

NATO and Italy in the 75th Anniversary of the Alliance: Perspectives beyond the Washington Summit

by Alessandro Marrone and Gaia Ravazzolo

ABSTRACT

The authors focus on the upcoming NATO Washington summit in July by outlining the framework of the Alliance's support to Ukraine and increased deterrence toward Moscow, and then analyse the global context, delving into the link between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific areas and the de-prioritisation of the southern flank by the allies. The study then illustrates the changes in the Atlantic Alliance's posture on partnerships and crisis management, concluding with a glimpse to the future: from defence funding to open challenges and opportunities, and finally looking at the prospects for Italy and its agenda to be redefined and implemented within the Atlantic framework.

NATO | Summit | Transatlantic relations | European defence | Italy

keywords

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Introduction

The next NATO summit, scheduled in Washington on 9-11 July 2024, is a crucial occasion for the thirty-two allies to examine the future perspectives in an ever more complex and changing international landscape, as well as an opportunity to take stock after 75 years from the establishment of the Atlantic Alliance. In Moscow's intentions, the Russian invasion of Ukraine that started in February 2022 should have weakened the West. However, NATO enlarged thanks to the joining of Finland and Sweden, and it benefits from a stronger awareness in Europe about its *raison d'être* as the cornerstone of the collective defence of the member states.

This study analyses the challenges for the Atlantic Alliance, focusing particularly on the support to Ukraine and the deterrence and defence vis-à-vis Russia, as well as on the NATO approach to the Indo-Pacific and the Southern flank, especially regarding partnerships. It then deals with the implications and future challenges for Italy arising from these developments, providing recommendations.

1. Towards the Washington summit

1.1 Support to Ukraine and deterrence towards Moscow

The Allies continue to support Ukraine's right to self-defence – also through military supplies from single NATO countries – and pursue what has been agreed on in the 2022 Strategic Concept: "A strong, independent Ukraine is vital for the

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stability of the Euro-Atlantic area”.¹ Indeed, shortly after the start of the Russian invasion, the Allies launched the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP). That is an overall assistance programme that was confirmed and strengthened in 2023 during the Vilnius summit and pointed toward reconstructing the Ukrainian defence sector and accompanying Ukraine towards full interoperability with NATO. Allies have invested over 640 million euros in the CAP. Above all, they supplied around 85 billion dollars bilaterally.² Nevertheless, there is no shortage of difficulties in various countries, including Italy, to prolong the support to Ukraine, which is engaged in a large-scale attrition war. This is because of the limited available funds, the progressive erosion of stocks and an insufficient production capacity.³

Considering the urgency of providing munitions, drones, artillery and air defence systems, NATO’s Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has stated:

we, I, made it clear that if the only way NATO Allies are able to provide Ukraine with the weapons they need to defend themselves, well that’s the risk we have to take provided that this is a national decision and provided that Allies then make sure that they replenish their stocks so they, again, are able to meet the NATO capability targets.⁴

During the Alliance’s foreign ministers’ meeting last April, Stoltenberg proposed a one hundred-billion quinquennial plan to support Ukraine.⁵ This idea has received mixed responses, and the argument will probably be tackled at the Washington summit. It is not a given that the allied countries will find themselves in agreement and sustain this endeavour. For example, the Italian minister of foreign affairs and international cooperation, Antonio Tajani, has welcomed the proposal, labelling it “certainly interesting”, and added that, from the Italian point of view, there is full support and interest, “but it [the proposal] must be examined, looked at in depth, to see technically how it can be done”.⁶ Broadening the discussion to the general transatlantic defence architecture, the minister has highlighted the importance of “developing a strong European defence industry: it is crucial to avoid duplications and inefficiencies in the EU-NATO relationship, promoting a deeper

¹ NATO, *2022 Strategic Concept*, July 2022, p. 1, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept>.

² Kiel Institute for the World Economy, *Ukraine Support Tracker*, updated on 6 June 2024, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker>.

³ In this regard see: Michelangelo Freyrie, “Industrial Production in Support of European and Transatlantic Defence”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 23|14 (July 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/17266>.

⁴ NATO, *Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the Virtual Meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council at the Level of Allied Defence Ministers*, 19 April 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_224840.htm.

⁵ Andrew Gray and John Irish, “NATO to Plan Long-term Ukraine Aid, Mulls 100-billion Euro Fund”, in *Reuters*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-ministers-mull-100-billion-euro-military-fund-ukraine-2024-04-02>.

⁶ “Open to NATO Funds for Kyiv, Grasp Details Says Tajani”, in *Ansa*, 3 April 2024, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/world/2024/04/03/open-to-nato-funds-for-kyiv-grasp-details-says-tajani_e564aee3-9dd4-455a-a8ff-9be84f8a377c.html.

complementarity between the two organisations”.⁷ It is not yet clear whether NATO funds for Ukraine will be allocated under the umbrella of the Atlantic Alliance or the EU, where funds have already been allocated for this purpose, such as the European Peace Facility (EPF).

Stoltenberg’s plan, whether approved or not, also reflects the need to defend Ukraine in order to better contain an increasingly aggressive Russia. The Strategic Concept adopted in Madrid in 2022 enshrines the return to a posture based on deterrence and defence rather than cooperation, which was the hallmark of NATO-Russia relations before the Russian annexation of Crimea.⁸ In the document, Russia is referred to as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area”.⁹ A threat to be contained militarily through the enhancement of the multinational battalions in Poland and in the Baltic states up to the brigade level (3,000-5,000 troops within the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP), and with the deployment of four additional multinational battlegroups in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia (headed respectively by France, Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic).¹⁰

During the 2023 Vilnius summit, the Alliance approved a new set of defence plans. For the North (Atlantic Ocean, Baltic and Scandinavian states), the centre of Europe till the Alps, and the South (Mediterranean Sea and Black Sea). These plans substantiate and detail the Allied military posture toward Russia and the new challenges. Such a posture also includes the new NATO Force Model, which envisions as many as one hundred thousand units deployable in just ten days, three hundred thousand in high readiness status deployable in ten-thirty days and at least half a million reinforcements mobilisable in a maximum of six months. A model that, given the limited American troops deployed in Europe compared to the Indo-Pacific, requires a strong contribution from the European Allies, diminishing the quantity of military resources deployable in other operational theatres.¹¹ These measures will be accompanied by others on deterrence to be discussed by the Allies in the 2024 Washington summit. Numerous challenges will have to be tackled: ensuring an adequate force readiness, being able to respond effectively to a possible escalation into a conventional conflict and giving adequate priority – in contrast to what happened in the past – to the replenishment of ammunition stockpiles.

⁷ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Partecipazione del ministro Tajani alla riunione Ministeriale della NATO a Bruxelles*, 2 April 2024, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=115192>.

⁸ To deepen this theme see: Elio Calcagno and Alessandro Marrone, “NATO’s Posture vis-a-vis Russia: Features and Challenges”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|09 (February 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18128>.

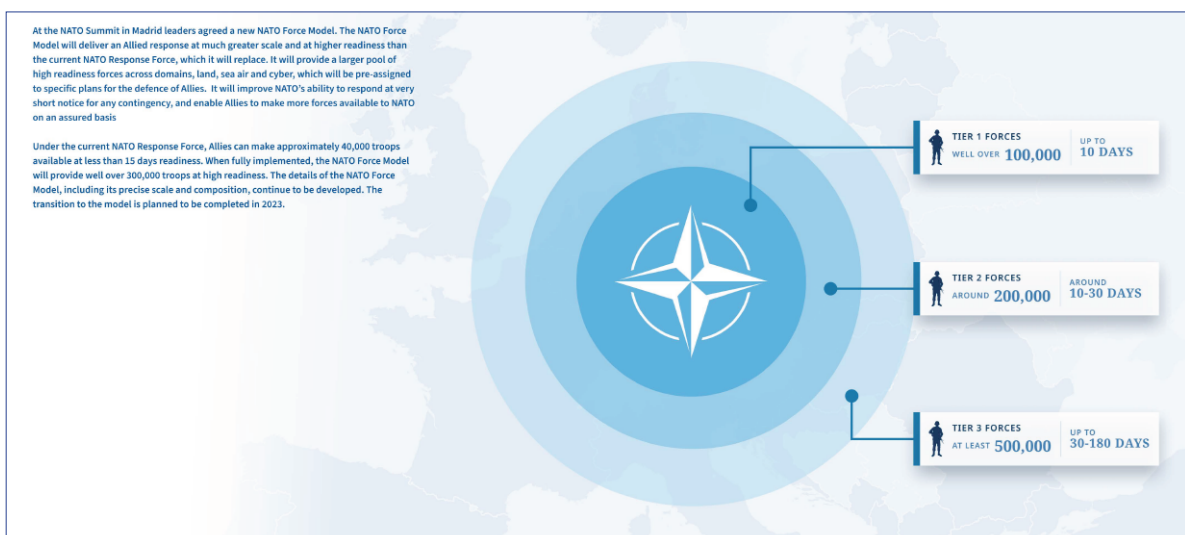
⁹ NATO, *2022 Strategic Concept*, cit., point 8.

¹⁰ Elio Calcagno and Alessandro Marrone, “NATO’s Posture vis-a-vis Russia”, cit.

¹¹ See in this regard Elio Calcagno and Alessandro Marrone, “NATO and a Reinforced Collective Defence”, in Alessandro Marrone (ed.), *Russian-Ukraine War’s Strategic Implications*, Rome, IAI, February 2024, p. 77-85, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18118>.

In this context, the last Russian nuclear exercises have to be taken into account. For the first time, they were limited only to tactical weapons and to only one military district, the South-Western one, which covers much of Ukraine's territory and the Black Sea. This could be an intimidatory message to South-East Europe and also reinforce the credibility of the Black Sea Russian fleet, which was severely damaged by the Ukrainians. Overall, this suggests that NATO needs to increase its attention towards that part of Europe that is most threatened by Russian influence and is traditionally very important for Italian national interests. The Washington summit could be the right occasion to renew the dialogue on Allied nuclear deterrence and update the corresponding strategy to cope with the current threats.¹²

Figure 1 | New NATO Force Model



Source: NATO, *Infographic - New NATO Force Model*, June 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf.

It is indeed worrying how nuclear deterrence is losing its grammar. This was ensured by the arms control process that aims to establish a common language between nuclear powers so to avoid misunderstandings and mistakes that could have tragic consequences. As international agreements get abandoned and multi-level meetings at the political, diplomatic and military levels do not occur anymore, there is a risk – especially with the advent of artificial intelligence – of not understanding the language of others and relying only on the roughest and most threatening forms of deterrence. This risk can bring, again, to tragic consequences. NATO cannot remedy it alone, but it can and must play an important role in this regard, and Italy – a member of the restricted NATO Nuclear Planning Group – traditionally boasts valuable expertise on arms control in multilateral frameworks.

¹² Karl-Heinz Kamp, "NATO at 75: Time to Deliver on its Promises", in *DGAP Analysis*, 14 February 2024, <https://dgap.org/en/node/40198>.

1.2 NATO's enlargement to Scandinavia and the status of Ukraine

In the face of the Russian threat, the Atlantic Alliance has welcomed Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024) as its last members by shifting its centre of gravity towards the North.¹³ Ukraine has presented the membership application in September 2022.¹⁴ At the political level, member states can decide to unanimously welcome membership requests from another European country if that contributes to the security of the North-Atlantic area.¹⁵ At the military level, interoperability and adjusting to NATO's standards is fundamental.

Figure 2 | Changes in NATO with the membership of Finland and Sweden



Source: Jonathan Masters, "How NATO Will Change if Finland and Sweden Become Members", in CFR In Briefs, last updated on 22 June 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/node/241694>.

¹³ Fabrizio W. Lucioli, "Italia e Alleanza Atlantica. Ieri, oggi e domani", in *Informazioni della Difesa*, No. 1/2024, p. 46-51, <https://www.comitatoatlantico.it/?p=13617>.

¹⁴ Stuart Lau, "NATO Invites Ukraine to Its Birthday Party, with No Fresh Pledge on Membership", in *Politico*, 4 April 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=4539924>.

¹⁵ NATO, *The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington*, 4 April 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm.

At the Vilnius summit, the Allies decided to simplify the Ukrainian application process by changing from a two-phase action plan to only one phase and creating a NATO-Ukraine Council, substituting the previous NATO-Ukraine Commission. That is a consultation forum between the Allies and Kyiv on security matters of common interest, including the conflict with Russia, where Ukraine – unlike what happened in the Commission – joins the Allies as an equal member. This enhances the political ties with NATO and increases the integration of Kyiv in the Atlantic framework.¹⁶ However, while holding out the prospect of membership and despite pressure from Poland and other Eastern European countries, no date has been set. Ukraine's membership can only occur after the ongoing war ends. Otherwise, it would lead Kyiv to the invocation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty on collective Defence with an inevitable escalation to a war between NATO and Russia. The formula adopted in Vilnius: "We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met",¹⁷ thus effectively codifying a postponement *sine die* of Kyiv's membership.

2. NATO and the international security environment

2.1 China and the Indo-Pacific

"The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values."¹⁸ With these words, the Strategic Concept 2022 mentioned China for the first time in a similar document. It then referred to hybrid operations that damage the Alliance's security and Beijing's use of its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies on other countries (both European and African) and strengthen its influence.

Obviously, this is a remarkable change of tone from the 2019 London summit, where allies did "recognise that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance".¹⁹ This shift has also been influenced in recent years by Beijing's de facto contribution to Moscow's war economy, both through the growth of trade (by 2023, it had reached more than 220 billion euros) and the supply of sensitive dual-use components that have been sanctioned by allies. In April 2024, Stoltenberg argued that if China did not stop its support to Russia's war, relations with the West would be in trouble. He warned the allies against dependence on Beijing for technology as they had been on Moscow for oil and gas.²⁰

¹⁶ NATO website: *NATO-Ukraine Council*, last updated on 13 May 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_217652.htm.

¹⁷ NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, 11 July 2023, point 11, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm.

¹⁸ NATO, *2022 Strategic Concept*, cit., point 13.

¹⁹ NATO, *London Declaration*, 4 December 2019, point 6, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm.

²⁰ "China Must Stop Aiding Russia if It Seeks Good Relations with West, NATO Says", in *Reuters*,

China poses a systemic challenge to the United States and the whole Alliance in terms of democratic values and raises concerns on Euro-Atlantic security mainly due to its support for Russia, its expansionist claims in the Indo-Pacific,²¹ its increasing acquisition of Western infrastructures and technologies,²² and the development of its technological capabilities. Beijing's assertiveness in the region will remain one of the Alliance's priority challenges. It will undoubtedly be a topic of discussion in Washington, thus broadening the 'geographic' interpretation of NATO towards a more global approach.

Against this backdrop, it is on the cards the enhancements of relations with NATO's partners in the Indo-Pacific in terms of political dialogue and cooperation, with a view to contain China. The heads of government of Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand attended the Madrid and Vilnius summits and will participate in the Washington one. NATO's relations with these countries could intensify in the following months, also at the operational level, via stronger information sharing, possible joint exercises, and synergies between commands. The geostrategic dynamics intertwining the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic regions thus expand the scope of allied action, even though for NATO, ensuring deterrence and defence in Europe against Russia remains the absolute priority.

2.2 Geographical and functional partnerships

In an international security environment marked by increasingly interconnected regional crises, the Atlantic Alliance has maintained cooperative relations with more than forty non-member countries, over time establishing several partnerships,²³ as the NATO 2030 Agenda also envisioned. These partnerships aim to operate in synergy on various shared security issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, counterterrorism, or disaster relief. Partners can participate in the Alliance's military operations, as well as in enlarged meetings of the Political Committee or the North Atlantic Council in an advisory capacity, without voting rights on the topics discussed.

²⁵ April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-must-stop-aiding-russia-if-it-seeks-good-relations-with-west-nato-says-2024-04-25>.

²¹ Luis Simón, "NATO's China and Indo-Pacific Conundrum", in *NATO Review*, 22 November 2023, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/11/22/natos-china-and-indo-pacific-conundrum/index.html>.

²² Examples include the purchase of the Greek port of Piraeus – the fifth largest in the Mediterranean – by the Chinese state-owned company Cosco (which controlled 67 per cent of the Piraeus Port Authority as of 2021) and the fact that China Merchants Port owns shares in the port of Antwerp and the French ports of Fos and Le Havre. On the technology side, there is the acquisition of the home appliances branch of Philips by China's Hillhouse Capital, and that of the German robotics company Kuka in 2016 by Midea.

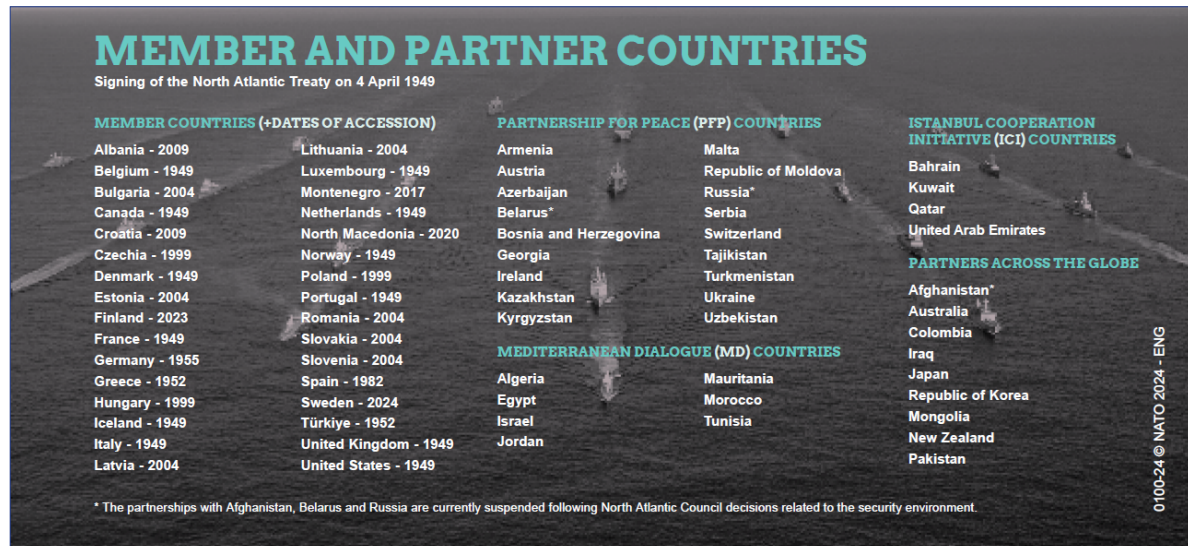
²³ These include Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Pakistan. With Afghanistan, the partnership is currently suspended.

The NATO partnerships currently include:

- the Partnership for Peace (PfP), a bilateral cooperation program between NATO and sixteen countries in the Euro-Atlantic and former Soviet Union (until 2022, this included Belarus and Russia);
- the Mediterranean Dialogue, which since 1994 has comprised Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia;
- the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, a forum established in 2004 and oriented towards the Gulf region (including Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar);
- beyond the frameworks mentioned above, there is the basket of Partners Across the Globe.²⁴
- Before the Russian invasion of 2022, the allies had also expressed their intention to engage with other interlocutors in Africa, Asia, and Latin America by increasing military diplomacy.²⁵

However, to forge more effective partnerships and strengthen those currently prioritised in the Indo-Pacific, NATO should undertake a general reorganisation of these partnerships by implementing a substantial reform that also focuses on the most promising areas of collaboration (such as cyber and technological research). Some partnerships in recent years have not yielded the expected results and need changes and revitalisation, especially concerning the NATO southern flank.

Figure 3 | NATO partnerships



Source: NATO, *What Is NATO?*, March 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/240311-what-is-nato-en.pdf.

²⁴ NATO website: *NATO's Partnerships*, last updated on 7 March 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_84336.htm.

²⁵ NATO website: *Relations with Partners across the Globe*, last updated on 7 March 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49188.htm.

2.3 Crisis management and stabilisation

Considering that the Allies' political and military resources available to the Allies are far from infinite, strengthening NATO's posture toward the eastern flank risks unbalancing the Alliance's 360-degree approach to the disadvantage of the southern flank, as well as relegating the tasks of crisis prevention and management to a secondary role - at least in the short and medium term.²⁶ It is not by chance that when Houthis' attacks seriously damaged the energy supply and trade of the European Allies, NATO did not launch a mission in the area: on the one hand, the United States acted through an ad hoc coalition, and on the other hand the EU launched naval operation Aspides.

An interesting idea that could, together with others, find space in allied reflection concerns the use of Stability Policing and Security Force Assistance as a tool for future low-intensity crisis management. For example, in Kosovo, NATO also employs the Italian Carabinieri,²⁷ a force with a long history of peacekeeping between Kosovars and Serbs, that still performs an important role in the KFOR mission. This could become a good practice applicable in other operational theatres, contributing to tasks such as training and mentoring of partner forces and, more broadly, to peacekeeping and stabilisation operations.²⁸ Notably, NATO missions in the Western Balkans conducted by the army, Carabinieri and other armed forces represent a stabilisation anchor to be maintained and strengthened, as confirmed by Defence Minister Guido Crosetto, stating that "stability in the Balkans is a priority for Italy".²⁹

2.4 The Southern flank

Although all eyes are on the East, the Washington summit is an opportunity to make also progress in strengthening the approach to the Alliance's Southern flank. As established in Vilnius, NATO has initiated a reflection on existing and emerging threats and partnership opportunities in the South, the results of which are expected to be presented in Washington.³⁰ Italy places high expectations on this, as Prime

²⁶ Enrico Casini and Andrea Manciuilli (eds), *La guerra tiepida. Il conflitto ucraino e il futuro dei rapporti tra Russia e Occidente*, Rome, Luiss University Press, 2023.

²⁷ Maria Gabriella Pasqualini, "Dal 1999. Viene costituita una nuova MSU per la KFOR", in *Missioni dei Carabinieri all'estero. Vol. II: 1936-2001*, https://www.carabinieri.it/arma/arma-all%27estero/proiezione-internazionale/vol-ii-1936---2001/parte-iii/dal-1999-kfor/msu_kfor.

²⁸ Federico Borsari, "Stability Policing: The Future of NATO Crisis Management", in *CEPA Europe's Edge*, 1 March 2023, <https://cepa.org/?p=16394>.

²⁹ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Italian Minister Crosetto in Kosovo. Meeting with Counterpart Maqedonci and KFOR Commander Ulutaş*, 29 March 2024, <https://ambpristina.esteri.it/en/?p=4007>.

³⁰ "[...] we have today tasked the North Atlantic Council in permanent session to launch a comprehensive and deep reflection on existing and emerging threats and challenges, and opportunities for engagements with our partner nations, international organisations, and other relevant actors in the region, to be presented by our next Summit in 2024". See NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, cit. point 22.

Minister Giorgia Meloni reiterated in her meeting with Stoltenberg in Rome in May: “Italy’s expectation for concrete decisions to be taken in Washington to address the challenges being faced by the southern flank, in line with the comprehensive approach to Euro-Atlantic security provided for by NATO’s Strategic Concept”.³¹

In 2024, the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting discussed a report presented by an independent group of eleven experts appointed last November by Stoltenberg (including Italian official Alessio Nardi) on the Alliance’s approach to its southern neighbourhood. The analysis shows a clear link between the security of NATO’s southern neighbours – North Africa, the Middle East, the Sahel region and adjacent areas – and that of the Allies.³² Indeed, challenges on the Southern flank, as recognised by the Strategic Concept, while not posing a direct and imminent threat like Russia on the eastern flank, nevertheless endanger the security of NATO member states and regional partners. In addition, the enlarged Mediterranean is the natural hinge between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions, and this reinforces its importance to NATO. The experts’ final report on the Southern Neighbourhood explicitly calls for the Alliance to strengthen “political dialogue about and with the region”, focusing on “partnerships, opportunities and concrete solutions to shared interests and concerns – from counter-terrorism to climate change and maritime security”.³³ To do so, it is essential to deeply understand the needs of regional partners and build trust.

Recommendations for NATO’s projection in the southern neighbourhood include the appointment of a special envoy to oversee the activities of the Alliance in the region, a periodic review of relations with actors in the area, the convening of a special summit with southern partners, and a review of the mandate of the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub in Naples. Currently, the Hub aims to improve the understanding of regional dynamics in North Africa, the Middle East, Sahel, Sub-Saharan and adjacent areas, facilitating analysis of challenges and identification of opportunities for cooperation to promote stability and security.³⁴ However, according to the report, the mandate of the Hub should be revised to allow it to contribute to training and capacity-building activities for partners, using Mobile Training Teams and detachments at NATO offices and training centres in the southern neighbourhood.

The document also proposes: a regional security dialogue and greater synergies with international organisations such as the United Nations, the African Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League; regular consultations between

³¹ Italian Government, *Meeting with NATO Secretary General*, 8 May 2024, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/25738>.

³² Independent Expert Group Supporting NATO’s Comprehensive and Deep Reflection Process on the Southern-Neighbourhood, *Final Report*, 7 May 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁴ See the official website: *About the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub*, <https://thesouthernhub.org/about>.

the Atlantic Alliance and the EU; and the creation of a NATO representation at the African Union. Finally, it mentions the possibility of a permanent mission for partner training, new partnerships with countries in the region, and strengthening counterterrorism and maritime security cooperation.

It is unlikely that the Washington summit will move forward on all these recommendations. Still, it is an opportunity to implement some of them – starting with the appointment of a special envoy, the regular convening of summits with regional partners, and the periodic review of relations with the region – and begin to act more effectively on the southern flank with an updated long-term strategy.³⁵

3. The upcoming 75 years

3.1 Funds and resources

At the 2014 summit in Wales, member states committed to spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence by 2024, a commitment confirmed at each subsequent summit. This ambition was then forcefully relaunched in Vilnius, where the intention undersigned by the then thirty-one member states was to invest “at least” 2 per cent, turning the target into a minimum threshold – notably, Russia currently invests around 6 per cent of its GDP in defence. By June 2024, twenty-three allies have reached the threshold.³⁶

An upward trend is in place, as the US and Canada increased their military budgets by 11 per cent just last year, while France,³⁷ Germany,³⁸ Poland³⁹ and Spain⁴⁰ significantly augmented their defence budgets. Italy, having not done the same after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, slipped to 26th place out of thirty-one member states in terms of military spending.⁴¹ The increase in defence spending is not only a political issue but also a technical and operational one. Indeed, the Italian armed forces are tremendously under pressure to meet the requirements of the new NATO Force Model in terms of both the number of troops and assets and the quality of heavy brigades while at the same time running other international missions.

³⁵ Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine NATO had already adopted the Framework for the South and the Package for the South.

³⁶ NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, 17 June 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm.

³⁷ French Ministry of the Armed Forces-Secretariat General for Administration website: *Budget*, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sga/budget-finances/budget>.

³⁸ German Federal Ministry of Defence website: *Verteidigungshaushalt*, <https://www.bmvg.de/de/themen/verteidigungshaushalt>.

³⁹ Tamsin Paternoster, “Military Spending in Western and Central Europe Higher than End of Cold War, Data Shows”, in *Euronews*, 22 April 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/04/22/military-spending-in-western-and-central-europe-higher-than-end-of-cold-war-data-shows>.

⁴⁰ Spanish Ministry of Defence, *Presupuesto del Ministerio de Defensa, año 2023*, <https://working.mde.es/defensa/presupuestos>.

⁴¹ NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, cit., p. 4.

In March 2022, the Chamber of Deputies had voted almost unanimously (391 pro, 19 con, seven abstentions) on a motion addressed to the government headed at the time by Mario Draghi containing a commitment to reach the 2 per cent target by 2028.⁴² According to the latest NATO data, Italy will spend 1.49 per cent of its GDP on defence in 2024.⁴³ It is foreseeable that Rome will miss the 2028 target, which already damages the country's international standing and credibility. Among Allies, increasing defence expenditures to 2 per cent of GDP is still a challenge only for Italy and a few other member states, and these countries increasingly risk being seen as free riders by most of the allies, which are now honouring commitments undertaken a decade ago.

3.2 Challenges and opportunities for Italy

Concerns are growing among experts about the impact of a possible new Trump presidency on the Atlantic Alliance. The Republican candidate caused already a stir when, at an electoral rally, he publicly called on Russia to "do whatever it wants" with NATO allies who do not meet the 2 per cent threshold. Trump's words appeared to undermine collective defence, the cornerstone of NATO itself. Trump takes to the extreme the frustration over insufficient European military spending that is widespread among both Republicans and Democrats in the electorate as well as in public opinion and Congress. This fact is bound to influence American policy towards NATO allies in the future. In particular, it is a challenge for Rome and its relationship with Washington, given how far Italy's defence budget remains from 2 per cent.

In this context, it is noteworthy that Trump's campaign website makes explicit reference to the desire to "finish the process", which began under his first administration, "of fundamentally reevaluating NATO's purpose and NATO's mission".⁴⁴ A Republican victory could entail a significant review of the priorities of the Atlantic Alliance's leading power. The features, timing, and effects of this scenario on Europe's collective deterrence and defence are still unclear. In any case, NATO needs to be stronger not only in terms of deterrence and defence but also with regard to possible internal changes. After all, one of the Alliance's main strengths is the political cohesion among its member states, especially the largest ones, and it requires a constant effort by all allies.

The appointment of the new secretary-general, Mark Rutte, also deserves special attention from an Italian perspective. The Norwegian Stoltenberg has held the role since 2014. In reverse chronological order, his predecessors are the Dane Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Dutch Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, and the British George

⁴² Italian Chamber of Deputies, *Stenographic record of the Assembly Sitting No. 658 of Wednesday 16 March 2022*, <https://www.camera.it/leg18/410?idSeduta=0658&tipo=stenografico#votazione.019>.

⁴³ NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024)*, cit., p. 9.

⁴⁴ Donald J. Trump, "Agenda47: Preventing World War III", in *Donald J Trump for President 2024*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/agenda47/agenda47-preventing-world-war-iii>.

Robertson. Such a track record demonstrates how the role has been entrusted to North European allies since 1999, not respecting any kind of criterion of geographical representation as was the case in the past. In the future, Rome would expect that top job posts will be assigned to southern European countries. Italy has long been underrepresented at the levels of Secretary General (the last was Manlio Brosio, 1964-1971), Deputy Secretary General (no Italian since 2012) and Assistant Secretary General.⁴⁵ The perpetuation of this under-representation with Rutte's appointment should lead Rome to reflect on the strategic nature of specific roles within international institutions and organisations to ensure that Italy is also at the top of NATO policy-making. This goes beyond the role of chairman of the Alliance's Military Committee entrusted to Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone from the end of 2024. Indeed, the assumption of a role of political responsibility by a high-profile personality would allow for a rise in NATO decision-making and agenda issues like the southern flank, which is important for allies in the Mediterranean region.

4. An Italian agenda to be redefined and implemented in NATO

In Italy, NATO membership since 1949 and during the Cold War was accompanied by intense debates and deep disagreements between political parties. From the 1980s onwards, however, there has been a substantial and broad convergence on the country's Atlanticist choice, alongside the Europeanist and Mediterranean vocation in the three circles of Italian foreign policy. It was also a valuable choice for the Alliance itself, given Italy's strategic position in the Mediterranean. Because of such a position and good relations with North African and Middle Eastern governments, Rome can play a leading role on the southern flank as NATO's "hub in the Mediterranean" – in synergy with the ambitious Mattei Plan for Africa launched by the Meloni government.

Therefore, Italy should actively work to fully, timely and effectively implement the recommendations of the NATO Southern Neighbourhood Report. For instance, all upcoming NATO summits and foreign or defence ministerial meetings should include special sessions with representatives of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in order to have a dialogue "with" the enlarged Mediterranean region before having a dialogue "on" this area.⁴⁶ Italy should also let the proposed Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood be included in NATO's International Staff and be provided with staff and budget to prevent it from remaining disconnected and irrelevant concerning the allied politico-military decision-making process. The recommended revision of the Strategic Direction South Hub's mandate should strengthen its connections with the decision-making

⁴⁵ Gaia Ravazzolo and Alessandro Marrone, "La politica di difesa e il ruolo della Nato", in Ferdinando Nelli Feroci and Leo Goretti (eds), *Il governo Meloni alla prova. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana, edizione 2023*, Rome, IAI, January 2024, p. 60, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18027>.

⁴⁶ For an in-depth study on the wider Mediterranean, see: Gabriele Natalizia and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso (eds), "La NATO nel Mediterraneo allargato", in *Osservatorio di Politica internazionale. Approfondimenti*, No. 213 (May 2024), <https://www.geopolitica.info/?p=46746>.

centres of both the International Staff and the International Military Staff, starting with the Secretary General's Office, the Chairman of the Military Committee and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe. Otherwise, the risk is that the Hub will have little politico-military impact on the alliance.

In addition to the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples, Italy hosts three significant NATO Centres of Excellence: The Centre for Security Force Assistance in Cesano (Rome), the Stability Policing Centre in Vicenza, and the Centre for Maritime Research and Experimentation in La Spezia, as well as the NATO Defence College in Rome and various bases, infrastructures and commands. These assets should be networked in a synergic manner with the Italian role in the Alliance, as it already happens in other European countries with the respective allied structures hosted there. Indeed, these structures are often centres for elaborating analyses, policies or plans, which are then taken to higher decision-making. At the same time, they are drivers of the socialisation of international personnel concerning Italy's perspective, which should, therefore, be better conveyed. They are important steps for the career of Italian military and civilian personnel employed there, with a view to rebalancing the Italian under-representation in the medium-high levels of NATO institutions. Moreover, Italy should enhance its role in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in order to more systematically channel its priority issues into the allied inter-parliamentary debate.

As far as crisis management and stabilisation operations are concerned, the fact that allies have not even discussed within NATO the issue of naval security in the Red Sea, acting instead through the EU or US-led coalitions, confirms how much the Alliance has marginalised this core task after its withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, Italy should: (i) aim to maximise the contribution of NATO assets, such as the Alliance Ground Surveillance at Sigonella (Sicily) or the AWACS aircraft, for EU and European missions in which Italian forces participate; (ii) work for greater synergy and information exchange between NATO operations underway in the Mediterranean, Iraq and the Western Balkans, and Italian/coalition/EU operations. Such a change of approach towards a supporting rather than leading NATO role in the enlarged Mediterranean would benefit from a national process to identify and learn lessons from military operations abroad, which Italian defence badly needs.

At the same time, Rome has to deal with a NATO agenda that is structurally unbalanced to the east. The priority issues are and will remain, at least for the next decade, Russia and Ukraine, and to a lesser (but growing) extent China and the Indo-Pacific. These are crucial issues for Italian security and national interests on which Rome should better shape and propose its vision. Also, not participating adequately in the strategic reflection on these issues weakens any other Italian argument, including those on the southern flank.⁴⁷ For example, NATO-EU

⁴⁷ Alessandro Marrone, "La NATO verso Vilnius e la difficile posizione dell'Italia", in *AffarInternazionali*, 15 June 2023, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=5697>.

coordination on military aid to Ukraine is as fundamental as lacking. Thus, Italy, being active in both contexts, could and should play an important role in ensuring that the respective initiatives and plans are synergic to produce greater and better results in terms of capabilities while strengthening the European defence industrial base. More generally, Italy should relaunch the NATO-EU strategic partnership and the construction of a solid European pillar within the Atlantic Alliance, two long-standing goals of the Italian foreign and defence policy with respect to the transatlantic and European circles. Europeans cannot guarantee the necessary contribution to their collective defence without joint European action, both within the EU and through a European pillar of NATO that also includes the United Kingdom.

Concerning Russia, the consolidation of the forward defence on the eastern flank could and should be accompanied by an allied naval action in the Black Sea to demine Ukrainian ports, secure the vital corridor for Ukrainian imports and exports, and fight the circumvention of international sanctions against Russia which also takes place by sea. Italy could play an important role in this field, which is synergic with the issue of maritime security and supply lines across the enlarged Mediterranean.

Regarding the Indo-Pacific, the Meloni government has intensified partnerships with India⁴⁸ and Japan, as demonstrated by the strategic cooperation agreements in 2023⁴⁹ and the sixth-generation Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)⁵⁰ fighter aircraft to be built by Italy, Japan and the UK. It is no coincidence that the carrier strike group Cavour will conduct a series of exercises, port calls and naval diplomacy activities in the region in 2024. Therefore, Italy is interested in playing an active role in the dialogue between NATO and its partners in this region, including current and possible interlocutors, primarily in terms of information sharing, dialogue, and trust building, which are necessary for tailored and effective cooperation.

Finally, also thanks to its military commitment to NATO, the current Italian Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral Cavo Dragone, will be the next chairman of the Atlantic Alliance's Military Committee as of January 2025. However, the chairman provides military advice for a decision-making process firmly in the hands of NATO's civil structures and national governments. This position should, therefore, be the stepping stone for Italy to regain the role of Deputy Secretary General within a few years with an important portfolio of competencies, such as partnerships or investments. Italy's support for Rutte should serve the purpose of obtaining an Italian deputy shortly afterwards. This, in turn, does not preclude solid Italian candidates

⁴⁸ India and Italy, *India-Italy Joint Statement during the State Visit of the President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic to India*, 2-3 March 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21954>.

⁴⁹ Japan Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, *METI Minister Nishimura Holds Meeting with H.E. Mr. Adolfo Urso, Minister of Enterprises and Made in Italy of the Italian Republic*, 12 December 2023, https://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2023/1212_002.html.

⁵⁰ Italy, Japan and UK, *GCAP Joint Leaders' Statement*, 9 December 2022, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21236>.

for the role of Secretary General later on in the future. More generally, Italy must better prepare candidates for the NATO top and middle positions, selecting the most suitable profiles in good time and supporting them systematically.

A redefined Italian agenda to be implemented in NATO cannot remain disconnected from achieving the 2 per cent target because, as mentioned earlier, it has become the minimum NATO threshold in order to be a credible and influential ally. Since almost all European allies subject to the rules of the EU Stability Pact have reached or will reach this threshold in a few years, not doing so pretty much condemns Italy, its interests and initiatives to marginalisation within NATO.

In conclusion, in Italy, the time has come for political courage to fulfil the commitments that have been taken and reaffirmed regarding the defence budget, to proactively update the Italian vision about the NATO agenda post-Russian invasion of Ukraine, and to implement a long-term strategy that safeguards national interests in the current and future transatlantic framework.

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