



Beyond Border Control

Europe's Migration Response and Counterterrorism Blind Spots After Ceuta

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Abstract

The European Union's response to the July 2026 Ceuta crisis has been substantial, but strategically uneven. Measures adopted since the mass crossing have substantially strengthened migration control, situational awareness, screening, border reinforcement and downstream compensatory capacity, while doing less to address dependence on upstream counterterrorism intelligence and access, unresolved attribution, or the humanitarian pressures that shape whether the wider response remains operationally effective and democratically sustainable. This report examines that imbalance through a counterterrorism lens. It argues that Europe is becoming better able to detect pressure, reinforce a frontline Member State and recover control once disruption reaches EU territory, while remaining far less able to substitute threat-specific intelligence, territorial access and investigative authority located in third countries. Greater European capacity therefore changes the terms of dependence rather than eliminating it: functions that can be internalised increasingly fall under European control, while intelligence, territorial access and sovereign authority that remain external become relatively more consequential.

Consequently, the policy challenge is not to create a new counterterrorism regime for migration emergencies, but to make the emerging European response more shock-adaptive: preserving counterterrorism discrimination under pressure, shortening the gap between warning and usable reinforcement, protecting shared processing capacity, and identifying which third-country dependencies can be reduced and which must instead be managed.

Introduction

The initial Spanish and European policy response to the mass crossing into Ceuta on 30–31 July focused primarily on migration management, border control and the humanitarian emergency. Its security consequences extended beyond those domains. Spanish authorities subsequently identified individuals with previous jihadism-related records among those who had entered,¹ while Italy introduced temporary controls at its internal borders with Spain, citing persistent risks to internal security and a possible danger of terrorist infiltration.² Neither development established that an organised terrorist infiltration had occurred. Together, however, they demonstrated that a temporary loss of identity assurance at an external border can generate security responses elsewhere before the existence, scale or nature of any terrorist threat has been established.

The crisis occurred at a particularly consequential moment for European migration policy. The Pact on Migration and Asylum had entered into application on 12 June, only weeks before the crossing. The Pact's ten legislative instruments introduced common procedures for registering irregular arrivals, mandatory identity, security, health and vulnerability checks, faster asylum and return procedures and solidarity mechanisms for Member States under migratory pressure.³ Ceuta was therefore an early stress test of a recently reinforced EU framework, rather than a crisis occurring in the absence of common rules.



Image 1: European Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration Magnus Brunner during a press point on migration in Brussels, 29 September 2026. © European Union, 2026 / Photo: Lukasz Kobus / CC BY 4.0.

The European response since the Ceuta crossing has moved further in the same policy direction. On 17 September, the European Parliament characterised the events in Ceuta as hybrid attacks and the instrumentalisation of migrants and called for stronger protection of the Union's external borders.⁴ On 29 September, the Commission presented a five-point plan focused on cooperation with third countries, stronger external borders, improved surveillance and early warning, action against smuggling networks and reinforced returns.⁵ On 1 October, justice and home affairs ministers discussed stronger migration situational awareness and early warning, while the Council gave final approval to a new common EU return system.⁶

The Return Regulation was negotiated before the Ceuta crisis and is therefore not part of the institutional response to it. That regulation's adoption on 1 October nevertheless reinforces the policy environment into which that response has been inserted: one increasingly oriented towards stronger external-border management, faster return, readmission and cooperation with third countries.⁷

The measures designed specifically after Ceuta follow the same broad direction. The Commission's five-point plan concentrates on anticipation of mass arrivals, stronger

external-border capacity, surveillance, action against smuggling networks and cooperation with neighbouring states.⁸ Taken together with the wider implementation of the Pact and the new return framework, the emerging policy response overwhelmingly prioritises migration and border management.

That policy orientation is understandable, but it is narrower than the problems presented by the crisis itself. Ceuta generated migration-management, humanitarian and counterterrorism (CT) consequences simultaneously, while the measures adopted since July have concentrated much more clearly on control of movement, border capacity and return. Those measures can produce positive CT and humanitarian effects (for example, by preserving orderly screening or reducing pressure on reception systems), but neither CT preparedness nor humanitarian protection is their organising logic. That distinction matters because instruments optimised for controlling movement do not necessarily preserve the information, processing capacity or external access on which CT performance depends under extreme pressure.

This report focuses on the CT implications of the Ceuta crisis and the EU response because the measures adopted since July have concentrated far more heavily on migration and border management. CEP's first Ceuta analysis established that border management, humanitarian protection and CT remain institutionally distinct even though, under extreme pressure, they depend on overlapping operational resources such as identity processing, personnel, information flows and reception capacity.⁹ The question here is how far the European response reduces the CT vulnerabilities created when those shared operational conditions deteriorate.

The relevant test is not whether the EU has strengthened migration management; it clearly has. The test is whether measures designed principally for migration control also reduce the CT vulnerabilities exposed in Ceuta: loss of identity visibility under acceleration; reliance on upstream intelligence and access; displacement of security work into a more difficult post-entry environment; and limited room for manoeuvre where an important external partner is itself part of the uncertainty surrounding the crisis.

The democratic consequences also extend beyond operational capacity. Emergency responses perceived as abandoning humanitarian obligations or normal legal safeguards can contribute to litigation, institutional mistrust, political polarisation and demands for more coercive or exceptional measures. None of those effects establishes that a state, terrorist organisation or extremist movement engineered the original crisis. They can nevertheless create grievances and political vulnerabilities that such actors may exploit.

The emerging European response is therefore strategically uneven. Its strongest effects are concentrated in functions over which the EU can expand direct control (situational awareness, border reinforcement, screening and downstream compensatory capacity), while the harder residual vulnerabilities remain concentrated in functions that depend on

external intelligence, foreign jurisdiction, unresolved attribution and the continued availability of shared humanitarian processing capacity.

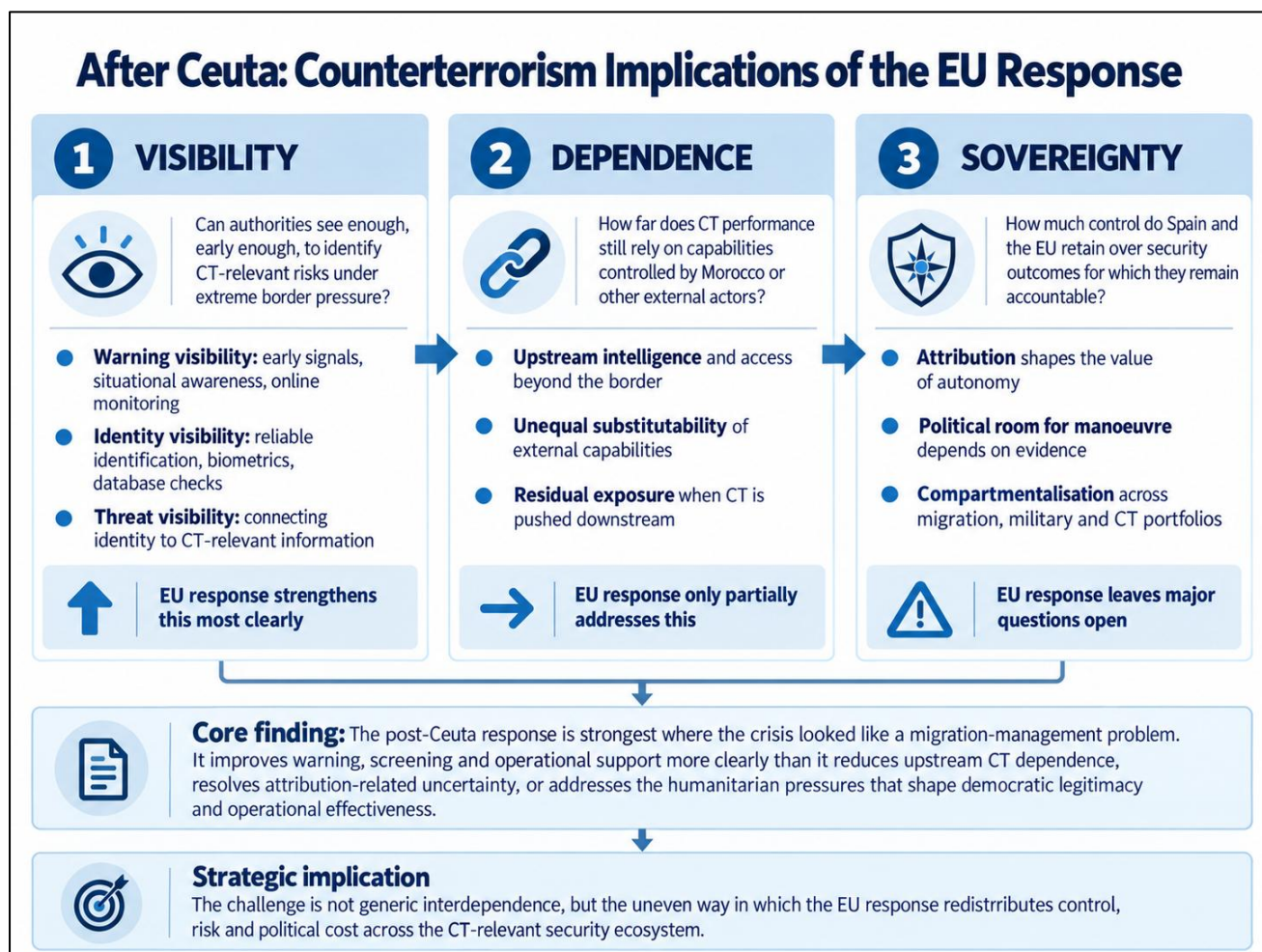


Figure 1: Counterterrorism Implications of the EU Response after the July 2026 Ceuta crossings

Visibility: What does stronger European warning preserve?

The Commission's post-Ceuta response emphasises anticipation. Its five-point plan proposes stronger use of European surveillance and situational-awareness capabilities; closer information-sharing, early-warning arrangements with partner countries; and greater attention to online activity associated with sudden mass movements.¹⁰ The 1 October justice and home affairs discussion reinforced that direction, with ministers supporting more timely information on emerging migration trends and greater use of existing EU structures and agencies.¹¹

For CT, stronger warning has value only to the extent that it preserves a usable security picture as pressure increases.

Three forms of visibility are relevant to CT performance. Warning visibility concerns whether authorities can detect deteriorating operational conditions before border processing begins to fail; identity visibility concerns whether they can establish reliably who has entered; and threat visibility concerns what police, intelligence and partner services know about those individuals once identity has been established.

In this report, “CT relevance” means that information warrants attention, referral or further assessment by CT authorities; it does not mean that an individual poses a current terrorist threat. A security-relevant record may reflect historical or administrative information whose present significance still requires assessment.

The distinction is operational rather than semantic. An accurately identified person may generate no match in European databases while remaining known to a third-country service, including a Moroccan security or intelligence service. A database match may concern a previous conviction, an administrative restriction or historical investigative interest without establishing a current terrorist threat.

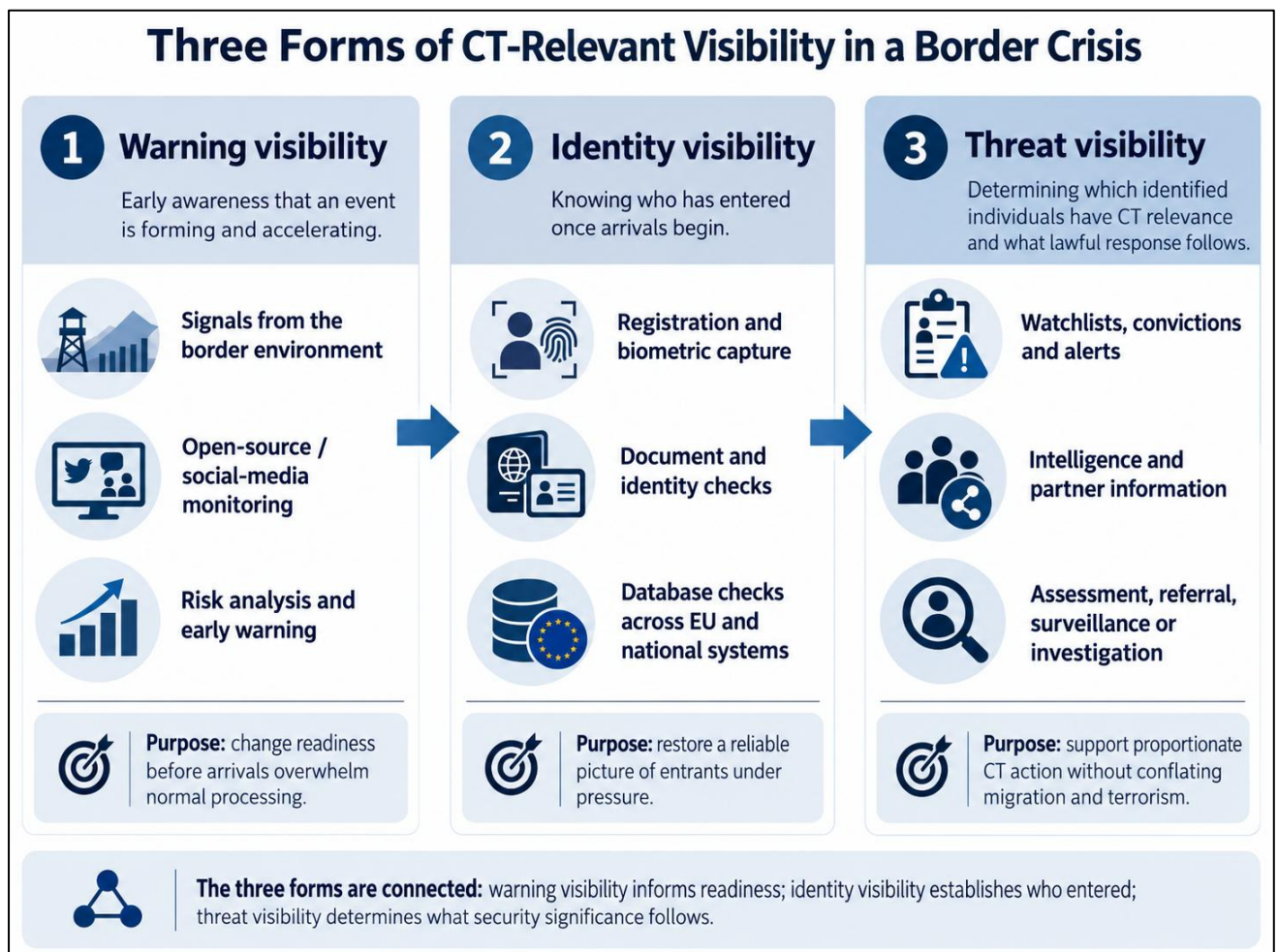


Figure 2: Three forms of CT-relevant visibility in a border crisis

European screening systems connect identity verification with subsequent security assessment without collapsing the distinction between them. Under the Pact on Migration and Asylum, irregular arrivals are registered and undergo identity, security, health and vulnerability screening. Security checks draw on relevant European and national information systems, but the information retrieved still requires assessment by competent authorities.¹²

Ceuta exposed the vulnerability created when identity verification can no longer keep pace with entry. Spanish authorities subsequently identified individuals who had previously been linked to jihadism-related investigations, convictions, restrictions or other security concerns.¹³ Open sources do not consistently establish whether each individual's record concerned a conviction, entry restriction, historical investigative interest or current intelligence concern, categories that carry very different CT implications. The Ceuta cases therefore demonstrate that relevant security information existed within official systems, but they should not be treated collectively as evidence of a current terrorist threat or coordinated infiltration.

These post-entry identifications nevertheless illustrate a specific security loss. Existing information has limited preventive value if authorities cannot reliably connect it to the person to whom it relates while that person passes through the controlled screening process.

The quality of the CT picture should therefore be judged by the questions the information can answer, not by the volume of information available

Earlier identification does not necessarily imply refusal of entry, detention or any other coercive measure. Its security value lies in enabling the legally appropriate response while the individual remains within a controlled process. Such responses include further assessment, referral to competent authorities, investigation, surveillance where legally justified, or other case-specific action.

The post-Ceuta EU response addresses this loss of identity-to-information matching indirectly by strengthening warning before arrival volumes overwhelm border-processing capacity. The European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) combines national and Frontex surveillance and situational information into shared pictures of the external border and pre-frontier area.¹⁴ Enhanced use of the system can give European authorities earlier visibility over abnormal concentrations and movement patterns without relying exclusively on neighbouring states.

The post-Ceuta response most clearly improves warning visibility, the ability to detect that operational conditions are deteriorating before identity processing begins to fail. Warning visibility is valuable, but it is not equivalent to identity or threat visibility. More surveillance data can improve awareness of movement without reducing uncertainty about the people or networks involved. The quality of the CT picture should therefore be

judged by the questions the information can answer, not by the volume of information available.

Online mobilisation and physical concentrations near the border are indicators of mounting pressure, not of the terrorist composition of the movement. Online calls can reveal mobilisation, intent and momentum,¹⁵ while physical concentrations indicate proximity to the border and potential scale.¹⁶ Neither identifies who is moving or whether individuals already relevant to CT or security authorities are among them.

Existing legislation provides for a “rapid border intervention” where a Member State faces specific and disproportionate challenges at its external borders.¹⁷ Once a Member State requests such an intervention, the Frontex executive director has two working days from receipt of the request to decide. If the request is approved, the executive director and the host Member State must agree an operational plan within three working days of that decision, and the first redeployed border-management teams must be deployed no later than five working days after the plan is agreed.¹⁸ These are rapid timelines for a formal EU deployment process, but a mass crossing can overwhelm border-processing capacity within hours rather than days.



Image 2: The Ceuta–Morocco Border at Tarajal. View across the Spain–Morocco border at Tarajal, with Ceuta in the foreground and Fnideq, Morocco, beyond the frontier. Photo: José Sáez / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 2.0.

Spain has already sought to reduce that deployment lag. Following the crisis, Madrid requested an extension of Operation Minerva,¹⁹ 10 additional Frontex officers, assistance with returns and a permanent Frontex presence in Ceuta. As of 8 October, the Commission was still assessing the request for a permanent presence and had requested further clarification from Spain. A permanent presence would change the readiness problem rather than eliminate it: some capacity would already be positioned at the border, but authorities would still need to decide when normal posture should shift to surge posture and which additional CT-supporting functions should be activated.

The residual CT problem is therefore a decision threshold problem as much as a deployment problem. Even with additional or permanent Frontex capacity, baseline resources may be insufficient during an exceptional surge. Waiting for threat confirmation may preserve evidentiary discipline at the cost of losing the controlled environment in which relevant information can still be applied efficiently. The unresolved question is therefore what combination of deteriorating indicators should justify a reversible shift in posture before a specific terrorist threat has been established.

From external border uncertainty to Schengen consequences

Italy's temporary controls with Spain illustrate how uncertainty generated at an external border can be transmitted into Schengen. The controls followed concerns about possible terrorist infiltration, rather than evidence that an identified terrorist had travelled from Ceuta to Italy. Where the identity of part of an entering population remains unresolved and secondary movement cannot be excluded, another Member State may therefore compensate for uncertainty through broader precautionary controls rather than targeted security action.

**Unresolved identity
uncertainty is itself
transferable**

This spillover from external border uncertainty into internal Schengen controls matters beyond the immediate CT question. Schengen has been built around the absence of routine controls at internal borders; even lawful temporary reintroductions place institutional and political strain on that model. Rapid restoration of identity visibility at the external border is therefore a European public good because unresolved identity uncertainty is itself transferable: when it cannot be resolved where entry occurs, other Member States may manage it through broader precautionary controls elsewhere.

On 16 October, Spain and Italy agreed to coordinate the removal of the temporary internal border controls introduced following the Ceuta crisis, with Italy extending its measures for seven days to align their expiry with Spain's.²⁰ The agreement does not alter the underlying mechanism illustrated by the episode: unresolved identity uncertainty at an external border had already generated precautionary restrictions elsewhere in Schengen. It does, however, demonstrate that such measures can be reversed through subsequent political and operational coordination. The strategic concern is therefore not their permanence, but the capacity of a localised border shock to generate wider restrictions before threat-specific uncertainty has been resolved.

Dependence: Which counterterrorism vulnerabilities has Europe reduced?

CEP's first report established that Ceuta exposed the risks created by externalised border dependence. The post-Ceuta question is more discriminating: which dependencies can European capacity actually reduce, and which remain structurally external?

The answer differs by function. Morocco exercises sovereign authority upstream of the Ceuta border and possesses forms of territorial access and intelligence collection that

Spain and the EU cannot independently reproduce. Spain bears the immediate consequences when that border comes under pressure, while the EU contributes surveillance, common information systems, operational reinforcement, funding and Schengen governance. “Upstream” should therefore not be treated as a single category: border enforcement, intelligence collection and investigative action differ sharply in how far they can be substituted.

The post-Ceuta measures most clearly increase European control over situational awareness and downstream capacity. EUROSUR and Frontex can reduce reliance on Moroccan warning that a large movement is developing; European information systems can strengthen identification once individuals reach EU jurisdiction; and additional personnel can reinforce an overloaded border operation. These are functions for which European capacity can meaningfully expand.

Threat-specific intelligence is different. EUROSUR can reveal movement without identifying the network behind it, while European databases can surface information that has already entered those systems. EU-level intelligence assessment also needs to be distinguished from collection: EU INTCEN (European Union Intelligence and Situation Centre) can integrate and assess information supplied through European and national channels, but it is not an EU HUMINT (Human Intelligence) service capable of reproducing source-based collection conducted by national or third-country intelligence services. Nor can additional European capacity reproduce Moroccan surveillance, arrest or investigative authority inside Morocco. The post-Ceuta response therefore reduces dependence on Morocco most effectively where the underlying function is operationally substitutable through European capacity. It does much less where the dependency derives from sovereign access rather than European capacity.



Image 3: A French Customs ocean patrol vessel deployed off Chios during a Frontex operation. Photo: Pierre Faissat / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0.

The timing of compensation also matters. At the border, authorities deal with a defined population at a controlled point. Once unidentified entrants disperse, CT work may require locating individuals, reconstructing movements and resolving identities within a population of uncertain size and composition. Downstream investigation can recover security visibility, but it does not recreate the preventive opportunity available at the original encounter. Compensation therefore changes the geometry of the CT task: the problem shifts from assessing a concentrated population at a controlled point to finding and resolving individuals within a dispersed population under greater uncertainty.

Dependence must also be disaggregated by portfolio. Border enforcement, migration cooperation, readmission, organised crime cooperation and CT intelligence involve different institutions and channels. A deterioration in one should therefore not be assumed to imply deterioration in another. The relevant tests are which function has been affected, whether disruption spills across portfolios and whether Spain or the EU possesses a credible substitute for that specific loss.

The post-Ceuta measures respond differently to those forms of dependence. EUROSUR, common information systems and greater Frontex capacity expand functions under European control, while the Commission's five-point plan simultaneously retains cooperation with third countries as a central element of prevention, migration management and return.²¹ Greater European capacity can therefore reduce avoidable exposure where a function is substitutable without requiring withdrawal from cooperation where foreign jurisdiction or access remains operationally valuable.

The appropriate objective is therefore selective de-risking: reducing dependence where Europe can credibly reproduce the function, and, where Europe cannot, managing explicitly those dependencies rooted in foreign jurisdiction. This does not mean decoupling from productive third-country cooperation. It means avoiding unnecessary exposure in substitutable functions while recognising where external access remains structurally important. De-risking one portfolio may also increase the relative importance of functions that remain harder to substitute, so reduced dependence in one domain should not be assumed automatically to reduce exposure across the entire relationship. In some cases, greater autonomy in substitutable functions may increase the strategic weight of the few functions that remain non-substitutable.

Sovereignty: What greater European capacity does (and does not) buy

For purposes of this analysis, sovereignty concerns optionality: the degree to which Spain and the EU retain meaningful choices over security outcomes for which they remain politically accountable. The post-Ceuta response increases that optionality because greater European surveillance, operational support and common capacity can allow Spain to absorb some short-term disruption without making the restoration of every form of Moroccan cooperation an immediate operational necessity.

European reinforcement therefore changes the conditions under which political decisions are made; it does not produce security independence.

The ability to absorb short-term disruption matters politically. The greater the capacity of Spain and the EU to absorb disruption, the more room they have to calibrate their response to the actor associated with it, rather than responding under immediate operational pressure. European reinforcement therefore changes the conditions under which political decisions are made; it does not produce security independence.

Attribution determines the value of that autonomy

The greater room for manoeuvre created by European capacity becomes politically meaningful only in relation to attribution. Different conclusions about what occurred in Ceuta would justify different responses, and the evidentiary picture remains incomplete. Parliamentary scrutiny in Spain was left unfinished by the dissolution of the Cortes on 6 October,²² while the European Parliament has already characterised the events politically as hybrid attacks and migration instrumentalisation.²³ Political characterisation, legal qualification and intelligence attribution should remain distinct: they answer different questions about conduct, intent and responsibility.

New evidence also broadens the attribution problem beyond border management. At least one Moroccan frigate and several Royal Moroccan Navy patrol vessels entered waters under Spanish sovereignty off Ceuta during the mass crossing, with further incursions reported in the following days.²⁴ Spanish naval assets were subsequently deployed, and the matter was addressed through high-level defence contacts. Unlike alleged passivity or facilitation by border personnel, the movement of Royal Moroccan Navy vessels constitutes conduct by a formal state military institution. The temporal coincidence does not, by itself, establish operational coordination between the naval activity and the mass crossing. It does, however, broaden the attribution question: analysis must now distinguish not only between state and non-state actors, but also among separate state portfolios whose conduct may carry different implications for the wider bilateral relationship.

The Commission's subsequent response illustrates the practical significance of that distinction. Asked about the naval incursion on 14 October, the Commission referred the incident to Spain and Morocco for clarification while simultaneously reaffirming that Ceuta and Melilla form part of the EU's external border and describing Morocco as an important strategic partner whose migration cooperation with the Union should continue

and deepen.²⁵ The EU response therefore remains deliberately compartmentalised: absent evidence of spillover, the naval episode has not been treated by the Commission as grounds for reconsidering cooperation in other portfolios, most visibly migration. This amounts to functional risk management rather than political exoneration: cooperation is preserved where its reliability has not been called into question, while attribution proceeds separately in the portfolio where problematic conduct is alleged.



Image 4: European Commission Briefing on the Ceuta Naval Incident, 14 October 2026. European Commission midday press briefing in Brussels, 14 October 2026, during the Q&A on the reported Moroccan naval incursion off Ceuta. The Commission referred clarification of the incident to Spain and Morocco while reaffirming that Ceuta and Melilla form part of the EU's external border and describing Morocco as an important strategic partner. Still image from European Commission Audiovisual Service, 14 October 2026. © European Union, 2026.

That distinction is important because the phenomena observed around the crisis carry different evidentiary and policy implications. Evidence of criminal facilitation does not establish state orchestration; jihadist exploitation of the resulting disorder does not establish involvement in organising the crossing; and conduct by a state institution in one domain, including military or border activity, does not, without further evidence, establish coordination with criminal or extremist actors or authorship of the mass crossing itself. Conflating these questions can distort CT priorities by turning opportunistic exploitation into evidence of authorship, or evidence from one state-security portfolio into conclusions about another.

Where state responsibility is at issue, the analysis must also distinguish among levels and institutions. Conduct by local border personnel, migration authorities, military authorities, security services and central political leadership should not be collapsed without evidence of direction or coordination. The institutional locus of any substantiated conduct matters as much as the fact of attribution itself, because it determines which parts of the wider relationship are actually implicated.

The sovereignty implications follow from these distinctions. A finding confined to border management conduct would create a different set of political options from a finding of

deliberate military or territorial pressure, and both would differ again from evidence implicating security information channels. Attribution therefore determines not simply how strongly Spain or the EU may wish to respond, but which parts of the bilateral relationship are implicated, and which forms of cooperation can reasonably remain insulated from that response. This is where strategic trust becomes relevant.

If attribution extends to counterterrorism channels: Implications for cooperation

The available evidence does not establish that Moroccan CT cooperation was compromised during the Ceuta crisis. The newly documented naval activity does not, by itself, alter that conclusion. Continuity should therefore remain the baseline where CT channels remain operational and reliable.

Any departure from that baseline should be evidence-led. If ongoing investigations raise questions about security information channels themselves, reassessment should rest on operational indicators (such as abnormal delays, unexplained gaps or repeated inconsistencies with independently obtained information) rather than political inference. Greater European capacity can provide more room for manoeuvre while such judgements are made, but it cannot resolve the attribution question itself.

The missing dimension: humanitarian capacity as a security and democratic variable

Humanitarian and CT functions remain institutionally distinct, but they can compete for and depend on the same processing infrastructure during an extreme border shock. The Pact itself reflects that operational overlap by placing identity and security checks alongside health and vulnerability assessment within the same screening process.

When reception capacity is overwhelmed, humanitarian failure can become a security bottleneck rather than merely a parallel workload

When reception capacity is overwhelmed, humanitarian failure can become a security bottleneck rather than merely a parallel workload. Interpreters, registration staff, processing space, medical triage and child protection capacity all affect the speed and accuracy with which authorities can establish identity and separate categories of need. The relevant security variable is therefore not humanitarian capacity in the abstract, but whether shared processing infrastructure remains functional enough to support accurate discrimination.

The reverse risk also matters. Treating a wider migrant population as presumptively security-relevant increases the number of people receiving security attention without necessarily improving identification of the few who genuinely warrant it. For a CT system, precision is a security capability. Under overload, indiscriminate securitisation can therefore degrade performance by increasing the denominator of cases requiring attention while specialist capacity remains finite.

Democratic consequences are not external to the security problem

The democratic security effect operates through competing narratives. Loss of control can be framed as evidence of state weakness, while coercive or rights-deficient responses can be framed as evidence of state illegitimacy. Those narratives can be exploited by different extremist milieus simultaneously, creating pressure for increasingly polarised policy choices. The strategic consequence is a narrower space for proportionate response: measures designed to restore control may themselves generate political effects that complicate subsequent crisis management.

The implication is not that humanitarian policy should be subordinated to security, but that legally and operationally credible humanitarian capacity helps prevent the crisis response itself from generating additional vulnerabilities.



Image 5: “El pueblo salva al pueblo”: Protest and Political Distrust in Ceuta. Demonstrators in Ceuta under the slogan “El pueblo salva al pueblo” (“The people save the people”). The protest reflects frustration with political institutions and a perceived failure of government response. Such legitimate grievances can create openings for extremist actors seeking to appropriate, amplify or radicalise broader public discontent. Photo: Xemenendura / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0.

The post-Ceuta response: a selective rather than comprehensive correction

The post-Ceuta response is best understood as a selective correction because its strongest measures concentrate on functions the EU can govern directly once pressure reaches European jurisdiction. It is substantial where the crisis is framed as a migration management problem: the Pact strengthens registration and screening, the Commission plan prioritises anticipation and external border support, and the Return Regulation reinforces downstream enforcement.

The response’s CT effects are more uneven. European authorities are gaining greater control over situational awareness, border reinforcement and some downstream investigative capacity, while threat-specific intelligence and sovereign access inside

Morocco remain much harder, or impossible, to reproduce. The response therefore reduces vulnerabilities that are amenable to European capacity-building, displaces others into the post-entry environment, and leaves substantially intact those rooted in foreign intelligence access, jurisdiction and sovereign authority.

The humanitarian correction is less developed politically. Although the Pact embeds health and vulnerability safeguards in screening, the high-profile response after Ceuta has centred on control, prevention and return. That leaves a residual risk that future operational planning strengthens migration control capacity without protecting the humanitarian infrastructure on which orderly identification, democratic legitimacy and, ultimately, CT precision also depend.

From a migration-led response to shock-adaptive security preparedness

Europe does not require a new CT regime for migration emergencies. Nor should migration control instruments be repurposed into general counterterrorism instruments.

The policy requirement is narrower: the measures already being strengthened after Ceuta should be designed so that they also preserve the conditions under which CT, humanitarian and democratic institutions can continue to perform their distinct functions during an extreme shock.

A shock-adaptive approach would therefore supplement the current migration-led response in four areas.

Preserve CT discrimination as visibility deteriorates

EU and national contingency plans should specify a limited set of CT-relevant degradation indicators (such as growth in the unidentified population, identification latency, unresolved security matches and delays in relevant partner information) and link them to predefined support measures. These indicators should trigger additional capacity, not a lower evidentiary threshold for action against individuals. Their purpose is to measure degradation of the operating environment, not to infer threat from population movement itself.

Close the gap between warning and usable reinforcement

Spain and the EU should develop a graduated readiness protocol linking specified combinations of warning indicators to reversible measures short of full emergency deployment: placing relevant Frontex resources on pre-alert, additional analytical staffing, verification of reserve processing capacity and intensified liaison with relevant services. The protocol should distinguish at least three decision states (heightened monitoring, precautionary reinforcement and emergency surge) so that warning produces proportionate posture changes rather than a binary choice between normal operations and full intervention.

Precautionary CT readiness also has an opportunity cost. Repeated mobilisation around border shocks can draw specialist analysts, liaison officers and investigative capacity away from ongoing terrorism cases. A graduated protocol should therefore distinguish low-cost posture changes from measures that materially consume routine CT capacity and reserve the latter for situations in which the security indicators justify that trade-off.

Such measures should have clear de-escalation criteria. A system capable of escalating readiness early but unable to stand down efficiently will consume resources unnecessarily and become vulnerable to alert fatigue.

A predictable trigger architecture can itself become observable to an adversary; preparedness therefore has to be rule-based internally without becoming mechanically exploitable externally.

The early-warning architecture must also remain robust against deliberate manipulation. If online mobilisation or visible border concentrations become recognised triggers for European precautionary action, hostile actors may attempt to manufacture or amplify those signals to probe thresholds or divert resources. A predictable trigger architecture can itself become observable to an adversary; preparedness therefore has to be rule-based internally without becoming mechanically exploitable externally.

Corroboration should therefore matter as much as sensitivity. No single externally observable indicator should trigger resource-intensive escalation automatically; higher readiness should require convergence across independent sources or a high-confidence security indicator.

Protect shared processing capacity across migration, protection and security functions

The third requirement is to protect the shared processing capacity on which migration management, humanitarian protection and security functions simultaneously depend.

Contingency planning should treat these resources as a shared capacity pool rather than as assets belonging exclusively to separate institutional plans. Exercises should identify which functions compete for the same interpreters, registration personnel, processing space, transport, communications and medical triage, and establish minimum protected capacity for each critical function under surge conditions.

They should also test whether emergency measures remain implementable within rights obligations and whether failures in reception or protection create avoidable political or extremist exploitation risks.

Map and stress-test non-substitutable third-country dependencies

The need to map non-substitutable dependencies extends beyond Morocco to third-country relationships in which EU migration management, border security or CT depend on functions performed outside EU jurisdiction. EU and national contingency planning should distinguish functions that can be reproduced internally from those that depend on

foreign territory, sovereign authority or source access, and identify credible compensatory options for each. Stress tests should then examine different failure modes (temporary interruption, degraded reliability, politically selective cooperation and complete loss of access) because the compensatory options available under each are not the same.

Morocco illustrates the distinction clearly. European surveillance and border reinforcement can reduce reliance on Moroccan warning or enforcement, but they cannot reproduce Moroccan HUMINT or investigative authority inside Morocco. Greater European capacity should therefore be used to reduce avoidable dependence and create political room for manoeuvre, not to assume all external dependencies can be eliminated.

The requirement is therefore not to duplicate the source- and channel-validation already conducted by intelligence services, but to incorporate non-substitutable external functions into strategic contingency planning. The objective is to give political decisionmakers a pre-crisis map of where autonomy is real, where compensation is possible only after disruption, and where Europe remains structurally dependent on access or authority it cannot reproduce. That distinction determines not only operational preparedness, but how much political freedom the EU retains when a critical partner is itself part of the crisis.

From a Migration-Led Response to Shock-Adaptive Security Preparedness



Policy premise: Europe does not need a new counterterrorism regime for migration emergencies, nor should migration control be repurposed into general counterterrorism. The priority is to adapt the measures already being strengthened after Ceuta so that counterterrorism, humanitarian and democratic institutions can continue to perform their distinct functions during an extreme shock.

1 Preserve CT discrimination as visibility deteriorates



- **Track degradation indicators:** unidentified population, identification latency, unresolved security matches, delays in partner information
- **Use these indicators to trigger extra capacity,** not lower evidentiary thresholds
- **Measure degradation of the operating environment,** not threat from population movement itself

2 Close the gap between warning and usable reinforcement



- **Adopt a graduated protocol with 3 states:** heightened monitoring, precautionary reinforcement and emergency surge
- **Reversible measures can include** Frontex pre-alert, extra analysts, reserve processing checks and intensified liaison
- **Set clear de-escalation criteria** and protect routine CT capacity from unnecessary mobilisation
- **Escalate on corroborated signals,** not on a single visible trigger

3 Protect shared processing capacity



- **Treat interpreters, registration staff, space,** transport, communications and medical triage as a shared surge pool
- **Set minimum protected capacity** for migration, protection and security functions
- **Test rights compliance** and whether reception failures create political or extremist exploitation risks

4 Map and stress-test non-substitutable third-country dependencies



- **Separate functions** that can be reproduced internally from those requiring foreign territory, sovereign authority or source access
- **Stress-test four failure modes:** temporary interruption, degraded reliability, selective cooperation and complete loss of access
- **Build compensatory options** to reduce avoidable dependence and preserve political room for manoeuvre



Preparedness goal

Supplement the current migration-led response so Europe can absorb extreme border shocks without collapsing CT discrimination, humanitarian protection or democratic legitimacy.

Figure 3: From a migration-led response to a shock-adaptive security preparedness

Conclusion

The EU response to Ceuta is substantial but selective. It is strongest where the underlying function can be brought further under European control: anticipation, border reinforcement, screening, return and downstream enforcement. Those measures can improve CT outcomes, but they do not address every CT-relevant vulnerability exposed in July.

The central distinction is between vulnerabilities that can be reduced through additional European capacity and those that derive from jurisdiction, access or shared operating conditions. Situational awareness, screening and downstream reinforcement can be strengthened within the EU. Threat-specific intelligence, territorial access and sovereign action inside a third country cannot be reproduced in the same way. Greater European capacity can nevertheless increase political optionality by reducing the immediate

operational cost of disruption, giving Spain and the EU more room to respond selectively where attribution implicates one part of a third-country relationship without assuming every other channel has become unreliable. Humanitarian capacity represents a third category: it is neither an external dependency nor a CT function, but a shared operating condition whose degradation can reduce identification quality and CT precision.

Otherwise, the EU may become better at managing the movement produced by a future shock without becoming equally better at managing its security consequences.

The strategic test after Ceuta is therefore not whether Europe can prevent or absorb another mass crossing. The test is whether greater control over migration pressure also preserves security discrimination under overload, reduces dependencies that Europe can realistically substitute, preserves access to external functions for which no credible substitute exists, and prevents compensatory measures from generating new operational or political vulnerabilities elsewhere in the system. Otherwise, the EU may become

better at managing the movement produced by a future shock without becoming equally better at managing its security consequences.

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