

Risks and Fallacies of Expanding New Roles to the Military: The Case of the Spanish Emergency Military Unit; A Research Note

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Abstract

This article responds to the analysis about the Spanish Emergency Military Unit in the research note by Pérez et al. in *Armed Forces & Society*, which emphasizes the efficiency of the Spanish Emergency Military Unit and how it has enhanced the image of the Spanish Armed Forces. We believe that a more critical understanding of the development of this military unit is necessary, as its deployment pitfalls and the literature on civil–military relations were neglected. Consequently, four policy traps are identified: response to civilian emergencies has become a central task of the armed forces rather than an auxiliary role; behind the pragmatism of its employment, there is potential for a worsening of civil–military relations, as highlighted by the scholarly literature; there are serious inefficiencies in its organizational design, related to human and financial resources; and image improvement is an illusion, strongly conditioned by political cleavages, with potential long-term counterproductive results.

Keywords

Spanish Armed Forces, emergency military unit, civil–military relations, armed forces, wildcard administration, militarization, civil protection

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Spain has partly militarized its response to civil emergencies since the creation of the Emergency Military Unit (UME for its initials in Spanish) in 2005. Unlike the traditional auxiliary role that the military has in responding to natural catastrophes or calamities, the UME has become the core function of national emergency response as part of the Spanish Armed Forces (SAF).

With approximately 4,000 specialized and well-equipped military personnel, the UME is trained to handle a wide range of emergencies, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, fires, snowfalls, river floods, and more. The unit has been deployed extensively in Spain and abroad, earning praise for its efficiency and effectiveness in fulfilling its missions. This success has improved the public perception of the SAF writ large, thereby countering traditionally characterized anti-military bias, as noted by Pérez et al. (2022).

Such a positive social outcome, as well as the values that inspire the organization—military *ethos*, discipline, and hierarchy—its territorial deployment, and the reasons for its creation—to reinforce the Spanish civil protection system—are the key analytical points underlined by Pérez et al. (2022). These factors coincide with those highlighted by the media and the Spanish Ministry of Defense as explanations for the UME’s success (Maíz, 2015; Robles, 2021; UME, 2015). It has even been analyzed as a case of “benchmarking” (Rod & Miron, 2023).

Notwithstanding these professed success in perception management, we identify four policy traps associated with this policy initiative, categorized into two potential risks and two fallacies. First, the SAF now have a central mission in civil protection, rather than just an auxiliary role, which, second, raises concerns about civil–military relations and the use of militaries as disaster response mechanisms. This issue aligns with scholarly debates on contemporary militaries’ roles in civil emergencies, and how this situation could represent institutional over-reach into civil society by the armed forces. A related third trap is that the UME is not an actual military specialization but rather a non-military capacity built to address deficits in the Spanish civil protection system, which could result in inefficiency. The last identified problem is related to the assumption that the UME has improved public opinion of the SAF; using the military for non-military roles does not necessarily solve the pitfalls in civil–military relations and the public’s perception of defense spending.

From an Auxiliary Role to a Core Function

In Spain, civil protection is a political competence that is devolved to each Autonomous Community (federal regions). The central state only intervenes in coordination tasks, if an autonomous community is overwhelmed or in situations of “national interest.” Given the open, flexible, and multilevel nature of the Spanish civil protection system, the UME is the national intervention means in the latter two scenarios.

According to Pérez et al. (2022, p. 2), similar units exist in other countries, such as Canada, France, Japan, Switzerland, and the United States. However, such a

characterisation is not entirely accurate, as in all cases, these units play an auxiliary role, as was the case in Spain before the UME was established. The Spanish model of the UME is slightly different even compared to other military corps, such as the French case. While both the UME and the French units are composed of military specialists in natural and technological disasters, the French units are attached to the Ministry of the Interior, not the Ministry of Defense.

Prior to the creation of the UME, the collaboration of the SAF in the national civil protection system was coordinated through the Spanish Defense Staff. In 2008, this coordination ceased, as the UME developed its own operational plan. Furthermore, the UME created its own training center.

Thus, the Spanish government launched a military tool to act in serious emergencies, whether or not they are of national interest. What is criticisable is the assumption of a central role in these tasks as it represents a militarization of areas that should not be military. The UME reports to the Ministry of Defense by delegation of the President of the Government and is deployed upon proposal of the Minister of the Interior. In other words, if regional authorities require the UME, they must request it from the Ministry of the Interior, which will then request it from the Ministry of Defense. This administrative labyrinth is explained by the desire to solve a public security problem with a military unit that is still attached to the Ministry of Defense.

In this regard, the establishment of the UME was challenged by some voices within the SAF on the basis that it greatly deviated from their essential role, which is national defense. In addition, some politicians argued that the UME is beyond the functions set forth in the Spanish Constitution for the SAF. Although acknowledging the social acceptance of its operations, which confirms the claim made by Pérez et al. (2022), the elites hold the view that the UME does not perform a military function and that this type of assignment should not be a priority for the SAF.¹

The Armed Forces as a Wildcard Administration

The use of the armed forces in situations of extreme need, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is a trend in which Spain participates by deploying both the UME and other Army, Navy, and Air Force units. These operations in the event of disasters and calamities are not new, as the SAF has already collaborated with civilian authorities in natural disasters, forest fires, border control, or in specific crises, like the air traffic controllers' strike in 2010. Therefore, the Spanish government has used the military in critical and exceptional scenarios as a last resort force.

The armed forces can always be employed for such tasks (Pion-Berlin, 2016), but implying that this transformation toward being the responder of first choice as one of their core missions risks adversely affecting civil–military relations (Desch, 2001). By undertaking these first-responder tasks, the military may gain privilege, greater social status, and enhanced economic and institutional bargaining power, which creates problems for democratic governance (Jenne & Martínez, 2022; Mazziotti, 2022).

The incremental increase in the UME's role is not due to a desire for the use of force, but rather stems from the belief that the armed forces are an underutilized resource with little expectation of being used for their defensive function. Alongside this is the perception among policymakers that conventional military capabilities have become meaningless in the 21st century, as stated by the former Minister of Defense and founder of the UME, José Bono (2015, pp. 280–281). These are armed forces that are not expected to employ the military force in the various tasks they are entrusted with, as these missions require large-scale activities in terms of military capacities, access to training areas, and problems of resource consumption (Martínez, 2022, p. 3). On the contrary, the supposed great advantage offered by the military, as noted by Pérez et al. (2022), is discipline, which is a theoretically characteristic shared by all hierarchical bodies.

Therefore, governments treat such organization not so much as an armed institution but as a “wildcard administration” (Jenne & Martínez, 2022). In this sense, although regulations appear to define the situations in which the UME can intervene, they end up leaving the door open to presidential arbitrariness: through the “national interest” clause, the UME can be activated in any emergency decided by the Spanish President of the Government.

The military's multifunctionality not only disregards the primary task of armies—national defense—but also usually involves flouting a well-understood normative framework, while circumventing necessary military reforms, obstructing the development of civilian skills for specific activities that the military undertakes, and implanting undemocratic trends that might undermine a democratically oriented political culture (Jenne & Martínez, 2022). As a consequence, the widespread use of the UME exemplifies the risks to civil–military relations by infringing upon institutional responsibilities, as explained by Erickson et al. (2023). Paradoxically, risks are induced by civilian power.

“It's Not a Bug, It's a Feature”: Organizational Inefficiencies

The UME is not designed to develop a military career and retain talent. Unlike infantry or artillery, it is not a specialty that occupies the entire professional life of the military. Career military service members achieve high rank mainly by practicing their core competency of defending the nation. UME members are constantly rotating in and out of the UME since the military—appropriately—do not want to focus entirely on a non-military mission. UME-assigned service members are recruited ad hoc from the Army, Navy, or Air Force, trained from scratch, and after a few years, return to their home units, taking with them a wealth of experience and training that the UME must provide to their replacements. This means that the UME is always training new members. All the expertise accumulated is lost as soon as they are promoted and leave the unit. Moreover, due to initial reluctance to join the UME, salaries were stipulated with much higher allowances than those of their comrades-in-arms.

Better working conditions are also a perk of joining the UME. Such benefits are still in place today (Alejandre Martínez, 2022, pp. 258, 260–261).

The UME was not just an organizational anomaly but is also an improvised policy² because the SAF were neither equipped nor trained to play their novel role in domestic non-defense emergencies. The size of the hypothetical challenges seemed to require a large economic investment: it was not spent by civil protection or the Ministry of the Interior, but by the Ministry of Defense, which committed resources from its budget allocations. This was a very burdensome situation, especially after 2008 because of the economic crisis. In proportional terms, the UME received (and still receives) a much higher percentage of funding than the rest of the SAF (Alejandre Martínez, 2022).

The UME, far from being an activity to make use of allegedly idle military capabilities, has become a unit that requires a significant level of investment in emergency materials, which the SAF lacked. This material is not relevant to its defense role and, as noted, comes from the ordinary defense budget. When Spain presents its level of defense spending—in 2021, 1.04% of shared gross domestic product (GDP) according to NATO, 1.4% according to the World Bank or SIPRI—it fails to explain that part of that refers to its performance in civil emergencies.

Finally, the development and employment of the UME could possibly be a disincentive to invest in civil preparedness for other governing administrations—mainly regional ones—thereby enticing them to neglect their responsibilities in the event of a disaster. Determining jurisdictions and responsibilities for key consequence management tasks has even led to disagreements between the competent territorial authorities and the UME itself (Alejandre Martínez, 2022, pp. 260, 263).

The Illusion of Improved Public Opinion

In addition to effectiveness in consequence management in the face of natural or man-made disasters, the primary argument of Pérez et al. (2022) is that the improvement in the public image of the SAF that the UME has purportedly brought about, even acts as a tool for interterritorial cohesion. As of the publication of this article, no surveys conducted up to 2017 demonstrate any claims that the UME is effective in this sense. Nevertheless, two surveys from 2019 and 2020 on citizen perceptions of defense and the armed forces are available.

The second survey referenced above (Sociométrica, 2020) queries the public about the UME and its management of the COVID pandemic: the social perception of the SAF during the pandemic was very positive, receiving an aggregate rating of above 8.5 out of 10. Despite this, 83% of the population believes that it would be appropriate to establish a civilian service to deal with disasters and calamities. This is the same argument echoed by the elites (see Note 1): the military operations conducted during the pandemic have enhanced the social image of the Armed Forces, but these tasks are far removed from their national defense mission.

Moreover, inferring a direct correlation between the improvement in the image of the SAF and the necessary existence of the UME is not in agreement with existing studies to date. The improvement in the public's rating of SAF began with the start of international military missions in 1998. Therefore, the improvement in the military's image must be seen as part of a deeper process of change in public opinion regarding the military institution (Martínez & Durán, 2017). This apparent evolution in the public's view of the military also fits in with global and European trends of improving the perception of the armed forces among societies, closely linked to various and novel international missions that include counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, and support to civil authority missions (Malešič & Garb, 2018, pp. 149–150). The public's more favorable view of the armed forces might not, therefore, be a fact derived solely from the existence and performance of the UME.

It cannot be neglected that the image of the armed forces and perceptions of defense policy are strongly influenced by various cleavages: ideological, socio-educational, and economic (Cicuéndez Santamaría, 2017). Even assuming that the assertion in Pérez et al.'s (2022) article that the UME improves the social image of the SAF is valid, it ignores the fact that Spaniards' views on defense and the armed forces are multifaceted and complex, which requires a much more nuanced analysis. More than 30% of the population thinks that an invasion does not justify the government in ordering military action, and part of society is reluctant to accept the more traditional roles of the SAF (Martínez, 2020, p. 295). Figure 3 by Pérez et al. (2022, p. 9) is misleading because it does not show that despite the SAF being highly valued, the profession is highly discredited; in fact, the professions of soldier and military officer are the lowest rated among the civilian population.

The UME does not contribute to Spaniards' commitment to better resources for the SAF. On the contrary, it has consolidated a discursive imaginary in which responses to civilian emergencies have been militarized. From the late 1980s until the war in Ukraine, defense was the only area where most Spaniards felt that spending was excessive; all other areas were insufficient or adequate. In fact, it was not the UME but the war in Ukraine that caused the change in spending preferences.³

Finally, the fallacy of territorial cohesion falls apart just by looking at the data. The defense minister who created the UME believed that this unit should be deployed throughout the country and that this would be a more peaceful and accepted way of military presence in the autonomous communities with the highest rates of pro-independence sentiment: Catalonia and the Basque Country. He highlighted how President Rodríguez Zapatero explained to the Defense Staff of the Spanish Army that the UME came to strengthen the state "as an effective instrument of aid and cohesion" (Bono, 2015, pp. 272–273). Pérez et al. (2022, p. 8) repeated this argument uncritically. However, the public's evaluation of the participation of the SAF during the COVID-19 pandemic barely average in the Basque Country and below average in Catalonia. When Spaniards express their general opinion about the SAF, the overall result is slightly positive, with Catalonia, the Basque Country and Navarre (Sociométrica, 2020) demonstrating a low regard for the SAF. In conclusion, it is not demonstrated

that the UME brings about a substantial improvement in Spaniards' opinion of defense, nor is it proven that the UME favors or promotes territorial cohesion.

Conclusions

The article by Pérez et al. (2022) contains several significant inaccuracies and avoids confronting the case of the Spanish Emergency Military Unit with the debates about military multifunctionality and its potential impact toward civil–military relations. On the contrary, they restrict themselves to a faux pragmatism of effectiveness and the illusory improvement of the SAF image. The SAF had an auxiliary role in emergencies, and expanding such a role results in a set of particular risks. One of them is to comprehend the armed forces as a “wildcard administration,” which could lead to a weakening of civil–military relations. It should be noted that although the UME appears to have been acting efficiently in multiple emergencies since 2005, it entails inefficiencies because it is not designed to retain talent and, moreover, its effectiveness is mainly due to heavy short-term investment that has been taken directly from the ordinary defense budget. Finally, the improved social image of the SAF predates the UME and does not contribute to better territorial cohesion, nor does it translate into greater societal support for defense investment, but it leads to a militarisation of emergencies, which is a counterproductive outcome to the retention and improvement of democratic principles and practices.

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Notes

1. Twenty generals and admirals of the SAF, 20 CEOs of the Spanish defense industry, as well as the spokespersons of the parliamentary groups in the defense committees of

the Spanish Congress and Senate were interviewed as part of a national research project (2021–2024) about the current state and future development of the Spanish Armed Forces, in which we, the authors of this article, are involved.

2. In an interview, the Prime Minister at the time, Rodríguez Zapatero, revealed that the idea to create the UME had originated from “a sleepless night” caused by heavy snowfall that led to the collapse of highways in northern Spain in December 2004 (González, 2007).
3. Surveys by the Center for Sociological Research during 2022 show how Spanish society is now, after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, more inclined to increase defense spending.

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