

Italy's role in NATO. Part 1

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Main points:

- Italy's areas of action in the NATO framework have been the MENA region and Europe;
- Italy has been striving to draw NATO's attention to the Mediterranean Sea and to assert its leading role in defence and security issues in the region;
- Italy, as a major energy consumer and importer, plays a key role in the transit of energy resources from the MENA region to Europe thanks to its location, infrastructure, and tradition of good relations with the MENA states, significantly contributing to European NATO countries' energy security;
- NATO operations in the Mediterranean and Italy's proactive participation is likely to increase in the future due to the ongoing security threats occurring in the region.

Antecedents of the Italy-NATO partnership

The beginning of Italy's history in NATO dates back to the end of the Second World War, when the US forces played an important role in the country's liberation process. In the following decades, Italy was a recipient of significant US Marshall Plan funds in the framework of the Truman Doctrine on the economic reconstruction of Europe. In the US projection, the intervention in Italy was part of a strategy aimed at securing a place among Italy's post-war allies and ensuring that the newborn Italian Republic, a European country transitioning from a dictatorship to a democracy, would have been part of the Western hemisphere. Italy was considered important first of all due to its strategically **relevant location in the centre of the Mediterranean**, which would have enabled the NATO forces to keep a watchful eye on neighbouring Yugoslavia (from US and British-administrated Zone A of the Free Territory of Trieste) and Northern Africa. What is more, Western powers' push for Italy's NATO membership was also an attempt to **deter the influence of the Italian Communist Party (PCI)**, the second-largest political party and the largest Communist party in Western Europe at that time.

Christian Democrat Alcide De Gasperi's government, with the obvious exception of the PCI, envisioned the West as Italy's natural ally in the bipolar Cold War context, and the prospect of such an alignment as Italy's occasion to reassert its position in the European political arena

after the disastrous twenty years of fascism¹. The membership treaty was signed on 4th April 1949. Despite being a defeated power after the Second World War, Italy rapidly integrated into the NATO framework as a founding member.

Nowadays, Italy is an active NATO member and hosts numerous NATO bases on its territory:

- Camp Ederle, Vicenza, NATO's headquarter in Southern Europe;
- NATO Hub for the South, based in Naples, promoting stability and ensuring security in Southern Europe;
- Allied Joint Force Command, training initiative based in Naples;
- NATO Rapid Deployable Corps, with its institutional headquarter in Milan and operational headquarter in Solbiate Olona, province of Varese;
- Aviano Air Base, Friuli-Venezia Giulia;
- Sigonella, Sicily (Allied Group Surveillance);
- Trapani (NATO Airborne Early Warning & Control Force – Forward Operating Base);
- Naval Support Activity Naples Department, Gaeta;
- MARIBASE Taranto, NATO's checkpoint;
- NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence, Rome.

Italy's Mediterranean role in NATO security framework

Especially at the beginning of its partnership with NATO, Italy acted in total compliance with the US foreign policy projects. However, in the 1980s', under the initiative of then-Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo, Italy underlined the necessity to intensify Euro-Atlantic consultations and to **drive NATO's attention to the neglected Mediterranean**, Italy's traditional area of interest². Such position was significantly expressed by Socialist Bettino Craxi, who pointed out that the NATO countries were undermining the significance of the Mediterranean in their security strategy and not using "the potential for relations that could ensure us an active role, useful for us and for the whole region"³.

¹ A. Varsori, *L'adesione dell'Italia al Patto atlantico*, in *MemoriaWeb – Trimestrale dell'Archivio storico del Senato della Repubblica*, no. 25, March 2019, pp. 1-5, https://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/file/Varsori_Patto_atlantico.pdf.

² D. A. Wertman, *Italian foreign policy in the 1980s': what kind of role?*, in *SAIS Review*, The John Hopkins University Press, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 1982, pp. 115-118.

³ Wilson Center Digital Archive, *During a meeting of the Central Committee of the Socialist Party, Craxi presents his point of view on the tense International situation*, 14-17 January 1980 <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113300>.

During the Cold War, NATO's activities in southern Europe were focused on the broad goal of keeping the Soviet Union away from 'warm water', without necessarily addressing the **specific security needs of the Mediterranean countries**, such as securing energy security, tackling piracy and preventing terrorist activities against, for example, commercial ships. European Mediterranean states have been showing the greatest interest in pushing for NATO's greater involvement in the area, since the stability of their MENA neighbours, achievable through, among others, terrorism and radicalisation tackling, border security, and migration management, is a key aspect for both local and NATO security. In 1995, then-Italian minister for defence warned NATO that the 'southern flank' shall not be undermined since it would become an increasingly more important area of defence and security action in the years to come, and that NATO needed to draft an adequate policy towards the region anticipating its destabilisation, instead of "waiting and seeing"⁴.

European Mediterranean countries believe the **engagement of MENA states** in security implementation operations in the region to be fundamental in ensuring good standards of security for the South of Europe. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, France, Italy, and Spain attempted to promote cooperation across the Mediterranean region through regional arrangements such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean and the Western Mediterranean Group. However, these initiatives did not develop successfully due to the civil war in Algeria and the introduction of international sanctions against Libya⁵. Simultaneously, a consensus was shaped among the member states of the Alliance as to the fact that stability and security in Europe are closely linked to stability and security in the Mediterranean region. Hence, **NATO's decision in February 1995 to begin a direct dialogue with non-NATO countries in the Mediterranean region. After consultations with countries in the region, states such as Egypt, Israel, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia accepted the invitation and became members of what later became known as the Mediterranean Dialogue.** Italy also endorsed the MD initiative, which has been providing a discussion and cooperation platform for the North Atlantic Council with seven third countries (currently, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria)⁶. Till today, MD

⁴ D. A. Leurdijk, *NATO's Mediterranean Dialog: The Emergence of a Front Line in the War on Terrorism*, in *AtlantischPerspectief*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (2004), p. 19-20.

⁵ G. Hunter, *The Mediterranean Dialogue – A Transatlantic Approach*, Arbeitspapiere zur Internationalen Politikund Außenpolitik, AIPA 2/2005, p. 2-19.

⁶ NATO's webpage – NATO Mediterranean Dialogue https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_60021.htm accessed: 16/08/2021.

confirms that transatlantic security cannot be separated from security in the Mediterranean. Threats such as the conflicts in Syria, Libya, increased migration, terrorism, the phenomenon of international fighters, or tensions between Greece and Turkey should be mentioned. This leads to the conclusion that NATO must constantly cooperate with its regional partners.

The “Arab Spring” and its subsequent consequences have brought both new challenges and opportunities to the Mediterranean Dialogue. **The seven MD partners share an interest in engaging with NATO and consider the Alliance to be an influential strategic actor and practical contributor to their security needs. Perhaps this interest has increased in recent years as partnership activities have accelerated and been more closely aligned with partners' individual interests due to threats such as international conflicts and terrorism.**

This vision was reiterated with the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), launched in 2004 with the purpose of involving the Gulf states (currently, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE) in security issues⁷.

The Mediterranean Dialogue initiative marked some important achievements in terms of reinforcing security and stability in the Mediterranean and building closer MENA-NATO cooperation. However, especially on the verge of emerging fundamentalism and terrorism from within the region, a **shift from dialogue to the proper partnership** was very needed⁸. In 2004, the seven southern Mediterranean countries of the Mediterranean Dialogue joined the Operation Active Endeavour (OAE), the anti-terrorism NATO network-based operation launched in the eastern Mediterranean right after the 9/11 attack against the US. The Mediterranean region was recognised, as stated by then-NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson, to be “a legitimate part (of its) area of security interest”⁹. Its aim was to ensure Maritime Situational Awareness and rapidly intervene in case terrorist activities were recorded in the Mediterranean. Importantly, OAE was initially classified as an Art. 5 operation, applying the principle of solidarity through the collective defence in response to a threat endangering one of the member states, and, therefore, at the beginning only NATO members were taking part

⁷ C. Yenigun, *Gulf security, NATO and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative*, in *NATO's approach to Gulf cooperation: lessons learned and future challenges*, The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2015, pp. 33-34.

⁸ P. Razoux, *The NATO Mediterranean Dialogue at a crossroad*, NATO Defence College, 2008, p. 2.

⁹ NATO, Speech by NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, in *NATO in the Mediterranean – moving from dialogue to partnership*, 29th April 2002 <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020429a.htm> accessed: 18/08/2021.

in it (including Italy with its submarines, helicopters, and NATO Standing Naval Forces frigates)¹⁰. **The later participation of some MENA countries, facilitated by the MD framework, in such an important NATO operation, supported Italy's belief that Mediterranean states play a crucial role in security missions concerning the very region**¹¹. In the same period characterised by increased NATO engagement and great instability in the area, then-Italian minister for foreign affairs Franco Frattini consistently pointed out once again that it was the West's interest to foster good governance and economic development in the MENA region through projects such as the Mediterranean Dialogue, the EU Barcelona Process, and the broader US-led Greater Middle East Initiative, using both military cooperation and prevention soft power tools¹². Such statement is to be framed Italy's opposing to the now obsolete East-West vision of the world still rooted in NATO's understanding of global security issues and acknowledge the existence of the South as a more recent strategic flank, whose growing importance calls for properly-designed security policies in order to anticipate its impact on both Europe and NATO¹³. **It is true that the objectives for security are probably closer than at any time in history if Europe and the Maghreb States are perceived in terms of North – South**¹⁴.

Those countries' increasing partaking in NATO initiatives stresses the growing necessity to discuss their future in the organisation, evidencing diverging approaches within the very NATO. On the one hand, Italy, as many European Mediterranean countries, would support the full **partnership of southern third partners**, since they have been proved to be instrumental in achieving specific security goals in the region, such as combating drug trafficking and human trafficking. Moreover, countries like Italy consider especially North African countries' accession to be fundamental for their own domestic security interest, as membership would help stabilize their knowingly unstable southern neighbours. On the other, **continental European states and the US are sceptical about southward enlargement and their interest**

¹⁰Ministry for Defence, Navy (Marina Militare) – Operation Active Endeavour <https://www.marina.difesa.it/cosa-facciamo/per-la-difesa-sicurezza/operazioni-conclude/Pagine/ActiveEndeavour.aspx> accessed: 18/08/2021.

¹¹ R. El Houdaïgui, *L'Opération Active Endeavour et son impact sur le Dialogue Méditerranéen de l'OTAN*, in *L'Opération Active Endeavour (OAE)*, NATO Defence College, 2007, pp. 15-23.

¹²D. A. Leurdijk, op. cit., p. 20.

¹³ M. Geri, *NATO and a new strategy for the South: updating the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative*, The Euro-Gulf Information Centre, 2020 <https://www.egic.info/nato-new-strategy-for-the-south> accessed: 18/08/2021.

¹⁴ I. Lesser, C. Brandsma, L. Basagni, B. Lété, *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue - perspectives on security, strategy and partnership*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2018, p. 2-34.

has always been oriented predominantly eastwards, towards ex-Soviet countries. Such tendency became even more marked since the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Ukraine escalated in 2014, drawing all the attention of NATO policy formulation.

Beside acknowledging the importance of Western partners' role in Ukraine, Italy, as many other Mediterranean and Balkan countries, points out that NATO should not only function as a collective defence instrument, but also deliver a **“360° defence” service in the vicinity of all member states**, and criticises NATO's neglecting attitude towards Mediterranean issues. As a matter of fact, no decision regarding stabilisation in North Africa was taken in the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago, despite NATO forces did carry out an air campaign in Gaddafi's Libya the year before. Similarly, in the 2014 summit in Wales, the security situation in western European countries was the core of the discussion despite the looming threat of the Islamic States in nearby Syria and Iraq, where NATO played in fact a merely mobilisation/support role¹⁵.

In the NATO summit in Warsaw in 2016, the transition from the Operation Active Endeavour to the Operation Sea Guardian, in the framework of the Alliance Maritime Strategy, marked a further chapter of an increasingly integrated Mediterranean security partnership strongly desired, among others, by Italy. **The operation is carried out to: maintain security, counter-terrorism, build defence capabilities in the region, protect freedom of navigation and critical infrastructure, and help maintain cooperative security with other actors in the region**¹⁶. It is conducted in synergy with Frontex and, till 30th March 2020, with the EU maritime defence operation EUNAVFOR Med (European Union Naval Force Mediterranean, also known as Sophia operation). For its location and rooted partnership in all the involved organisations and institutions, Italy has been a naturally important player in the operation and contributed with 240 soldiers and one vessel¹⁷.

Italy's deep interest in the MENA area is witnessed by the country's conspicuous **engagement in other NATO missions**¹⁸.

¹⁵ A. Marrone, *The West and security in the Mediterranean*, in *Italy and security in the Mediterranean*, IstitutoAffariInternazionali, 2016, pp. 85-87.

¹⁶ I. Lesser, C. Brandsma, L. Basagni, B. Lété, *The Future of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue - perspectives on security, strategy and partnership*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2018, p. 33-34.

¹⁷ Ministry for Defence, Navy (Marina Militare), *Mediterranean – the NATO Operation Sea Guardian* https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Active-Endeavour/Pagine/default.aspx accessed: 18/08/2021.

¹⁸ V. Camporini, T. De Zan, A. Marrone, M. Nones, A. R. Ungaro, *The Role of Italian Fighter Aircraft in Crisis Management Operations: Trends and Needs*, in *Italy's participation in crisis management operations*, IstitutoAffariInternazionali, 2014, pp. 31-58.

In the Operation Desert Storm in Iraq (1990-1991) launched in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Italy contributed with a cell of F104-G from the 28th squadron, which successfully completed deterrence missions, and 8 Tornado fighters of 6th, 36th, and 50th Wings.

During NATO's anti-terrorist military intervention in Afghanistan (2001-2014), Italy contributed to:

- Operation Enduring Freedom with the Garibaldi Carrier, three support frigates, 8 AV-8B, and a dozen of combat helicopters, for a total of 1,400 military personnel
- International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with a few hundred troops in 2002 and nearly 4,000 in 2009, 2,165 units on the ground, 4 Tornados deployed in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities, ranking fourth among contributing countries

What is more, Italy continued its engagement in Afghanistan in the framework of the non-combat Resolute Support mission, launched in 2015 as a replacement of ISAF and concluded in June 2021¹⁹.

Italy took part in the NATO multinational air campaign in Libya from March to October 2011, in response to the revolts against the Gaddafi regime in February 2011. As in the case of the Balkan wars, the primary reason for Italy's partaking in the mission was the fear of retaliation by nearby Libya. Italy made available its military basis in Aviano, Amendola, Decimomannu, Gioia del Colle, Pantelleria, Sigonella, Trapani, as well as the Joint Force Command (JFC) in Naples for launching and controlling NATO air operations across the Mediterranean. What is more, Italy deployed F-16, Eurofighter, Tornado, AMX, AV-8B, and KC-130J, and KC-767A as well as Predators B tankers, conducting Suppression of Enemy Air Defences, Defensive Counter Air, Offensive Counter Air and Strike Coordination And Reconnaissance, and Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance activities in the framework of the Operation Odyssey Dawn and then Operation Unified Protector.

Moreover, the Italian Navy participated in the anti-piracy NATO Operation Ocean Shield off the coasts of the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean, archived in 2016, by providing ships for the Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG1 and SNMG2), NATO's Immediate Reaction

¹⁹ Ministry for Defence, *Afghanistan – Resolute Support*
http://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni_oltremare/pagine/afghanistan-rs.aspx accessed: 23/08/2021.

Forces. Significantly, in 2012 Italian Rear Admiral Antonio Natale assumed the command of the SNMG2²⁰.

²⁰ Ministry of Defence, *L'Italian al comando dell'operazione antipirateria Ocean Shield* L'Italia al comando dell'operazione antipirateria Ocean Shield - Difesa.it accessed: 23/08/2021.

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