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The Future of NATO

Italy: A Committed but Divided Ally



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Introduction

Italy continues to be a committed NATO ally and a keen contributor to NATO collective defence, though its status in the Alliance is threatened by the country's inability to reach the two percent of GDP annual expense guideline (Natalizia and Mazziotti di Celso, 2024). Italy hosts US nuclear weapons as part of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement and is home to a significant number of entities: the Allied Joint Force Command and the Strategic Direction South HUB in Naples; the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps' headquarters near Varese; the NATO Defence College; the Multinational CIMIC Group; the Deployable Air Command and Control Centre (DACCC); the Centre for Maritime Research and Experimentation; and three NATO-accredited Centres of Excellence (CoE).¹ Italy also continues to host several US bases and is consistently one of the top European contributors to NATO operations (McPartland and Marinides, 2021).

However, institutional and political support for NATO does not necessarily reflect public opinion. When polled, Italians invariably adopt more sceptical positions on NATO and the transatlantic relationship than the citizens of most other allied countries (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2024). This sentiment is generally ignored by more mainstream parties in the political sphere, but is often heeded by far-left and far-right parties. Nevertheless, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has at times exposed divisions among parties closer to the centre, including the Democratic Party (Il Sole 24 ore, 2024).

Looking ahead, Donald Trump's rhetoric on NATO's European allies and aggressive statements on Canada and Greenland are likely to feed deep-seated anti-American (and therefore anti-NATO) narratives that are a common trait between both far left and far right. Moreover, Italy's inability to make significant defence budget increases places the country in a delicate position vis-à-vis the new US administration and exposes it to open criticism.

Threat Perception: Southern Instability and US Unpredictability

The think tank ecosystem in Italy is relatively undeveloped when compared to other European countries of a similar size, with only a handful of significant think tanks of varying size and scope.

Despite the watershed moment of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, much of the public debate in Italy still fails to perceive Russian aggression as a significant threat to the country. As of early 2025, discourse in Italy has been largely focused on how the Trump administration will affect NATO's unity, and especially on how Rome is exposed to US pressure regarding defence expenditure

as the two percent of GDP is inevitably shifting from a ceiling to a minimum requirement (Marrone, 2025). At the same time, Trump's election is expected to accelerate the process of US disengagement from Europe in favour of a continuing pivot to Asia, and therefore the need for strengthening the EU's defence toolbox in a way that complements rather than duplicates NATO (A. Gilli and M. Gilli, 2024). While the issue of complementarity with NATO was broadly seen as a *conditio sine qua non* for European defence integration, the new US administration's aggressive diplomacy has had a significant impact on the Italian debate; with increasing fragmentation even among mainstream think tanks as to whether or not Trump's policies are harbingers of a new European security architecture. Furthermore, Ursula von der Leyen's announcement of the ReArm Europe plan and the publication of the EU White Paper for European Defence have instigated a proliferation of polarising approaches in both the parliament and the media and are mostly based on misunderstandings, disinformation or ideological considerations. There is still a degree of uncertainty when it comes to an analysis of the Italy-US relationship, which is often reduced abroad to the friendly discourse between Prime Minister Meloni on one side, and President Trump and Elon Musk on the other. For instance, on top of the two percent issue, experts in Italy have for months warned that Italy's position is rendered even more precarious by its commercial surplus with the US, which is second only to Germany's among major European economies (Villa and Della Gatta, 2025). While this could compel the Italian government to try and adopt a more accommodating approach to US intransigence on trade balances and tariffs, it may also push the US administration to take a more hostile stance towards Rome.

Even before Trump's election, Italian think tanks generally agreed that European Allies could not postpone preparations for a potential US disengagement from the Ukraine conflict – whether Trump was elected or not (Dassù and Menotti, 2024). Tocci (2024) hoped that a Trump presidency might galvanise European efforts on strengthening their defence – yet she warned of a European continent politically divided over Ukraine due to Trump's disruptive and antagonising policies. The new Trump Administration's hostile rhetoric towards Europe and the EU is particularly worrying (Menotti, 2025), as is its approach to a resolution of the war in Ukraine. This approach is sidelining European partners while simultaneously demanding that they take an active and dominant role in guaranteeing Ukrainian security in the future – something that is likely beyond their means (Dassù, 2024).

Menotti (2025) argued how Trump's approach towards negotiations with Russia, excluding Ukraine and immediately removing Kyiv's NATO membership from the bargaining table, in itself represents numerous unnecessary concessions

¹ These are the Modelling and Simulation (M&S) COE, Security Force Assistance (SFA) COE, and the Stability Policing (SP) COE.

to Moscow, which, instead, is left in a far stronger position (Menotti, 2025). Indeed, he warns that the US is assuming the role of a revisionist power; regardless of whether its threats to Panama, Greenland, and Canada are real or a negotiation tactic. Marrone (2025) highlighted how European NATO allies still have different threat perceptions and this leads to heterogeneous approaches to the EU as a defence actor. As a result, progress on this front has been incremental and Trump's election has not yet led to a paradigm shift (Marrone, 2025).

Meanwhile, successive governments have consistently called for NATO to pay more attention to the southern neighbourhood and regional instability, which, in Italy, is still perceived as the closest and most immediate threat to national security (Vitiello, 2024). In recent years, these calls have continued despite all evidence suggesting that NATO has no resources to spare on any front that is not directly threatened by Russian aggression and in the absence of more concrete ideas about what NATO should do in the south that it is not already doing. From an Italian perspective, however, the likely acceleration in US disengagement from the MENA region threatens to exacerbate regional instability and further facilitate Russian influence in the area (Dassù, 2022). IAI researchers in particular have been rather vocal in calling for Italy to recognise that NATO will devote most of its energy to the north-eastern flank of the Alliance in the short- to medium-term, and that it would be better for Rome to spend its political capital elsewhere instead of regularly pushing for an unlikely outcome (i.e. the southern flank becoming more prominent in NATO efforts) (Marrone and Ravazzolo, 2024).

The Southern Dimension – Italy's Prevalent Concern

The loosely defined southern flank largely overlaps with Italy's idea of 'Enlarged Mediterranean' (*Mediterraneo Allargato*), which remains absolutely central to Rome's strategic interests (Coticchia and Mazziotti Di Celso, 2023). Historically, since the end of the Second World War, Italy has rooted its foreign policy in a 'multilateral first' approach, addressing its national interests by influencing decision-making in multilateral bodies like the UN, EU and NATO (Calcagno, 2023). Multilateralism is generally also a priority for some of those experts more closely studying EU affairs and integration, and continues to be a point of advocacy for ECFR (Coratella and Varvelli, 2021). Meanwhile, the Meloni government has seemingly embarked on a path that is leading the country to an approach towards the African continent (and elsewhere) that strongly indicates a change of pace in Rome and a preference for bilateral avenues of cooperation where multilateralism has not worked. In practice, this has translated into the Mattei Plan, which the government envisages as an initiative fostering a new era of engagement between Italy and African countries with a view to development and mutually beneficial relationships (Carbone and Ragazzi, 2024). The de-

bate in Italy has been characterised by a mixture of opinions ranging from those calling the Plan an empty shell (Di Robilant, 2024), to others defining it as an opportunity to find a sustainable *modus operandi* for partnerships between Italy and its African counterparts (Giro, 2024). While not directly relevant to NATO policy in the southern flank, ongoing trends observed in Italy, which point to a growing need to operate outside multilateral forums, may afford useful insights on whether and how Rome will act in the near future with regard to the region, and North Africa and the Sahel in particular.

The Mattei Plan notwithstanding, NATO's southern dimension features very prominently in the Italian debate – perhaps more than in most other southern European allies. In Italy, instability and its exploitation by hostile actors is perceived to be the greatest regional threat; with uncontrolled migration flows being one of the most politically sensitive consequences. Yet, in the absence of more concrete guidance and leadership by the current government as well as previous ones on a concrete path for the Alliance in the south, the debate continues to be superficial. Generally speaking, the main call is for NATO to focus more on the south, because (in the words of Defence Minister Guido Crosetto) "[NATO] cannot pay attention to crises only when they ignite" (Battaglia, 2024). Hence from a purely institutional and governmental point of view, the ideal role of NATO in this region is, broadly speaking, one tied to projecting stability. Nevertheless, Italian researchers agree that the southern flank is now far from the Alliance's top priorities and that it is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. This is due to Russian aggression and posturing at the eastern flank, but also the failure of flagship Out of Area Operations like Afghanistan and Libya (Calcagno and Marrone, 2022).

In 2024, public and expert debate in Italy relating to NATO's southern dimension focused on a NATO Secretary-General-appointed independent group of expert's report and its recommendations, including one calling for a new Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood. The subsequent appointment of a Spaniard in this newly created post was perceived as a slight by the government (Parigi, 2024). Having said that, in light of repeated disappointments some IAI observers have questioned Italy's approach to sponsoring its own representatives in positions of influence in NATO in recent years (Vitiello, 2024).

Despite the primacy of collective defence and the Russian conventional threat in terms of NATO's current threat perception and purpose, Menotti and Mastrolia (2024) have argued that it is important for the Alliance to maintain its relevance by integrating deterrence and crisis management/prevention rather than separating them. This way, it would address all its members' primary security concerns. Indeed, they argue that the southern and eastern flanks converge along the Balkans and the Black Sea in a sort of instability continuum that presents different but often interconnected threats.

Russia – A Divisive Threat in the Public Debate

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represented a watershed moment regarding how (and how much) the Italian mainstream media covers defence-related issues. It has ushered in an era of unprecedented interest in, but also scrutiny of, the Italian armed forces and NATO. The relentless demand for interviews and talk show appearances afforded an opportunity for think tank defence and security experts to reach out to a wider audience than ever, yet it cleared the way for a plethora of self-styled experts and former military personnel to disseminate misleading narratives and fake news. Especially on TV, the type of concise, often-simplistic analysis offered by many of these individuals perfectly catered to Italy's ratings-centred TV style, helping some become true household names. While this issue does not directly pertain to the wider debate involving think tanks and academics, it has indirectly changed the landscape of defence, security and geopolitical studies. It has done so by offering quick and often flawed solutions to complex problems which have in many cases directly influenced public opinion. For instance, NATO polling data shows that in 2021 only eight percent of Italian respondents believed that cooperation between European and North American NATO nations made their country less safe, while this percentage had risen significantly to 32 percent in 2024. (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2024).

This melting pot of thoughtleaders in Italy needs to also include a handful of magazines and experts specialising in a particular brand of geopolitical studies. These have become the most prominent and media-visible outlets of information on geopolitical affairs. "Limes", headed by Lucio Caracciolo, and "Domino", headed by Dario Fabbri, favour a geopolitical interpretation based on spheres of influence and the decadence of what they define as the "American empire" and have caught the attention of both the public and high-profile decision-makers. Along with academics and think tank experts, Lucio Caracciolo regularly teaches a course at the Institute for Advanced Defence Studies (IASD) that is attended by high-ranking armed forces officers – a testament to how a once-niche magazine and discipline in Italy has now become part of the mainstream. This is all the more relevant to an analysis of Italian threat perception vis-à-vis Russia considering that Limes and Caracciolo subscribe to a narrative where Putin's Russia has been provoked into attacking Ukraine by Western (and especially US) encroachment of Russia and destabilisation of Ukraine (Caracciolo, 2024).

However, mainstream think tanks perceive the Russian threat as clear and present, especially with regard to potential Russian aggression along the eastern flank and exploitation of instability in the MENA region. Indeed, even prior to February 2022, there has been a general understanding that Russian sabre-rattling toward Kyiv was part of a long-term Kremlin strategy to carve out a sphere of influence akin to what Moscow enjoyed in the Soviet era (Dassù, 2022). Given Italy's special attention to the Medi-

terranean and littoral regions, Libya is seen as particularly vulnerable to Russian penetration; and even more so following the deployment of some 1,800 Russian mercenaries and soldiers in the territories controlled by General Haftar (Manredi Firmian, 2024). All of Italy's main think tanks agree that Russia represents a long-term challenge to NATO unity, and this includes IAI in particular, which produces the most defence-oriented written outputs due to the defence programme's focus. They all take Russia's threat very seriously, especially in terms of its ability to field mass and wage protracted high-intensity conflict in the face of Europe's difficulties in ramping up military equipment production and fulfilling NATO New Force Model commitments (Calcagno and Marrone, 2024).

China – A Predominantly Economic Challenge

In recent years, Italian think tank debates on China have been largely dominated by the slow process of withdrawal (or rather non-renewal) from the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), to which Rome signed up in 2019. Aurelio Insisa of IAI highlighted the successful diplomatic process that enabled the Draghi and then Meloni governments to exit the BRI seemingly without negative repercussions on Sino-Italian relations (Insisa, 2023). Italy continues to maintain a cooperative approach to Beijing that is geared towards re-balancing the trade balance (now heavily in favour of China) in the context of a bilateral relationship that Insisa defines as 'fluid'. For instance, Insisa points out that while the countries attempt to redefine their relations, the Italian Navy and Air Force have been leading unprecedented deployments to the Indo-Pacific and all the way to Japan, though avoiding the South China Sea (Insisa, 2025).

The Italian navy dispatched an offshore-patrol vessel (ITS Morosini) in 2023 and a carrier strike group (aircraft carrier ITS Cavour and frigate ITS Alpino), off-shore patrol vessel ITS Montecuccoli and training ship ITS Amerigo Vespucci in 2024. That same year, the Air Force took part in the Pitch Black and Rising Sun international exercises in Australia and Japan respectively, deploying F-35 and Eurofighter fighters as well as a C-130J transport aircraft, three KC-767 tankers and a Gulfstream E.550 Conformal Airborne Early Warning (CAEW) (Itamilradar, 2024). It is worth noting that Italy had never dispatched its carrier strike group to the Pacific, while the Air Force's expedition to Japan was by all accounts one of its most complex operations since the Second World War.

While China continues to be the focus of Italian think tanks in economic terms, the Indo-Pacific theatre in general has become a much more prominent topic of discussion. The most recent armed forces' deployments to the Far East, with their unprecedented scale and intensity, have sparked a great deal of discussion among experts as to why (and if) the country needs to be so active in this macroregion when its strategic priorities are so clearly based around the Mediterranean. Mazziotti di Celso (2024)

has been rather vocal in arguing that these deployments to the Indo-Pacific are potentially harmful to the Italian military's readiness, as they further overwhelm already overstretched forces; especially when the Enlarged Mediterranean presents more urgent challenges for Rome. Indeed, according to Mazziotti di Celso, Natalizia and Termine (2024) this increased military presence in the Indo-Pacific is mainly due to US pressure on its NATO allies to be more involved outside of the Alliance's traditional area of interest. Meanwhile, Alessio Patalano (2024) places Italy's growing role in the Indo-Pacific within a general trend towards an expanded understanding of 'Enlarged Mediterranean' that is justified by specific strategic and economic reasons. Zampieri and Ghermandi (2024) go even further as they argue that the recent Red Sea crisis sparked by the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping "represents [...] a significant threat to the validity of the concept of [Enlarged Mediterranean]", because "if Italy is not able to maintain a free access to the relevant choke point represented by Bab-el-Mandeb-Red Sea-Suez, it will not be able to give substance to the geopolitical and geoeconomic space in which it operated in the last forty years" (Zampieri and Ghermandi, 2024). Against this backdrop, the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) involving Italy, the UK and Japan is also listed as a very relevant pull factor for Rome towards the Indo-Pacific region (Abbondanza, 2023) given the closer relations with Tokyo. These relations were formalised as a strategic partnership in 2023 – a process that culminated in the Italian Navy's flagship Cavour making a port call in Japan in 2024 in the context of the aforementioned armed forces' deployments to the East.

The War in Ukraine and the Country's Future Position in the European Security Architecture

Mainstream think tanks universally perceive Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as an unprovoked aggression. This is somewhat in contrast to the public (Coratella, 2022) which, as the FES' 2025 Security Radar (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2025) shows, is much more divided and often an outlier compared to other Western European countries. While there was no significant opposition to calls for Ukraine's EU and NATO membership, which have been more prevalent in other countries, there was significant scepticism behind closed doors about the plausibility of this path given the unlikelihood of a Ukrainian victory on the field, and therefore its freedom to determine its future in the face of Russian terms.

While different polls consistently show that the Italian public is affected more than any other in Western Europe by narratives that view weapon supplies to Ukraine as an obstacle to peace (Krastev and Leonard, 2024), the country's main think tanks have argued for continued and committed support to Kyiv's war effort. IAI was particularly vocal in arguing against heeding Russia's incessant red lines regarding the supply of main battle tanks and then F-16 fighters to Ukraine (De Palo, 2023).

Systemic Challenges: Nuclear Weapons and Hybrid War

Italy stands out as a country particularly affected by Russian nuclear threats, which have been addressed and exaggerated by the media since early in the invasion. This has had a significant impact on the public's perception of the war and the risk of an internationalisation of the conflict and nuclear escalation. Despite that, Italy's participation in the Nuclear Sharing Agreement has received little attention outside of the Russian embassy (2023) or the media outlets closest to the Kremlin's narrative of the conflict. Yet, the fact that most Italians are still unaware of the presence of US tactical nuclear bombs on Italian soil certainly feeds narratives that portray this as an arrangement concealed from the population (Sarti, 2017). In general, though, think tanks rarely discuss nuclear deterrence and NATO's role in this field given that these topics are essentially outside the country's control. Credi and Silvestri (2024) described the fragility of treaty-based non-proliferation architecture and argued that reconciling NATO commitments with Italy's traditional non-proliferation objectives has been a source of concern and resulting inertia within the Italian establishment, which might provide further explanation as to why public debate generally steers well clear of nuclear deterrence. Even the more recent discourse regarding France's offers to initiate discussions on extending its nuclear deterrent has not aroused particular interest in the country other than some scepticism about its feasibility due to practical, political and doctrinal reasons (Darny, 2025).

Russian disinformation is widely discussed in the Italian think tank community, as is the country's vulnerability to malicious foreign influence. A July 2023 report by Carrer, Coratella and Samorè examines large-scale efforts, especially around elections, to push pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO narratives on social media. Nevertheless, given that political parties have been observed sharing pro-Russian disinformation, including some members of the governing coalition, the topic is highly sensitive and, despite some exceptions, generally discussed in a rather superficial way.

Summary and Outlook

Although Italy's think tank ecosystem is rather small, it is largely homogeneous in terms of opinions on issues relating to defence, security and the NATO alliance. Trump's widely touted policies are seen as both a huge threat to EU and NATO unity and as an opportunity for European countries to put aside their longstanding differences and herald a new era of more pragmatic cooperation. There seems to be rather widespread pessimism on this particular point, regardless of how necessary such a shift would be for Europe in the face of a revisionist and ultra-transactional US administration.

The southern neighbourhood remains very high on the list of Italian strategic concerns, though think tank experts still need a more structured debate about how to formulate a more decisive Italian role vis-à-vis countries in the region, on a bilateral basis where necessary but also within NATO and the EU where possible. The marginal role of Ukrainian EU and NATO membership in the Italian think tank debate is perhaps a sign that only few in the country believed these to be realistic prospects and at least while Ukraine is still in a state of conflict with Russia.

An ongoing theme in the country which has certainly been exacerbated by the Ukraine conflict is the widening gap between Italian public opinion and think tanks regarding Ukraine and NATO's role in European security – a trend that will inevitably start to impact on future government policies. In this context, the meteoric rise of alternative sources of information belonging to a certain brand of geopolitical studies, which now have a wider audience and greater appeal than specialised think tanks – certainly according to the general public and increasingly often the decision-makers themselves – must not be dismissed as a temporary phenomenon.

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The Future of NATO – Country Report Italy

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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