

Italy's role in NATO. Part 2

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Main points:

- Italy has been partaking in numerous NATO missions in Europe and brought an important contribution in the NATO operations during the wars in the Balkans;
- Italy plays a major role in Europe's energy security by securing the transit of oil and gas through its territory and infrastructures;
- NATO's positive involvement trend in the Mediterranean is likely to be reinforced in the future and Italy will continue cultivating its leading role in shaping and implementing NATO security plan in the Mediterranean.

Engagements of Italy in NATO missions in Europe

During the wars in the **Balkans** in the 1990s, Italy showed great interest in taking part in the NATO missions, as the country felt threatened by the geographical proximity to the conflict field and the Serbian armed forces. Italy contributed to the NATO campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1993-1998) by providing logistic support in the basis of Rimini, Piacenza, Ghedi, Brindisi, and Villafranca and by taking part in several operations, ranking fourth among contributing countries¹:

- in the Operation Deny Flight with Tornado and AMX fighter aircraft and logistical support to NATO units deployed on Italian military bases²;
- in the Operation Sharp Guard with 8 Tornados and support for UN maritime embargo to tackle weapon import by the enemy combatants³;
- in the Operation Deliberate Force with 8 Tornado, 6 AMX, one Boeing 707 Tanker, one C-130, and four G-222⁴;
- in the Operation Decisive Endeavour with 8 Tornado and 6 AMX⁵;

Moreover, since 1999 Italy has provided 50 aircraft, including F-104, Tornado, AMX, and AV-8B in Kosovo.⁶

¹ V. Camporini, T. De Zan, A. Marrone, M. Nones, A. R. Ungaro, *The role of Italian fighter aircraft in crisis management operation: trends and needs*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI Research Papers, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2014, p. 11.

² Idem, p. 38.

³ Idem.

⁴ C. R. C. Owen, *Deliberate Force: a case study in effective air campaigning*, Air University Press, 2000, p. 53.

⁵ V. Camporini et alia, op. cit. p. 39.

⁶ Idem, p. 10.

Nowadays, Italy cooperates with NATO in the Balkan in the framework of the NATO Liaison Office in Skopje, North Macedonia, the Operation Kosovo Force (KFOR), the NATO Military Liaison Office Belgrade, Serbia, as well as the Operation Joint Forge in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in direct contact with the JFC Naples⁷.

Italy's military engagement in NATO missions, however, is not limited to its immediate vicinities. As a matter of fact, Italy has been the only country to take in all the operations of the NATO Baltic Air Policing, aimed at preserving the integrity of **Baltic states' airspace** since 2015. Italy has been contributing with aircrafts of the 46th Air Brigade of Pisa and the 14th Sea Practice Flock (it. *Stormo di Pratica di Mare*)⁸.

Italy's energy resources reception capacity as a buffer for European NATO countries' energy security

Italy is a **major oil and natural gas consumer and minor producer**. It consumed 169.079 million tonnes of oil in 2019⁹. In 2020, oil consumption fell by 16.7% due to the pandemic crisis¹⁰. Moreover, Italy consumed 74.3 billion cubic meters of natural gas in 2019 and 71 billion in 2020¹¹.

Italy is able to self-produce just a small portion of the entire national requirement. Only 6.5% of the whole amount of consumed gas was nationally sourced in 2019, and 5.7% in 2020. Similarly, the country extracted only 7.5% of the national oil requirement in 2019¹², while import made up more than 90% of it¹³. National energy companies' production activities have

⁷ Ministry for Defence, *Operazioni internazionali in corso* https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Pagine/Operazioni_int.aspx accessed: 23/08/2021.

⁸ Ministry for Defence, *Missione in Estonia: Italia impegnata nella NATO Air Policing* https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Baltic_Eagle_Estonia/notizie_teatro/Pagine/Missione_in_Estonia_Italia_impegnata_nella_NATO_Air_Policing_F35.aspx accessed: 23/08/2021.

⁹ Ministry for Ecologic Transition, *The National Energy Situation in 2019*, June 2020, p. 19 https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/pub/sen/relazioni/relazione_annuale_situazione_energetica_nazionale_dati_2019.pdf accessed: 02/08/2021.

¹⁰ Ministry for Ecologic Transition, *The National Energy Situation in 2020*, July 2021, p. 26 https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/pub/sen/relazioni/relazione_annuale_situazione_energetica_nazionale_dati_2020.pdf accessed: 07/08/2021.

¹¹ Ministry for Ecological Transition, Energy and Mining Analysis and Statistics, natural gas consumption in 2019 and 2020 <https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/bilancio-gas-naturale> accessed: 31/07/2021.

¹² Ministry for Economic Development, national hydrocarbon reserves for 2019 <https://unmig.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/dati/ricerca-e-coltivazione-di-idrocarburi/riserve-nazionali-di-idrocarburi> accessed: 31/07/2021.

¹³ Ministry for Economic Development, *The National Energy Situation in 2019*, June 2020, p. 22 https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/pub/sen/relazioni/relazione_annuale_situazione_energetica_nazionale_dati_2019.pdf

been limited primarily by the EU directives on electricity (1996/92/EC) and natural gas (1998/30/EC), which resulted in the privatization and liberalization of Italy's main energy monopolies. What is more, national legislation (legislative decree 2012/249, implementing the 2009/119/EC) also imposes severe limitations on the extraction possibility in order to ensure a certain amount of stock resources in case of energy crisis¹⁴.

Italy strongly emphasizes the **need for resources diversification and secure reserves**. The country's limited subsistence translates into a **strong dependency on imported resources**. Italy imported 63 million tonnes of crude oil in 2019 and 50 million (-20%) in 2020¹⁵. The Middle East region is Italy's main crude oil supplier. In 2020, Iraq provided 17.3% of the entire imported amount, and Saudi Arabia 13.2%. However, Asia has also been playing an increasingly important role as an oil exporter: Azerbaijan became Italy's top oil trader in 2020 (19.9% of the total), while Kazakhstan supplied 6.9%. The most important oil suppliers from the African continent are Libya (6.9%) and Nigeria (5.4%), while Russia holds the European record for oil export towards Italy (11.1%). Lastly, in 2020 Italy also imported a small amount of crude oil from the USA (3.1%), Canada (1.7%), and Venezuela (1.4%). For what concerns natural gas import, Italy imported 71 billion cubic meters of natural gas in 2019 and 66,3 (-6%) in 2020. Italy's most important gas providers are Russia (42.9%), Algeria (22.7%), Qatar (10.4%), Norway (10.4%), and Libya (6.7%)¹⁶.

Italy has been trying to ensure a good position in the delicate discussion on the transit of the **Russian gas** towards Europe, which exacerbated in 2014 due to the EU economic sanctions on Russia after the aggression of Crimea. Before the conflict escalated, Russia had been developing the **South Stream pipeline project**, which consisted in providing European states with gas through a pipeline system crossing the Black Sea (bypassing Ukraine), the Balkan peninsula, and then bifurcating towards the Central European states on one side and towards the port of Otranto, in Apulia, on the other. Such infrastructure, which was abandoned due to

¹⁴ Ministry for Economic Development, Security oil stocks <https://www.mise.gov.it/index.php/it/energia/gas-naturale-e-petrolio/petrolio/scorte-petrolifere> accessed: 02/08/2021

¹⁵ UNEM – Unione Energia per la Mobilità, Crude oil import <https://www.unem.it/i-numeri-dellenergia/italia/petrolio/> accessed: 07/10/2021

¹⁶ Ministry for Ecologic Transition, *The National Energy Situation in 2020*, July 2021, p. 25 https://dgsaie.mise.gov.it/pub/sen/relazioni/relazione_annuale_situazione_energetica_nazionale_dati_2020.pdf

the impossibility to conduct negotiations in that complex geopolitical situation, would have reinforced Italy's important role in the transit of energy towards Europe¹⁷.

On the other hand, many European states, and in particular Germany, are demonstrating their support for the **Nord Stream 2 project**, which would transport Russian gas to Germany through a pipeline crossing the Baltic Sea and circumventing the Baltic republics and Poland. For its part, **Italy's concern is that the new pipeline would ultimately marginalise the country**, since Germany would become the main transit zone for Russian gas¹⁸. In such a situation, Italy has to interact with EU and NATO states for the achievement of common energy security goal, underlining the negative implications of Nord Stream 2, but at the same time has to be loyal to its domestic interests by maintaining a fruitful dialogue with Russia, Italy's first gas trading partner, in the unlikely prospect of revitalising the abandoned southern route¹⁹.

So far, Europe has been very difficultly dealing with Russian threats on energy supply and struggling to properly address the issue. **Despite it is not realistic to state that Europe could easily lower its degree of dependency on Russian gas any time soon, Italy's solid relation with the MENA countries and its reception and transport infrastructures, if properly maintained and developed, may still represent a crucial asset in NATO countries' energy supply, reinforcing the country's role in the regional energy equilibrium.**

Conclusion and future perspective

Since Italy joined the alliance in 1949, the Italy-NATO relations have been growing stronger. The two entities managed to build a solid partnership because they share common security concerns and defence expectations and reciprocally benefit from partaking in joint strategic projects.

On the one hand, in the last few decades, NATO has been taking some important steps in terms of engagement in the Mediterranean, showing that the area, and the countries within it, have

¹⁷ C. Dominelli, *Dal South Stream al Tap: le vie del gas tra progetti falliti e nuove rotte*, in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 10/05/2017 <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/dal-south-stream-tap-vie-gas-progetti-falliti-e-nuove-rotte-AEMRelJB>

¹⁸ L. Pagni, *Italia e Polonia contro Germania: la guerra del gas divide l'Europa*, in *La Repubblica*, 18/12/2015 https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2015/12/18/news/la_guerra_del_gas_e_dei_tubi_che_divide_l_europa-129764802/

¹⁹ N. Sartori, *Italia-Russia, una storia a tutto gas*, Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale, 11/10/2018 [Italia-Russia, una storia a tutto gas | ISPI \(ispionline.it\)](http://www.ispionline.it)

obtained a certain degree of strategic recognition in the framework of both local and international security maintenance. Italy is a crucial partner for NATO due to its central position in the Mediterranean, which enables the Atlantic organisation to keep a watchful eye on nearby unstable regions, as well as by virtue of its actual capacity to play a leading role in the complex MENA scenario. As a matter of fact, throughout time military bases located in Italy have been used to launch and coordinate operations in the Western Balkans and North Africa. Italy enjoys extremely good relations with MENA countries, the outcome of decades of political and economic support and cooperation, which make Italy an essential mediation partner in maintaining quality dialogue between NATO and those countries. Moreover, Italy significantly contributes to Europe's and NATO's energy security by providing a vital transit area for energy supply.

On the other hand, Italy also greatly benefits from membership in the alliance and, in particular, from NATO's involvement in its vicinities, as the geographical proximity to theatres such as the Balkan wars in the 1990s', as well as the fragile MENA region, have always been treated by the Italian governments like a serious threat Italy would most likely not be able to tackle alone. What is more, Italy's consistency in asserting its NATO agenda (including securing a room for Italian leadership in the Mediterranean theatre) and its contribution in several NATO missions both in its surroundings and outside are the clearest demonstration of its consolidated pro-Atlantic alignment, which will remain a fundamental aspect of Italy's defence strategy and foreign policy as a whole.

Throughout decades, NATO has increased its effort in engaging in the Mediterranean, Italy's area of interest. The MENA region remains an extremely unstable area, while the Mediterranean Sea is a broad front where the security of the neighbouring states is at stake. It seems, therefore, that the role of NATO will be increasing in the region, especially in cooperation with the Maghreb countries. This is extremely important not only due to the ongoing war in Libya, conflicts in Central Africa, or the migration of fighters. The main goal is to strengthen North-South cooperation in which, within the engagement in the activities of the North Atlantic Treaty, **it is possible to create a stable security environment in cooperation between Africa and Europe.**

Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that NATO's positive involvement trend in the Mediterranean will be reinforced and that Italy will continue cultivating its leading role in shaping and implementing NATO security plan in the Mediterranean.

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