

Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer,
Interview with La Razón
December 18, 2018

Q: So first question, I'd like to talk about the 30th anniversary of the relationships between Spain – of defense relationships between Spain and the United States. And I have one comment for you: like, how did you see us as a partner, as a defense partner? You know, a general comment of relationships in this matter between Spain and the United States.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: Oh, it's a – it's a very interesting time now. If you look at Secretary Mattis' second line of effort, which is to create a robust constellation of allies and friends, one of the charges of the three service secretaries is to really go out and, quote/unquote, "hug" our allies, and to make sure that message resonates amongst them.

One of the biggest surprises for me coming onboard as Secretary of the Navy is the extent and depth of the relationships that the United States Navy has cultivated over the centuries. But Spain is forefront. If I look at how we are interoperating now, you go back 10, 15 years ago when we did a joint venture, it was basically ships just sailing next to each other and waving. Now we are truly interoperating. We are – we are communicating together. We're exchanging information. We can actually do operations together, meaningful operations. We have a way to go, don't get me wrong, but we are on a very solid footing.

And if you look at the message that the U.S. is trying to send in defense, we see what was done at Wales. You all put the commitment for the 2 percent. That is fantastic. How President Sánchez and the government funds it is, obviously, up to Spain. But we look forward to seeing and working with you stronger. We have examples of the – your battleship Núñez coming out with Abraham Lincoln this spring to sail with us. We were just with the chief of the Navy talking about how that's going to unfold, and it's very, very exciting. We look forward to seeing the possibility of putting Marines on the Juan Carlos.

So, again, the whole structure here that we're looking for, the whole effort we're looking for is to do strong interoperations with close allies of ours. Spain is front and center.

Q: And what would we – I want to talk now about the role of the base in Rota and how important it is for the global effort of the U.S. Navy, and if the United States is planning to increase the soldiers there or sailors, and more ships there.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: So, if you look at the whole mission that's of the United States Navy, it is our forward presence. It is our deployed presence. It is our ability to – as Secretary Mattis says, it's our diplomatic ability to keep order, but when in fact called for action it can deliver the kinetic action very quickly – peace through presence, or deterrence through presence as we like to call it.

Rota is a linchpin in our whole forward-deployed strategy. You can't be forward-deployed from Norfolk nor San Diego only. You have to have forward-deployed sub-bases. And Rota is exactly that.

You heard us talk about expanding to a 355-ship Navy. We are on our way there. I will pause for a second, though, and put a point forward, to answer your first question: We're probably right now at 289 battleships in the inventory, going to 355.

But what I like to tell people is we have a 700-plus-ship armada when we count our allies, because right now we are interoperating so strongly we really do count them as part of the armada.

Will Rota grow? Presently, there's no immediate plans. But with more ships coming online, it's not out of the question.

Q: And what are we in the next year doing to exercise and maneuvers between our navies?

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: Well, we have the full – I'll be open, I don't know what Spain is going to participate in or not. When it comes to others, I know we have the Abe Lincoln strike group, which is a carrier strike group, which – (inaudible). I think we're going to have Trident Juncture again next fall. Would love to see Spain participating in that. Bright Star, don't know if you participate in that. But there are others that are always available.

Q: And now there is this topic that has appeared in your – one of your answers, and it is the commitment of Spain to give money to the NATO, to 0.9. And President Trump and other former administrations have been very insistent in putting pressure to the allies to put more money in the joint efforts of the NATO. How is your opinion about how Spain is doing on that point? Do you think we should achieve our commitment of the 0.9 fast, or not? Well, the commitment is the 2 percent, sorry.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: Correct.

Q: (Laughs.) So, and now we are in the 0.9. I think it is to be in 1.5 in 2024, I think. As you have realized, I am not an expert. Excuse me. (Laughter.) My friend, the guy who does defense, couldn't be here this morning, so – (laughter) –

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: So you drew the short straw.

Q: Yeah. The interview has two parts. (Laughter.) First one is about security and –

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: You're doing a very good job. (Laughter.)

Q: Second about international – foreign policy, and that will be no problem. (Laughter.) So – yeah.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: No, when it comes to – like I said earlier, we were very impressed to see in the Wales agreement that Spain signed up for its commitment for 2 percent of GDP. As I said before, how President Sánchez and your government decide to get there is your business. What I would like to say, though, is that we define partnership as commitment. And as we work together and commit together, it takes investment to make a true partnership. We'd love to see you get there sooner rather than later, but how you do it is your own business.

Q: Now there is a joint effort in the European Union to put together a European armed forces. It's called PESCO. And I wanted to know your views and your comments about do you see possibly this? Because there has been a declaration by the Trump administration against this effort and a little bit of controversy about it, and I wanted to ask you about that.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: Wearing my Navy hat, my Navy-Marine Corps hat, I'm pretty impressed with the way that NATO works. And our interoperability with the NATO members is reaching all-time highs in various cases. Spain is at an all-time high of interoperability. We view you as a NATO partner. I just don't know what additional benefits could be presented in an alternative structure. Always open for discussion, but right now why fix something that works very well?

Q: I understand that there may be a need to replace the Harrier fighters in our Navy. And F-35 is something that has been – and I wanted to ask you if you know something about the negotiations about – there are these issues of these fighters.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: I don't know the exact negotiations. I know that possibly a foreign military sales case is being built on behalf of Spain and the, quote/unquote, "office" that sells the F-35, what we call our Joint Office. It's playing out to be a game-changer of a weapons platform. We're driving down the costs as fast as we can, because it's not an inexpensive platform, to say the least. But I think you'll see what the Air Force, the Navy, and the Marine Corps can do well is, in fact, drive down the cost as it gets implemented into our fleets. And therefore, the benefits attribute to our allies that are also using the same platform.

Q: OK, now second part of the interview.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: Uh-oh. This is what you know about, now?

(Laughter.)

Q: I wanted to talk about the menace that Russia is for NATO. And I wanted to ask you about the news yesterday that Moscow is going to deploy, I think, five fighters – no, 10 fighters in Crimea, because they are waiting – they have information about a possible provocation operation for the Ukrainians. And as secretary of the Navy, I wanted to ask you how do you see the demands from Russia? How are you planning to fight back – not fight, but, you know –

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: So it's a great question when it comes to global security. And if you read our latest national defense strategy, Secretary Mattis has framed, I think quite well, our transition from fighting violent extremist organizations – which was, you know, chasing someone down on a bicycle with a big weapon, or going after open warfare in, quote/unquote, “secure skies” – the whole story has changed now, because now we're into an area of great power competition. And the great power competition is primarily spread in the short term with Russia, which we call a spoiling event, and the long-term competition is China.

You're addressing Russia specifically. It is our job, along with our partners, to keep order and peace on the high seas, and also to work with our allies. We will keep an eye on this situation. Obviously it moves forward.

The belligerence that's being shown over there is duly noted. Amped up to any other level will it be tolerated? I doubt the world scene will let that happen.

Q: And do you think that you think that the NATO navy are prepared to confront these adversities from Russia, particularly in this theater, in the Black Sea and in Eastern Mediterranean?

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: So, remember, my job, wearing my Title 10 hat in the United States, is to man, equip, train, and deliver those assets needed. You asked the question, are we ready? We are ready. It's not my decision to say whether we'll go in or not. That's the Joint Chiefs and combatant commanders. But I will tell you that the United States Navy, along with its partners, have trained and prepared for situations such as this.

Q: You talk about China and the long term. And I understand that there was a new aircraft carrier, a Chinese one, the first one. And in what way does this new ship and the others that will come – I think they are from Russian design – but this is the first on that they've done.

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: Indigenous.

Q: Yeah. And they – knowing the Chinese – most likely they will do 10 in 10 years, or something like that. And how is the United States preparing for this change of game?

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: You look at our force structure analysis; we are completely gearing it towards what we call the great power competition that I just discussed. And China is one of the pacing threats that we have. We have an eye on them at all times. We're constantly honing our capabilities. And we're also looking at our capacity, because it's not just capacity that you grow. Your multiplier effect is your capabilities on top of your capacity. They're a meaningful competitor. But we're also a meaningful competitor.

Q: And I want to talk now, not about, you know, the tons of warships, the quantity in this and that in the United States. It's, of course, what it will be for a lot of these. But on the technological side, how do you think the United States is cast in its advantage against Russia and against China on this particular point, and of course in the defense industry?

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: It's a great question. If you go back to 1956, I believe it was, in January, there was an event called Sputnik that happened. And all of a sudden the U.S. found themselves on the back of their heels. And you look what happened between 1956 and putting a man on the moon. It was a pretty spectacular trail. We have enjoyed a very interesting, I believe, technological gap when it comes to technology and warfare.

That gap is under threat. We are focusing on how do we keep the gap there, and now open up the gap to what we call opening up our competitive space? It's something we are definitely focused on.

You know, the previous 16 years of – at war, but at a lower level of war with a competitor, to now going to the, quote/unquote, “1980s and ’90s” of having a true power competition, we’ve atrophied in some muscle actions. But we’re bringing them back quickly. Again, the gap is there, and we are wanting to expand it.

Q: OK, then a last one, yeah? And I wanted to talk, because – about the – again, about the Ukrainian crisis, and the 23 sailors in Ukraine that are there. And what do you think that has to happen in order for Moscow to set them free?

SECRETARY RICHARD V. SPENCER: That’s a very interesting question. If you look at what’s transpired over the past couple of days, I mean, the sailors, I heard, were moved to Moscow, because they’re viewing the area as a tense area. There definitely have to be some off-ramps put onto the negotiation, so we can let some pressure out of the situation. The last thing anyone wants to see is it to go kinetic. And I think we have, hopefully, people at the table who can do so. But rest assured, as I said earlier, if in fact called on, we will back up our friends and allies in doing what is needed.

Q: Perfect.

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