

NATO and the Southern Neighbourhood: Challenges and Opportunities for Italy

by Giovanni Parigi

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) Summit in Washington on 9-11 July showcased the current geostrategic priorities of the Alliance. The Southern flank remains one of the key strategic directions of the Alliance but, in the last few years, NATO is increasingly looking elsewhere. Undoubtedly, NATO's pivotal focus is the support to Ukraine and the threats coming from Russia, described as the "most significant and direct threat to Allies' security".¹ If the Eastern flank is considered the immediate and primary challenge to the Alliance, from a longer-term perspective, the Indo-Pacific is looming. China is described as a systemic challenger to Euro-Atlantic interests, security and values, and as a strategic partner of Russia. Moreover, among the Allies, there are notable differences regarding the level of commitment to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

¹ NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, para. 3, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.

This is a complex situation for those countries whose foreign policy and national interests are bound to the MENA region. Therefore, Italy, and several other Allies, are pressing for enhanced attention from NATO towards the Southern flank and its challenges. Thanks to their efforts, in the last months, the NATO reflection on the so-called Southern Neighbourhood has accelerated. Following the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, the Alliance tasked the North Atlantic Council with launching a "comprehensive and deep reflection" on the threats, challenges and opportunities in the Southern Neighbourhood.² Subsequently, the Secretary-General appointed an independent group of experts, whose findings were collected in a report published last May.³ Leveraging the

² NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, 11 July 2023, para. 22, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm.

³ NATO, *Group of Experts Publishes Report on NATO's Southern Neighbourhood*, 7 May 2024, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/>

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report's findings, the NATO Deputy Permanent Representatives Committee drafted an action plan for a renewed and more effective approach towards the Southern Neighbourhood. Lately, the final communiqué of the Washington Summit contains few but important decisions agreed upon by the Allies concerning the Southern flank.

Why the report is relevant for Italy

The May report set the agenda of the discussions on the Southern flank and laid the ground for the relevant paragraphs of the Washington Summit communiqué. The report's findings are also the starting point for the action plan for the Southern Neighbourhood.

In essence, the value of the report to Italy is double: it kept the Allies' attention on the Southern flank alive and produced more than one hundred actionable recommendations. The basic rationale of the latter is that NATO needs a renewed strategic approach. A first set of recommendations is focused on bolstering regional partnerships. On the one hand, the experts suggested energising existing cooperation frameworks, such as the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI)⁴ and the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD).⁵

[news_225245.htm](#).

⁴ Launched in 2004, the ICI is a partnership forum that aims to contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering non-NATO countries in the broader Middle East region the opportunity to cooperate with the Alliance. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates currently participate in the Initiative.

⁵ Launched in 1994, the MD is a partnership forum that aims to contribute to security and stability in the wider Mediterranean region,

These two partnership frameworks are described as still valid, but their full potential has yet to be leveraged: ICI should extend its memberships and the range of its activities, while the MD must overcome bilateral tensions and Allies' disagreements, which paralysed its effectiveness. On the other hand, it is necessary to widen the options for cooperation, enhancing partners' involvement and flexibility, and reaching out to new actors. These recommendations are valuable to Rome, which has a vested interest in the stability of the MENA region and well-established bilateral partnerships with countries of the so-called Enlarged Mediterranean.

A second set of recommendations outlines thematic areas for cooperation to be prioritised. Several of these recommendations are of peculiar interest to Italy. For example, those calling for strengthening good governance, counter-terrorism efforts or maritime security in the region, address challenges which are at the core of Italian foreign policy. Moreover, recommendations concerning climate change, public diplomacy and strategic communications indirectly support Italy's Mattei Plan for Africa,⁶ improving

and promote good relations and understanding among participating countries and NATO Allies. Currently, the following non-NATO countries take part in the Dialogue: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

⁶ Law No. 2 of 11 January 2024: *Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 15 novembre 2023, n. 161, recante disposizioni urgenti per il «Piano Mattei» per lo sviluppo in Stati del Continente africano* [Conversion into law, with amendments, of law-decree No. 161 of 15 November 2023, containing urgent provisions for the Mattei Plan for African states' development], <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:>

the political environment for bilateral relations.

A third set of recommendations is devoted to the enhancement of the cooperation with international and regional organisations, such as the European and the African Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. These might be extremely precious to Rome, since they could improve synergy among international efforts and enhance NATO involvement in the MENA – producing a positive environment also for the Italian bilateral cooperation.

A last set of recommendations concerns the improvements of NATO internal structures, coordination and other measures, such as the establishment of additional NATO liaison offices and training centres, aimed at raising awareness of NATO's activities in the region, as well as strengthening partnerships and engagement.

The Washington Summit communiqué

Unquestionably, the main focus of the Washington Summit was on the Eastern flank, epitomised by the pledge of Long-Term Security Assistance for Ukraine. Concerning the Southern flank, in addition to a couple of boilerplate paragraphs, like the fourth mentioning the challenge posed by MENA instability or the 28th mentioning the anniversaries of the MD and the ICI, only one paragraph – the 32nd – is fully devoted to Southern Neighbourhood. This paragraph

mentions the reflection process that ushered in the May report and stresses the importance of partnerships in the Middle East and Africa, in order to foster security and stability.⁷

From Rome's point of view, the Summit also produced a few practical opportunities, such as the establishment of a Special Representative for the Southern Neighbourhood and a revision of the mandate for the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub in Naples. However, the first of the two opportunities has seemingly already been lost – following the decision of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, harshly criticised by Italy, to appoint Spanish diplomat Javier Colomina.

The second opportunity is the decision to review the mandate for the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub in Naples. Not being a proper think tank nor an intelligence agency, its potential is currently underdeveloped, and the structure would sensibly benefit from a renewed mandate, encompassing training and capacity-building for partners.

In addition, the dialogue, outreach and visibility of the Alliance will be bolstered by strengthening instruments such as the Defence Capacity Building Initiative, the NATO-Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre in Kuwait and the opening of a liaison office in Jordan. Finally, the communiqué also mentions the adoption of the already mentioned action plan “for a stronger, more

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⁷ NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, cit.

strategic and result-oriented approach toward our Southern Neighbourhood, which will be regularly updated”.⁸

Looking ahead

Overall, the Southern flank appears not to be a priority for NATO, now and in the next future. Threats, challenges and opportunities coming from the Eastern flank will very likely monopolise the Alliance’s focus in the next few years. Moreover, after the experiences in Afghanistan and Libya, there is very limited appetite for crisis prevention and management, and the priorities are restoring NATO’s deterrence and defence capabilities and supporting Ukraine. Meanwhile, China’s systemic challenges will become increasingly relevant. As a consequence, the political and military bandwidth of the Alliance towards the Southern flank risks being limited. Furthermore, following the incoming presidential election in the USA, there is the real possibility of a sudden change in US foreign politics and policy towards NATO – potentially further absorbing the Alliance’s capacity, at the additional expense of the Southern flank.

Nonetheless, the Washington Summit communiqué provides several opportunities for Italy to play a leading role on the Southern flank, in parallel and potentially in synergy with the Mattei Plan. Surely, the appointment of a Spanish diplomat as Special Representative was a lost opportunity for Italy. However, on the one hand, regardless of their nationality, this new player might be extremely useful

for enhancing and streamlining the Alliance’s overall focus on the Southern flank. On the other hand, Italy has reportedly not given up on asking for the post, claiming that it is a decision taken by an almost expired Secretary-General that will have to be confirmed by his successor, Mark Rutte.

Another opportunity is the revision of the Hub for the South’s mandate, which could also provide support to the newly appointed Special Representative. More generally, the mandate should widen the range of the Hub’s activities but also strengthen its connections with NATO decision-making centres. Notably, Rome will soon rely on a key enabler, since Italian Admiral Cavo Dragone will take over as Chairman of the NATO Military Committee in January 2025.

In addition, against the backdrop of an increased relevance of defence and deterrence among NATO’s core tasks, Italy should limit calls to crisis management initiatives, emphasising instead those related to cooperative security. This could be done in several ways: first, by supporting an energised and more flexible partnership framework. Moreover, Rome should try to exploit any opportunity offered by the establishment of NATO contact point embassies, training centres and liaison offices in the MENA region. Lastly, in order to call attention to the relevance of the Southern flank, Rome might stress its interlinkages with the Eastern flank, such as the Russian influence in the Sahel or Libya, or the destabilising role of Iran. The much-vaunted – but not so much implemented – principle of NATO’s 360-degree approach might conceptually help. Finally and relatedly,

⁸ Ibid., para. 32.

the war in Gaza and the subsequent increase in tensions in the Middle East might force the Alliance to turn its attention once again to the region, where it still has a mission in a critical area such as Iraq.

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