on identifying optimal solutions and mainstream approaches emphasize actor interaction and political processes, interpretive approaches examine how policy problems are framed and socially constructed. In interpretive policy analysis, policy documents are understood not merely as outputs of decision-making but as discursive instruments that shape political reality (Browne, Coffey, Cook, Meiklejohn, & Palermo, 2019).

Strategic documents such as national security strategies define threats, articulate national priorities and signal intentions to both domestic and international stakeholders. This perspective is particularly relevant to this thesis' research question, which examines how Spain's engagement in the Sahel is connected to both security safeguarding and influence accumulation within the European Union. The focus is not simply on what policies are announced, but on how the Sahel is represented as a security space, how threats are categorized, and how European cooperation is framed within Spain's strategic self-understanding.

This thesis will follow several analytical steps to analyze the EAE 2025–2028 and the *Estrategia España-África 2025–2028*, consistent with qualitative research methodology.

First, both documents are read holistically to identify their main narrative structures, with particular attention to representations of the Sahel as a security space, references to hybrid threats, constructions of European cooperation and autonomy, and signals of influence ambitions within EU governance structures.

Second, thematic coding is conducted across both texts to identify recurring references to the Sahel, hybrid threats, European strategic autonomy, and Spain's role within EU security frameworks, allowing patterns to be compared between the global strategy (EAE) and the regional strategy (*Estrategia España-África*). Third, the analysis examines the implicit assumptions embedded in the texts, including conceptions of

instability, sovereignty, partnership, and influence. Finally, the findings are interpreted in light of the theoretical framework, and changes and possible recommendations are appointed.

Through this analysis, this thesis will pay special attention to three interrelated dimensions across both documents:

The representation of the Sahel as a security space. The analysis will examine whether the Sahel is framed primarily as a source of terrorism, irregular migration, geopolitical competition, governance fragility, or hybrid instability, and whether the EAE and the Estrategia España-África converge or diverge in this framing. This is analytically significant because, as interpretive policy analysis suggests, the way a problem is constructed shapes the range of acceptable policy responses (Browne, Coffey, Cook, Meiklejohn, & Palermo, 2019).

Additionally, the analysis explores references to hybrid threats. Given that hybrid warfare blurs the boundaries between internal and external security, the presence or absence of hybrid threat language within the strategies reveals how Spanish policymakers conceptualize contemporary conflict. Identifying such language allows the researcher to assess whether Spain's strategic framing aligns with the hybrid warfare logic developed in the theoretical framework, and whether the regional document articulates this dimension more explicitly than the general one.

Lastly, the analysis investigates how European cooperation and strategic autonomy are articulated. References to the European Union, strategic autonomy, and collective defense are examined to determine whether they are framed as indicators of Spain's positioning within European security governance, paying particular attention to the Estrategia España-África's explicit ambition for Spain to play a greater role in shaping EU policy toward Africa, which it presents as a vehicle for advancing this positioning.

By linking discourse to institutional behavior, document analysis complements secondary data analysis. While secondary data may reveal Spain's participation in missions or diplomatic initiatives, discourse analysis reveals how these actions are justified, framed, and used within broader strategic narratives. Analyzing both the EAE and the Estrategia España-África ensures that this discursive layer is captured at both the global and the regional scale. As qualitative research methodology highlights, meaning and context are central to understanding political phenomena (J. Taylor, Bogdan, & L. DeVault, 2015).

Strategic documents provide indispensable insight into how states conceptualize their role in the international arena.

3. Empirical analysis

This chapter operationalizes the research design set out in Chapter 2 by asking the following question: do observable changes in the regional security environment between 2020 and 2026 (the independent variable) correspond to observable changes in Spain's strategic behavior (the dependent variable). To answer it, the analysis is organized around the four indicators specified in Table 1, which are treated as analytical threads carried through every subsection. Two indicators capture the transformation of the security order itself: Russian disinformation operations (Indicator 1) and political violence and civilian fatalities (Indicator 2). Two capture Spain's response: its operational and institutional engagement (Indicator 3) and its strategic framing in policy discourse (Indicator 4). Accordingly, Section 3.1 traces Indicators 1 and 2 and reconstructs the environment to which Spain must react; Section 3.2 examines Indicator 3 through Spain's missions, deployments and partnerships, and Section 3.3 examines Indicator 4 through Spain's strategic documents.

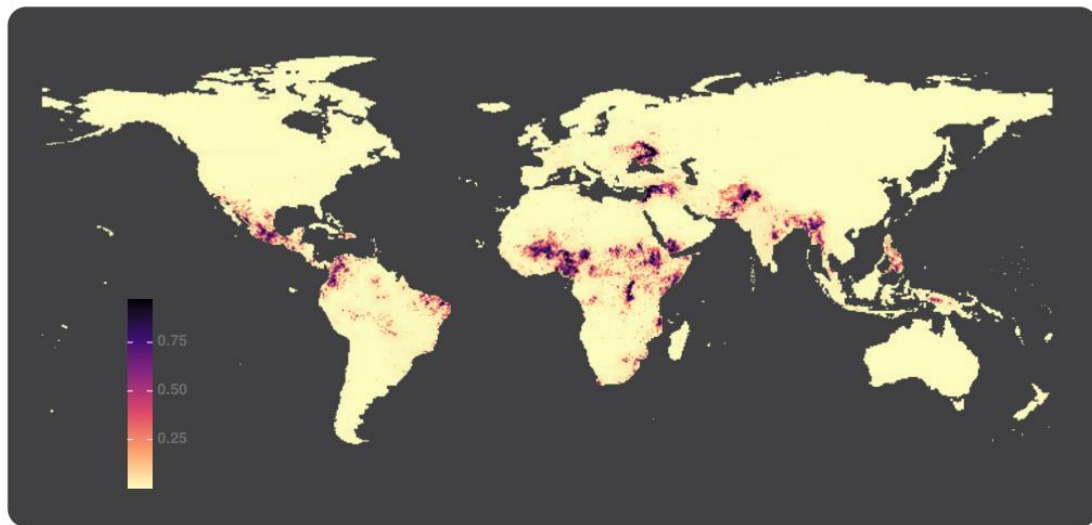
3.1 The Sahel as Spain's Southern Strategic Environment

The Sahel's modern configuration is the product of post-colonial state formation, the states of the Sahel central, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, emerged in the 1960s as fragile, multi-ethnic populations and economies built around extractive rents and subsistence agriculture. The limits of state intervention into rural peripheries created what scholars of African politics have called "neo-sovereigntist discourse". This refers to a territory nominally controlled by the capital but, in practice, governed by traditional authorities, criminal networks and armed insurgents (Driessen Cormenzana & Fernández Rodríguez, 2026)

The contemporary security crisis is conventionally dated to 2012, when the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya sent flows of weapons and fighters southward, igniting insurgency in northern Mali. The Malian state's loss of control over the north triggered France's Operation Serval (2013) and subsequently Operation Barkhane (2014–2022), as well as the deployment of MINUSMA, the United Nations stabilization mission. For nearly a decade, the Sahel was governed by a dense layer of Western-led security architecture including French counter-terrorism operations, EU

training missions (EUTM Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUCAP Sahel Niger), the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and bilateral assistance programs. However, jihadist violence intensified, and, at present, the region is described as a notable conflict hotspot (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). The most recent Global Terrorism Index reports that the Sahel accounted for 51% of all terrorism-related deaths globally in 2024, with five of the ten countries most affected by terrorism located in the region (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025).

Figure 1: Likelihood of violent conflict in 2025-2026



Source: Institute for Economics and Peace

The cumulative effect of insecurity, governance failure and growing anti-French sentiment generated a political opening that was exploited by Sahelian militaries. Between 2020 and 2023, successive coups brought juntas to power in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023). In each case, the new authorities legitimized themselves through a neo-sovereigntist discourse, presenting themselves guarantors of peace, prosperity and dignity against neo-colonial interference (Driessen Cormenzana & Fernández Rodríguez, 2026). The rupture became institutional in September 2023 with the signing of the Liptako-Gourma Charter, which established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This became irreversible in January 2025 when Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formally withdrew from ECOWAS, fracturing the West African institutional architecture for the first time since the Cold War.

The record of jihadist expansion underscores the gravity of this institutional rupture. In 2024, Burkina Faso accounted for one-fifth of all global terrorism deaths,

Niger experienced a 94% increase in terrorism deaths, the largest annual rise recorded worldwide; and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province have expanded operations both within central Sahel toward the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025).

3.1.1 Case description: The Western withdrawal and the Russian influence.

From a strict offensive realist perspective, the Sahel functions as a textbook case of a regional power vacuum. As France progressively withdrew Barkhane, MINUSMA closed in 2023 at the request of the Malian junta, and EUTM Mali and EUCAP missions were suspended or scaled back, the security architecture that had protected Western interests for a decade dissolved. In classical realist terms, no vacuum of power remains unfilled. Russia, operating with a deliberately ambiguous mix of state and non-state instruments, moved decisively to occupy the space left by Western powers.

The Wagner Group, restructured into Africa Corps, deployed mercenaries to Mali from late 2021, replacing French forces in counter-insurgency operations and securing privileged access to extractive industries, especially gold mining (Driessen Cormenzana & Fernández Rodríguez, 2026). In Burkina Faso, Africa Corps personnel were reported in early 2024, while Niger expelled the last French troops in late 2023 and signed military cooperation agreements with Moscow shortly after. However, this doesn't follow the structure of conventional military expansion, it exhibits all the defining attributes of hybrid warfare: integrated use of paramilitary force, information operations, economic capture and political subversion, calibrated to remain below the threshold of formal confrontation with Western powers.

Between December 2021 and June 2023, 298 political-violence events were recorded involving the group, making it the fourth most active armed actor in the country, behind only JNIM, Islamic State Sahel Province and the Malian Armed Forces (Serwat, Gurcov, & Nsaibia, 2023)

The information dimension is particularly revealing. Russian state-affiliated outlets, a wide network of Telegram channels, and proxy media have systematically expanded anti-French and anti-Western narratives across the Sahel, actively promoting the AES as a model of liberated African governance. According to the Africa Center for

Strategic Studies, documented disinformation campaigns across Africa quadrupled between 2022 and 2024, with Russia as the single largest state sponsor, and West Africa as the most targeted region (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Figure 2 Regional Map of Disinformation in Africa, 2024



Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies

The most representative examples of this hybrid approach in the Sahel include:

- **Military-informational sequencing.** The appearance of Russian flags and pro-Moscow demonstrations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger systematically coincided with the signing of military cooperation agreements with Moscow, revealing a coordinated pattern (Peluchon, 2024).
- **The “ghost reporter” networks.** Investigative reporting uncovered an influence operation that made up non-existent journalists, creating fake personas from the

identities and photographs of deceased individuals, to write anti-French and pro-Russian articles subsequently placed, often as paid content, in media outlets across more than a dozen West and Central African countries (Rtizen, 2025)

- **Capture of local media.** Following the coups, the expulsion of foreign correspondents and the banning of international outlets created an information vacuum filled by pro-Russian content. Russian-linked structures, including the African Initiative agency (Peluchon, 2024), which features several anti-French and pro-Russian articles, with statements like the following: “the media, especially the French media, started this PR campaign to show that everything is bad in Mali.” (Bespalova, 2026). In addition, it has also been extended to social media, for example, in Senegal an anti-government demonstration in Senegal on 2025 was framed by a network of Facebook accounts claiming Pan-Africanism and that Faye, the president, was a “puppet of the Élysée” (African Digital Democracy Observatory, 2025).
- **Anti-colonial and sovereigntist narrative framing.** Across the region, Russian messaging has strategically appropriated the language of anti-colonialism and national sovereignty, positioning Moscow as a partner of liberation against a supposedly neo-colonial France and EU (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2025). This can be observed, for example, in press conferences, where the foreign affairs Russian minister Sergei Lavrov, has often highlighted Russian and Chinese support for African “economic independence” and to “help Africans take their own destiny, their countries, economies into their own hands” (Matulyan, 2026).

The evidence assembled above describes a trajectory rather than a static condition for Indicator 1 (Russian disinformation operations). Between 2022 and 2024 the volume of documented Russian-linked influence campaigns across Africa quadrupled, with West Africa and the central Sahel the single most heavily targeted theatre (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). The qualitative character of the campaigns escalated as well, from opportunistic flag-waving and staged demonstrations to institutionalized structures such as the African Initiative agency and the fabricated “ghost reporter” networks that placed pro-Russian content across more than a dozen states. The indicator therefore shows a maturing influence on architecture whose purpose is to raise the political cost of Western

re-engagement to an impossible level. This is precisely the operational signature that Hybrid Warfare theory anticipates: the accumulation of strategic advantage below the threshold of attributable confrontation (Mumford & Carlucci, 2022)

At the same time, the consequences for Sahelian populations have been severe and quantifiably dramatic. The juntas' security strategy, frequently implemented with Africa Corps support, has been associated with widespread human rights violations, including the Moura massacre of March 2022 in which Malian forces and Wagner mercenaries reportedly killed between 400 and 500 civilians (United Nations News, 2023). According to ACLED data, the lethality of political violence in the central Sahel rose from a monthly average of 3.9 in 2023 to 4.4 in 2024, while reported fatalities from the deliberate targeting of civilians increased from roughly 2,520 in the second half of 2023 to over 3,000 in the first half of 2024 (ACLED, 2024). The UNHCR reported that internal displacement in Burkina Faso alone surpassed 2.1 million people by the end of 2024, facing a deepening humanitarian crisis (UNHCR, n.d.).

Figure 3 Fatalities from civilian targeting in the Sahel

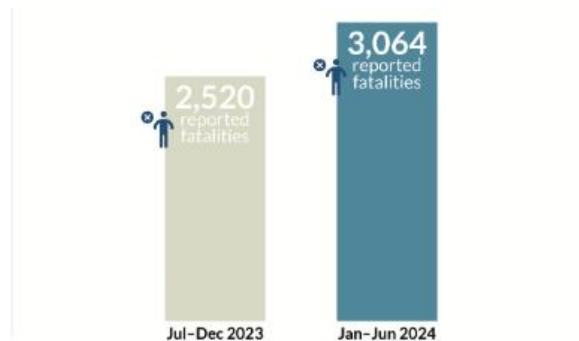
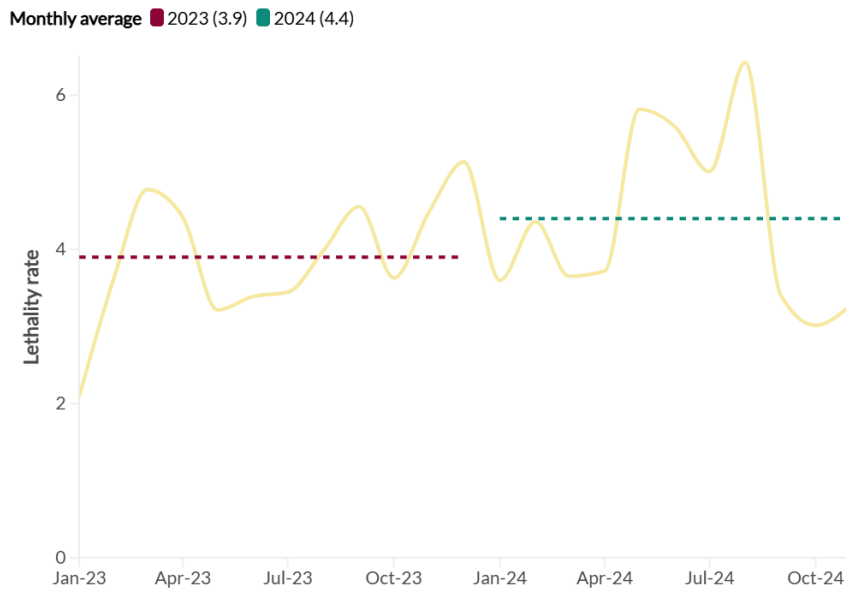


Figure 4 Source: ACLED

Figure 5: Lethality of political violence in central Sahel

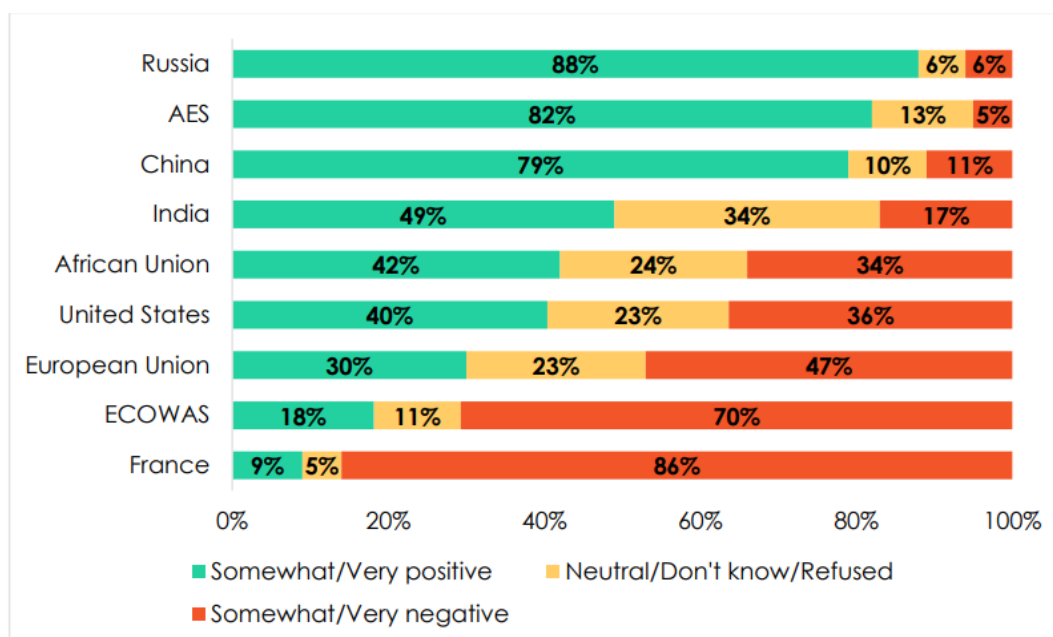


Source: ACLED

In addition, both terrorist groups JNIM and ISSP launched kidnapping campaigns targeting foreigners, reaching record-high instances of kidnapping in Mali and Niger, as part of their economic warfare strategy (ACLED, 2025). The Global Terrorism Index situates these figures within a wider regional collapse, with the Sahel accounting for more than half of all global terrorism deaths in 2024, Burkina Faso alone for roughly a fifth, and Niger recording the largest annual increase registered anywhere in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025).

These material consequences have unfolded together with a shift in popular attitudes. Data reveal that Russian propaganda campaigns have achieved a demonstrable degree of success in reshaping perceptions of Western actors, especially in the coup-affected states. In Mali, 88% of respondents describe Russia’s economic and political influence as “somewhat positive” or “very positive”. In contrast, France receives a positive assessment from only 9% of Malian respondents, ECOWAS from 18%, and the European Union from 30% (AfroBarometer, 2025).

Figure 6 Influence of foreign powers in Mali 2024



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on Mali is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Source: AfroBarometer

The continental picture differs, placing Russia last among all major external actors, with only 36% of African respondents rate Russia's influence as positive. The survey also notes that Burkina Faso and Niger, the two countries with the most substantial Africa Corps presence, could not be fully surveyed: Niger's government authorities refused to allow it, which is an indirect indicator of the depth of the democratic and civil-liberties regression underway in the AES states. However, it also demonstrates the loss of European influence, placing China at first place of influence in Africa (Ghambi, Kwadzo Torsu, & Logan, 2026).

Indicator 2 (political violence and civilian fatalities) traces the same upward path as Indicator 1, but its evolution between 2020 and 2026 is the most revealing of the two, because it measures the human cost of the security transition itself. In the baseline year of 2020, when the first Malian coup took place, the central Sahel was already deteriorating under the Western-led architecture. From late 2021, as Africa Corps replaced French forces, the deliberate targeting of civilians became the dominant modality of violence.

Taken together, the figures presented above describe a structural escalation whose curve goes upward precisely as the Russian-backed model consolidates. The indicator shows no inflection toward stabilization through 2025 and into 2026. JNIM and Islamic

State Sahel Province have continued to expand both within the central Sahel and toward the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea, even as the juntas' dependence on Africa Corps has deepened. The evolution of Indicator 2 between 2020 and 2026 therefore yields the central finding for the independent variable: the post-2020 reconfiguration did not substitute one functioning security model for another.

Through the lens of offensive realism, this produces an undeniable strategic implication for Spain. The Sahel is now a contested geopolitical space in which a revisionist power (Russia) is actively constructing zones of influence on Europe's southern flank, as terrorism threats increase in the region. Spain, as the EU member state most directly exposed to security threats, has both the strongest structural incentives and the clearest opportunity to translate this exposure into strategic influence within EU security governance.

3.2 Spain's Current Engagement in the Sahel

The following section turns to Indicator 3 (Spain's operational and institutional engagement), the second component of the dependent variable. This section examines what Spain does, through the missions it sustains, the deployments it commits, the partnerships it builds, and the institutional frameworks through which it channels them. It follows the guiding question of whether the configuration of Spain's engagement shifted with the transformation of the regional order traced in Section 3.1, and what the direction of that shift reveals about Spain's strategic posture.

As established in Chapter 1, the country occupies a structurally exposed position relative to the Sahel: its southern frontier in Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands is directly sensitive to instability-driven migration, two of its principal energy suppliers lie on the region's edge, and the jihadist violence captured by Indicator 2 is expanding toward the Atlantic coast from which routes to Spain originate. This exposure generates both the strongest structural incentive among EU member states to act and a clear opportunity to convert that exposure into institutional influence, that isn't being exploited (Memmi, 2026).

3.2.1 The dismantling of the central-Sahel mission architecture (2020–2026)

At the start of the case period, Spain was one of the principal European contributors to a decade-old security architecture in the central Sahel, channeled almost entirely through EU and French frameworks. Its flagship military contribution was the Destacamento Aéreo Táctico “Marfil”, an air detachment created in January 2013 that provided tactical and logistical air transport in support of French counter-terrorism operations and the EU training effort. The main goal of this mission was to keep an air bridge between Bamako and other airports in the operation zone for the transport of AFISMA (African-led Force in Support to Mali) troops and resources (Estado Mayor de la Defensa, 2023).

In addition, Spain joined the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) in 2013. EUTM Mali provided the Malian Armed Forces with military training and advisory support on command structures, logistics, and human resources management, as well as guidance on international humanitarian law (Estado Mayor de la Defensa, n.d.). Spain was, for much of the mission’s life, the largest European troop contributor (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025).

Spain also participated in the European Union Capacity Building Mission Sahel (EUCAP) in both Niger and Mali. EUCAP Niger was established in 2012 to strengthen Niger’s internal security sector and its capacity to combat significant security threats (European Gendarmerie Force, n.d.). EUCAP Mali was established to support the implementation of the Malian government's security sector reform by providing strategic guidance, supporting capacity-building and infrastructure projects (European Union External Action, 2025).

A third instrument operated at the law-enforcement level, the GAR-SI Sahel project (Grupos de Acción Rápida – Vigilancia e Intervención en el Sahel), an EU-funded initiative led by the Guardia Civil and managed by the FIAP, that started in 2017, focused on police training, specifically for African gendarmes. Spain’s Guardia Civil played a prominent role in exporting security expertise across the G5 Sahel states. Despite its focus on technical training, the project was subject to EU conditionality regarding human rights and democratic standards. For example, the European Union denied a request from Chad for additional GAR-SI units because the country did not meet the required democratic

and human rights benchmarks (Gogny & De Castro, International Critical Thought, 2025).

Figure 7 International Operations and Missions for Peace and Security in the Western Sahel as of 2021



Source: Spanish National Security Department

The western-led architecture began to fracture as the security order transformed. After Wagner's deployment to Mali in late 2021, the EU suspended the operational training of Malian units in April 2022, limiting EUTM Mali to non-operational tasks. It was at this point that Spain assumed its most visible institutional role by taking command of EUTM Mali, holding the post until the mission's closure (Estado Mayor de la Defensa, n.d.). That same month, the EU established the EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger (EUMPM Niger) at the request of the then-Nigerien authorities. Its goal was to improve the capacity of Niger's Armed Forces to contain the terrorist threat, protect the country's population, and ensure a secure environment in accordance with human rights law and international humanitarian law (Consejo de la Union Europea, 2024).

It was 2023 that marked the decisive rupture. The July coup in Niger removed the last Western-aligned government in the central Sahel, after the establishment of AES MINUSMA fully withdrew from Mali. On 4 December 2023 the Nigerien junta terminated the legal basis for both EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUMPM Niger (Council of

the European Union, 2024). Nonetheless, Spain launched the third phase of its flagship law-enforcement project: GARS I 3, running from December 2023 to September 2026 with EU financing of 10.85€ million. However, it has reoriented away from the AES core to Mauritania and Senegal (FIAP, n.d.)

In 2024, EU member states agreed not to extend EUTM Mali, and the mission ended on May 18th after eleven years. Its last contingent was mostly made of Spanish personnel under Spanish command (Estado Mayor de la Defensa, n.d.). On May 27th the Council formally confirmed that EUMPM Niger would not be extended beyond June 2024, and both civilian (EUCAP) and military missions in Niger closed (Council of the European Union, 2024). The downstream effect on Spain's participation was immediate, citing the closure of EUTM Mali, the Spanish Air and Space Force carried out a partial withdrawal of Destacamento Marfil's personnel to optimize resources (Estado Mayor de la Defensa, 2024).

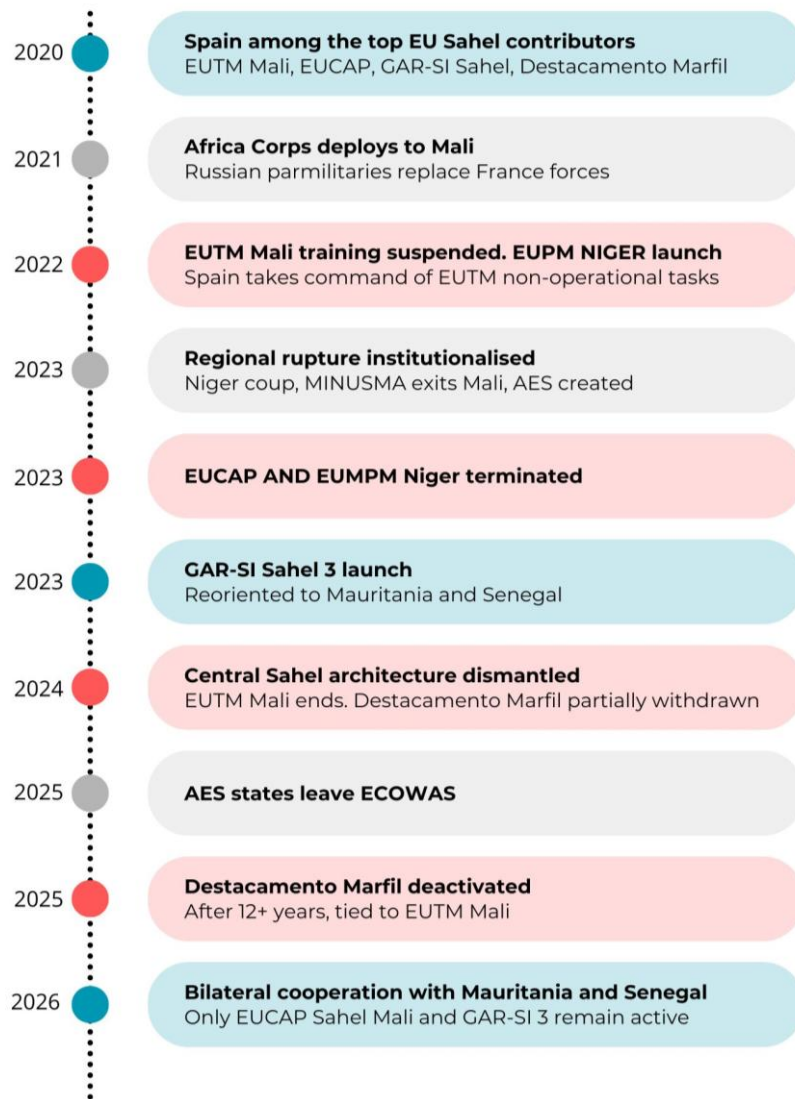
In January 2025, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formally withdrew from ECOWAS. On June 21st, 2025, after more than twelve years of continuous presence, over fifteen thousand flight hours and operations across nineteen countries, the Destacamento Marfil was officially deactivated. Spanish military authorities attributed the closure directly to the end of EUTM Mali and the broader French withdrawal from the Sahel (Estado Mayor de la Defensa, 2025)

As of 2026, Spain has redistributed its engagement to the coastal periphery and the maritime domain. The reorientation of the GAR-SI project followed this logic: its third phase concentrated on establishing a second rapid-action unit in Senegal and a third in Mauritania, and in February 2026 ambassadors from several EU member states (including Spain's) visited the project in Mauritania (FIAP, 2026). The single instrument Spain kept inside the central Sahel is its modest civilian contribution to EUCAP Sahel Mali, whose mandate was extended until January 2027 and in which Spain maintains four personnel supporting Malian security-sector reform (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025).

Bilaterally, Spain has sustained and increased its Cooperative Security Activities, the framework of military training and advice it has maintained with Senegal since 2014. During 2025 these activities included combat-medicine and special-operations training for the Senegalese armed forces, sniper and urban-combat instruction in Cape Verde, and

commando training in Mauritania. All of them were conducted at the host states' request and all in countries that, unlike the AES, had not expelled European partners (Estado Mayor de la Defensa, 2025).

Figure 8 Spanish Sahel engagement timeline 2020-2026



Source: Self-made

In terms of diplomatic relationships, Spain used its commitment to the region to advance recognition of the “Southern Flank” as a core Atlantic-Alliance concern, an effort that was institutionally seen at the 2022 NATO Madrid Summit, where instability in the Sahel was explicitly incorporated into the Alliance’s Strategic Concept in the following way (NATO, 2022):

“Conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East directly affect our security and the security of our partners. NATO’s southern neighborhood, particularly

the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions, faces interconnected security, demographic, economic and political challenges. This situation provides fertile ground for the proliferation of non-state armed groups, including terrorist organizations. It also enables destabilizing and coercive interference by strategic competitors.”

Moreover, at the EU Foreign Affairs Council of 20 November 2025, the Spanish minister José Manuel Albares argued that the Union should recover its presence and missions in the Sahel, recalling that Spain had once been among the most militarily present European states in the region and committing Spain to support any renewed European mission. He drew an explicit distinction between the military juntas, “with which the relationship is much more difficult,” and the region’s thriving democracies such as Mauritania as a partner demonstrating that results were possible in difficult circumstances (EuroEFE, 2025).

Analyzing the dependent variable, Spain’s response to the transformation of the security order was neither a reinforcement nor a recalibration but a withdrawal, executed as a reaction of the disappearance of European presence. The clearest definition of Indicator 3 over the period is contraction. It followed a contrary path to Indicator 1 and 2, showcasing a clear decrease due to the European withdrawal and Spanish shift to the West. The logic of Spain’s shift is consistent with Offensive Realism’s self-help premise, as the EU was denied access to the central states, Spain preserved autonomous operational capacity by relocating it where it could continue to accumulate relationships and credibility. However, it doesn’t confront the source of the transformation, the disinformation and paramilitary penetration captured by Indicators 1 and 2 inside the AES states, leaving the core driver of regional change unaddressed.

3.3 Framing the Sahel

This section addresses Indicator 4 (the strategic framing of the Sahel in Spain’s policy discourse) and the discursive-strategic dimension of the dependent variable. After reconstructing the security environment Spain confronts and a timeline of its military and diplomatic engagement, the analysis of the following section shows how that environment is represented in Spain’s own strategic documents regarding future actions. It aims to analyze how the Sahel is constructed as a security space, whether the external competitors operating in it are acknowledged, and how Spain articulates its own role and leadership

ambitions within EU security governance. Two documents adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation are observed: the Estrategia de Acción Exterior (EAE) 2025–2028 and Estrategia España–África 2025–2028.

The “Estrategia de Acción Exterior” (EAE) 2025–2028, adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation in 2025, constitutes the principal strategic document guiding Spanish foreign policy. The EAE 2025–2028 explicitly incorporates the Sahel into the architecture of Spain's strategic outlook.

The document opens with the acknowledgement that "violence has escalated throughout our strategic environment, from the Sahel to the Middle East" and identifies the region as one in which "instability may worsen during the period covered by this Strategy, with direct implications for Spain and the rest of Europe". The Sahel is explicitly recognized as the area with "the world's highest concentration of terrorist attacks" and as a space encompassing "key energy suppliers for Spain, such as Nigeria and Algeria.", which represents an upgrading of the region's status (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025).

Nevertheless, the Sahel is introduced primarily as a source of risk than as a strategic arena in which competing powers are actively contesting influence. The document acknowledges, in general terms, that the EU faces "the weaponization of interdependence," (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025) but these structural observations are not applied to the Sahelian context. There is no explicit naming of Russia as a strategic competitor in the region, no mention of Africa Corps, no reference to the Alliance of Sahel States, and no analytical engagement with the geopolitical implications of the juntas' realignment with Moscow. This omission is analytically significant. From an offensive-realist perspective, a strategic document that identifies a region as central to national security but refuses to name the competitors operating in that region, may be strategic illegibility: the threat environment is acknowledged in its consequences but not in its causes. It identifies West Africa and the Sahel as priority subregions and acknowledges the displacement of Western influence by other external actors. However, the language remains carefully neutral, Russia is alluded to through references to "other international actors" and "new players," never as a strategic adversary.

The most significant analytical gap in the EAE 2025–2028 may be the conceptualization of hybrid threats. The document engages with hybrid warfare concept in two ways. First, when discussing European Strategic Autonomy, it states that "European autonomy must necessarily be based on a comprehensive concept of security, which must encompass traditional defense domains as well as threats ranging from terrorism to hybrid attacks and coercion, economic security, civil protection" (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025). Additionally, in the section on democratic resilience, it acknowledges that "the stability of our democracies has become yet another terrain for geopolitical contest, exposed to destabilization strategies and even foreign interference," and that "algorithmic biases, the rise of disinformation, and the spread of hate speech are direct threats to social cohesion, making us more vulnerable to radicalization and foreign interference" (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025).

However, these passages treat hybrid threats almost exclusively as a domestic European concern. The hybrid dimension of the Sahel, Russian information operations, paramilitary deployments and economic coercion, receives no explicit mention. The asymmetry is particularly visible when contrasted with the EAE 2025–2028's treatment of the war in Ukraine, where hybrid dimensions are explicitly mentioned. The implicit assumption appears to be that hybrid warfare requires a European target. The Sahel, framed primarily as a source of conventional risk (terrorism, migration), is excluded from the hybrid category.

Regarding European Strategic Autonomy, the document repeatedly affirms that "Europe's open strategic autonomy must be based on a comprehensive approach to security,". Spain explicitly commits to making "a significant contribution to EU missions, particularly across our strategic environment, including the Mediterranean, the Sahel, and the Gulf of Guinea, as well as the Horn of Africa, and the Indian Ocean." (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025). Yet, the document is not precise about how Spain proposes to translate this commitment into mechanisms of influence accumulation within EU security governance. The theoretical framework of this thesis argues that influence accumulation operates through three principal channels: shaping the conceptual frameworks within which EU strategy is formulated; providing operational contributions to CSDP missions that align with one's preferred strategic agenda; and constructing coalitions of member states willing to push collective policy in

directions favorable to one's interests. The EAE 2025–2028 doesn't propose a distinctive Spanish strategy for the Sahel that could serve as a focal point for European debate.

Moreover, Spain's strategy affirms that "Spain and Europe must take greater responsibility for their own defense and contribute more significantly to shared security as security providers," and emphasizes that Spain's "extensive experience in cooperative security activities and CSDP missions and operations provides us with considerable added value" (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2025). However, the strategic document underplays two important tensions. First, much of Spain's engagement is mediated through EU instruments (EUTM Mali, GARSI Sahel, EUCAP missions) whose mandates and political viability are increasingly more difficult following the AES rupture. The document does not address how Spain proposes to adapt its security-provider role to an environment in which the partner states have actively expelled European missions. Second, the document's emphasis on Spain as a security provider contrasts with its parallel commitment to a "human-centered, rights-based approach" and to multilateralism and international law. In a region where the most influential security partner is now the Africa Corps and where Spain's potential interlocutors are authoritarian juntas, the security-provider role cannot easily be reconciled with the normative framing without explicit strategic adjustment. This calls for more flexible alliances, in which Spain serves as the middleman between partners with very different human rights approaches, the EU and Russia (Memmi, 2026).

The sectoral Estrategia España - África 2025–2028 complements the EAE and provides a second reading for Indicator 4. In the document, the Sahel is portrayed as the area where the continent's gravest challenges are concentrated and with the greatest intensity: terrorism, criminal and trafficking networks, coups d'état and climate fragility, combined with by increasing migratory pressure toward Spain and Europe. As in the EAE, the dominant focus is humanitarian crisis rather than of a contested geopolitical arena.

Compared to the EAE, this document is more explicit about naming the competition, it states that the Sahel has become fertile ground for destabilizing narratives frequently fostered by external powers and, it identifies the central-Sahel states that formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as having prioritized their security ties with Russia and other actors (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación,

2024). However, even though it names Russia and the AES and registers the informational dimension of the threat, it still does not treat that informational and paramilitary penetration as a domain in which Spain must compete inside the Sahel.

At the institutional level, the strategy advocates strengthening Spain's diplomatic and administrative capacity towards West Africa and the Sahel, including the creation of a dedicated unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the reinforcement of regional cooperation structures. The document highlights the importance of supporting regional partners, focusing on Mauritania, which is portrayed as a key pillar of stability on Europe's southern flank. Spain also reiterates its commitment to European security and training missions, capacity-building programs, and regional security institutions. Beyond traditional security concerns, the strategy adopts a comprehensive approach linking stability to development, governance, humanitarian assistance, and climate resilience, understanding the Sahel as a multidimensional security environment.

On the second question (whether and how the document articulates Spanish leadership), the *Estrategia España - África* presents Spain as an EU member state willing to assume a greater role in orienting and executing the Union's policy toward Africa and to make better use of European instruments (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2024). It advances specific claims to existing leadership such as Spain's command of European capacity-building missions, the participation of its security forces in EU institutional-strengthening projects, and its presidency of the Sahel Alliance general assembly for three consecutive years (until 2023). The strategy commits Spain to make its interests and positions decisive in the formulation of EU policy toward the continent, to multiply Spanish position papers on African questions, and to place Spanish officials in the Brussels units and EU delegations that design and implement that policy. However, leadership remains articulated around the cooperation, development and littoral-stability agenda on which Spain already enjoys access and credibility, rather than contesting the Russian-backed order inside the AES core.

4. CONCLUSION

Between 2020 and 2026 the central Sahel became an arena of open geopolitical competition, in which a revisionist power has constructed zones of influence barely two thousand kilometers from Spanish territory. For the European Union member state most

directly exposed to terrorism, irregular migration and energy-supply vulnerabilities that radiate from that instability, the transformation is not a distant policy concern but a structural threat to its national security.

Understanding how Spain has responded to this changing environment required a framework capable of capturing both geopolitical competition and institutional dynamics. In order to do this, the thesis combined three theoretical concepts and tested them through a single-case study spanning 2020 to 2026. Offensive Realism theory supplied the external logic, explaining why a state confronting a regional power vacuum is structurally driven to occupy the space a rival would fill otherwise. The concept of Hybrid Warfare characterized the environment in which that competition unfolds, identifying the Sahel as a grey zone in which Russia operates below the threshold of traditional confrontation. Lastly, European Strategic Autonomy concept specified the mechanism by which a middle power like Spain converts sustained security contributions into agenda-setting influence within EU governance. The case study, aimed at analyzing Spain's security posture and its influence within European Union security governance regarding Central Sahel from 2020 to 2026, was examined against four indicators tracked across the period: Russian disinformation operations, political violence and civilian fatalities capturing the independent variable, and Spain's operational-institutional engagement and strategic framing capturing the dependent variable. These indicators were triangulated through document analysis, secondary data analysis and a semi-structured expert interview.

The indicators describe a process in which the regional environment was heavily transformed while Spain's response transformed only partially. The four indicators were selected because they capture the principal dimensions of the strategic environment examined in this study: informational influence, security conditions, local perceptions of external actors, and Spain's policy response. They provide a multidimensional picture of both the changing regional context and Spain's capacity to adapt to it. The two indicators measuring the independent variable move in the same direction and reinforce one another. Russian-linked disinformation across Africa quadrupled between 2022 and 2024 building durable influence architecture of fabricated personas, captured media and anti-colonial messaging. Over the same period, political violence and civilian fatalities reached record-high levels, the Sahel alone accounting for more than half of all global terrorism deaths in 2024. The accompanying shift in popular attitudes favoring Russia confirms that the contest is being lost in terms of legitimacy as much as on the ground.

Spain's response was adaptive in form but not in substance. As the EU-led mission architecture in the central Sahel was dismantled and the juntas expelled European forces, Spain did not reinforce its position but executed a retreat toward the Gulf of Guinea, the maritime domain, and a bilateral track with non-AES partners such as Senegal and Mauritania. This demonstrated its capacity to keep Spanish instruments engaged as the central frontier closed, however, it did not contest the source of the transformation in the region. The two dimensions that drove regional change, hybrid disinformation and Africa Corps-backed violence inside the AES, were met neither with a dedicated counter-capability nor with a doctrine for competing in the grey zone. In other words, Spain has been addressing the symptoms of the transformation while leaving its core causes untouched. As the expert interview highlighted, the binding constraint is not the quality of Spanish strategic thinking but its limited capacity to convert exposure into collective European action, a limitation rooted in the fact that the Sahel is not yet truly treated as a national priority (Memmi, 2026).

This thesis asked the following research question:

How can Spain's engagement in the Sahel simultaneously serve to safeguard its southern security and to enhance its strategic influence within the European security landscape?

The answer to the research question follows directly from this evidence. In principle, Spain's engagement can serve both objectives at once, because security provision and influence accumulation are not independent goals but expressions of a single strategic logic: by acting as the European Union's most committed southern security provider, Spain can make geographic exposure into institutional authority, safeguarding its territory plus earning the credibility on which agenda-setting influence depends.

In practice, however, Spain has kept the Southern Flank on the European and Atlantic agenda and has accumulated authentic operational credibility, but it has not translated that credibility into a recognized leadership position, and its contribution to the broader objective of European strategic autonomy has remained limited. Internally, by focusing on maintaining a presence rather than competing for political influence, Spain has become increasingly marginal in the very arena where the region's future is being determined and where the security threats most relevant to Spain are taking shape.

Externally, no Spanish leadership can succeed while the European Union still lacks the common response into which such leadership could be inserted. Thus, the conclusion is conditional: Spain's engagement can simultaneously safeguard its security and enhance its European influence, but only if it moves to a posture that confronts the competition it faces and contests it in the informational and grey-zone domains where influence is genuinely at stake.

Any forward-looking assessment in the European frame must begin with the recognition that the geopolitical context has changed fundamentally since European engagement in the Sahel began. The environment is no longer defined by post-conflict stabilization among consenting partners but by geopolitical competition and strategic fragmentation, in which a revisionist power actively constructs zones of influence on Europe's southern flank. In these conditions, the instruments that defined the previous era such as conditionality, normative influence, and capacity-building tied to democratic values have lost much of their leverage. The implication is not military intervention or unconditional cooperation with authoritarian juntas, neither of which would be consistent with the values that distinguish European engagement from its competitors. It requires flexible engagement: a strategic dialogue that coexists with the defense of European principles. Spain is highly well placed to practice it, because its proximity, its diplomatic tradition and its pragmatic, non-post-colonial posture make it the most plausible European actor to act as a bridge between the EU and AES (Memmi, 2026). That role is constrained by Spain's bilateral dependencies in the Maghreb and its relationship with Morocco, but complete disengagement would threaten European Strategic Autonomy in the long term and vacate the field to alternative actors.

Three priorities emerge for the coming decade. First, Spain should develop an exclusive Sahel strategy, making it a specific national priority and capable of shaping the European debate. Influence within EU governance stems not only from participation in missions but also from the ability to shape the ideas and frameworks that guide collective action. The recognition of the Southern Flank in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept provides Spain with an opportunity to advance this agenda at the next NATO Summit in Ankara. Spain can provide a high level of knowledge and understanding of the southern flank that not only serves its national priorities but enriches plurality in the transatlantic community. Second, Spain should invest in the informational and grey zone capabilities that remain underdeveloped in its current approach (Carnero, 2024). Without stronger tools in these

domains, European engagement will struggle to compete in the arena where regional power dynamics are increasingly being contested and reshaped. Lastly, Spain should translate its role as a bridge-builder into lasting coalitions with like-minded member states. Within the EU, influence is generated through coalition-building rather than through unilateral initiatives. In this context, framing irregular migration, terrorism and energy routes disruptions more clearly as a shared European security challenge, rather than as an issue caught between humanitarian and security narratives, could strengthen Spain's credibility among European partners.

Spain's involvement in the Sahel is best understood as the instrument through which a middle power can transform the burden of exposure into a claim to leadership. Even though that conversion hasn't occurred yet, the conditions for it remain in place, and no other member state is better positioned to attempt it. For future lines, the question facing Spain is no longer whether to engage, as the structural incentives, trajectory of the threat and Spain's own strategic documents have already settled that, but how to adapt its engagement to a landscape defined by competition, hybrid threats and fluid alliances while remaining loyal to European values and its own long-term strategic interests. Meeting that challenge will require Spain to decide how it is willing to compete and to build the doctrine and coalitions through which its strategic vision becomes effective European action.

The Sahel will only grow as a security challenge for European security. Whether Spain emerges as the European Union's indispensable southern security actor, or merely as a secondary contributor, will depend on the strategic clarity with which it defines its objectives and the realism with which it adapts to an increasingly contested geopolitical landscape.

4.1 Limitations

As with any qualitative, single-case design, the findings of this thesis must take into account its limitations, which fall into three categories: methodological, empirical and theoretical.

The integration of literature review, interviewing, secondary data analysis, and document analysis constitutes methodological triangulation, defined as the use of multiple methods to increase validity and reduce systemic bias (Buttolph Johnson, D.

Mycoff, & T. Reynolds, 2019). Despite reducing bias, it does not eliminate the weaknesses of each component.

The single-case study design is well suited to identifying causal mechanisms, but it limits statistical generalization. The mechanism linking increased security engagement to institutional influence might apply to Spain, but it is not established as a regularity across all middle powers.

Furthermore, interviewing introduces an additional limitation. Qualitative methodology highlights that interviews give access to perceptions and interpretations instead of objective facts (J. Taylor, Bogdan, & L. DeVault, 2015). These risks are increased by the reliance on a single expert interview. Even though the respondent's regional and institutional expertise leads to analytical depth, the limited sample size can't represent the whole range of views within the Spanish and European policy communities. The interview's contribution is therefore of contextualization and interpretive triangulation, not focused on representativeness.

Empirically, the study is limited by the recent and evolving nature of the subject under investigation. Since the case extends to early 2026, several developments remain to be seen, and the analysis relies on provisional reporting, institutional communications and think-tank and ACLED datasets. In addition, the difficulties regarding data collection are part of the phenomenon as AES authorities refused independent surveying and foreign correspondents' access which restricts available evidence. Disinformation campaigns also resist objective measurement so indicators of their volume and reach should be read as informed approximations instead of precise quantities.

Finally, the theoretical framework has its own limitations. Applying offensive realism to a middle power embedded in a supranational institution stretches a theory built to explain great-power behavior. The thesis mitigates this by channeling realist premises through the concept of European Strategic Autonomy. The thesis's central claim, the mechanism converting exposure into influence is real but latent, is especially exposed since it hasn't produced its predicted outcome.

However, weighed against the epistemological orientation of the research, these constraints don't undermine the study. As the objective is to uncover the mechanisms linking Spain's forward engagement in the Sahel to its influence within European security governance, explanatory depth and contextual understanding outweigh its limitations. By

making these limitations explicit, the thesis strengthens its analytical transparency within the standards of political-science research.

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ANEXO: Declaración de uso de herramientas de IA generativa

Nombre Grado/Máster:	Ade y RRII E6
Nombre Alumno:	Marta Sánchez Serrano
Coordinador/a TFG/TFM:	
Nombre Director/a de TFG/TFGM:	Galyna Solovei

Declaro que para la elaboración del presente Trabajo Fin de Grado / Trabajo Fin de Máster se ha utilizado inteligencia artificial generativa como herramienta de apoyo.	SÍ	NO
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Uso de la IA Generativo

Si tu respuesta ha sido SÍ, contesta a las siguientes preguntas. Si has contestado NO, pasa al apartado 2.

Uso ético

	SÍ	NO
¿A la hora de usar la herramienta IA, en los <i>prompts</i> utilizados has incluido datos de carácter sensible o de carácter personal (fotos de personas reales, datos personales, etc.)? <i>Si tu respuesta es afirmativa especifica cuáles.</i>		✗
¿Has orientado tu uso a suplantar tu trabajo personal sin hacer una revisión crítica de la extraído en la herramienta IA? <i>Si tu respuesta es afirmativa especifica cuáles.</i>		✗
¿Has tenido en cuenta las recomendaciones académicas que te han hecho específicamente en el Grado/Máster sobre lo que está permitido o no con la IA?	✗	

Uso técnico realizado: ChatGPT 5, Claude Opus 4.8, Notebook

¿Qué herramientas has utilizado (ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Nano Banana...)? Especifica la versión o tipo de licencia.

Marcar lo que corresponda:

- Generación de texto (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT 5, Claude Opus 4.8, Notebook
- Reformulación (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT 5, Claude Opus 4.8, Notebook
- Traducción / corrección (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT 5, Claude Opus 4.8, Notebook
- Sugerencia de estructura (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT 5, Claude Opus 4.8, Notebook
- Apoyo metodológico (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT 5, Claude Opus 4.8, Notebook
- Buscar o citar bibliografía (*Especificar qué herramientas*) → ChatGPT 5, Claude Opus 4.8, Notebook
- Generar contenido audiovisual (videos, infografías, audios, imágenes, gráficos. *Especifica en concreto qué contenidos has generado con IA además de citarlo correctamente en el trabajo.*)
- Otros (*Especificar qué herramientas*) →

Confirmando que el contenido final ha sido revisado, corregido y validado íntegramente por mí como autor/a y asumo la plena responsabilidad académica del mismo.

La utilización de la IA no ha sustituido el análisis crítico, la reflexión personal ni el trabajo intelectual propio exigido en un TFG/TFM.

Firma:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'H. Santos', written in a cursive style.

Consentimiento informado

Yo, Emna Memmi con NIE Y6433057V

- He leído la hoja de información previa
- He podido hacer todas las preguntas que he considerado sobre el estudio.
- He recibido respuestas satisfactorias a mis preguntas.
- He recibido suficiente información sobre el estudio.
- He hablado, si ha sido necesario, con: _____ (mail: _____)
- Comprendo que mi participación es voluntaria.
- Comprendo que puedo retirarme del estudio:
 - o Cuando quiera.
 - o Sin tener que dar explicaciones.
- Presto libremente mi conformidad para participar en el estudio.

Fecha: 10/06/2026

Firma de aceptación de la participante

Emna Memmi



Firma de la Investigadora Principal