

Continuity and novelties in Italy's outlook on NATO's Strategic Concept

Alessandro Marrone | Head of the Defence Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Professor at the military academy of the Italian Ministry of Defence | @Alessandro__Ma 

Analysis

Italy's current outlook on NATO features four main elements of continuity and two meaningful novelties, which altogether are likely to shape Rome's approach to the Madrid Strategic Concept. The former concern Italy's stable investment in the transatlantic bond, the enduring validity of the current NATO three core tasks, the strategic relevance of the 'wider Mediterranean' region and a NATO-EU partnership deemed more essential than ever. The two novelties regard the space and cyberspace domains, in which Italy has established two respective joint operational commands and is able to provide a renewed contribution to the unfolding allied reflection. Obviously, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine will prompt a new reflection at both NATO and Italian levels, whose outcomes are for the moment difficult to foresee.

Italy's stable investment in the transatlantic bond

The first continuity element is the importance attached to the Alliance during both Donald Trump's and Joe Biden's presidencies, as a politico-military pillar of the transatlantic bond. Rome has continued to believe and invest in NATO even when the leaders of other European allies talked about a 'brain-death' alliance and consistently argued for a European strategic autonomy compatible with transatlantic cohesion.¹ Such a commitment is epitomised by the Italian F-35 patrols in the Baltic skies, the army's contribution to the Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia, and the navy's participation in NATO exercises and activities in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region.

At a political level, Italy values the transatlantic framework as the only one where all European countries –including the UK–, North America and Turkey can have a strategic dialogue on wide range of security issues, from Russia to instability in North Africa, from tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean to new operational domains like space and cyber. This is particularly important considering the good bilateral relations between Rome and London, which Italy wants to maintain and expand despite Brexit, and Italy's balanced position towards the Eastern Mediterranean, a growing area of interest where Defence Minister Lorenzo Guerini has regularly engaged with both Greek and Turkish counterparts in recent years.

¹ See <https://www.gmfus.org/news/italy-positions-itself-driver-transatlantically-sustainable-european-strategic-autonomy>.

The enduring validity of NATO's current three core tasks

The second continuity element of Italy's approach concerns the value of the three core tasks laid down in the 2010 Strategic Concept. Rome supports the drawing up a new document taking into account the current and foreseeable international security environment, marked by the return of great power competition and NATO's recognition of two new operational domains, as well as by the development of EU defence initiatives beneficial for the European pillar of the alliance. Many novelties have to be discussed and agreed. Yet NATO has succeeded throughout its long history by means of evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, adaptation. In this context, the basics of article 5 are obviously relevant, as are, for different reasons, the three decade-long NATO efforts on out-of-area operations and cooperative security.

From an Italian perspective, the operations run by NATO in Kosovo, Iraq and the Mediterranean Sea present various degrees of challenges and are all important for the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. The Alliance should make sure they succeed and be ready to undertake new missions if, when and where the allies decide to respond to security threats and challenges by using that instrument. Obviously, the dramatic Western retreat from Afghanistan –which involved not only NATO but also the EU, UN and the international community and left the country to the Taliban following the US decision to disengage at whatever cost– casts a dark shadow on any future crisis management or stability operation to be undertaken by the West. It is therefore important to learn the lessons from the two-decade long military operations in Afghanistan in order not to repeat the same mistakes –first and foremost in Iraq but also in any eventual future NATO missions–. Italy will assume command of the NATO Training Mission in Iraq from May 2022 by demonstrating its concrete politico-military commitment on the security and stability of the Middle East as well as its investment in NATO as tool for Western crisis management.

When it comes to cooperative security, in the Italian perspective the three baskets of enlargement, partnership, and arms control and non-proliferation are as relevant as ever for the Euro-Atlantic area, but they have to be tailored to the current security environment.

First, the integration of the Western Balkans in both the NATO and EU frameworks remains a key element for the stability and security of the alliance itself, also in light of the aggressive penetration of both Russia and China in South-Eastern Europe. This is an enduring national interest for Italy considering its geography, history and multi-faceted relations with the region.

Secondly, the NATO partnerships have been underdeveloped and under-resourced over the past decade, although they remain an important basis and entail a great potential for both the Southern and Eastern flanks, as well as for the links with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. Italy will continue to insist on promoting partnerships with countries in North Africa and the Middle East, whose security and stability is intertwined not only with those of NATO's Mediterranean members but with the entire Euro-Atlantic area, also as regards the terrorist threat. Progress should be made both at the bilateral level and through the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

Third, the past decade has witnessed the demise of non-proliferation and arms control regimes, notably the Intermediate range Nuclear Force (INF) treaty, which leaves a tremendous vacuum for Europe's strategic stability. The New START deal between Washington and Moscow is a necessary but insufficient condition to fill that vacuum. NATO has traditionally played a facilitating role on this issue, and should continue to do so with renewed and greater efforts. Being part of NATO's nuclear-sharing agreements, host to the US tactical nuclear weapon and with dual-capable aircraft –the F-35–, Italy can and should bring added value to arms control and non proliferation efforts by leveraging on its long-standing diplomatic track record in NATO, the EU and other forums.²

The strategic relevance of the 'wider Mediterranean' region

Over the past decade Italy has consistently developed and applied the geopolitical concept of the 'wider Mediterranean', an area including not only the Mediterranean Sea's littoral states but the whole Maghreb, Sahel, Horn of Africa and Middle East up to the Black Sea and the Caucasus. It is a variegated regional security complex, whose sub-regions are closely interlinked in demographic, economic, energy, religious, political, diplomatic and security terms. Since 2011 the wider Mediterranean has turned out to be an arch of instability for NATO members, as well as a central arena for competition with Russia and China.

The Allies themselves bear part of the responsibility for the instability on their southern flank, primarily with regards to the way they contributed to the collapse of the Libyan regime in 2011 without adequately and collectively committing to the subsequent stabilisation of Libya. This is the most acute example of a broader trend. Indeed, the US military disengagement from North Africa and the Middle East left a vacuum and deprived the region of an off-shore balancer. At the same time, the rest of NATO allies split by pursuing national and often diverging agendas in the wider Mediterranean, as France and Turkey did in Libya and the Eastern Med. The division within the Western camp in turn facilitated an impressive increase of the Russian presence and of Chinese influence in a region historically bound to Western Europe more than to Asia.

Italy's geography and national interests place the country at the centre of the wider Mediterranean region as well at the forefront of its security and stability challenges, from maritime insecurity to illegal smuggling of migrants, and from international terrorism to regional tensions. But these challenges do not impact Italy alone. Tensions between allies concern the Alliance as a whole, which was established to maintain peace *in* the West as well as the peace *of* the West vis-à-vis the threat of Moscow. International terrorism does not recognise boundaries, as dramatically experienced by Europe particularly in 2015-16, and it has been consistently recognised as a major threat by both NATO and its allies since 2001. Energy security is part of a broader Alliance priority on resilience. Smuggling of migrants can be used as tool to exert pressure at the politico-diplomatic-military level, as recently witnessed on NATO's Eastern flank. Rome will likely

² For an updated synthesis of the nuclear policy of Italy and other European countries see https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Working_Paper_European_SP_Perspectives.pdf.

continue to make the case for the strategic relevance of the wider Mediterranean for the entire Alliance, to be addressed by the upcoming Concept in an adequate manner. In doing so it may well find common ground with Spain, considering their shared position on the Mediterranean Sea.

A NATO-EU partnership more essential than ever

Italy has probably been the staunchest advocate of the NATO-EU partnership and of cooperation, within both the Alliance and the Union's decision-making processes, over the entire post-Cold War period. In particular, it has supported the 2016 and 2018 Joint Declarations, and is will welcome the one in the making. Such a position will likely be applied to the next Strategic Concept through deep-rooted arguments. At the political level, through a genuine belief in multilateralism in addressing global challenges, and particularly as regards the synergy between 'European integration' and 'transatlantic cohesion'.³ At the military level, through the recognition that Italy, as well as 20 other European countries, has a single set of forces to be put at the disposal of the two organisations it belongs to; therefore, the more NATO and the EU converge the better it will be for defence planning and capability development. At the industrial level, the broader transatlantic cooperation in this field complements and enhances the intra-EU one, since the Italian defence and aerospace sector has a solid partnership with its counterparts in both the UK and the US.

From an Italian perspective, the NATO-EU partnership is more essential than ever for three main reasons linked to the current international security environment. First, they have complementary toolboxes to address the hybrid warfare on the Eastern flank, particularly but not only when it comes to resilience, and by acting together they can better pressure Russia to sit at a negotiating table to find a diplomatic solution for pan-European security. Secondly, NATO-EU cooperation on technological and industrial issues, from standards to innovation, would benefit the competitiveness of the defence-related private sector across the Euro-Atlantic area, a crucial issue at a time when the West risks losing the military and technological edge it has enjoyed for centuries over Asia.⁴ Third, together they can be a force for good norm-setting in new, contested and congested operational domains such as space and cyberspace.⁵ Fourth, because the wider Mediterranean region has a strategic relevance for the whole of Europe, it is essential to have renewed cooperation between the two organisations as regards their shared southern neighbourhood. These arguments in favour of the NATO-EU partnership may well resonate in Madrid as Spain is an active member of both organisations, including EU defence initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

³ This principle of Italian defence policy is well laid down in the 2015 White Paper on defence and international cooperation, available at https://www.difesa.it/Primo_Piano/Documents/2015/07_Luglio/White%20book.pdf.

⁴ That argument was repeatedly made at the NATO Industry Forum hosted by Italy in November 2021, including by the Italian Permanent Representative to NATO Francesco Maria Talò.

⁵ On the approach to cyber-defence by NATO, US and major European countries see <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/cyber-defence-nato-countries-comparing-models>.

The Italian novelties on space and cyberspace

There were important sets of novelties in Italy over the past few years as regards NATO's two newest operational domains, with far reaching implication on the Italian posture.

Concerning cyberspace, in 2020 Italy created the joint Network Operations Command (*Comando per le Operazioni in Rete*, COR). The COR is responsible for managing and protecting defence info-structures, for the whole spectrum of cyber operations and the related doctrinal development. Given the intrinsic dual-use nature of most cyber technologies and activities, Italy also completed in 2021 a broader reform of the sector's governance, including the definition of a National Cybersecurity Perimeter and the establishment of a National Cybersecurity Agency.⁶ These important novelties enable Italy to better deal with the cyber domain in the NATO framework also, and to contribute to the development of the Alliance's policy, doctrines, activities and capabilities in this field.

In 2020 Italy established a joint Space Operations Command (*Comando Operazioni Spaziali*, COS) to develop space operations while continuing to provide space products to other traditional domains. Thanks to the COS, the Ministry of Defence is currently able to plan the policy for military space assets, identify procurement requirements and manage in-house the launching, activities and de-orbit of these assets through operational centres active 24/7: a pioneer, unique military capability in Europe. Once again, and also in light of the dual-use nature of space technologies,⁷ in 2018 Italy reformed its national space governance by establishing an inter-ministerial committee led by the Prime Minister's office, able to design and plan a whole-of-government approach. Then in 2019 Rome adopted its National Security Strategy on Space, considering that Italy is the second country in Europe by the number of assets it has in orbit, the third largest contributor to the European Space Agency and the home of a complete space value chain, from upstream –including launchers– to downstream capacities. From such a position, Italy can provide an important contribution to NATO and European thinking on the expanding nexus between space and defence.

Against this backdrop, recent domestic political developments have contributed to stabilising Italy's international standing. In January 2022 the re-election of Sergio Mattarella as President of the Italian Republic for another seven years ensures politico-strategic continuity and stability at the highest institutional level. The re-election has enhanced the consideration of the government led by Mario Draghi, which is likely to remain in charge until the next general elections scheduled for Spring 2023. As a result, Italy is in a good position to actively contribute at all levels to the NATO agenda with a view to designing the Strategic Concept and beyond.

⁶ On Italy and cyberdefence see <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/litalia-e-la-difesa-cibernetica>.

⁷ For example, the Italian constellation for Earth Observation has been jointly procured by the Ministry of Defence and the Italian Space Agency. See https://www.difesa.it/EN/Primo_Piano/Pagine/COSMO-SkyMed-Second-Generation-Satellite-Takes-Off.aspx.

Disclaimer: The Elcano Royal Institute is launching a series of publications with the aim of feeding into the emerging debate around NATO's Strategic Concept by providing a collective and national approach to the future of NATO. Selected national experts from different NATO allies (United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal and Poland) have contributed to the series by portraying the current debate in their home countries around the Strategic Concept and the future of the Alliance. Thus, the Elcano Royal Institute seeks to highlight the importance of the renewal of the Concept and its adoption at the Madrid Summit, to be held in Madrid in June 2022.

Updated 4 march 2022