

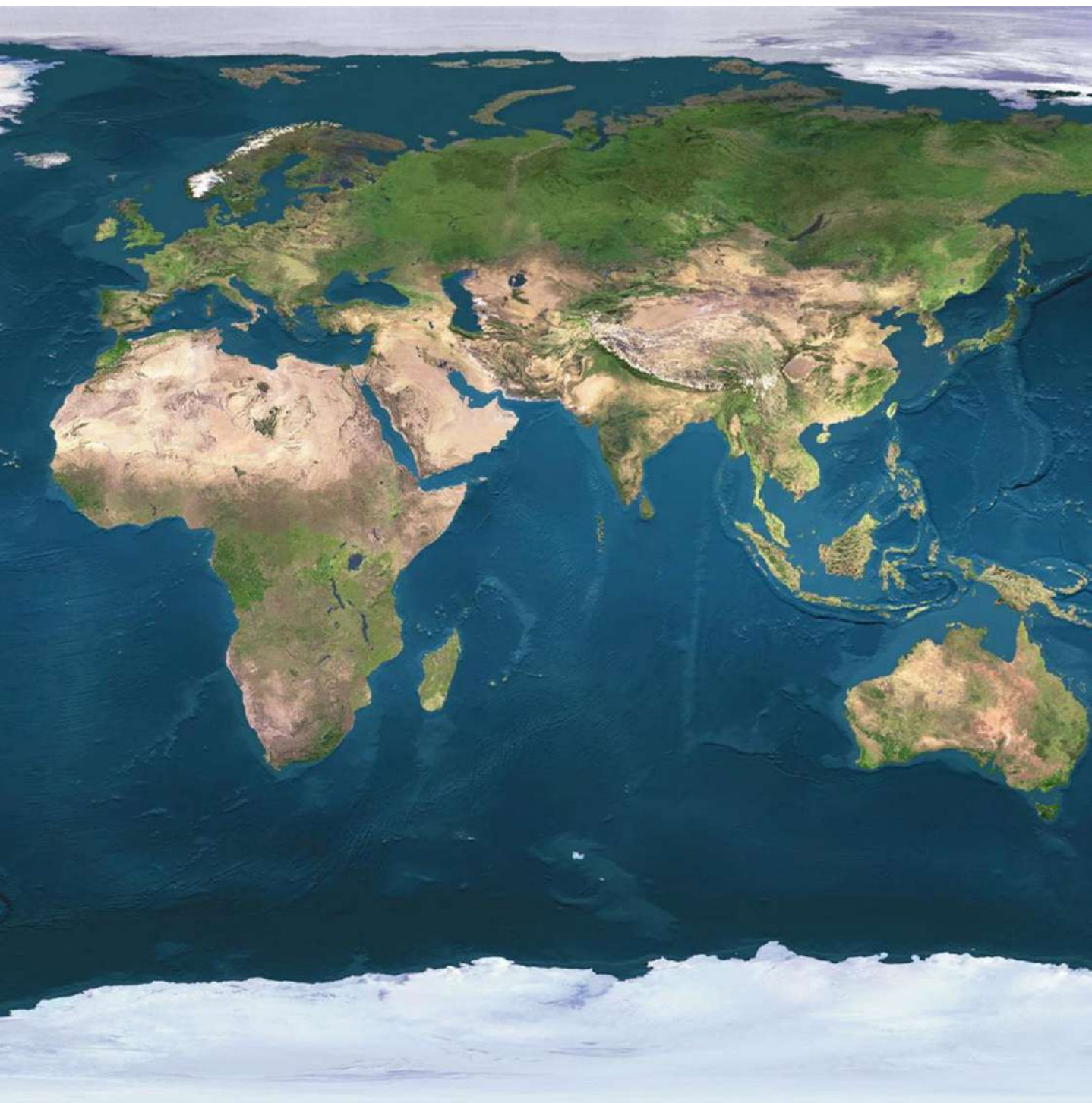


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Global Strategic Overview

Claudio Bertolotti

The international picture presented in this volume of the Strategic Observatory is not one of a mere succession of regional crises. Rather, it is the image of a system undergoing simultaneous transformation, in which power competition, armed conflicts, sub-threshold coercion, technological and energy dependencies, infrastructure vulnerabilities and political fragilities interact with one another. Central and Eastern Europe, the Wider Mediterranean, the Sahel, the Indo-Pacific and Latin America no longer constitute separate regions: they are interconnected spaces, traversed by the same fault lines and by the consequences of decisions taken elsewhere.

It is from this awareness that this volume brings together contributions that differ in subject, method and geographical scale, yet converge in their aim of providing an analytical perspective that supports an anticipatory understanding of strategic phenomena. The Strategic Observatory of the Institute for Research and Analysis of Defence does not seek merely to describe events: it interprets trends, identifies connections, highlights vulnerabilities and proposes analytical frameworks consistent with the information requirements and analytical direction of the Ministry of Defence. From this perspective, the plurality of authors is a strength, as it allows the same international environment to be examined through complementary historical, geopolitical, military, economic, energy and social expertise.

Leonardo Bianchini opens the volume with an analysis of Transcarpathia, a crossroads in Central and Eastern Europe and a space in which history, identity and security overlap. The dispute between Hungary and Ukraine over the Hungarian-speaking minority shows how an apparently peripheral issue can become an instrument of negotiating pressure within European Union and NATO forums, while also acquiring dimensions linked to espionage and disinformation. The contribution thus invites us to regard border areas not as passive margins, but as sensitive points where local tensions can produce broader strategic effects.

On the southern flank, Andrea Molle examines the Levant following the direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, highlighting the progressive convergence of the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, the Red Sea and the Sahel. Energy security, freedom of maritime lines of communication, power competition and hybrid threats now define a single operational and political space.

Matteo Giusti focuses on the Sahel, where European withdrawal, Russia's advance, regime instability and jihadist expansion have reshaped regional balances. In this context, Italy's presence in Niger may still provide an access point and a diplomatic and military asset for preserving a margin of European initiative.

Michele Brunelli analyses Oman's quiet diplomacy and the strategic value of its active neutrality. Muscat emerges as a political-diplomatic sensor capable of maintaining channels with opposing actors, clarifying regional intentions and reducing the risk of perceptual error. Its position on the Strait of Hormuz and its relations with Tehran, the Houthis, Washington and London make it a significant interlocutor for stability in the Gulf and, by extension, for the security of the routes linking the Red Sea, Suez and the Mediterranean.

The dimension of systemic competition is addressed by Claudio Bertolotti in the contribution devoted to China's global power projection. Beijing does not replicate the US model of permanent alliances and large, dispersed bases; instead, it combines regional military power, selective logistical access, control of infrastructure and value chains, cyber and space capabilities, economic diplomacy, and the construction of an alternative narrative of the international order. Pressure on Taiwan, coercion in the South China Sea and growing nuclear capabilities point to a strategy primarily intended to alter other actors' calculations without necessarily crossing the threshold of war.

Paolo Pizzolo examines Russia's anti-access and area-denial strategy across four theatres - Crimea, Kaliningrad, the Arctic and Syria - assessing its structure, employment and effectiveness. The

contribution shows how A2/AD has supported conventional deterrence and Russia's power projection, but also how the war in Ukraine has exposed vulnerabilities and forced adaptations. The analysis is particularly relevant to NATO, which must develop counter-capabilities and reconsider the relationship among forward defence, freedom of manoeuvre and the resilience of its operational infrastructure.

The volume then turns to Latin America through Caterina Tarozzi's analysis of Argentina's geopolitical realignment under President Milei. Energy, liquefied natural gas, lithium, copper and supply chains form the basis for the selective bilateral diplomacy that Buenos Aires is building, oscillating among Washington, Brussels and Beijing. Argentina's strategic value is increasing as the country pursues an alignment grounded in realist pragmatism.

Matteo Mazziotti di Celso addresses the revision of NATO's policy on reserve forces and directly examines Italy's capacity to adapt to a context in which force quality must be matched by the mass required to sustain prolonged, high-intensity operations.

Silvio Labbate, in turn, reconstructs the evolution of Italy's energy landscape, placing external dependence and supply vulnerabilities at the heart of national security. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that energy choices, often regarded as purely economic, are in fact integral to strategic posture and the state's freedom of decision.

Claudio Bertolotti's contribution on Iranian influence in Europe and the vulnerability of the cognitive domain concludes the thematic sequence. The analysis describes an adaptive ecosystem in which state media, digital platforms, local intermediaries and criminal networks may contribute to a strategy that moves from narrative to coercion. The Italian case is examined by distinguishing the reception and reworking of Iranian narratives from the hypothesis that a chain of command exists linking them to local actors. The appeal to 'resistance', however, can provide a common framework for the Palestinian cause, anti-Atlanticism, political antagonism and conflict with the state, thereby creating an environment conducive to the amplification of hostile messages.

Alongside contributions structured by region and theme, the volume includes the in-depth section 'Under the Lens', devoted to the dossiers of greatest current relevance and interest. The section responds to the need to focus analytical attention on events or phenomena that, because of their rapid evolution, potential impact or relevance to national security, require closer examination. 'Under the Lens' does not replace scenario analysis; it complements it: by narrowing the gap between observation of an event and its strategic interpretation, it provides timely inputs for understanding and assessment.

Taken together, the contributions reveal several common threads. The first is the growing interdependence between regional security and global competition: a linguistic minority, a port, a lithium deposit, a naval base or a communications network may acquire a significance that extends far beyond its local context. The second is the centrality of sub-threshold coercion, pursued through military, economic, information, cyber or administrative instruments that make it possible to exert pressure while avoiding, at least initially, open conflict. The third concerns the transformation of dependencies into vulnerabilities: energy, dual-use technologies, port infrastructure, critical minerals, data and logistics chains have become components of defence capacity and decision-making sovereignty.

A fourth common thread concerns the quality of the military instrument and national resilience. Deterrence does not depend solely on platforms and weapon systems, but on the availability of personnel, reserves, logistics, industry, secure communications and political consensus. At the same time, cognitive competition requires a distinction between dissent, propaganda, hostile influence and operational support: imprecise attribution weakens analysis, while underestimating narrative convergences may obscure the transition from information pressure to mobilisation or coercion.

For Italy, these elements converge in the Wider Mediterranean but are not confined to it. National security depends on developments in the Sahel, the Gulf, the Red Sea, the Indo-Pacific and Latin American industrial supply chains; it also depends on NATO cohesion, Europe's capacity to act, the protection of routes, and the resilience of the economic and information system. The function of the Strategic Observatory is precisely to make this interdependence intelligible, avoiding both the fragmentation of analysis and the temptation to reduce different phenomena to a single explanation.

This volume is therefore not a collection of juxtaposed contributions, but a knowledge instrument designed to support strategic assessment. Drawing on different approaches and areas of expertise, the authors provide the Ministry of Defence with an interpretive framework for identifying risks, opportunities, signs of discontinuity and possible trajectories of change. The objective is not to predict the future deterministically, but to reduce uncertainty, identify relevant connections in good time, and provide sound judgements capable of supporting planning, military preparedness and the protection of national interests.

In a strategic environment in which events unfold faster than decision-making processes, analysis must combine historical depth, attention to data, caution in attribution and forward-looking capacity. This is the role the IRAD Strategic Observatory is called upon to perform: to observe change as it takes shape, transform information into knowledge, and place that knowledge at the service of national defence and security requirements.

Osservatorio Strategico

Transcarpathia: the crossroads of central and eastern Europe

Leonardo Bianchini

Executive Summary

A border region par excellence, a true limes of Central and Eastern Europe, Subcarpathian Ruthenia – today Ukraine's Transcarpathia oblast – long remained at the margins of historiographical research, despite having represented a crucial crossroads in the history of Central and Eastern Europe: a land of contradictions in which different identities have coexisted, not always peacefully. This contribution first reconstructs, from a historical-geographical (and toponymic) perspective, the premises that explain the tensions currently affecting the area. The second part focuses on the present geopolitical scenario, with particular reference to the dispute between Hungary and Ukraine over the protection of the region's sizeable Hungarian-speaking minority. Since 2022, this dossier has also acquired security dimensions (espionage and disinformation) and has become a source of negotiating leverage within the EU and NATO. Indeed, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has merely intensified a pre-existing friction between Budapest and Kyiv; recent political changes in Hungary, however, appear to have opened a window for a possible negotiated settlement.

1. A Region with Many Names

Over the centuries, Transcarpathia (in Ukrainian, Zakarpats'ka) has been known by several different names. This is an essential starting point, since changes in toponymy - or, more accurately, its plurality – reflect both the continuous succession of state dominations and the territory's heterogeneous ethno-linguistic composition, which has never stabilised around a single national identity, a phenomenon by no means uncommon in Central and Eastern Europe. What for the Magyars (more commonly known as Hungarians) was simply “the land lying at the foot of the Carpathians” (in Hungarian, Kárpátalja) is regarded in the Slavic world as an integral part of Ruthenia, a generic toponym (from the medieval Latin Ruthenia, a Latinised form of the Slavic ethnonym Rus') which, in historical-geographical terms, denoted the vast territory of Eastern Europe inhabited by the descendants of Kyivan Rus'¹.

In the Slavic languages, the region is known as Carpathian Ruthenia or, more accurately, Subcarpathian Ruthenia (in Czech and Slovak, Podkarpatská Rus; in Ukrainian, Pidkarpats'ka Rus'), a name that mirrors the Hungarian, and subsequently Czechoslovak, variant by adopting a perspective that looks at the region on this side of the Carpathians from west to east. Given its close proximity to Galicia and their shared ethno-linguistic features, Ukrainians claimed that these lands belonged to Ukraine; from their perspective, the region was therefore called Transcarpathian Ukraine (in Czech and Slovak, Zakarpatská Ukrajina), from which the current name Transcarpathia derives. More generally, from a Western perspective it was referred to as Subcarpathian Ukraine or Carpathian Ukraine, a much broader name without precise geographical connotations, which was nevertheless adopted by the autonomous entity established in the region in November 1938, as well as during the short-lived independence proclaimed in March 1939. Following the brief and brutal German occupation in 1944, the Soviet Union annexed Subcarpathian Ruthenia to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945 as the Transcarpathia

¹ The historian who, more than any other, has studied Rusyn history and identity and its relationship with the other peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the Ukrainians, is Paul Robert Magocsi. For further discussion, see his bibliography, especially: MAGOCSI P.R., An Historiographical Guide to Subcarpathian Rus', in «Austrian History Yearbook» 9 (1973), pp. 201-265; ID., The Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus' 1848-1948, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1978; ID., A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2010 (1st ed. 1996); ID., With Their Backs to the Mountains: A History of Carpathian Rus' and Carpatho-Rusyns, Central European University Press, Budapest-New York, 2015.

oblast, officially established in 1946. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Ukraine's independence, the region's borders and name remained unchanged.

2. The Region's Physical, Human and Historical Geography

Subcarpathian Ruthenia is a predominantly mountainous border region covering approximately 12,000 km². Located in the heart of Central, or Central-Eastern, Europe, it shares a short border with Poland to the north, Romania to the south, Slovakia to the north-west, Hungary to the south-west, and the Ukrainian oblasts of Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk to the north-east. In 2022, before the start of the Russian invasion, Transcarpathia had a population of just over 1.25 million, making the region broadly comparable in area, population and physical geography to Trentino-Alto Adige/South Tyrol.

Geographically, the territory is divided into two distinct zones: the mountainous area of the "Forested" Carpathians (or Ukrainian Carpathians) in the north-east, and a lowland area, generally known as the Transcarpathian Plain, which forms part of the vast Hungarian Plain and corresponds to the upper course of the Tisza River. Several waterways also descend from the Ukrainian Carpathians through almost parallel valleys towards the plain; along them stand the towns of Uzhhorod (Ungvár in Hungarian), Mukachevo (Munkács in Hungarian, Munkatsch in German and Muncaci in Romanian), Berehove (Beregszász in Hungarian) and Vynohradiv (Nagyszőlős in Hungarian, Seleuşu Mare in Romanian and Vynohradiw in German)².

The relatively small lowland area has been the most favourable for agricultural and urban development, and it is in this part of the region that significant Hungarian-speaking communities reside. By contrast, the hilly and mountainous zone is inhabited by the so-called Rusyns or Carpatho-Rusyns: a Slavic ethnic group often regarded as a subgroup of Ukrainians, but which in fact retains its own language and identity. Traditional subsistence activities in this part of the territory have primarily consisted of pastoralism and the exploitation of forest resources³.

Present-day Ukrainian Transcarpathia has been characterised by pronounced ethno-linguistic diversity, the result of the numerous migrations and forms of rule that have succeeded one another over the centuries. Considering only the states to which it has belonged, the Subcarpathian region has formed part of at least six different political entities. Conquered by the Magyars – who, according to tradition, entered the territory of present-day Hungary through the mountain passes of what is now Transcarpathia – the region belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary until 1920. In that year, the treaties that ended the First World War (Saint-Germain and Trianon) assigned the province to Czechoslovakia. Between 1938 and 1939, first following the First Vienna Award and then the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Subcarpathian Ruthenia gradually returned to the control of the Kingdom of Hungary, a revisionist ally of the Axis. After a brief but violent German occupation, which culminated in the almost complete deportation of the Jewish communities, the region was occupied by Soviet troops from autumn 1944 until the end of 1945. Although the Soviets formally restored Czechoslovak sovereignty, they retained effective control; in 1945, following an agreement between Prague and Moscow, the Soviet occupation also became legally effective through the annexation of Subcarpathian Ruthenia to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic⁴. The Transcarpathia oblast was established in January 1946, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the region has formed part of modern Ukraine. Throughout this historical period, the territory has therefore been inhabited by numerous peoples: Rusyns, Hungarians, Romanians,

² BIANCHINI L., *Dal Regno d'Ungheria all'Ucraina sovietica: il dominio ungherese (1867-1918)*, in «Rivista di Studi Ungheresi (RSU)» (2025) 24, pp. 107-122, especially pp. 108-109.

³ MAGOCSI P.R., *With Their Backs to the Mountains*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁴ VASYL M., *L'Incorporation de l'Ukraine subcarpathique à l'Ukraine soviétique, 1944-1945*, Centre Ukrainien d'Etudes en Belgique, Louvain, 1956.

Czechs, Slovaks and Ukrainians, as well as Germans, who arrived in the late Middle Ages, Jews⁵, Roma, Poles and, following Sovietisation, Russians, Belarusians, Georgians and Armenians⁶.

Despite its geographically central position within Central and Eastern Europe, Subcarpathian Ruthenia has consistently remained peripheral to the state entities of which it formed part, with adverse consequences for the political, social and economic life of its inhabitants. Until 1945, the region had always belonged geographically to Central Europe; consequently, its political orientation, cultural life and patterns of trade were shaped by the major Central European cities of Budapest, Vienna, Prague, Kraków and Lviv⁷. The Soviet period, by contrast, was marked by extensive militarisation and the closure of the region, including towards the rest of the country, because its strategic position was regarded as a gateway to Danubian Europe. It is no coincidence that Soviet troops sent to suppress the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968 passed through Transcarpathia.

Behind its apparent marginality, Subcarpathian Ruthenia experienced some of the most significant turning points in the history of Central and Eastern Europe. It therefore constitutes a true *limes* between the Western, Catholic and Roman world and the Eastern, Orthodox and Russian world; a gateway through its mountain passes to Danubian Europe; and a land of conquest marked by linguistic, religious, cultural and ideological divisions. It is in this narrow strip of territory that the contradictions of Carpathian-Danubian Europe have historically reached their greatest intensity, and continue to do so today⁸.

3. The Dispute between Budapest and Kyiv over Transcarpathia (2011-2025)

The dispute between Hungary and Ukraine over the Carpathians therefore has centuries-old roots, but has intensified in the recent past. In 2011, Viktor Orbán's Hungarian government adopted a law facilitating the granting of Hungarian – and therefore European – citizenship to anyone able to demonstrate that an ancestor was born in territories belonging to Hungary until 1920 or during the period 1938-1945, provided that the applicant had a basic knowledge of the Hungarian language. In those same years, earlier Ukrainian legislation on minority languages, enacted under the pro-Russian presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, allowed Hungarian to be adopted as the official language of the local administration in central Beregszász – the town with the highest proportion of Hungarian-speaking residents in Transcarpathia – and enabled the Hungarian consulate to operate in the cultural sphere for years without significant opposition.

Following the Russo-Ukrainian crisis of 2014, the first genuine rupture came in 2017-2018, when Kyiv first enacted a controversial education law and then expelled the Hungarian consul from Berehove, accusing him of issuing Hungarian passports to Ukrainian citizens in breach of the law prohibiting dual citizenship. In the following years, the Ukrainian government further tightened its linguistic and cultural policy, with the declared aim of definitively severing the country's ties to the Russian language and culture. Yet while Ukraine's new education laws of 2017 and restrictions on the use of languages other than Ukrainian introduced in 2019 were primarily intended by successive governments as anti-Russian measures, for Transcarpathia's Hungarian community they represented a threat to its survival as a minority. It was on this basis that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán began to threaten - and repeatedly implement - the obstruction of Ukraine's path towards closer integration with the European Union and NATO⁹.

⁵ On the extermination of the Jewish population during the brief German occupation, see: SEGAL R. - CSÖSZ L. - KHUDISH P., *Jews and Roma in the Carpathian Region and Southern Slovakia: Uncovering Historical Relations and Entangled Destruction*, in «*Journal of Genocide Research*», (2025) 27, pp. 576-597.

⁶ ZÉKANY K., *To stay in Transcarpathia. The fate of a multinational region in the light of historical changes*, in «*Rivista di Studi Ungheresi (RSU)*» (2020) 19, pp. 247-257, especially pp. 247-248.

⁷ MAGOCSI P.R., *With Their Backs to the Mountains*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁸ BIANCHINI L., *La Rutenia subcarpatica*, op. cit., p. 112.

⁹ In its report of 8 November 2023 on Ukraine's progress towards accession, the European Commission itself identified the rights of national minorities as one of the outstanding conditions, effectively reiterating the concerns previously raised by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission. See JĘDRYSIAK M. - NIECZYPOR K., *Ukraine: another amendment to the law on national minorities*, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Warsaw, December 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-12-13/ukraine-another-amendment-to-law-national-minorities>.

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict did not restore calm to the region; on the contrary, positions hardened further. Ukraine adopted an increasingly nationalist policy, while Hungary remained sceptical for a long time both about providing military aid and about imposing sanctions on the Russian aggressor. Although Budapest made a concrete commitment to receiving Ukrainian refugees – many of whom passed through the Transcarpathian hub – it also adopted a cautious approach to the war, opposing both arms deliveries and the transit of military equipment across the Hungarian-Ukrainian border. Later, in the context of European sanctions, Hungary went so far as to veto an embargo on Russian gas, justifying its position on the strategic need to safeguard its energy autonomy. Orbán consequently built both his 2022 election campaign, which culminated in his latest re-election as Hungary's prime minister, and the 2024 European election campaign around Hungarian-Ukrainian tensions, presenting his electoral victories as victories over Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and, naturally, the European leadership in Brussels¹⁰.

Another aspect of the affair concerns reports of an alleged proposal to partition Ukraine, supposedly presented by Putin to Orbán when the latter travelled to Moscow to meet him on the eve of the invasion¹¹. More significant than speculation about an improbable Hungarian invasion of Transcarpathia, however, was the dispute over the Carpathian minorities and the security of the border region, which cast a genuine shadow over Kyiv's western flank throughout the conflict. The internal boundary between the oblast and the rest of the country was therefore subjected to stringent controls to prevent deserters from reaching the EU border or possible agents from travelling inland. Compulsory conscription imposed by Ukraine, which resulted in documented cases of forced recruitment, further aggravated tensions when the Hungarian minority was subjected to such pressure. In July 2025, a Ukrainian citizen of Hungarian ethnicity died after allegedly being beaten to death by Ukrainian recruiters, causing a major diplomatic incident and a strong reaction from the Budapest government¹².

The "Transcarpathian question" has predictably been exploited by Moscow's propaganda and disinformation. According to Ukrainian sources and several regional analytical centres, Transcarpathia has long been the target of a systematic Russian hybrid warfare campaign operating on two fronts: towards the Ukrainian population, by fostering the perception that Hungary harbours annexationist ambitions; and towards the Hungarian population, by portraying the Hungarian minority as persecuted by Ukrainian nationalist policies. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has repeatedly reported operations of this kind, ranging from SMS campaigns targeting the Hungarian community in the first months of the war to a more recent information and psychological operation identified in March 2026, involving anonymous intimidating calls routed through spoofing techniques¹³. These accounts must, of course, be read with due caution. Nevertheless, the phenomenon highlights a relevant fact: because of its ethnic composition and its nature as a border region, Transcarpathia is a significant target for hybrid operations

¹⁰ For an overview of the controversial relations between Hungary and Ukraine, with particular reference to Transcarpathia and Viktor Orbán's policies, see CARTENY A. - BIANCHINI L., *La guerra in Ucraina e l'ombra di Mosca sull'Europa carpatico-danubiana: il caso di Ungheria, Slovacchia e Serbia*, in CARTENY A. (ed.), *Competizione globale, conflitti regionali e crisi politiche. Europa Orientale, Medioriente e Indopacifico*, Intra Edizioni, Pesaro, 2025, pp. 47-78; and, above all: CARTENY A. - BIANCHINI L., *La guerra in Ucraina e l'influenza russa sull'Europa centro-orientale: il caso ungherese*, in «Europea» (2025) 10, pp. 175-196.

¹¹ CARTENY A., *Il filo russo che unisce Budapest e Belgrado*, in «Domani», 18 July 2022, <https://www.editorialedomani.it/politica/mondo/russia-guerra-balceni-occidentali-orban-ungheria-serbia-vucic-scenari-ggns8m8a>. When he returned to the subject in 2025, however, the Hungarian prime minister categorically denied the hypothesis. See Mathias Döpfner's interview with Orbán in November 2025: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEKzdYKyX3Q>.

¹² Ungheria e Ucraina ai ferri corti per gli arruolamenti forzati in Transcarpazia, in «Analisi Difesa», 20 July 2025, <https://www.analisedifesa.it/2025/07/ungheria-e-ucraina-ai-ferri-corti-per-gli-arruolamenti-forzati-in-transcarpazia/>.

¹³ On hybrid warfare and Russian disinformation techniques, see: IASHCHENKO I. - CARTENY A., *Sharp Power, Ideology Building and Disinformation Warfare upon Russo-Ukrainian Conflict*, in CARTENY A. (ed.), *Competizione globale*, op. cit., pp. 93-128.

intended to amplify pre-existing tensions between Kyiv and Budapest and to divide the front that supports, or should support, the Ukrainian war effort¹⁴.

A further crisis had already brought the two governments into confrontation. In May 2025, SBU officers dismantled an alleged Hungarian spy network in Transcarpathia. The case involved two former servicemen accused of passing information on the region's security and defences to Hungarian operatives. According to the SBU's reconstruction, the alleged spies were also tasked with gauging local residents' attitudes towards a possible Hungarian occupation of the region - an eventuality indignantly rejected by both the Hungarian foreign minister and Orbán himself. Budapest's response, in what became a fully fledged "war of spies", was not long in coming: two Ukrainian citizens were expelled from Hungary on accusations of spying for Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service (SZRU). Ukraine, in turn, expelled two Hungarian diplomats. The principal consequence of this espionage crisis was the cancellation of a planned Hungarian-Ukrainian meeting in Uzhhorod intended to discuss the minority issue¹⁵.

4. The End of Orbán: A Change of Course for Transcarpathia? (2026)

At the beginning of 2026, shortly before the political turning point that brought "regime change" to Hungary, yet another crisis erupted between Budapest and Kyiv. On 27 January, supplies through the Druzhba pipeline – the route through which Russian crude oil continued to flow to Hungary and Slovakia – were interrupted. Kyiv attributed the disruption to a Russian drone attack, while Orbán immediately accused Zelenskyy of having deliberately blocked the pipeline. The Budapest government responded by withholding its approval of the twentieth EU sanctions package against Russia and the EUR 90 billion loan to Ukraine. The crisis escalated further on 5 March, when Hungarian special forces stopped two cash-in-transit vans belonging to Oschadbank, one of Ukraine's leading banks, and seized approximately USD 40 million, EUR 35 million and nine kilograms of gold under a decree signed by Orbán on national security grounds. Kyiv responded by accusing Hungary of "state terrorism" and "extortion"; shortly afterwards, Hungarian Transport Minister Lázár even acknowledged that the episode had been a reprisal for the failure to restore the Druzhba pipeline¹⁶.

Hungary's parliamentary elections in April 2026 held Europe – and, very plausibly, the inhabitants of Transcarpathia – in suspense. At stake was not only Budapest's position and attitude towards Brussels, but also the future of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations and the resolution of the impasse concerning minorities in the Ukrainian oblast. During the fiercely contested election campaign, the anti-Orbán candidate promised a sharp break with the past: domestically, by dismantling the Fidesz prime minister's patronage system; and externally, by adopting a more conciliatory approach towards the EU, greater openness towards Ukraine and a firmer stance against Russia. After winning the election, however, Hungary's new prime minister, the centre-right politician Péter Magyar – formerly a close associate of the outgoing premier – appeared to pursue an overall cautious course.

Magyar certainly promoted a rapprochement with Kyiv, declared his readiness to meet President Zelenskyy and facilitated an agreement on minority rights, one of the most contentious issues in the election campaign. The development was presented as a major success for Hungary's new political

¹⁴ INOTAI E., Orbán's Propaganda Campaign Against Ukraine Proves Surprisingly Effective, in «Balkan Insight», 20 September 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/20/orbans-propaganda-campaign-against-ukraine-proves-surprisingly-effective/rd/>; TÓTH L., To Quote Lies Is Lying. How Hungary's Government Amplifies Russian Disinformation On Ukraine, in «Vox Ukraine», 26 May 2023, <https://voxukraine.org/en/to-quote-lies-is-lying-how-hungary-s-government-amplifies-russian-disinformation-on-ukraine/>; SSU exposes large-scale Russian disinformation operation targeting Hungarian community in Zakarpattia, in «Ukrinform», 18 March 2026, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-crime/4102885-ssu-exposes-largescale-russian-disinformation-operation-targeting-hungarian-community-in-zakarpattia.html>.

¹⁵ GAIANI G., Il "fronte occidentale" ucraino: spionaggio, espulsioni e tensioni tra Budapest e Kiev, in «Analisi Difesa», 10 May 2025, <https://www.analisedifesa.it/2025/05/il-fronte-occidentale-ucraino-spionaggio-e-tensioni-tra-budapest-e-kiev/>; PELLEGRINI L., Ucraina e Ungheria in crisi: tra spionaggio e tensioni storiche, in «Orizzonti Politici», 22 May 2025, <https://www.orizzontipolitici.it/ucraina-e-ungheria-in-crisi-tra-spionaggio-e-tensioni-storiche/>.

¹⁶ BETTIOL C., L'Ucraina nel mirino di Orbán, in «Osservatorio Balcani, Caucaso e Transeuropa (OBCT)», 25 March 2026, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/cp_article/ucraina-nel-mirino-di-orban/.

course. On 3 June 2026, Magyar announced in Budapest what he himself described as a turning point: an agreement with Kyiv on the linguistic, educational, cultural and political rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, reached after three weeks of negotiations. Ukraine undertook to restore the Hungarian-language school system, not merely teaching Hungarian as a subject but using it as the medium of instruction; to permit the use of Hungarian national symbols and the national anthem in schools located in areas where Hungarians account for more than 10 per cent of the population; to issue diplomas in Hungarian; and to allow pupils to sit their school-leaving examination in Hungarian, while any compulsory courses in Ukrainian would require parental consent. Despite the agreement, Magyar did not withdraw Hungary's veto on Ukraine's accession to the EU, which will remain conditional on implementation of the agreement. In short, although the new Hungarian prime minister changed the approach to bilateral relations with Ukraine, and with the EU, he did not alter the substance of Hungary's demands¹⁷.

Meanwhile, Transcarpathia was subjected to several incursions by Russian Shahed-type drones which, as also reported by Hungarian sources, caused casualties and destruction in Mukachevo. The incident immediately prompted a response from Budapest's new government, which summoned the Russian ambassador and strongly condemned such actions against Ukrainian territory¹⁸. Ukraine's decision to relocate several plants producing war materiel – particularly drone components, which have unexpectedly shifted the course of the war in Ukraine's favour – to the region beyond the Carpathians, thereby attracting Russian strikes, is certainly a factor that should not be underestimated. It once again highlights the centrality of a historically overlooked province which has always stood, if only geographically, at the centre of major and decisive geopolitical and military questions¹⁹.

5. Strategic Outlook

The history of Transcarpathia displays a feature typical of liminal regions: whenever a regional system enters a phase of transition, its borderlands become genuine hotspots or crisis points. The region itself - economically and demographically peripheral overall – does not generate the crisis. Rather, its geographical position as a crossroads and its ethno-linguistic composition make Transcarpathia, at each of these critical junctures, one of the places where the upheavals produced by Central and Eastern Europe's major geopolitical transitions reverberate at the local level.

From this perspective, the shift brought about in Hungary by Magyar must be assessed with caution: it changes the tone of Budapest's relations with Kyiv, but not their underlying substance. Protection of Transcarpathia's Hungarian community remains an important source of negotiating leverage in Hungary's relations with Ukraine, just as it was under Viktor Orbán. The emerging détente between the two countries therefore appears genuine, but remains at an early stage, is not without ambiguity and may not prove irreversible.

Secondly, openly irredentist rhetoric, however loud and suspicion-inducing, remains a marginal phenomenon and was repeatedly rejected even by the Orbán government. This supposed annexationist impulse has also been extensively exploited by Russian Federation propaganda to divide the front supporting Kyiv and sow mistrust between Ukraine and its neighbours. The real risk, therefore, is not annexation, but the persistence of an unresolved dossier – involving incursions by spies, or alleged spies, diplomatic crises, resource blackmail and the resulting reprisals – capable of generating structural and

¹⁷ ESPOSTO E., Budapest e Kiev: c'è l'accordo sulla minoranza ungherese in Transcarpazia, in «East Journal», 24 June 2026, <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/147919>;

¹⁸ HETZMANN M., Attacchi di droni russi colpiscono la regione ucraina della Transcarpazia con una significativa popolazione di etnia ungherese, il FM ungherese reagisce, in «Daily News Hungary», 13 May 2026, <https://dailynewshungary.com/it/ultime-notizie-attacchi-di-droni-russi-colpiscono-la-regione-ucraina-della-transcarpazia-con-una-significativa-popolazione-di-etnia-ungherese-il-fm-ungherese-reagisce-foto/>; Russian drone strike in Transcarpathia sparks diplomatic protest, in «The Budapest Times», 14 May 2026, <https://www.budapesttimes.hu/hungary/russian-drone-strike-in-transcarpathia-sparks-diplomatic-protest/>.

¹⁹ Ukraine relocates long-range drone industry to Carpathians, in «Intelligence Online», 26 February 2026, <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/europe-russia/2026/02/26/ukraine-relocates-long-range-drone-industry-to-carpathians,110668036-art>.

long-term friction between the two countries even without a genuine escalation. Russia has demonstrated considerable skill in exploiting precisely this kind of tension to its own advantage. The issue should therefore not be underestimated, given Budapest's negotiating weight, at a time when Hungary is undergoing a genuine political revolution, in the negotiations that may eventually lead to Ukraine's accession – still a distant prospect – to the EU and the NATO system.

In conclusion, the case of Transcarpathia extends far beyond the merely bilateral Hungarian-Ukrainian dimension. It is, rather, a crucial test of the internal cohesion of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance on the eastern flank. From a strategic perspective, the history of this region clearly demonstrates how, in contexts of hybrid warfare – where narrative matters as much as the war being fought – the presence of minorities within a state's borders can constitute a significant vulnerability and a source of negotiating leverage, not only for adversaries but also for potential partners. This can force the government concerned to balance the need for internal cohesion against the demands and interests of neighbouring countries that support, even if only partially, its war effort.

Strategic Convergence in the Wider Mediterranean: Implications for North Africa, the Levant, and NATO's Southern Flank

Andrea Molle

Executive Summary

Recent developments in the Mediterranean geopolitical landscape point to a structural transformation of the security environment along NATO's Southern Flank. Rather than a collection of distinct regional crises, the Wider Mediterranean is increasingly emerging as an integrated strategic system in which developments in the Levant, the Red Sea, North Africa, and the Sahel generate reciprocal effects across the principal domains of contemporary strategic competition.

The conflict between Israel and Iran has served as the primary catalyst for this transformation, demonstrating how seemingly localized events can simultaneously affect the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), energy security, the political stability of North Africa, and strategic competition among both regional and extra-regional powers.

This article interprets these developments through the concept of strategic convergence in the Wider Mediterranean, defined as the progressive functional integration of theaters that have traditionally been treated as distinct. This analytical framework highlights why Mediterranean security can no longer be addressed through the compartmentalized management of individual regional crises.

For Italy, this transformation underscores the need to adopt an integrated approach to NATO's Southern Flank by strengthening strategic foresight, enhancing the protection of sea lines of communication, increasing the resilience of critical infrastructure, and improving coordination among diplomatic, military, and economic instruments.

1. Introduction¹

In recent years, the concept of the Wider Mediterranean has progressively regained a central place in both political discourse and national and international strategic thinking. The resurgence of great-power competition, the return of high-intensity conventional warfare, the proliferation of hybrid threats, the vulnerability of critical infrastructure, and the growing importance of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) have transformed what, until only a few years ago, was widely regarded as a region characterized by a heterogeneous collection of regional crises into one of the principal arenas of geopolitical competition within the international system².

For a long time, however, this strategic space was analyzed as a mosaic of only partially interconnected theaters. The Libyan civil war, instability in the Sahel, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, competition over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, security challenges in the Red Sea, and the persistent threat posed by jihadist actors were largely treated as distinct policy issues, each characterized by its own internal dynamics and addressed through separate political, diplomatic, and military instruments. Although this approach has generated a substantial body of specialized scholarship,

¹ Declaration on the use of Artificial Intelligence Tools. During the preparation of this article, artificial intelligence–based writing assistance tools (Grammarly and ChatGPT) were used exclusively to improve the linguistic quality of the manuscript, including grammar and spelling correction, stylistic consistency, readability enhancement, and the preparation of figures. In addition, ChatGPT was used to assist the translation of the manuscript into English. The conceptual framework, analysis, selection and interpretation of sources, arguments presented, and conclusions are entirely attributable to the Author, who assumes full responsibility for the scholarly content of this work.

² NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO), *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, adopted at the Madrid Summit, June 29, 2022, paras. 6–15; EUROPEAN UNION, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Brussels: European Union, March 2022).

it now appears increasingly inadequate for interpreting a strategic environment marked by growing interdependence among phenomena that transcend traditional geographic boundaries³.

The evolution of this strategic environment therefore calls for a different analytical framework. Rather than a simple aggregation of adjacent crises, the Wider Mediterranean increasingly resembles an integrated strategic system⁴ in which seemingly localized events generate cascading effects that rapidly propagate across the entire Euro-Mediterranean region. The confrontation between Israel and Iran, the disruption of commercial shipping in the Red Sea, Libya's persistent instability, extremist dynamics in the Sahel, and the intensifying competition among major powers should therefore not be viewed as isolated phenomena, but as interconnected manifestations of a broader strategic transformation.

From this perspective, the conflict between Israel and Iran should be understood not as the origin of this transformation but as its principal catalyst, accelerating processes that were already underway. Military operations in the Levant have demonstrated how decisions taken within a single theater can rapidly affect the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs)⁵, Europe's energy security, the political stability of North Africa, and the strategic posture of the principal powers operating throughout the region. While the analytical distinction between the Levant, North Africa, the Red Sea, and the Sahel remains geographically meaningful, it is becoming progressively less relevant from both strategic and operational perspectives.

Building upon these considerations, this article proposes interpreting the Wider Mediterranean as an integrated strategic ecosystem⁶ characterized by the growing convergence of geopolitical competition, maritime security, energy security, hybrid threats, and regional conflicts. In other words, the region is experiencing an accelerated phase of a longer-term process of strategic convergence that is transforming a collection of contiguous regional theaters into a single strategic security space. For Italy, this evolution underscores the need to move beyond an approach based on the compartmentalized management of individual regional dossiers and to adopt a unified vision of NATO's Southern Flank, in which the security of the Levant, North Africa, the Red Sea, and the Sahel is recognized as an integral component of a single strategic framework.

2. From the Geographic Mediterranean to the Strategic Mediterranean

The concept of the Wider Mediterranean⁷ has become firmly established in Italian strategic thinking and now constitutes one of the principal analytical frameworks for assessing threats originating from NATO's Southern Flank. It extends beyond the purely geographical boundaries of the Mediterranean basin to encompass a broader set of maritime and terrestrial spaces directly connected to Italy's national strategic interests, stretching from North Africa to the Levant, from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf, and further to the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. More recent interpretations also project this strategic space toward the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific, reflecting the growing importance of global sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and the increasing integration of the principal theaters of international strategic competition.

This perspective reflects a broader evolution in strategic thought, according to which security dynamics can no longer be understood solely within rigidly defined geographical boundaries. The Wider Mediterranean constitutes a strategic space where geographic proximity intersects with political, economic, military, and infrastructural relationships, creating a system of interdependencies that

³ BUZAN B., Ole WÆVER O., *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴ FREEDMAN L., *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xi–xx; GRAY S.C., *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

⁵ TILL G., *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁶ This article adopts a qualitative analytical-comparative approach. The argument is developed through the analysis of four case studies (the Red Sea, Egypt, Libya, and the Sahel), selected because they are representative of the principal security dynamics shaping the Wider Mediterranean. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive examination of each theater but rather to assess the hypothesis that recent regional developments reveal an increasing process of strategic convergence, understood as the progressive functional integration of security systems that have traditionally been regarded as distinct.

⁷ ITALIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, *Multi-Year Defence Planning Document 2024–2026* (Rome: Italian Ministry of Defence, 2024).

transcends the traditional distinction between the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa. In recent years, this perspective has gained additional relevance as a result of three mutually reinforcing developments⁸.

The first is the return of great-power competition⁹. The Mediterranean has once again become an arena of strategic competition among the United States, Russia, and China, alongside increasingly assertive regional actors such as Turkey, Israel, Iran, and the Gulf monarchies. As these actors project their influence beyond their traditional spheres of interest, regional rivalries have become progressively intertwined with global geopolitical competition, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish local dynamics from broader systemic processes.

The second development concerns the growing strategic importance of critical infrastructure and transnational economic networks¹⁰. Energy security, global supply chains, commercial ports, submarine communication cables, pipelines, liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, and sea lines of communication have become essential components of contemporary strategic competition. Consequently, events that appear geographically localized can produce political and economic repercussions far beyond the theater in which they originate. The disruption of commercial shipping in the Red Sea, with its effects on traffic through the Suez Canal and, more broadly, on European economic security, provides a clear illustration of this phenomenon.

The third development is the increasing prominence of multidomain competition¹¹. Conventional military operations, information warfare, cyber activities, economic coercion, migration pressures, and the employment of non-state actors now constitute complementary instruments within a unified strategic competition. Proxy organizations¹², private military companies (PMCs), terrorist groups, and transnational criminal networks increasingly operate as force multipliers for state actors, contributing to the progressive erosion of the traditional distinctions between peace, crisis, and armed conflict.

Taken together, these transformations suggest that the concept of the Wider Mediterranean itself should be interpreted in evolutionary terms. Rather than simply describing a geographical extension of the Mediterranean basin, it now denotes a strategic space characterized by growing functional integration among domains, actors, and operational theaters. Within this framework, the distinction between North Africa, the Levant, the Red Sea, and the Sahel retains geographical and analytical relevance, yet becomes progressively less meaningful for strategic planning and crisis management.

The central hypothesis advanced in this article, illustrated in Figure 1, is that the Wider Mediterranean is undergoing a process of strategic convergence¹³, whereby seemingly localized events generate systemic effects across the entire Euro-Mediterranean region. Rather than representing a collection of adjacent regional crises, the Wider Mediterranean is increasingly evolving into a single integrated security ecosystem in which decisions taken within one theater directly alter the strategic conditions prevailing in the others. From this perspective, the recent evolution of the conflict between Israel and Iran should be interpreted not as an isolated event but as the principal catalyst of a broader strategic transformation already underway.

⁸ BUZAN B., WÆVER O., *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40–55.

⁹ THE WHITE HOUSE, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 2022); U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022); NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO), *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*.

¹⁰ EUROPEAN UNION, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Brussels: European Union, March 2022); NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO), *Strengthened Resilience Commitment*, Brussels Summit, 2021.

¹¹ HOFFMAN F.G., *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007).

¹² MUMFORD A., *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

¹³ In this article, the term strategic convergence is used to describe the process through which traditionally distinct regional theaters become functionally interdependent as a result of the growing integration of military, economic, energy, logistical, and informational domains. The concept represents the author's original analytical framework. Although it draws upon Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory, it differs by placing greater emphasis on multidomain interaction and on the systemic effects of contemporary strategic competition.



Figure 1. Framework of Strategic Convergence in the Wider Mediterranean

The framework conceptualizes the Wider Mediterranean as an integrated strategic system in which the principal regional theaters are interconnected through the shared domains of contemporary strategic competition.

3. From Fragmentation to Strategic Convergence

The transformations outlined in the previous section find clear expression in the evolution of the crises affecting the Wider Mediterranean. For many years, these crises were analyzed as distinct phenomena, each characterized by its own causes, actors, and management strategies. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, instability in Libya, the dynamics of the Sahel, security in the Red Sea, and competition in the Eastern Mediterranean were generally regarded as separate issues, capable of influencing one another only to a limited extent.

Recent developments in the strategic environment, however, suggest a different interpretation. Rather than a simple interconnection among regional crises, what is emerging is a process of strategic convergence, whereby events unfolding in one theater directly reshape the political, economic, and military conditions of others. This development represents more than an increase in the number or intensity of interactions among adjacent geographical areas; it reflects the progressive integration of security systems that, until only a few years ago, could still be considered relatively autonomous.

From this perspective, the direct confrontation between Israel and Iran constitutes an especially significant case study. The strategic importance of this conflict lies not solely in its military consequences or in the altered balance of power between the two protagonists, but rather in the way it has revealed the growing interdependence of the Wider Mediterranean as a whole. Military operations in the Levant have produced immediate consequences for the security of navigation in the Red Sea, the functioning of the Suez Canal, international energy markets, the strategic calculations of regional powers, and the military posture of external actors operating throughout the region. At the same time, they have influenced the behavior of states and non-state actors not directly involved in the conflict, prompting political and military adaptations that have extended to North Africa and, indirectly, to the Sahel.

The significance of these developments lies above all in their multidomain character. The consequences of the conflict have extended well beyond the military domain, simultaneously affecting maritime security, global supply chains, energy security, financial markets, technological competition, and the information environment. This confirms that contemporary strategic competition unfolds across multiple interconnected domains in which diplomatic, economic, military, technological, and informational instruments operate in concert to advance common strategic objectives.

Strategic convergence also manifests itself through the increasingly blurred distinction between state and non-state actors. Armed organizations, militias, terrorist groups, private military companies

(PMCs), and transnational criminal networks no longer constitute merely localized sources of instability. Increasingly, they function as instruments through which states project influence indirectly, expand their strategic depth, or constrain the freedom of action of their competitors. As a consequence, the traditional distinctions among conventional warfare, proxy warfare, and competition below the threshold of armed conflict are becoming progressively less meaningful.

Viewed from this perspective, a qualitative transformation becomes apparent. The Wider Mediterranean can no longer be understood simply as a collection of adjacent operational theaters. Instead, it increasingly resembles an integrated strategic ecosystem in which vulnerabilities propagate through dense and expanding networks of interdependence. Consequently, strategic planning must also evolve. Crisis management can no longer be confined to the theater in which a crisis originates but must take into account the second- and third-order effects that may reverberate across the regional system as a whole.

Strategic convergence in the Wider Mediterranean therefore represents not only an analytical framework for interpreting contemporary regional dynamics but also a guide for the development of future security policy. For a country such as Italy, whose economic prosperity and national security depend increasingly on stability along NATO's Southern Flank, understanding these interdependencies is an essential prerequisite for developing effective instruments of prevention, deterrence, and crisis response.

The war between Israel and Iran provides perhaps the clearest demonstration of this transformation. Rather than simply redefining the balance of power between the two belligerents, the conflict has demonstrated how contemporary security dynamics unfold through networks of interdependence that transcend traditional regional boundaries. The effects of military operations extended far beyond the Levant, influencing freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, Euro-Asian trade routes, European energy security, the strategic calculations of North African states, and, indirectly, the competition for influence in the Sahel.

The growing convergence among these theaters is not, however, an exclusively military phenomenon. Rather, it reflects the multidomain nature of contemporary strategic competition, in which diplomatic, economic, military, technological, and informational instruments are employed in an integrated manner to achieve strategic objectives. Consequently, the effects of regional crises increasingly manifest themselves simultaneously across multiple domains, expanding both the number of actors involved and the complexity of their consequences.

To fully appreciate the significance of this transformation, it is useful to examine several of the principal dynamics that have shaped the Wider Mediterranean in recent years. The cases of the Red Sea, Egypt, Libya, and the Sahel demonstrate that crises which appear distinct at first glance are, in reality, expressions of a single strategic ecosystem in which regional security depends increasingly on the relationships connecting the various theaters – illustrated in *Figure 2* – rather than on the internal balance within each theater.



Figure 2. Systemic Propagation of Crises in the Wider Mediterranean

The figure illustrates the sequence through which a crisis originating in the Levant can generate systemic effects across the Wider Mediterranean, influencing maritime security, energy security, global supply chains, and Italy's strategic interests.

3.1. *The Red Sea: Maritime Security as a Euro-Mediterranean Issue*

The crisis affecting maritime navigation in the Red Sea represents perhaps the clearest example of the progressive strategic convergence of the Wider Mediterranean.

Initially conceived as a means of exerting pressure in support of the Palestinian cause and Iran's broader regional strategy, Houthi attacks against international commercial shipping quickly produced consequences extending far beyond the Yemeni theater. The substantial reduction in maritime traffic through the Suez Canal¹⁴, rising insurance premiums¹⁵, the rerouting of major commercial shipping around the Cape of Good Hope, and the resulting disruptions to global supply chains demonstrated that the security of the Mediterranean now depends upon developments unfolding thousands of kilometers beyond its shores.

The international response further confirmed this transformation. Naval missions deployed to safeguard freedom of navigation brought together Euro-Atlantic, regional, and Asian actors, underscoring that the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) has become a shared strategic interest transcending regional boundaries. The Red Sea should therefore no longer be regarded as a peripheral theater of Mediterranean security, but rather as one of its principal strategic vulnerabilities.

For Italy, whose economy depends heavily on maritime trade and on the uninterrupted flow of commerce linking the Mediterranean with the Indo-Pacific, the security of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal has acquired significance that extends well beyond its economic dimension¹⁶. The protection of sea lines of communication has become an essential component of both national security and the resilience of the broader European economic system.

The Red Sea case demonstrates that while the distinction between the Levant, the Red Sea, and the Central Mediterranean remains geographically meaningful, these regions have effectively become components of a single integrated security system from a strategic perspective.

3.2. *Egypt: Domestic Stability and Regional Security*

Egypt's strategic position illustrates particularly well how strategic convergence extends beyond the military domain to encompass economic and political dimensions as well. Cairo occupies the intersection of several of the principal axes of Mediterranean security: the conflict in the Gaza Strip, stability in the Sinai Peninsula¹⁷, control of the Suez Canal, and the management of relations with both Israel and the Arab states.

The economic consequences of the Red Sea crisis have directly affected revenues generated by traffic through the Suez Canal¹⁸, exacerbating an already fragile economic situation characterized by high levels of public debt, persistent inflationary pressures, and growing domestic social demands. At the same time, the continuation of military operations in Gaza has heightened Egyptian concerns regarding the possibility of refugee flows into the Sinai and the risk of a broader destabilization of the country's eastern frontier.

These developments demonstrate that Egypt's security can no longer be understood solely through the lens of domestic politics or its bilateral relationship with Israel. Instead, Egypt's stability increasingly depends upon the simultaneous evolution of crises affecting the Levant, the Red Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean, reinforcing the country's role as a strategic hub for the wider regional security environment.

The Egyptian case confirms that economic security, political stability, and regional security have become inseparable dimensions of a single integrated strategic system.

¹⁴ UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT (UNCTAD), *Navigating Troubled Waters: Impact on Global Trade of Disruptions to Shipping Routes in the Red Sea, Black Sea and Panama Canal* (Geneva: UNCTAD, January 2024).

¹⁵ LLOYD'S LIST INTELLIGENCE, *Red Sea Crisis: Shipping Market Assessment* (London: Lloyd's List Intelligence, 2024).

¹⁶ INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND (IMF), *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, April 2024), 17–25.

¹⁷ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *Egypt's Sinai Question, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 61* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007).

¹⁸ INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND (IMF), *Arab Republic of Egypt: Staff Report for the 2024 Article IV Consultation* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2024).

3.3. *Libya: The Central Mediterranean in Great-Power Competition*

Libya's persistent instability continues to represent one of the principal sources of vulnerability in the Central Mediterranean. Yet even here, domestic political dynamics can no longer be understood solely in terms of competition among Libyan actors. The country has increasingly become an arena in which the strategic interests of both regional and extra-regional powers converge – from Turkey and Russia to European states and the Gulf monarchies.

Developments across the broader Middle East directly influence this competition. The gradual weakening of Iranian influence in the Levant, the redefinition of the United States' regional posture, and growing Western attention to the security of maritime trade routes inevitably reshape Libya's strategic value as a platform for political and military power projection in the Central Mediterranean¹⁹. At the same time, Libya's energy resources continue to make the country indispensable to European energy security, further strengthening the connection between North African stability and Euro-Atlantic strategic interests.

Within this context, Libya can no longer be viewed merely as a localized security problem. It increasingly represents one of the principal nodes through which competition for influence across the Wider Mediterranean is expressed.

The Libyan case demonstrates that the Central Mediterranean is not an autonomous theater but rather a strategic space closely connected to developments in the Levant, North Africa, and the broader competition among major powers.

3.4. *The Sahel: The Mediterranean's Strategic Depth*

Instability in the Sahel provides perhaps the clearest illustration of the geographical reach of strategic convergence within the Wider Mediterranean. Although located beyond the Mediterranean basin itself, the region directly affects European security through multiple channels, including jihadist terrorism²⁰, transnational criminal networks, illicit trafficking, irregular migration, and strategic competition among external actors²¹.

In recent years, the gradual decline of Western influence, the expansion of Russia's presence, the growing activism of Turkey and the Gulf states, and China's expanding economic engagement have transformed the Sahel into one of Africa's principal arenas of strategic competition²². The consequences of these developments inevitably extend into North Africa and, through North Africa, into the Central Mediterranean, contributing to migratory pressures, political instability, and broader vulnerabilities in regional security.

For Italy, therefore, the Sahel should not be regarded as a peripheral theater but as the strategic depth of NATO's Southern Flank. Developments in the region directly affect the stability of Libya, the security of the Central Mediterranean, and Europe's ability to prevent crises from cascading across the broader regional system.

The Sahel case illustrates that the strategic depth of the Wider Mediterranean extends well beyond the Mediterranean basin itself, confirming the growing functional convergence among the principal theaters of Euro-African security.

4. *Implications for Italian Security*

The progressive strategic convergence of the Wider Mediterranean calls for a reassessment of Italy's posture as the principal maritime power of Southern Europe and as a state directly exposed to the

¹⁹ INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (IISS), *The Military Balance 2025* (London: Routledge, 2025), chap. "Middle East and North Africa."

²⁰ UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

²¹ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *Frozen Billions: Reforming Sanctions on the Libyan Investment Authority*, Middle East and North Africa Report No. 249 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2025).

²² INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES (ISS Africa), *African Futures and Innovation Programme* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, reports 2023–2025); STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2025* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

dynamics shaping NATO's Southern Flank²³. If, as argued in this article, the Wider Mediterranean is now best understood as a single integrated strategic ecosystem, then the analytical, planning, and response instruments adopted by Italy must evolve accordingly.

Traditionally, the principal challenges originating from the southern strategic environment have been addressed through sector-specific policies: Libya primarily as a migration and energy security issue; the Levant largely as a diplomatic challenge; the Sahel as a counterterrorism theater; and the Red Sea as a maritime security concern. Although this approach reflected the distinct nature of each individual crisis, it now risks overlooking the deep interdependencies that characterize the contemporary strategic environment. As convergence among these theaters intensifies, it becomes increasingly difficult to formulate effective responses through the compartmentalized management of separate regional dossiers.

For Italy, this first requires the adoption of a genuinely integrated vision of the Wider Mediterranean. The security of sea lines of communication, the continuity of energy supplies, the stability of North Africa, the resilience of critical infrastructure, and the containment of hybrid threats should no longer be viewed as separate policy objectives, but rather as complementary components of a unified national strategy. Protecting these interests demands closer integration among military capabilities, diplomacy, intelligence, economic security, and cooperation with regional partners.

Particular attention should also be devoted to the maritime domain. The Mediterranean constitutes the principal gateway through which energy resources, commercial trade, and digital communications flow toward the European continent. The vulnerability demonstrated by key sea lines of communication in recent years underscores that freedom of navigation and the protection of critical infrastructure²⁴ must now be regarded as essential pillars of national security. Within this context, the role of the Italian Navy (Marina Militare) extends well beyond the traditional defense of national maritime spaces to encompass the protection of Italy's strategic interests throughout the Wider Mediterranean, as summarized in *Table 1*.²⁵

Theater	Primary Dynamic	Systemic Effects	Italian Strategic Interest
Levant	Israel–Iran conflict	Regional escalation	Political stability
Red Sea	Houthi threat	Suez Canal, maritime trade	Maritime security
Egypt	Economic vulnerability	Regional instability	Suez Canal, energy security
Libya	Great-power competition	Energy, migration	Central Mediterranean stability
Sahel	Terrorism and strategic competition	Migration, regional security	NATO's Southern Flank

Table 1. From the Traditional Perspective to Strategic Convergence in the Wider Mediterranean
Source: Author's elaboration

At the same time, the increasingly multidimensional character of contemporary strategic competition requires stronger strategic foresight capabilities²⁶. The speed with which seemingly localized crises can generate systemic consequences makes it essential to develop analytical tools capable of identifying the interdependencies among domains and operational theaters before they fully materialize. Achieving this objective requires closer integration among intelligence, strategic planning, and international cooperation while reinforcing the role of multilateral organizations and regional initiatives in preventing the escalation of crises.

²³ NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO), *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, paras. 11–16, 38–45.

²⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *European Economic Security Strategy* (Brussels: European Commission, June 2023).

²⁵ ITALIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, *Multi-Year Defence Planning Document 2024–2026* (Rome: Italian Ministry of Defence, 2024), Part I.

²⁶ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022); NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO), *Comprehensive Approach Action Plan* (Brussels: NATO).

Finally, the strategic convergence of the Wider Mediterranean confirms the growing importance of NATO's Southern Flank within the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. For many years, NATO's strategic attention remained focused primarily on its Eastern Flank. The dynamics examined in this article, however, demonstrate that the Alliance's security increasingly depends on its ability to preserve stability along its southern periphery. Within this framework, as illustrated in Table 2, Italy is called upon not only to contribute to collective defense but also to assume a proactive role in shaping an integrated strategy for the Wider Mediterranean, leveraging its geographical position, extensive operational experience, and long-standing network of regional partnerships.

Traditional Perspective	Framework Proposed in this Article
Separate regional crises	Integrated strategic system
Theater-by-theater analysis	Analysis of systemic interdependencies
Predominantly military security	Multidomain strategic competition
Localized threats	Systemic cross-theater effects
Sector-specific responses	Integrated political-military approach
Mediterranean as a geographical space	Wider Mediterranean as a functional strategic space

Table 2. Evolution of the Strategic Paradigm in the Wider Mediterranean
Source: Author's elaboration.

4.1. *Final considerations*

The transformations currently reshaping the Wider Mediterranean require moving beyond an analytical perspective based on the simple juxtaposition of separate regional crises. As this article has shown, the growing interdependence among the Levant, the Red Sea, North Africa, and the Sahel makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish these theaters from one another in strategic and operational terms. Rather than a collection of contiguous regions, the Wider Mediterranean is increasingly emerging as a single strategic ecosystem characterized by systemic relationships among geopolitical competition, maritime security, critical infrastructure, energy security, and hybrid threats.

The conflict between Israel and Iran has acted as a powerful accelerator of this transformation. Although the conflict has unfolded primarily in the Levant, it has demonstrated the speed with which a regional crisis can generate cascading effects across NATO's Southern Flank, simultaneously influencing maritime security, Egypt's economic stability, the geopolitical balance of North Africa, and great-power competition throughout the Mediterranean.

The central argument advanced in this article is that these developments are best understood through the concept of strategic convergence in the Wider Mediterranean. Rather than merely describing an increase in connections among regional crises, this concept captures the progressive functional integration of the principal theaters of Mediterranean security, whereby localized events generate systemic consequences extending far beyond their immediate geographical origins.

For Italy, this transformation requires adapting not only operational capabilities but also the analytical frameworks through which developments on NATO's Southern Flank are understood. The ability to recognize and anticipate interdependencies among the region's various theaters will become an essential prerequisite for protecting national interests within a strategic environment characterized by increasing complexity and multidimensionality. From this perspective, the Wider Mediterranean is no longer simply an area of strategic interest; it is the principal arena in which Italy's – and, more broadly, Europe's – security will be shaped in the years ahead.

5. Strategic Outlook

The dynamics examined in this article suggest that strategic convergence across the Wider Mediterranean is likely to intensify over the medium term. The resurgence of great-power competition, the growing strategic importance of critical infrastructure, the expansion of multidomain threats, and the persistent instability of NATO's Southern Flank make a return to a regional order characterized by largely autonomous crises increasingly unlikely.

For Italy, this evolution requires the development of planning capabilities able to anticipate the systemic effects generated by developments in the Levant, the Red Sea, North Africa, and the Sahel. Strengthening strategic analysis, enhancing cooperation with allies, and maintaining an effective national presence across the principal maritime domains will become essential components of safeguarding Italian national interests.

At the same time, technological change and the increasing integration of military, economic, and informational dimensions will make the ability to operate effectively in a multidomain environment ever more important. The resilience of critical infrastructure, the security of sea lines of communication, the protection of supply chains, and the countering of hybrid threats will become inseparable elements of a national strategy centered on the Wider Mediterranean.

The principal implication for policymakers is therefore the need to move beyond a fragmented understanding of regional crises and adopt a systemic perspective on NATO's Southern Flank. The ability to understand and anticipate interdependencies among the region's various theaters will become a decisive factor both for Italy's national security and for the role the country will play within NATO and the European Union.

The Sahel: Russia's advance, Europe's retreat and Italy's strategic option

Matteo Giusti

Executive Summary

Geopolitical competition in Africa is increasingly centred on the Sahel, where the contraction of the French presence has opened space for Russia and other actors, while political instability and jihadist expansion deepen the regional crisis. In this setting, Italy retains a military and diplomatic presence in Niger that may still provide Europe with a limited margin for initiative.

1. The Sahel and the erosion of French influence

The Sahel is a long belt of territory stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea; in Arabic, its name means “edge of the desert”, as it forms the southern boundary of the Sahara. The countries that make up this important African region have historically been highly turbulent, but in recent years their internal situation has undergone a genuine collapse. The western part of the region, the cornerstone of what was once called *Françafrique* because it belonged to Paris's colonial and post-colonial sphere, has been struck by a succession of coups that, since 2020, have brought the military to power in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger. Countries once deeply loyal to France, having entrusted themselves politically and economically to Paris, have fallen into Russia's arms. Moscow worked for years to cultivate young African officers and encourage them to overthrow tired and discredited regimes. Mali opened this season of coups with the removal of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and the seizure of power by Colonel Assimi Goïta, who then carried out a second coup in May 2021 to purge what little civil-society representation remained within the government. Goïta, Bamako's new strongman, had been trained by the Russians through a series of courses and joint exercises and immediately opened Mali's doors to contractors from the former Wagner Group, subsequently renamed the Africa Corps. The contagion quickly spread to neighbouring Burkina Faso, historically one of the poorest countries on the African continent. In Ouagadougou, in January 2022, the government led by Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was swiftly overthrown and replaced by the usual military junta, bearing the grandiose name Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration. It is noteworthy that when the army seizes power, it invariably does so in the name of the people and of some mysterious higher interest that normally coincides with the salvation of the homeland. Yet even for small Burkina Faso, one coup was not enough: in September of the same year, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the country's interim President, was arrested. Members of the “Cobra” unit surrounded the capital with roadblocks, preventing anyone from entering, and then stormed the presidential palace. Guards loyal to Damiba were killed there, and the entire government cabinet was arrested. That same day, artillery Captain Ibrahim Traoré announced on television that he and a group of officers had decided to remove President Damiba because of his inability to manage the jihadists destabilising the north of the country. In the nation that gave birth to Thomas Sankara, one of the most distinguished figures in African politics, Moscow's long arm had also taken control of the junta, which, like Mali, rapidly expelled the French and replaced them with the Russians. Paris has witnessed the rapid erosion of its power in Africa, although that power remains standing thanks to the currency – the notorious CFA franc – and, above all, to private-sector contracts through which it still exercises considerable control. In 2021, Guinea, another former French possession, also fell into military hands when the 83-year-old Alpha Condé was deposed and yet another National Committee for Reconciliation and Development was established – the customary pompous and high-sounding name

adopted by a group of soldiers taking power without having to pass through the ballot box. This time, the protagonist was Lieutenant Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, who within a few months also transformed himself into President, discarding his fatigues and putting on a suit and tie, in accordance with the familiar script in its African version. Guinea is the world's leading producer of bauxite, with reserves estimated at 30% of the global total, alongside iron, gold and diamonds. All these minerals remain under tight French control, and France still accounts for roughly 50% of the Guinean market. In 2023, Russia decided to settle the Sahel contest once and for all by taking control of Niger, probably the most important country on this strategic chessboard. The great majority of migrants heading towards the Mediterranean and, consequently, Europe pass through Nigerien territory, while the city of Agadez is the principal transit and trafficking hub for the hundreds of thousands of people arriving from the Gulf of Guinea. Mohamed Bazoum, the President elected in April 2021, governed in Niamey until he was deposed and arrested on 26 July 2023 by his former commander of the Presidential Guard. The familiar address to the nation, read by a spokesperson standing before a group of senior officers, also handed Niger over to what was then still called the Wagner Group, which entered the country from bases in southern Libya. General Abdourahamane Tchiani was designated the new Head of State and placed at the helm of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, which continues to govern the Sahelian country. French forces were also shown the door in Niger amid loud, albeit orchestrated, street demonstrations. In Niamey, the capital's tailors had to turn French flags into Russian ones overnight, fortunately helped by the overlap in their colours... Alongside the French military, Niger also expelled the Americans, who for several hours found themselves at a base close to one occupied by Russian mercenaries, narrowly avoiding a diplomatic incident.

2. Niger and Italy's remaining strategic foothold

Today, only an Italian Army contingent remains in the African country, with numbers varying between 300 and 500 personnel. Italian troops are in Niamey to train Nigerien paratroopers and special forces and are held in high regard by the junta. The Italian presence in an area such as this is Europe's last foothold for retaining geopolitical influence, but the contest for the Sahel now appears to have been definitively lost. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended all member states in which the military had seized power, while France exerted intense pressure for ECOWAS forces to intervene militarily in Niger, without achieving anything concrete. Neither Senegal nor Côte d'Ivoire, at the time still under French influence, agreed to send a military force to free President Mohamed Bazoum, who remained a hostage of the junta. Today, the Sahel is marked by a dangerous divide between the areas around the capitals, still laboriously held by national armies steered by Russia, and entire provinces that are completely beyond control. During 2026, a dangerous alliance emerged in Mali, bringing together the Tuareg independence movement under the banner of the FLA (Azawad Liberation Front) and the local representatives of al-Qaeda known as JNIM (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims). In April, they organised a major offensive that led to the conquest of northern Mali and the fall of important caravan towns. Al-Qaeda terrorists even attacked the fortified compound at Kati, where the junta ruling in Bamako is based, killing Defence Minister General Sadio Camara with a car bomb. Hundreds of FAMA soldiers (Malian Armed Forces) were killed, and several dozen Russian mercenaries also fell while attempting to defend the towns. Bamako itself trembled as the rebels advanced to within a few dozen kilometres of the capital, but the offensive eventually halted, leaving the city of Kidal and all the northern provinces in Tuareg hands. The second wave of the blue men of the desert, together with al-Qaeda's Islamic fundamentalists, was even more overwhelming. Several locations in Mali – including Aguelhok, Anefis and Gao in the north, Sévaré in the centre and Kénérioba in the south – were attacked with the aim of expanding the territory under their control. At Anefis, Russian mercenaries were trapped inside two barracks and were saved only by the arrival of a squadron of Mi-24 helicopters, which retook the town after three days of bombardment; the settlement is a crucial junction on the route to the capital. At Kénérioba, only 50 kilometres from Bamako, a prison was stormed and hundreds of jihadists were

freed. This bleak picture changed only partially after substantial reinforcements arrived from the capital region, allowing government forces to recover the southern regions and part of the central areas. Ambushes against military convoys are countless, and in recent days alone at least 40 soldiers and 15 mercenaries were reportedly killed, while around ten others were taken hostage.

3. Strategic Outlook

Today, the Sahel represents the greatest challenge for the West and, above all, for Europe, which must demonstrate its operational capacity at the international level. The risk is that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, active in the region through its local branch, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, may seek to establish an Islamic caliphate in the heart of Africa. Such a realm of terror would be devastating for local populations, but it would also constitute a criminal entity capable of destabilising the Mediterranean and, consequently, Europe. All northbound trafficking would pass through it: weapons, migrants and drugs, the latter facilitated by new alliances with South American narcotics cartels. Italy, the only Western country still present in the Sahel, can play an important role by seeking to maintain relations with these military-led states. The Italian Government's Mattei Plan for Africa may also serve as an economic and diplomatic instrument for re-engaging in the Sahel, even though only Mauritania has so far been included in the project, owing to the region's extreme instability and the difficulty of maintaining relations with juntas aligned with Russia.

Oman's Quiet Diplomacy: Active Neutrality, the Persian Gulf and Stability in the Wider Mediterranean

Michele Brunelli

Executive Summary

Oman's active neutrality is a strategic asset for stability in the Gulf and the Wider Mediterranean. Its position on the Strait of Hormuz, its channels with Tehran and the Houthis, and its consolidated relations with Washington and London make Muscat a particularly effective partner in indirect stabilisation. For Italy, the Sultanate's principal value lies not in its ability to resolve crises autonomously, but in its capacity to make the intentions of regional actors more intelligible. Rome should therefore regard Muscat not as a decisive mediator, but as a political-diplomatic sensor useful for crisis prevention and the early assessment of regional dynamics. From this perspective, Oman can help preserve crisis communication, reduce the risk of misperception and strengthen maritime security along the routes connecting the Gulf, the Red Sea, Suez and the Mediterranean.

1. Oman's Historical Perspective

In 1973, while the Sultanate of Oman was still fighting the long Dhofar insurgency, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi sent Iranian troops to support Sultan Qābūs bin Sa'īd. The intervention, undertaken at Oman's request, was not an act of dynastic courtesy but the product of a precise strategic calculation. Set within the broader Cold War framework, it helped contain the Marxist rebellion of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, supported by neighbouring South Yemen, an important Soviet outpost in the area, and marked one of the moments when Oman's internal security began to intersect directly with the geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz. Imperial Iran did not regard Dhofar as a peripheral theatre, but as a forward front in the security of the Gulf and its energy routes. Oman, in turn, understood that its strategic survival depended on its ability to avoid being absorbed into the rivalries of its more powerful neighbours. The Khomeinist Revolution of 1979 would radically change the nature of the regime in Tehran, but it would not erase that strategic memory, either in Iran or, above all, in Muscat. From it emerged one of the most recognisable imperatives of Omani foreign policy: to prevent geographical proximity to Iran from becoming political dependence or permanent hostility. The literature on the Iranian intervention confirms that the Dhofar War was also a testing ground for Iran's regional power projection and for the centrality of the Strait in the security perceptions of the littoral states¹.

This historical origin helps explain the distinctive character of the Sultanate's diplomacy. Oman is not neutral in the passive sense of the term, nor equidistant out of weakness or lack of ambition, nor isolationist by vocation. Its neutrality should instead be understood as an active posture of strategic survival, grounded essentially in its geographical position, in institutional continuity with Qābūs bin Sa'īd's project of domestic modernisation, state consolidation and international opening, developed between 1970 and 2020, and in prudent, carefully calibrated political judgement.

Its location on the southern shore of the Strait of Hormuz, opposite Iran, makes Oman a geopolitical actor of fundamental importance to regional security. Within this complex system, it participates in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an organisation that combines economic and financial cooperation with a common defence dimension, launched with the joint military force in 1984 and consolidated by the 2000 Joint Defence Agreement.

¹ GOODE J. F., *Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972-75*, in «Iranian Studies» 47, 3 (2014), pp. 441-462.

Yet it has never accepted that solidarity among the Gulf monarchies should automatically translate into anti-Iranian alignment. While maintaining solid relations with Washington, London and Riyadh, it preserves privileged channels with Tehran and Yemen's Houthis. Its function is therefore less that of the 'Switzerland of Arabia' – an evocative but reductive journalistic formula – and more that of a security hinge between the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Wider Mediterranean. That definition tends to suggest a static neutrality, whereas the Omani case points to a more active posture, useful for preserving channels, reducing the risk of escalation and improving the political intelligibility of crises in a region of direct Euro-Atlantic interest².

2. Neutrality as an Instrument of Power

Oman's distinctive position arises from an only apparent contradiction. The Sultanate is vulnerable because of its economic and demographic scale and its geographical location, yet precisely for this reason it has transformed some of these fragilities into diplomatic capital. Its power does not lie in imposing solutions, but in making possible conversations that would be politically impracticable elsewhere. It does not possess Saudi resources, Iran's strategic depth sustained by the Axis of Resistance, the West's capacity for external military power projection or Turkey's activism. In a region where mistrust is often more dangerous than limited military capacity, it possesses a rare asset: cross-cutting credibility, a quality that can become a strategic resource.

The best-known case remains the confidential channel between the United States and Iran, which helped create the political and technical conditions for the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the nuclear agreement designed to subject the Islamic Republic's programme to limits and international monitoring in exchange for the gradual easing of the sanctions regime. Direct contacts between Washington and Tehran demonstrated that Oman could provide not merely a physical venue, but a political environment perceived as non-hostile by interlocutors unable to recognise one another publicly³.

At that juncture, Muscat was able to perform this function precisely because it did not appear threatening, had built a reputation for diplomatic consistency and maintained sufficiently solid relations with both sides. The literature on mediation has described the Sultanate as an interlocutor state: a state whose practice of confidential mediation, associated with back-channel diplomacy, contributes simultaneously to the protection of national security, the construction of international reputation and the preservation of autonomous margins for diplomatic manoeuvre⁴.

Its neutrality should therefore not be read as a simple diplomatic category, but rather as a capacity to manage the regional operational environment. In the Gulf, political-military crises often unfold incrementally, through naval coercion, attacks on energy infrastructure, the use of missiles and drones, seizures of commercial shipping, proxy warfare, insurance pressure on maritime traffic, information campaigns and calibrated threats against military bases or installations. In an environment marked by hybrid threats and political-diplomatic ambiguity, keeping channels open with mutually hostile parties becomes a strategic resource even for actors enjoying clear military superiority. Naval power can protect sea routes, but it cannot replace the political communication channels needed to interpret an adversary's intentions and distinguish a deterrent manoeuvre from a negotiating opening or genuine preparations for offensive action.

² WORRALL J., *Switzerland of Arabia: Omani Foreign Policy and Mediation Efforts in the Middle East*, in «The International Spectator» 56, 4 (2021), pp. 134-150.

³ UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, Resolution 2231 (2015), S/RES/2231 (2015), 20 July 2015; INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY, *Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015)*, GOV/2025/24, Vienna, 31 May 2025; FITZPATRICK M. - ELLEMAN M. - IZEWICZ P., *Uncertain Future: The JCPOA and Iran's Nuclear and Missile Programmes*, «Adelphi Series», London-New York, International Institute for Strategic Studies-Routledge, 2019.

⁴ WORRALL J., 'Switzerland of Arabia', op. cit.; CHAZIZA M. - LUTMAR C., *Oman's Niche Diplomacy: Middle Power Strategies in a Shifting Middle East*, in «Social Sciences» 14, 9 (2025), 511.

3. Hormuz: Geography, Law and Strategic Risk

The Strait of Hormuz is the physical and symbolic centre of the Sultanate's posture. At its narrowest point it is about 21 nautical miles wide and lies within the territorial waters of Iran and Oman. At the same time, it is among the straits used for international navigation, where the sovereignty of the littoral states coexists with a legal regime intended to guarantee the continuity of maritime traffic. For Muscat, the stability of Hormuz is a constitutive component of both national security and international credibility. Every military confrontation in the Gulf exposes Oman to twofold pressure: on one side, from Western allies and GCC partners interested in freedom of navigation, the protection of energy infrastructure and deterrence towards Iran; on the other, the need to preserve a minimum relationship of trust with Tehran, without which the Strait would cease to be merely an energy chokepoint and become a theatre of escalation. This also explains the connection with the Wider Mediterranean. Crises originating in the Gulf rarely remain confined to their initial theatre; there is always a risk that they will spread along the corridor linking Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, Suez and the Eastern Mediterranean, with inevitable effects on European ports, supply chains, insurance premiums, energy supplies and the Western naval posture⁵.

For Italy, a Mediterranean power with a strong maritime vocation, Oman should therefore not be regarded as a regional interlocutor in isolation, but as an advanced vantage point for analysing regional stability and a discreet channel of strategic communication. The Sultanate does not seek to replace military alliances; it can, however, contribute to the Euro-Atlantic posture by facilitating understanding of local actors' intentions and maintaining channels of contact when direct dialogue becomes politically impracticable.

4. Ibadiyya and Political Culture

The originality of the Omani case also derives from a distinctive religious and cultural matrix, which affects the relationship between Ibadi identity, political culture and the Sultanate's external projection. Oman is the only Arab state with an Ibadi majority, and although Ibadism cannot be mechanically turned into a single-cause explanation of foreign policy, it has helped produce a political culture less absorbed by Sunni-Shia polarisation. Its relevance lies not so much in automatically generating a neutral posture as in placing Oman outside the main confessional fault line that structures many contemporary regional rivalries⁶.

This lateral confessional position enables the country to distance itself, at least in part, from the sectarian Sunni-versus-Shia vocabulary that has fuelled many regional narratives since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the Arab uprisings of 2011.

In a region where the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has often been interpreted through confessional categories, Muscat enjoys the advantage of being able to engage Sunni and Shia actors without being perceived as organically belonging to either camp. Oman thus demonstrates that the sectarian key is useful for understanding some dynamics of the contemporary Middle East, but remains insufficient when adopted as the sole analytical criterion.

The country is perceived neither as a revisionist Sunni power nor as a Shia satellite of Iran. It is an Arab Muslim actor and a member of the GCC, but one with a distinct religious genealogy. This position does not remove the Sultanate's material interests, security alliances or geographical constraints; it does, however, help reduce the political cost of contact with interlocutors belonging to opposing camps. The Ibadi difference, in other words, does not automatically produce neutrality, but facilitates the construction of a non-ideological profile less exposed to the logic of confessional affiliation.

⁵ UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE LAW OF THE SEA, Montego Bay, 10 December 1982, Arts 37-44; KRASKA J., The Legal Vortex in the Strait of Hormuz, in «Virginia Journal of International Law» 54, 2 (2014), pp. 323-366.

⁶ VALERI M., Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State, London 2009, pp. 31-47; WILKINSON J. C., Ibādism: Origins and Early Development in Oman, Oxford 2010.

5. Muscat as a Threshold Actor

In analytical terms, the Ibadi state can be understood as a threshold actor: a subject located at the points of friction between rival systems and able to maintain political access to mutually hostile camps. This function emerges in at least four areas. The first is the relationship between Iran and the United States, in which Muscat has over time built a reputation for discretion, reliability and diplomatic continuity. The second is communication between the Sunni monarchies and the Islamic Republic, especially during periods when rivalry between the two shores of the Persian/Arabian Gulf has narrowed the space for direct contact. The third is the security of Hormuz, in relation to which Oman is not an external observer but a littoral state directly exposed to the consequences of any escalation. Finally, there is the Yemen dossier, where its channels with the Houthis have acquired political, humanitarian and security value.

The Yemeni crisis illustrates the nature of this function particularly clearly. Unlike other GCC members, Muscat did not adopt a direct military role in the Saudi-led coalition in 2015. Instead, it maintained channels with the internationally recognised authorities, the Houthis and Western interlocutors, seeking to preserve space for communication even at moments of maximum regional polarisation. Its approach to Yemen therefore does not express abstract neutrality, but a policy of military non-involvement, cross-cutting communication and risk containment dictated by pragmatic calculations of national security. For the Sultanate, Yemen is not only a humanitarian crisis or the theatre of a proxy confrontation between Riyadh and Tehran, but also the unstable border through which historical fears, illicit trafficking, tribal pressures and security vulnerabilities could re-emerge along the al-Mahra axis, the eastern Yemeni region that geographically connects the country's crisis to Oman's security⁷.

Omani diplomacy is quiet by method. In the Middle East, public visibility can harden positions, force leaders to defend identity-based narratives and turn negotiation into a test of strength. Discretion, by contrast, allows a form of constructive ambiguity, enabling the parties to explore options, test compromises and preserve exit routes without immediately paying the political cost of mutual recognition. Here lies the difference between the public spectacle of mediation seen during some phases of the conflict between Israel and Hamas and mediation aimed at creating genuine negotiating space. Oman rarely seeks to be a protagonist on the public stage, preferring instead to build the conditions for negotiation.

6. The Wider Mediterranean and Italian Interests

For Italy, Oman's relevance lies not simply in its position along a critical maritime corridor, already implicit in the centrality of Hormuz, but in the possibility of incorporating that position into a broader national posture of crisis prevention. Rome has direct interests in the continuity of sea lines of communication, energy security, stability in the Red Sea, the protection of critical infrastructure and the predictability of relations among the Gulf, the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean. In this context, Muscat can offer not so much an operational guarantee as an early-warning function in reading the strategic environment⁸.

For Italian decision-makers, Oman's distinctive value lies in its ability to intercept political signals that do not immediately pass through formal diplomatic circuits or the public communications of regional actors.

In periods of tension with Iran, in Yemen or in the Red Sea, the quality of Muscat's channels can help distinguish coercive rhetoric from genuine preparations for escalation and from negotiating availability. This is particularly relevant for a middle power such as Italy, which has extensive interests in

⁷ JALAL I., *The War Next Door: Omani Foreign Policy toward Yemen*, Middle East Institute, 2023; CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE, *The Struggle Over Mahra*, 2025.

⁸ ITALIAN MINISTRY OF DEFENCE, *Security and Defence Strategy for the Mediterranean*, Rome 2022; ITALIAN DEFENCE GENERAL STAFF, *Chief of Defence Strategic Concept*, Rome 2022; CALCAGNO E. - DAGA G. - AHMED F., *Deterrence and Diplomacy in the Red Sea: Recommendations for Italy*, «IAI Papers» 25/19, Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali, July 2025, pp. 1-21.

the Wider Mediterranean but more limited autonomous influence than the United States or the principal regional actors.

Cooperation with Oman should therefore be understood as a political-diplomatic multiplier of Italy's presence, not as a substitute for existing alliances. It can strengthen preventive analysis, improve understanding of Iranian and Yemeni dynamics, contribute to maritime security and provide a useful point of contact when direct communication between the parties is blocked. The added value is not decisive mediation, but the reduction of strategic opacity.

Three operational implications follow from this perspective. The first concerns maritime security: dialogue with Muscat can complement Italy's assessment of risks along the routes between the Gulf, the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, particularly in the presence of hybrid threats, seizures of commercial shipping, drone and missile attacks or indirect pressure on shipping companies.

The second concerns preventive diplomacy: Oman can help identify preliminary signs of hardening or negotiating openness in the Iranian and Yemeni dossiers.

Finally, a third operational implication concerns political-military planning: for Rome, maintaining a stable channel with Muscat means enriching the information framework needed to calibrate naval presence, protect energy interests, coordinate with Euro-Atlantic partners and manage regional crises.

In summary, Oman should neither be burdened with excessive expectations nor transformed into a supposedly decisive actor. Its usefulness to Italy is more selective and concrete: helping to anticipate crises, preserving communication channels in polarised environments and indirectly supporting the security of the maritime routes on which essential national interests depend.

7. Infrastructure, Military Access and Strategic Discretion

Omani neutrality should not be confused with demilitarisation. The Sultanate has historically cultivated defence relations with London and Washington, also to compensate for the constraints arising from its small population, relatively limited autonomous military resources and shallower strategic depth compared with the principal regional actors. The presence of important port and logistics infrastructure, proximity to Indian Ocean routes and its function as a hinge between the Strait of Hormuz, the Arabian Sea and the routes towards East Africa give Oman an importance greater than its demographic size. It is precisely the combination of solid Western partnerships and channels of communication with Tehran that makes the country relevant to Euro-Atlantic security. The case of this Gulf monarchy demonstrates that military-logistical access and de-escalation communication are not necessarily incompatible instruments.

The Duqm hub deserves particular attention from an operational perspective. Its location outside the immediate Hormuz chokepoint and its access to the Indian Ocean make it a logistics platform and naval support point less exposed to the Strait's political-military pressures. For Western navies, this does not mean replacing the region's principal bases, but gaining access to complementary infrastructure in a position useful for operational continuity, the protection of traffic and the management of crisis scenarios⁹.

7.1. *A Neutrality that Is Not Anti-Western*

Another misconception to avoid concerns the relationship between Omani neutrality and the West. The Sultanate does not practise anti-Western neutrality, nor does it seek to present itself as an alternative to the US security architecture in the Gulf. Its autonomy instead serves to preserve room for manoeuvre in an environment where total alignment with one side would make its bridging function impossible. This is the essential point: Oman is useful not despite its autonomy, but also because of it. If it appeared simply as an extension of Western strategy, it would lose a decisive part of its diplomatic credibility. For Italy,

⁹ IISS, *The State of Defence Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region*, 2 May 2023; UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *U.S. Security Cooperation with Oman*, 2024; GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM, UK and Oman Sign Historic Joint Defence Agreement, 21 February 2019.

this implies the need to enhance the relationship without overexposing the country, ensuring that bilateral cooperation does not compromise Oman's credibility as a cautious interlocutor with actors that openly distrust the Western posture. Quiet diplomacy works when it is not turned into public political capital by other actors. Excessive emphasis, demands for an overt alignment or the attempt to use Muscat as a one-way channel towards Tehran could weaken the very quality that makes the Sultanate valuable. The best cooperation is that which respects the Omani method: discretion, prudence, gradualism, sensitivity to regional concerns and a clear distinction between contact, mediation and alignment.

7.2. *The Limits of Omani Neutrality*

It would nevertheless be a mistake to idealise this model of active neutrality. It works when hostile parties still have an interest in communicating; it loses effectiveness when the objective becomes total victory or the exemplary punishment of the adversary. Oman can create conditions, not impose agreements. It can safeguard channels, not substitute for political will. It can facilitate the containment of escalation, but it cannot prevent an actor from deliberately choosing confrontation.

The first limitation is one of scale. The country does not possess Saudi economic weight, Emirati financial capacity, Iranian strategic depth or Turkish military power projection. The second is economic. The Sultanate remains exposed to the volatility of energy revenues and the need for diversification. The International Monetary Fund has noted significant progress in the growth of non-hydrocarbon activities and the strengthening of fiscal and external positions under Oman Vision 2040, but also the need to continue reform and diversification policies. The third limitation is institutional: the 2020 succession has so far preserved continuity, but the personal capital accumulated by the Sultan over half a century of rule is not entirely transferable. The fourth is geopolitical. A direct and prolonged war between Iran and the United States, or between Iran and Israel, would drastically narrow the space for mediation. The same would apply to a crisis in which Hormuz became a theatre of open hostilities. In that case, Oman would be called upon not only to mediate but also to protect its sovereignty and reputation under simultaneous and contradictory pressures. Its neutrality is therefore robust but not unlimited; resilient, but not invulnerable¹⁰.

8. *Implications for Italy's Posture*

For Italian defence and security policy, the issue is not whether Muscat should be classified as an ally, a neutral actor or a mediator. It is more useful to recognise that the Sultanate belongs to a less visible but strategically relevant category: partners in indirect stabilisation. The bilateral relationship should therefore be conceived beyond the commercial framework and strengthened selectively and continuously, encompassing freedom and security of navigation, preventive diplomacy, monitoring of crises in the Gulf, action against illicit trafficking, the protection of critical infrastructure and the assessment of Yemeni and Iranian dynamics.

The objective should be to build a stable but low-profile channel based on regular consultations, exchanges of assessments on the Iranian and Yemeni dossiers, maritime security and the protection of critical infrastructure.

In military terms, the lesson is that deterrence and communication should not be conceived as separate dimensions. Deterrence without crisis channels can produce unintended escalation, while diplomacy without military credibility risks appearing weak. Oman's value lies precisely in its position between these two poles. It does not guarantee Western security, but it can help make the environment in which that security is exercised more intelligible, enabling Rome to interpret in advance signs of hardening, negotiating openings or escalation risks that often emerge through confidential channels before they appear in official statements.

¹⁰ INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND, Oman: 2025 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Oman, IMF Country Report No. 2026/004, Washington, 15 January 2026.

At the diplomatic level, Rome should enhance this interlocutor in dossiers where it has direct interests but limited capacity for influence, from Yemen and Red Sea security to energy routes, the containment of escalation with Iran and the interconnection among the various crises in the Levant. A more structured relationship with the Sultanate would give Italy a qualified listening post on dynamics that directly affect the security of the Wider Mediterranean, without compromising the confidential method that makes the Omani posture effective. The Omani case points to a broader lesson. In the contemporary Middle East, not only the most visible actors, the major regional powers or military coalitions matter. States capable of operating in the intermediate spaces of competition also acquire importance, where informal communication, diplomatic credibility and the management of confidentiality can influence the prevention of escalation. This leads to a methodological recommendation. Oman should be observed less as a single country than as a regional sensor. Its conduct towards the Islamic Republic, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United States can help determine whether a crisis is entering a phase of hardening or whether room remains for a controlled de-escalation. The point is not to assign the Sultanate a decisive role, but to recognise that some strategic signals necessarily pass through actors far from the centre of the stage. For Italy, strengthening dialogue with Muscat therefore means increasing its capacity for preventive crisis assessment, rather than delegating a decisive mediation role to the Sultanate.

9. Strategic Outlook

In the medium term, Oman's relevance will depend on the Sultanate's ability to preserve its balance among diplomatic autonomy, cooperation with the West and functional relations with Iran. Pressure on Hormuz, the persistence of the Yemeni crisis, the militarisation of the Red Sea and uncertainty in the competition among the United States, Iran and regional actors make this balance more difficult, but also more valuable. For Italy, the Omani case suggests a selective and pragmatic posture based on maritime security, information exchange, preventive diplomacy and the enhancement of discreet channels. The objective should not be to turn Muscat into a visible ally against any party, but to preserve its function as a reliable interlocutor when direct communication becomes politically impracticable.

China: global power projection, regional coercion and the construction of an alternative order

Claudio Bertolotti

Executive Summary¹

China does not project its power according to a single model. It does not (yet) replicate the United States system of permanent alliances and major bases distributed worldwide; instead, it is building a layered form of power projection based on military force concentrated in the regional theatre, selective logistical access abroad, control of infrastructure and value chains, cyber and space capabilities, economic diplomacy, a presence in multilateral organisations, and the promotion of an alternative narrative of international order. Taken together, these factors allow Beijing to generate global effects without having to maintain a permanent military presence everywhere.

In 2026, this trajectory became more clearly discernible. China's official defence budget rose to approximately 1.94 trillion yuan, an increase of 6.9 per cent, while the Fifteenth Five-Year Plan confirmed the modernisation of national security and the military instrument as a structural priority. The nuclear component continues to expand: the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates that China possessed approximately 620 warheads at the beginning of 2026 and identifies it as the state expanding its arsenal most rapidly. At the same time, pressure on Taiwan, maritime coercion in the South China Sea and exercises with Russia demonstrate a growing capacity to integrate deterrence, political assertiveness and operational preparation.

The central issue, however, is not the imminence of a global war, but China's growing ability to alter other actors' calculations without necessarily crossing the threshold of conflict. Beijing seeks to make ordinary what previously appeared exceptional: patrols, exercises, inspections, temporary blockades, the use of the Coast Guard, economic pressure, export restrictions and the political exploitation of technological dependencies. The normalisation of pressure narrows the adversary's decision-making space and, at the same time, makes it more difficult to identify the point at which competition becomes crisis.

For Italy and its defence establishment, the China question therefore does not amount to a direct military threat to national territory. It concerns, rather, the security of routes, ports, cables, digital infrastructure, industrial supply chains and dual-use technologies; it affects allied cohesion, freedom of navigation, the resilience of logistics chains and the ability to distinguish among economic cooperation, strategic dependence and access that could potentially be used for military purposes. In summary, China's global power projection is a capacity for presence without occupation, coercion without declared war and alignment without formal alliance. Over the next twelve months, a gradual increase in pressure is more likely than open conflict.

1. Key Events and Drivers of Chinese Foreign and Military Policy

1.1. *The defence budget, modernisation and political rectification of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*

The 6.9 per cent increase in the official 2026 budget, to approximately 1.94 trillion yuan, does not represent a discontinuity, but confirms a decades-long trend. The percentage increase is slightly lower than the 7.2 per cent recorded in each of the previous three years, yet it shows that military modernisation

¹ ChatGPT by OpenAI, GPT-5.6 Thinking model, was used in an ancillary capacity in preparing the draft. The text was subjected to source verification, analytical review and editorial control; responsibility for the assessments and for the version intended for publication remains with the Author.

remains a priority protected from economic headwinds². The objective is to support the integration of mechanisation, informationisation and “intelligentisation”: the extensive use of artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, sensors, distributed command and long-range strike capabilities. Official figures do not encompass all resources attributable to the military and security apparatus. The annual U.S. report to Congress on Chinese military power estimates that the People’s Republic of China’s total defence expenditure in 2024 was between USD 304 billion and USD 377 billion, or between 32 and 63 per cent higher than the USD 231 billion officially announced by Beijing³. In addition to the declared budget, the estimate includes expenditure on the People’s Armed Police, provincial security, veterans, mobilisation, military research and development, and capital investment. Modernisation coexists with a political rectification campaign that reached the highest levels of the Central Military Commission in 2026. The announced investigations into Generals Zhang Youxia⁴ and Liu Zhenli⁵, together with Xi Jinping’s renewed emphasis on political loyalty and control of financial flows, indicate that corruption is not merely a disciplinary issue, but a phenomenon affecting command reliability, procurement quality and the ability to translate resources into operational readiness⁶. In the short term, the political intervention in the military leadership may generate discontinuity and greater caution; over the medium term, it is intended to strengthen Party control over the armed forces.

1.2. *Approaching the 2027 operational milestone*

The year 2027 should not be interpreted as the predetermined date of an invasion of Taiwan. It is, rather, a capability threshold: the point by which the Chinese leadership intends to possess a credible instrument with which to impose or sustain its position on the island through different military options, and to counterbalance U.S. intervention in the theatre. The U.S. Department of War’s annual report describes the objective as the ability to achieve a “decisive strategic victory”⁷ over Taiwan and to deter and control other regional actors. The distinction is essential: possessing an option is not the same as deciding to use it, but it makes coercion more effective even in the absence of war.

1.3. *Pressure on Taiwan and the normalisation of exercises*

The live-fire exercises held on 23 and 24 July 2026 in the Taiwan Strait, near Dongshan Island, form part of a broader cycle of military and paramilitary activity. Beijing uses these exercises to train its forces, gather information on Taiwanese and U.S. reactions, consume adversary resources and turn military deployment into an ordinary feature of the strategic landscape⁸. The intended effect is twofold: to

² MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *Chinese Military Spokesperson Details 2026 Defense Budget*, 10 March 2026 (<https://eng.mod.gov.cn/2025xb/P/16447711.html>; accessed 30 July 2026); U.S. DEPARTMENT OF WAR, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2025*, Washington 2025, pp. 54-55. Available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Dec/23/2003849070/-1/-1/1/annual-report-to-congress-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2025.pdf> (accessed 30 July 2026).

³ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF WAR, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2025*, Washington, D.C., 23 December 2025, p. 54.

⁴ Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, he has been a trusted ally of Xi Jinping and is a veteran with actual combat experience from the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.

⁵ Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, he is an experienced military strategist and also a veteran of the conflict against Vietnam.

⁶ MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *China resolute in winning anti-corruption war in military*, 24 January 2026 (<https://eng.mod.gov.cn/2025xb/N/T/16439159.html>; accessed 30 July 2026); GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *Xi stresses enhancing political loyalty in military to advance military modernization*, 7 March 2026 (https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202603/07/content_WS69abea9cc6d00ca5f9a09b3b.html; accessed 30 July 2026). Individual responsibilities remain subject to the proceedings announced by the Chinese authorities.

⁷ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2025*, cit., pp. VI, 10-11. The reference to 2027 is treated as a U.S. assessment of the PLA’s objectives and capabilities, not as an indication of a fixed date for the use of force.

⁸ REUTERS, *China begins two days of live-fire drills in Taiwan Strait*, 23 July 2026 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-announces-live-fire-drills-taiwan-strait-2026-07-23/>; accessed 30 July 2026).

constrain Taipei's political freedom and to make the distinction between training, rehearsal and the opening phase of an actual operation less visible.

1.4. *Maritime coercion in the South China Sea*

The July 2026 incidents involving Chinese and Philippine vessels at Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal confirm the use of graduated instruments: the Coast Guard, maritime militia vessels, close manoeuvres, blockades and water cannon. On 24 July, Manila reported a second consecutive day on which water cannon had been used against its government vessels, as well as an approach to within approximately seven metres, while Beijing described its actions as legitimate control measures⁹. The use of assets that are not strictly naval enables China to apply physical pressure while preserving ambiguity over the military nature of the confrontation and complicating the activation of allied responses.

1.5. *Expanding the global network: Russia, infrastructure and the Global South*

The China-Russia Joint Sea-2026 naval exercise, conducted in Qingdao on 6 July and followed by patrols in the Pacific, confirms a growing level of interoperability and strategic partnership, without turning the relationship between Beijing and Moscow into an automatic alliance modelled on NATO¹⁰. At the same time, the Belt and Road Initiative, port cooperation, the base in Djibouti, the Chinese-funded modernisation of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, peacekeeping missions and military exports are multiplying China's points of access worldwide. This evolution is making China an actor that is not merely building bases, but laying the foundations on which its options can rest securely: a network of access points, relationships, services and dependencies that gives an increasingly global reach to a power whose military mass remains concentrated primarily in the Indo-Pacific.

2. *Analysis of the Current Situation*

2.1. *A regional power with global effects*

Geography continues to dictate priorities. It leads China to place the centre of gravity of its military instrument within the first island chain, from Japan to the Malay Peninsula, and to recognise that the fundamental operational problem is to prevent, or make prohibitively costly, a hypothetical U.S. intervention in a Taiwan crisis. Ballistic and cruise missiles, air power, submarines, air defence, electronic warfare, cyber and space capabilities have been developed to create an anti-access and area-denial system. The protection of overseas interests, however, is now explicitly included among the tasks of the People's Liberation Army, within the framework of the doctrine of "active defence", which combines strategic defence with operational-level offensive initiative¹¹.

This produces a two-speed model of power projection. The first is regional, high-intensity and geared towards combat against a technologically advanced adversary; the second is global, selective and adaptive: evacuations, naval escorts, counter-piracy missions, protection of citizens and investments, exercises with partners, arms sales, defence attachés, and access to ports and infrastructure. Not every

⁹ REUTERS, *Philippines accuses China of using water cannon on its vessels for a second day*, 24 July 2026 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/philippines-accuses-china-using-water-cannon-its-vessels-second-day-2026-07-24/>; accessed 30 July 2026); COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, *South China Sea: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the tenth anniversary of the Arbitral Award between the Philippines and China*, 11 July 2026 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/07/11/south-china-sea-statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-tenth-anniversary-of-the-arbitral-award-between-the-philippines-and-china/>; accessed 30 July 2026).

¹⁰ MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *Participating naval vessels of China-Russia "Joint Sea-2026" naval exercise assemble in Qingdao*, 7 July 2026 (<https://eng.mod.gov.cn/2025xb/N/T/16472349.html>; accessed 30 July 2026); GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *Xi, Putin sign joint statement on enhancing comprehensive strategic coordination, deepening good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation*, 20 May 2026 (https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202605/20/content_WS6a0d57eec6d00ca5f9a0b1ec.html; accessed 30 July 2026).

¹¹ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF WAR, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025*, cit., pp. 9-17. The definitions of PLA doctrine and missions are used here while distinguishing between official Chinese sources and the interpretation contained in the U.S. report.

commercial port needs to become a base. It is sufficient for selected nodes to provide refuelling, maintenance, intelligence, communications or political support when required.

2.2. From bases to access platforms

Djibouti remains China's only officially acknowledged overseas military base, but it does not exhaust the issue. Studies of port infrastructure show how the presence of Chinese companies, and the financing, construction and management of terminals, can create favourable conditions for future logistical use. Ream is illustrative: its modernisation was financed by Beijing and the Cambodian authorities deny granting China exclusive access, yet the configuration of the new facilities raises questions about privileged availability of certain areas and of the main port infrastructure¹². The point is not to assign military purposes automatically to every investment, but to assess the infrastructure's strategic convertibility: how rapidly a civilian node could support a military presence.

This model reduces the political costs of a global network. A formal base generates domestic opposition, visibility and responsibility, whereas an access agreement, a port company, an economic zone, a logistics hub or a training partnership can provide some of the same advantages with less exposure. Chinese power projection is therefore less visually apparent than that of the United States, but no less significant: it is distributed among civilian, military and commercial actors, consistently with the fusion of economic development, national security and strategic objectives.

2.3. Sub-threshold coercion and escalation control

Whenever possible, Beijing avoids the binary choice between inaction and war. Its preferred space is the intermediate one, characterised by economic pressure, administrative restrictions, patrols, use of the Coast Guard, cyber activity, sudden exercises, information campaigns, trade sanctions and restrictions on critical materials. Chinese doctrine seeks to control the timing, tempo, scale and margin of escalation, imposing incremental *faits accomplis* that the adversary can oppose only by accepting progressively higher costs.

Maritime coercion against the Philippines is the most visible laboratory. The risk lies not only in a deliberate incident, but in the accumulation of encounters in which a collision, a serious injury or a miscalculation could transform a confrontation between coast guards into a crisis involving the Mutual Defense Treaty between Manila and Washington. Beijing appears confident that it can keep pressure below that threshold; however, as the frequency of close interactions increases, escalation control can be taken less and less for granted.

2.4. The nuclear, space and technological dimensions

Nuclear expansion is gradually changing China's strategic relationship with the United States and, indirectly, with NATO. China continues to declare a no-first-use policy and a posture of self-defence, while the growth in silos, delivery systems and warheads is expanding both the arsenal and the capacity to sustain a more complex form of deterrence. Although China's White Paper on global governance reaffirms the stated no-first-use policy, independent sources – notably SIPRI – record quantitative and qualitative acceleration¹³. This divergence is not necessarily a contradiction: Beijing can retain an

¹² U.S. DEPARTMENT OF WAR, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025*, cit., section "Overseas Basing and Access", pp. 56-58; AIDDATA, *Harboring Global Ambitions: China's Ports Footprint and Implications for Future Overseas Naval Bases*, Williamsburg 2023 (https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/harboring-global-ambitions/Harboring_Global_Ambitions.html; accessed 30 July 2026); ASIA MARITIME TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE-CSIS, *A Tale of Two Reams*, 5 May 2025 (<https://amti.csis.org/a-tale-of-two-reams-questions-remain-at-cambodias-growing-naval-base/>; accessed 30 July 2026).

¹³ STATE COUNCIL INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *More Just and Equitable Global Governance: China's Principles, Proposals and Actions*, 17 June 2026 (https://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/node_9019704.html; accessed 30 July 2026); STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE, *Increasing focus on nuclear weapons amid heightened escalation risks - new SIPRI Yearbook out now*, 8 June 2026 (<https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2026/increasing-focus-nuclear-weapons-amid-heightened-escalation-risks-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>; accessed 30 July 2026). SIPRI estimates that China possessed approximately 620 warheads in January 2026.

avowedly defensive doctrine while simultaneously building the capabilities required to make the threat of retaliation credible and constrain an adversary's freedom of action.

The same logic applies to space, cyber and artificial intelligence. These are not auxiliary domains, but primary infrastructures of contemporary warfare: they enable forces to locate targets, disrupt communications, degrade logistics networks, shape perceptions and accelerate the decision-making cycle. Competition therefore concerns not only military platforms, but also standards, data, semiconductors, satellite constellations, cables and critical minerals. Industrial dependence thus becomes a military variable even before conflict begins.

2.5. *The internal constraint: command and operational experience*

Growth in capabilities does not automatically translate into combat effectiveness. The PLA has not fought a large-scale war for decades and is training increasingly complex forces while remaining exposed to the gap between performance in exercises and behaviour under pressure. The anti-corruption campaign discussed above, which has involved the highest levels of the armed forces, may correct deep-rooted distortions, but leadership replacements reduce continuity, trust and organisational memory in the short term. This vulnerability does not negate Chinese deterrence, but makes the transition from possessing capabilities to accepting high operational risk less linear.

2.6. *Russia: convergence without subordination*

Cooperation with Russia expands China's strategic depth through joint exercises that provide experience, demonstrate solidarity and divide Western attention across several theatres. Beijing also benefits from access to resources, technologies and operational lessons derived from the war in Ukraine, but avoids binding itself to a mutual-defence obligation that could draw it into crises it did not choose. The alignment is therefore functional rather than unconditional: it is characterised by shared opposition to Western global leadership, but also by complete autonomy of manoeuvre over interests, timing and escalation.

On the opposite side, NATO is observing this convergence with growing attention. At the Ankara Summit in July 2026, the NATO Secretary General referred to China's military modernisation and nuclear expansion, linking them to the growing cooperation among China, Russia, North Korea and Iran.¹⁴ For Beijing, however, the relationship with Moscow is also a negotiating instrument: useful in reducing Russia's isolation, but requiring calibration so as not to jeopardise access to European markets or China's image as a responsible actor in the Global South.

2.7. *The construction of an alternative order*

China's global power projection is not solely military. In the White Paper of 17 June 2026, Beijing presented a vision of governance founded on sovereignty, multipolarity, greater representation for the Global South, the centrality of the United Nations and criticism of "power politics". China also states that it has signed cooperation documents under the broader Belt and Road Initiative with more than 150 countries and over 30 international organisations, and claims the role of largest contributor of troops to UN missions among the permanent members of the Security Council.¹⁵ From 1 May 2026, Beijing also extended "zero-tariff treatment" to all 53 African countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations,

¹⁴ NATO, *Keynote speech by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the NATO Summit Defence Industry Forum*, Ankara, 7 July 2026 (<https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2026/07/07/keynote-speech-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-at-the-nato-summit-defence>; accessed 30 July 2026).

¹⁵ STATE COUNCIL INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *More Just and Equitable Global Governance: China's Principles, Proposals and Actions*, cit. The document is used as a primary source for China's official representation of the international order.

presenting not only an important economic measure but, more significantly, a political investment in China's role as the preferred interlocutor of the Global South.¹⁶

The strategic function of this narrative is clear: to present China's rise not as the replacement of one hegemony with another, but as a rebalancing of the system. The message responds to a real demand in many countries seeking infrastructure, credit, trade, accessible technology and reduced dependence on the West. This does not imply automatic adherence to the Chinese model. Many partners practise opportunistic balancing, deriving benefits from Beijing without abandoning their relations with Washington, Brussels, Moscow or regional powers. China accepts this ambiguity because it nonetheless expands its capacity to build coalitions within international organisations.

2.8. *Geoeconomics and strategic dependencies*

Access to raw materials, refining capacity, industrial components and dual-use goods gives Beijing instruments of pressure that can be calibrated more precisely than broad sanctions. In July 2026, China imposed export controls on dual-use goods destined for fourteen European entities, in response to European Union sanctions against parties accused of supporting Russia.¹⁷ The episode demonstrates how trade and security now belong to the same repertoire: the message is directed not only at the companies affected, but also at governments required to assess the industrial cost of their political decisions.

For Italy, the response cannot be indiscriminate decoupling, which would be economically costly and politically unrealistic. It should instead take the form of selective de-risking through the mapping of dependencies, protection of strategic sectors, screening of investments, cyber security, supplier diversification, controls on dual-use technologies and the ability to ensure logistics continuity. The priority is not to sever every relationship with China, but to prevent a commercial relationship from being rapidly converted into a political or military vulnerability.

3. *Implications for Italian Defence*

Chinese power projection affects Italian Defence along at least five lines. The first is maritime: freedom of navigation, security of shipping, protection of straits and continuity of routes between the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific. The second is infrastructural: ports, terminals, 5G and future 6G networks, undersea cables, satellites and data centres. The third is industrial: semiconductors, permanent magnets, rare earths, batteries and components also required for military production. The fourth is information-related: cyber espionage, acquisition of intellectual property, influence and data collection. The fifth, finally, concerns alliances: Italy's contribution to NATO's posture and to partnerships with Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand.

From this perspective, two opposite errors must be avoided. The first is to reduce China to a traditional and imminent military threat, neglecting the economic, technological and normative dimensions. The second is to regard it merely as a commercial competitor, ignoring the manner in which civilian capabilities can support security objectives. A strategic approach to relations with China must hold both dimensions together and distinguish among declared intentions, available capabilities and observable behaviour.

4. *Strategic Outlook: Twelve-Month Predictive Assessment*

The most likely scenario, assessed as having a medium-to-high probability, is one of coercive continuity: a rise in Chinese pressure without a deliberate transition to open war. Beijing will seek to reach

¹⁶ GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *China implements historic zero tariffs for all African nations with diplomatic ties*, 1 May 2026 (https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/policywatch/202605/01/content_WS69f45e35c6d00ca5f9a0ac01.html; accessed 30 July 2026). The treatment applies to all 53 African countries maintaining diplomatic relations with Beijing; the twenty countries not classified among the least developed are granted a preferential zero tariff for two years.

¹⁷ ASSOCIATED PRESS, *China slaps export controls on 14 EU entities in retaliation for Russia-related sanctions*, 24 July 2026 (<https://apnews.com/article/cfb75918077b268eb76b0f19c1673511>; accessed 30 July 2026).

2027 by demonstrating credible capabilities rather than necessarily employing them, because the leadership has an interest in preserving economic stability, market access and escalation control. At the same time, it cannot appear passive over Taiwan, the South China Sea or the strengthening of U.S. alliances.

4.1. *Baseline scenario: increasing and calibrated pressure*

Over the next twelve months, Taiwan is highly likely to remain the principal theatre for military signalling. Further short-notice exercises, joint air and naval activity, blockade simulations, Coast Guard operations, and cyber or information campaigns should be expected. A large-scale amphibious invasion remains less likely than graduated options because it would entail extremely high military, economic and political costs. In the short term, the rectification of the PLA's senior leadership strengthens the incentive to favour controllable demonstrations over an irreversible operation. A strategy of attrition is more plausible: reducing Taipei's diplomatic depth, testing its responses, shaping traffic flows and presenting encirclement as a new normal.

Incidents involving the Philippines are likely to continue in the South China Sea, with China maintaining its preference for the Coast Guard and maritime militia over combat vessels in order to preserve a wide margin of ambiguity. The principal risk is an unplanned event involving casualties that could prompt Manila to request U.S. support. A prolonged confrontation remains less likely than a contained crisis, but the growing number of interactions is narrowing the margin of safety.

At the global level, an increase in logistical access agreements, naval visits and exercises is highly likely, without the necessary announcement of new permanent bases. Beijing benefits from maintaining a flexible-access formula that provides operational advantages while reducing political resistance in host countries. The areas to watch are the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Guinea, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, South-East Asia and the Pacific islands.

4.2. *Critical scenario: a regional crisis with rapid escalation*

The critical scenario, less likely but high-impact, could be triggered by three types of event: a serious incident between China and the Philippines; a Taiwanese political move perceived by Beijing as irreversible; or a U.S. or Japanese decision interpreted as altering the status quo. In such circumstances, China could resort to a selective blockade, temporary exclusion zones, compulsory inspections or exercises of unusually long duration. The initial objective would be to impose a political choice, not necessarily to occupy the island.

Warning indicators to be monitored include the prolonged mobilisation of logistics and civilian units, a broad call-up of reservists, the accumulation of fuel and medical stocks, missile dispersal, the extended closure of maritime and air areas, coordinated employment of civilian ferries, intensified cyber operations against Taiwanese infrastructure, and the preventive evacuation of Chinese citizens from potentially involved countries. No single indicator would be conclusive; its significance would lie in the combination and persistence of multiple indicators.

4.3. *Tactical stabilisation scenario*

A phase of tactical stabilisation, facilitated by dialogue between Beijing and Washington, is possible but less likely. It could temporarily reduce the tempo of military activity without altering the underlying causes of competition. China would use such a pause to consolidate its capabilities, improve its economic position and drive a wedge among U.S. allies seeking to reduce the risk of crisis while strengthening regional deterrence. It would therefore constitute a tactical-operational truce, not a strategic reconciliation.

4.4. *Concluding assessment*

By July 2027, China will probably possess greater power-projection capabilities, but will not necessarily be more inclined towards war. Military modernisation, nuclear growth, logistical access,

maritime pressure and geoeconomics will broaden the range of options available to the Chinese leadership. Beijing's principal success would not consist in employing those options, but in convincing other actors that they could be used effectively.

The challenge for Italy and its allies is therefore to prevent prudence from becoming acquiescence and competition from producing escalation. This requires military capabilities, industrial resilience, political cohesion and credible channels of dialogue. Beijing will seek to retain the initiative while leaving others to bear the cost of reacting. The most effective response is therefore to reduce the vulnerabilities that make coercion possible, without abandoning forms of cooperation compatible with national security and the international order.

Russia's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) Strategy: Structure, Employment, And Effectiveness Across Four Theatres

Paolo Pizzolo

Executive Summary

This article analyses Russia's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy between 2014 and the present through four case studies, namely Crimea, Kaliningrad, the Arctic, and Syria. It argues that Russian A2/AD has been effective in conventional deterrence and power projection but that the war in Ukraine has exposed its vulnerabilities while accelerating its adaptation. The study concludes with implications for NATO's counter-A2/AD strategies and future strategic deterrence.

1. Russia's A2/AD architecture: Structure, capabilities, and geographic distribution

In recent years, several great and middle powers have challenged the international status quo through economic, diplomatic, institutional, and military means. Within the military domain, a prominent revisionist approach has been the adoption of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies aimed at preventing or restricting an adversary's ability to project military power into contested theatres. Designed to offset the conventional superiority of technologically advanced militaries, A2/AD now constitutes one of NATO's principal strategic challenges¹. Among the principal states employing A2/AD strategies are China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea².

The literature generally defines A2/AD as a strategy intended to deny or limit an adversary's ability to project and employ military force within a contested theatre³. The US Department of Defense distinguishes anti-access (A2) – long-range actions preventing entry into an operational area – from area denial (AD) – shorter-range capabilities restricting freedom of manoeuvre once forces have entered the theatre⁴. NATO studies adopt a similar distinction, viewing A2 as preventing access to a contested region

¹ TANGREDI S. J., *Anti-access warfare: Countering A2/AD strategies*, Annapolis MD 2013.

² HUANG A. C., *The Chinese navy's offshore active defense strategy: Conceptualization and implications*, in «Naval War College Review» 47, no. 3 (1994), pp. 7-32; CHRISTENSEN K. D., *Strategic developments in the Western Pacific: Anti-access/area denial and the AirSea Battle concept*, in «Journal of Military and Strategic Studies» 14, no. 3 & 4 (2012), pp. 2-24; GUNZINGER M., *Outside-in: Defeating Iran's anti-access and area-denial threat*, Washington DC 2012; HARMER C., *Iranian naval and maritime strategy*, Washington DC 2013; CHENG D., *The U.S. needs an integrated approach to counter China's anti-access/area denial strategy*, Washington DC 2014; PERMAL S., *China's military capability and anti-access area-denial operations*, in «Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India» 10, no. 2 (2014), pp. 16-32; ELLEMAN M., *Iran's evolving ballistic missile doctrine: From deterrence to anti-access/area-denial strategies & capabilities*, Monterey CA 2015; LANOSZKA A. - HUNZEKER M. A., *Confronting the anti-access/area denial and precision strike challenge in the Baltic region*, in «The RUSI Journal» 161, no. 5 (2016), pp. 12-18; SMURA T., *Russian anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities: Implications for NATO*, Warsaw 2016; BONDS T. M. - PREDD J. B. - HEATH T. R. - CHASE M. S. - JOHNSON M. - LOSTUMBO M. J. - BONOMO J. - MANE M. - STEINBERG P. S., *What role can land-based, multi-domain anti-access/area denial forces play in deterring or defeating aggression?*, Santa Monica CA 2017; BIDDLE S. - OELRICH I., *Future warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese antiaccess/area denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and command of the commons in East Asia*, in «International Security» 41, no. 1 (2016), pp. 7-48; Śliwa Z. - Załęski K., *Kaliningrad Oblast as the forward anti-access/area denial hub*, in «Security Forum» 2, no. 2 (2018), pp. 19-34; LUCAS E. R. - CROSBIE T., *Anti-access/area denial in the Baltic Sea region*, in «Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies» 2, no. 1 (2019), pp. 72-73; SAPMAZ A., *A concept of increasing importance in international security: Anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) doctrine: The case of Russia*, in «Proceedings of the Fourth International Aegean Symposium on Social Sciences & Humanities» 4 (2021), pp. 60-71; PIZZOLO P., *The legacy of admiral von Tirpitz: A geopolitical understanding of China's naval buildup through sea-denial strategies*, in «Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica» 52, no. 3 (2022), pp. 297-312.

³ TANGREDI S. J., *Anti-access warfare*, op. cit.

⁴ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, *Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)*, Washington DC 2012, pp. 1, 6.

and AD as limiting operational effectiveness within it⁵. Whereas A2 targets power projection, AD constrains operations inside the battlespace, making it a complementary subset of the former⁶.

Over the past two decades, Russia has reemerged as an increasingly assertive military power by modernising its conventional forces and developing one of the world's most comprehensive A2/AD architectures. Rooted in Soviet operational thought, Russian doctrine traditionally emphasises layered defence by integrating long-range strike systems with radar, surveillance, and command-and-control (C2) networks⁷. Following the military reforms initiated after 2008, these capabilities were substantially modernised through investments in precision-guided weapons, integrated air defence, electronic warfare (EW), intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and advanced naval forces⁸.

Rather than explicitly referring to A2/AD, Russian doctrine frames this approach within the broader concept of 'strategic deterrence' (*strategicheskoye sderzhivaniye*), combining offensive and defensive capabilities to discourage external intervention⁹. The objective is to delay intervention, complicate operational planning, and increase the costs of military action by preventing an adversary from rapidly establishing air superiority, maritime dominance, or operational freedom. Accordingly, Russian A2/AD integrates long-range precision strike, integrated air defence, EW, cyber capabilities, ISR, naval forces, tactical aviation, and increasingly network-centric C2 within a single multi-domain architecture¹⁰.

Since 2014, Russia has established regional A2/AD bastions extending from the Western Pacific to the Eastern Mediterranean. The principal architectures are in Kaliningrad, Crimea, the Arctic (Murmansk, Novaya Zemlya and Tiksi), and Syria (Khmeimim and Tartus), protecting strategically important regions while complicating NATO's ability to project military power across the Baltic, Black Sea, Arctic, and Eastern Mediterranean¹¹. These deployments are widely regarded as one of NATO's principal conventional military challenges¹².

Operationally, Russia's A2/AD posture rests upon several mutually supporting components. Its backbone is the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS), composed of layered S-400, S-300, *Buk*, *Tor*, and *Pantsir* surface-to-air missile systems linked through automated C2 networks integrating radar, airborne sensors, and increasingly AI-assisted battle management¹³. These are complemented by long-range precision-strike capabilities, including *Iskander*-M ballistic missiles, *Kalibr* and Kh-101 cruise missiles, and, in selected theatres, *Kinzhal* hypersonic missiles. Although offensive in nature, these systems

⁵ LASCONJARIAS G. - MARRONE A., *How to respond to anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)? Towards a NATO counter-A2/AD strategy*, Rome 2016; SCHMIDT A., *Countering anti-access/area denial: Future capability requirements in NATO*, in «Romanian Military Thinking» 2018, no. 1 & 2 (2018), pp. 248-258.

⁶ KREUDER G., *Lead turning the fight: The Joint Operational Access Concept and joint doctrine*, in «Joint Force Quarterly» 69, no. 2 (2013), pp. 103-108; FUKUDA J., *Counteracting China's anti-access/area denial capabilities*, in «Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS) Quarterly» 6, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1-4; PERMAL S., *China's military capability and anti-access area-denial operations*, op. cit.; GORDON IV J. - MATSUMURA J., *The Army's role in overcoming anti-access and area denial challenges*. Santa Monica CA 2013.

⁷ JONSSON O., *The Russian understanding of war: Blurring the lines between war and peace*, Washington DC 2019.

⁸ CHIORCEA I., *The A2/AD (anti access/area denial) concept: Between theory and practice*, in «Romanian Military Thinking» 1 (2024), pp. 96-109.

⁹ CHARAP S., *Strategic sderzhivanie: Understanding contemporary Russian approaches to 'deterrence'*, 2020 (<https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/strategic-sderzhivanie-understanding-contemporary-russian-approaches-deterrence-0>; accessed on 12 July 2026).

¹⁰ GRAU L. W. - BARTLES C. K., *The Russian way of war: Force structure, tactics, and modernization of the Russian Ground Forces*, Fort Leavenworth KS 2016, p. XIV; KOFMAN M. - FINK A. - GORENBURG D. - CHESNUT M. - EDMONDS J. - WALLER J., *Russian military strategy: Core tenets and operational concepts*, Arlington VA 2021, pp. 14, 25, 55-57, 71, 75, 81-82.

¹¹ SMURA T., *Russian anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities*, op. cit.; DOBIJA K., *The political and military aspects of creating anti-access/area-denial systems (A2/AD): The example of China and Russia*, in «Safety & Defense» 7, no. 2 (2021), pp. 22-39; SAPMAZ A., *A concept of increasing importance in international security: Anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) doctrine*, op. cit.

¹² LANOSZKA A. - HUNZEKER M. A., *Confronting the anti-access/area denial and precision strike challenge in the Baltic region*, op. cit.; GÓRECKI A., *To what extent are Russian 'anti-access' and 'area-denial' systems defensive or offensive in character?*, in «Security Forum» 2, no. 2 (2017), pp. 97-108; LUCAS E. R. - CROSBIE T., *Anti-access/area denial in the Baltic Sea region*, op. cit.

¹³ SMURA T., *Russian anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities*, op. cit.; KOFMAN M. - FINK A. - GORENBURG D. - CHESNUT M. - EDMONDS J. - WALLER J., *Russian military strategy*, op. cit.

perform a central anti-access function by threatening ports, airbases, logistics hubs, command centres, and transport infrastructure before opposing forces enter the theatre.

A second pillar is maritime denial. *Bastion-P* and *Bal* coastal missile batteries armed with P-800 *Oniks* anti-ship missiles operate alongside naval aviation, coastal surveillance systems, and a modernised submarine fleet to contest access to the Baltic, Black, Barents, and Japanese Seas¹⁴. Conventional and nuclear-powered submarines further strengthen this posture by threatening naval formations and maritime lines of communication while extending Russia's long-range strike capability.

EW and ISR provide the enabling framework. Systems such as *Krasukha-4*, *Murmansk-BN*, *Borisoglebsk-2*, and *Leer-3* disrupt satellite navigation, radar, communications, C2, and unmanned platforms, degrading an opponent's situational awareness. Simultaneously, an extensive ISR network – combining over-the-horizon radars, satellites, airborne early-warning aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), signals intelligence (SIGINT), and naval reconnaissance – supports target acquisition and operational coordination across the theatre¹⁵.

Finally, Russia's naval and aerospace forces provide the architecture's mobile component. Rather than seeking decisive fleet engagements, the Baltic, Black Sea, Northern, and Pacific Fleets primarily function as missile-launch platforms extending Russia's denial posture into adjacent maritime theatres. Likewise, tactical aviation – including Su-35S, Su-30SM, Su-34, and MiG-31K aircraft – supports long-range interception, maritime strike, and precision attack missions in coordination with missile forces, EW units, and ISR assets.

2. Assessing Russia's A2/AD architecture: Four operational cases

Russia's A2/AD strategy has not been implemented uniformly across its strategic periphery but has been adapted to the geographical, operational, and political characteristics of individual theatres. Since 2014, four regions have emerged as the principal laboratories of Russian A2/AD, namely Crimea, Kaliningrad, the Arctic, and Syria.

2.1. The Crimean Peninsula

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia transformed the peninsula into the cornerstone of its southern A2/AD architecture by deploying layered S-400/S-300 air-defence systems, *Bastion-P* coastal missiles, Black Sea Fleet assets, *Kalibr*-capable ships and submarines, naval aviation, and EW capabilities¹⁶. Together, these systems created a regional denial architecture covering much of the Black Sea and extending into Eastern Turkey, Georgia, and the Eastern Mediterranean¹⁷. The modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet further enhanced Russia's maritime denial and long-range strike capabilities¹⁸, turning Crimea from a defensive bastion into a regional power-projection hub that significantly complicated NATO planning¹⁹.

The 2022 war in Ukraine provided the first large-scale test of this architecture. Initially serving as Russia's principal logistical hub in southern Ukraine, Crimea was progressively degraded by Ukrainian long-range precision strikes, drones, special operations, and Western-supplied systems²⁰. Repeated attacks against Sevastopol, Saky, Belbek, radar sites, S-400 batteries, and Black Sea Fleet assets forced Russia to relocate major naval units from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk. Crimea demonstrated that even sophisticated A2/AD architectures become vulnerable when their ISR, C2, and logistical networks are systematically degraded.

¹⁴ SMURA T., *Russian anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities*, op. cit.

¹⁵ KOFMAN M. - FINK A. - GORENBURG D. - CHESNUT M. - EDMONDS J. - WALLER J., *Russian military strategy*, op. cit.

¹⁶ BURTON L., *Bubble trouble: Russia's A2/AD capabilities*, 25 October 2016 (<https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2016/10/25/bubble-trouble-russia-a2-ad/>; accessed on 13 July 2026).

¹⁷ GÓRECKI A., *To what extent are Russian 'anti-access' and 'area-denial' systems defensive or offensive in character?*, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

¹⁸ WEMYSS M. J., *The bear's den: Russian anti-access/area-denial in the maritime domain*, Maxwell Air Force Base AL 2016, pp. 10-11.

¹⁹ SMURA T., *Russian anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities*, op. cit., p. 5; DOBIJA K., *The political and military aspects of creating anti-access/area-denial systems (A2/AD)*, op. cit., p. 35.

²⁰ PIZZOLO P., *War in the borderland: Four ways to interpret the conflict in Ukraine*, London 2025.

2.2. Kaliningrad Oblast

Often described as Russia's 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' in the Baltic Sea²¹, Kaliningrad forms the core of Moscow's A2/AD posture in the Baltic. Since 2014, the exclave has been reinforced with layered air-defence systems, *Iskander-M* missiles, *Bastion-P* batteries, early-warning radars, tactical aviation, artillery, and Baltic Fleet assets. Together, these capabilities threaten NATO airbases, ports, logistics hubs, and reinforcement routes throughout much of the Baltic theatre, particularly along the strategically important Suwałki Corridor²².

Kaliningrad also serves as Russia's principal instrument of conventional deterrence in the Baltic by extending its IADS, strengthening early warning, supporting operations with Belarus, and enabling the Baltic Fleet to contest the central Baltic Sea and Gulf of Finland, especially after Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO²³. Nevertheless, its strategic value is constrained by geographic isolation. Surrounded by NATO territory and lacking strategic depth, the exclave would itself be vulnerable during a prolonged conflict. Kaliningrad therefore remains both one of Russia's most important regional A2/AD bastions and one of its most strategically exposed forward positions.

2.3. The Arctic

The Arctic constitutes one of the most strategically significant components of Russia's A2/AD posture owing to its economic importance, natural resources, emerging sea routes, and role in Russia's nuclear deterrent²⁴. Although receiving less attention than the Baltic and Black Sea, Russia's Arctic architecture remains a major concern for Norway²⁵. Centred on the Northern Fleet, it combines radar installations, S-400, *Pantsir*, *Bastion-P*, and military bases protecting Murmansk and the Kola Peninsula while contesting NATO access to the Norwegian and Barents Seas. Recent exercises in Franz Josef Land further demonstrated the operational role of *Bastion-P* in protecting Arctic maritime approaches²⁶. Unlike Crimea, however, the Arctic architecture has never been tested in high-intensity conflict, making its effectiveness largely dependent on deterrence rather than combat experience.

2.4. Syria

Russia's intervention in Syria marked the first permanent deployment of a large-scale A2/AD architecture beyond the former Soviet space. Centred on Khmeimim and Tartus, this expeditionary network integrated S-400/S-300, *Bastion-P*, tactical aviation, *Kalibr*-equipped naval platforms, and EW systems such as *Krasukha-4* into a layered operational architecture protecting Russian forces while extending Moscow's influence across the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East²⁷.

Unlike Crimea or Kaliningrad, Syria's A2/AD architecture has been designed primarily to preserve Russian military operational freedom rather than defend Russian territory. It also complicates NATO planning, particularly by reducing the feasibility of a potential Western-imposed no-fly zone. Overall, Syria represents one of Russia's most successful applications of A2/AD, securing limited political and military objectives while increasing the costs of external intervention in the region.

3. Strategic outlook

Russia's A2/AD architecture has become a cornerstone of Moscow's conventional deterrence strategy. The four cases illustrate distinct strategic functions: Crimea serves as Russia's most comprehensive A2/AD complex to protect the Black Sea and access to southern Russia; Kaliningrad deters NATO

²¹ PIZZOLO P., *The strategic relevance of Kaliningrad*, in «U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings» 150, no. 10 (2024), pp. 69-71.

²² PIZZOLO P., *L'oblast' di Kaliningrad: Il valore strategico di un territorio che da Prussia è diventato Russia*, in «Rivista Marittima», February (2023), pp. 76-80; PIZZOLO P., *War in the borderland*, op. cit., pp. 223-226.

²³ VEEBEL V., *Why it would be strategically rational for Russia to escalate in Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Corridor*, in «Comparative Strategy» 38, no. 3 (2019), pp. 182-197.

²⁴ WEMYSS M. J., *The bear's den*, op. cit., p. 12; SMURA T., *Russian anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities*, op. cit., p. 5.

²⁵ GÓRECKIA., *To what extent are Russian 'anti-access' and 'area-denial' systems defensive or offensive in character?*, op. cit., p. 103.

²⁶ THE DEFENSE WATCH, *Russia expands Arctic naval denial capability with bastion system deployment at Franz Josef Land*, 30 April 2026 (<https://thedefensewatch.com/naval-maritime/russia-bastion-coastal-defense-system-strengthens-arctic-naval-denial-strategy/>; accessed on 7 July 2026).

²⁷ WEMYSS M. J., *The bear's den*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

reinforcement in the Baltic; the Arctic protects Russia's strategic nuclear bastion and continental core; and Syria demonstrates the effectiveness of A2/AD in securing limited regional objectives.

The war in Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped understandings of A2/AD. Operational experience shows that missile range alone does not guarantee effectiveness. Ukrainian long-range precision strikes, drones, electronic attack, and OSINT-supported targeting repeatedly penetrated Russian defensive networks, demonstrating that A2/AD depends less on individual weapon systems than on the resilience of ISR, C2, and logistics²⁸. At the same time, the conflict accelerated Russian adaptation through greater asset dispersion, increased mobility of air-defence systems, more resilient C2 and reconnaissance networks, and the integration of EW, unmanned systems, and saturation strikes combining one-way attack drones with cruise and ballistic missiles²⁹.

For NATO, these findings suggest that counter-A2/AD strategies should prioritise degrading the critical nodes upon which Russian denial architectures depend rather than pursuing symmetrical responses. Investment in ISR, cyber operations, EW, Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses/Destruction of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD/DEAD), long-range precision strike, autonomous systems, resilient C2, military mobility, integrated air and missile defence, and the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) should remain central. Allied forces must also be prepared to operate under degraded communications, contested logistics, and persistent EW.

Finally, A2/AD should be understood not as a uniquely Russian innovation but as a broader model of conventional deterrence increasingly adopted by revisionist powers seeking to offset expeditionary military superiority. Studying both evolving A2/AD and counter-A2/AD strategies therefore provides an important framework for understanding future great-power competition and assessing whether resilient conventional deterrence may increasingly complement – or, in some contexts, partially substitute for – nuclear deterrence. In an emerging multipolar order, the interaction between denial architectures and the capabilities designed to overcome them is likely to become one of the defining features of contemporary military strategy.

²⁸ PIZZOLO P., *War in the borderland*, op. cit.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

The Argentine Pivot: Strategic Resources and Geopolitical Realignment under Milei?

Caterina Tarozzi

Executive Summary

Since December 2023, Argentina has made a radical shift in its foreign policy, replacing traditional multilateralism with a selective bilateral diplomacy geared toward maximizing immediate economic returns. The country now sits at the center of three dossiers that are redefining the Euro-Atlantic balance of power: energy security, tied to the development of Vaca Muerta LNG; competition over critical minerals, particularly lithium and copper; and the recomposition of alliances among Washington, Brussels, and Beijing.

Over 2025-2026 this approach translated into a multi-vector bilateralism: Buenos Aires signed the EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement in January 2026 and, the following February, a critical minerals trade agreement with the United States, almost simultaneously. This realignment toward Washington emerged even more clearly on the financial front: under US pressure, Argentina has all but eliminated the drawn portion of its *swap*¹ currency swap with the People's Bank of China – a concrete signal of where it stands on the chessboard of Sino-American competition for control of supply chains. For the two Western partners, Argentina's strategic value breaks down along different but complementary lines: for the European Union, Vaca Muerta offers a chance to diversify energy supply at a time of growing concentration of LNG imports from a single supplier, the United States; for Washington, Argentine lithium and copper serve the strategy of containing Chinese leadership in critical-minerals refining. The main risk for the Western partners, then, is not losing Argentina as an ally, but the underlying fragility of the relationship: an understanding built on momentary convenience rather than lasting institutional commitments is, by its very nature, exposed to rapid erosion.

1. Energy security, critical minerals, and the realignment of alliances in Javier Milei's Argentina

1.1. Introduction: Argentina's New Centrality in the Competition for Strategic Resources

Javier Milei's inauguration as president of the Argentine Republic in December 2023 marked a sharp break with Buenos Aires' traditional diplomatic line, with repercussions that extended far beyond the boundaries of domestic politics. This shift bears directly on the balance of energy security, on competition for strategic resources, and on the map of alliances in the Western Hemisphere, restoring to Argentina a role the country had not held for some time: that of a hub for critical resources – unconventional hydrocarbons, lithium, copper – within an international system in which the security of supply has itself become a variable of power dynamics, on par with traditional military alliances.

The picture that emerges from 2025-2026 is more nuanced than a simple break with multilateralism. Buenos Aires has in fact pursued, in parallel, an intense bilateral rapprochement with Washington and the signing of a wide-ranging interregional agreement with the European Union, composing a mosaic of relations that should be read in terms of a balance of power rather than a single-minded ideological alignment

1.2. From Multilateralism to Selective Bilateralism

The Argentine government's external projection shows a move away from multilevel multilateral governance channels, in favor of bilateral relations geared toward maximizing immediate economic returns. The most emblematic case of this approach remains the handling of the Argentine delegation at

¹ A derivative financial contract in which two parties agree to exchange periodic cash flows in two different currencies, calculated on a notional principal

COP29 in Baku in November 2024, read by observers as a signal of the intent to unilaterally redefine the scope of the country's multilateral obligations.

The 2026 data, however, introduces a significant correction to this picture. On 17 January 2026, in Asunción, Argentina signed – together with Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay – the EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement (EMPA) and the related Interim Trade Agreement (ITA), which entered into provisional application on 1 May 2026 after negotiations lasting more than twenty-five years. Buenos Aires was among the first to complete its domestic ratification procedure, together with Brazil and Uruguay².

The apparent paradox – an executive that disowns multilateral climate forums yet consolidates a structured interregional agreement with the European Union – dissolves once the underlying logic is examined: it is not multilateralism as such that is being rejected, but any framework perceived as binding on regulatory and environmental grounds without an immediate, quantifiable commercial return. The Mercosur agreement, which covers a market of roughly 720 million people and provides for the removal of tariffs on 91% of EU exports and 95% of South American exports, fits squarely within the logic of maximizing commercial interests that guides Buenos Aires's new diplomacy³.

In parallel, on 4 February 2026 Argentina signed, on the margins of the global Critical Minerals Ministerial convened by the White House – attended by delegates from more than fifty countries – a bilateral trade agreement and a specific Framework Instrument on the security of critical-mineral supply chains. The US Secretary of State publicly named Argentina a key player in the global critical-minerals market, while Argentine diplomacy reiterated its ambition to present itself as a reliable partner in diversifying Western supply chains⁴.

Argentina's relational framework in 2026 is thus one of selective multi-vector bilateralism: targeted, verifiable understandings with the two Western poles (the European Union and the United States), set against a persistent disengagement from multilateral forums perceived as regulatorily binding and lacking immediate economic return.

1.3. *Energy Security: Vaca Muerta on the Map of European Supply*

The Vaca Muerta unconventional field, in Neuquén province, now sits at a juncture favorable to Argentina's entry among the suppliers of liquefied natural gas to the European market. The context that makes this development significant is not internal to Argentina but concerns the trajectory of European energy security: according to estimates by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA), in 2026 the United States will cover roughly two-thirds of European LNG imports, a share that could rise to 80% by 2028⁵, while the temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz in March 2026 removed from the market export capacity equivalent to roughly a fifth of the global supply coming from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates⁶.

Against this backdrop of supply concentration – which the European energy regulator (ACER) has described as a new form of strategic dependence, this time on the United States rather than Russia⁷ – the entry of a new Atlantic supplier takes on a significance that goes beyond the bilateral commercial dimension. In May 2026 the *Southern Energy consortium*, which includes Golar LNG, signed an eight-year LNG supply contract with the German operator Securing Energy for Europe, worth more than \$7

² Agrinews Italia, «Accordo UE-Mercosur, firma confermata sabato 17 gennaio 2026 ad Asunción», January 2026; Access2Markets – European Commission, «Applicazione dell'accordo commerciale interinale UE-Mercosur il 1° maggio 2026»; Confindustria Ancona, «Accordo UE-Mercosur in vigore in via provvisoria dal 1° maggio 2026», 27 March 2026.

³ MORIA., «Mercosur: tra intese e dissidi, blocco al bivio», ISPI, 9 April 2026.

⁴ ANSA, «Argentina-Usa, intesa sui minerali critici», 4 February 2026; Buenos Aires Herald, «Trump-Milei governments sign critical minerals agreement», 5 February 2026.

⁵ IEEFA (Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis), *European LNG Tracker*, reprinted in AGEI, *L'Europa prigioniera del GNL: nel 2026 due terzi*

⁶ LUGANO F., *La trappola del GNL: il report ACER 2026, lo shock di Hormuz e l'Europa sempre più dipendente dagli USA*, in «Scenari Economici», 14 May 2026, scenarieconomici.it.

⁷ LUGANO F. «La trappola del GNL: il report ACER 2026, lo shock di Hormuz e l'Europa sempre più dipendente dagli USA», in «Scenari Economici», 14 May 2026, scenarieconomici.it

billion in total: the first long-term export agreement signed by Argentina, explicitly linked to Germany's need to diversify away from its now near-total dependence on US LNG⁸.

Buenos Aires has stated its goal of reaching \$30 billion in energy exports by 2030⁹, a horizon that would place Argentina as a second-tier but non-negligible player in the diversification of European supply. For the European Union, Vaca Muerta's strategic value lies precisely in easing supplier concentration rather than in the sheer scale of volumes: it is a useful element of an energy-security policy built on plurality of sources, not a substitute for existing relationships.

1.4. *The Competition for Strategic Resources: Lithium, Copper, and the Race for Critical Minerals*

Argentina's second axis of geoeconomic relevance concerns the so-called "lithium triangle," which the country shares with Chile and Bolivia, and the growing importance of copper. In 2025 Argentine mining exports reached a record \$6.037 billion, up roughly 30% on the previous year, while lithium carbonate production topped 110,000 tonnes a year for the first time, a level the country had never previously reached¹⁰.

This extractive acceleration is part of a systemic competition for control over the value chains of critical minerals, in which China holds a dominant position: according to industry estimates, Beijing controls between 70% and more than 90% of world refining capacity for lithium, copper, cobalt, graphite, and rare earths, depending on the mineral in question. It was in response to this concentration that, on 4 February 2026, the United States, the European Commission, and delegates from more than fifty countries – including Argentina – signed a memorandum to diversify supply chains away from China, as part of a network of roughly 38 bilateral critical-minerals partnerships signed by Washington in recent months¹¹.

The Framework Instrument signed by Buenos Aires with the United States at that same venue was explicitly presented by US diplomacy as a tool for ensuring a secure, resilient, and competitive supply of critical minerals, with the stated aim of offering the Andean country a credible alternative to commercial dependence on China, to which the majority of processed Argentine critical minerals currently flows¹². The bilateral trade agreement signed in parallel provides for a reduction in US tariffs in exchange for the opening of the Argentine market, with a chapter devoted to critical minerals in which Buenos Aires commits to favoring the United States as its investment partner in lithium and copper¹³.

For the People's Republic of China — which remains the leading buyer and processor of Argentine critical minerals and a long-standing trade partner for the agri-food sector — this development represents a relative loss of ground rather than a rupture: Beijing retains significant room to maneuver, but investments in new mining capacity are shifting ever more visibly toward Western actors.

1.5. *The Washington–Beijing–Buenos Aires Triangle: Financial Leverage as a Tool of Realignment*

The most immediately observable dimension of Argentina's realignment is not commercial but financial, and concerns the currency swap between the Central Bank of the Argentine Republic (BCRA) and the People's Bank of China, active since 2009 and renewed several times for a total value of up to \$19 billion¹⁴. Despite Milei's initially hostile rhetoric toward Beijing, between 2023 and 2024 the Argentine government made extensive use of the drawn portion of the swap to stabilize its currency reserves – a classic example of contingent economic necessity trumping declared ideological posture¹⁵.

⁸ STURTZ N., *Vaca Muerta: la Argentina exportará gas a Alemania por más de 7.000 millones y se suma al mapa energético europeo*, in "Infobae", 6 May 2026, infobae.com.

⁹ Infobae, cit. (note 7).

¹⁰ Diario de Cuyo, *Argentina y Estados Unidos suscribieron un acuerdo sobre minerales críticos*, 5 February 2026, diariodecuyo.com.ar.

¹¹ FANTI C., *L'appetito yankee per i minerali critici latinoamericani*, in «Il Manifesto», July 2026, ilmanifesto.it.

¹² Il Foglio, *L'accordo tra Argentina e Stati Uniti riduce i dazi e apre i mercati, per contenere la Cina*, 7 February 2026, ilfoglio.it.

¹³ Il Sole 24 Ore, *Argentina firma accordo con Usa, mercato aperto in cambio di sgravio dazi*, 6 February 2026, ilsole24ore.com

¹⁴ BURGUEÑO C., *Argentina, China y el swap: por qué es el acuerdo más imprescindible y secreto de Javier Milei*, in «MDZ Online», 8 June 2026, mdzol.com.

¹⁵ HARÁN J.M., *From Tension to Understanding: Argentina-China Relations Under Milei*, in «The Diplomat», 15 November 2024, thediplomat.com.

With the installation of the Trump administration and the intensification of Sino-American competition, US pressure on Buenos Aires became explicit and insistent: the US Treasury Secretary made American financial support – which included a US currency swap, declared fully repaid in January 2026 at a profit for the American taxpayer – conditional on a progressive Argentine disengagement from China¹⁶. The Argentine government consequently accelerated repayment of the drawn portion of the Chinese swap, reducing it by more than \$2.4 billion between 2025 and the first days of 2026, down to a residual balance of a few hundred million dollars, with the stated aim of bringing it to zero by mid-2026, coinciding with the agreement’s contractual expiry¹⁷.

This episode is instructive for the analysis of alliances: it shows how, for an economy structurally dependent on external liquidity, bilateral financial leverage is today a more effective tool of geopolitical realignment than traditional political-diplomatic pressure. Buenos Aires has not severed economic ties with China – which remain significant commercially, particularly in beef exports – but it has significantly scaled back its financial exposure to Beijing, reallocating it toward Washington.

2. Implications for the Architecture of Western Alliances

The overlap of these three dossiers – energy, critical minerals, financial realignment – makes it possible to draw a more precise picture of the current state of alliances in the Argentine quadrant than a reading based solely on multilateral disengagement.

2.1. The Relationship with the European Union

The provisional application of the EU-Mercosur trade agreement from 1 May 2026 represents the main institutional anchor between Buenos Aires and Brussels – a result that nonetheless remains contingent on the completion of the national ratifications of the EMPA by all EU member states, a process exposed to sectoral resistance, particularly from European agriculture, and to possible review by the EU Court of Justice¹⁸. For the Union, the agreement offers a predictable channel of access to lithium, copper and, prospectively, LNG; however, the question remains open of how to reconcile such access with the traceability and *due diligence* standards the Union applies to its trading partners in supply chains – a matter that concerns the EU’s own internal regulatory coherence more than Argentine policy as such.

2.2. The Relationship with the United States

The rapprochement with Washington currently appears to be the most solid and best-institutionalized vector: a trade agreement, a critical-minerals framework, direct financial support, and coordinated pressure on the China dossier together form a broad-spectrum relationship, explicitly framed by both sides in terms of competition with China. The risk for Washington lies in the personalistic and cyclical nature of this relationship, built largely on the direct rapport between the two political leaderships rather than on a lasting institutional architecture, and therefore potentially exposed to the outcomes of both countries’ electoral cycles.

2.3. The Relationship with China

Beijing retains structural interests in Argentina – commercial, agri-food, and, prospectively, mining – that the scaling-back of the currency swap does not erase. China also remains the primary processing outlet for Argentine critical minerals, an infrastructural and industrial dependency that no framework agreement can close in the short term. This means that Argentina’s realignment toward the West is today

¹⁶ South China Morning Post, *Argentina’s Milei plans China trip for 2026 as US pressures Buenos Aires to curb ties*, 12 January 2026, [scmp.com](https://www.scmp.com).

¹⁷ iProfesional, “Milei pagó deuda en swap con China y la dejó en mínimos históricos por presión de Trump”, 15 May 2026; La Política Online, “Milei sacó un decreto anti China, pero a mitad de año tiene que renovar el swap”, 20 January 2026.

¹⁸ Access2Markets – European Commission, *Applicazione dell’accordo commerciale interinale UE-Mercosur il 1° maggio 2026*, trade.ec.europa.eu.

more pronounced on the financial and diplomatic front than in the actual logistics and processing chains, where China's weight remains preponderant.

2.4. The Regional Strategic Vacuum

On the broader security front, the abandonment of predictable multilateral diplomacy in favor of opportunistic bilateral pragmatism keeps in place an element of structural risk: a government that treats foreign policy as a bargaining chip for securing short-term financial resources exposes its geopolitical posture to high unpredictability over the medium term, even where the current trajectory favors Western partners. Against this backdrop, the subcontinent's critical infrastructure, port hubs, and telecommunications networks remain an open field of competition for third-party actors as well.

3. Strategic Outlook

Looking to the 2026-2028 horizon, three trajectories appear most likely for the Argentine quadrant and warrant priority monitoring.

- Consolidation of multi-vector bilateralism. The most likely short-term scenario is a continuation of the current model: a parallel intensification of ties with the United States and the European Union, a scaling-back – not an elimination – of relations with China, and no return to full multilateralism. The full entry into force of the EU-Mercosur agreement and the full implementation of the critical-minerals Framework with the United States are the two main indicators to watch over the next twelve months.
- Risk of electoral and macroeconomic volatility. The sustainability of this positioning depends on the domestic resilience of Argentina's economic program and on the outcomes of upcoming elections. A change in the governing majority, or a fresh macroeconomic shock, could quickly alter the incentives currently steering Buenos Aires toward Washington and Brussels, reopening room for maneuver for third-party actors – China foremost among them.
- The need for institutional anchoring on the part of Western partners. For the European Union and the United States, the advantage gained through the 2026 agreements is not irreversible: consolidating it requires turning framework understandings into long-term infrastructural and contractual commitments (multi-year supply contracts, direct investment in local processing capacity, stable regulatory frameworks), thereby reducing the relationship's dependence on the political conjuncture on both sides.

The key for policymakers lies not in assessing the ideological coherence of Argentina's trajectory, but in the constant, detached monitoring of shifting alliance balances and supply-chain security. Seen in this light, Argentina in 2026 is not a partner definitively secured, but a contested, high-potential quadrant whose future trajectory will depend on the ability of Western partners to turn a contingent convergence of interests into a stable architecture of cooperation.

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NATO prospects and possible developments

Nato's new policy on reserves: is Italy ready?

Matteo Mazziotti di Celso

Executive Summary

The changing security environment has compelled NATO to revise its plans. In this context, one of the most important changes concerns the update of the Policy on Reserve Forces, which encourages Allies to invest in their reserves in order to increase not only their quality, but above all their quantity. The Italian reserve only partially meets the guidance set out in this policy. Although it can enhance the quality of regular forces, it is currently unable to provide the mass required to sustain large-scale operations.

1. Introduction

The changing European security environment, driven primarily by the launch of Russia's offensive in Ukraine, has led NATO to focus its attention on the first of its core tasks: deterrence and defence. As a consequence, the Alliance has begun a process of revising its concepts, strategies and plans, with the aim of strengthening its ability to exercise credible deterrence against potential military aggression.

One of the most important changes has concerned NATO's policy on reserve forces. The term refers to the category of military personnel who, although not serving full-time, have received military training and may be recalled to service when required. In the changed security environment, which requires Allies to be able to field a large volume of military personnel, the Atlantic Alliance has recognised the importance of reserves in enabling its forces to generate greater mass. For this reason, the NATO Military Committee launched an extensive review of its policy on reserve forces. The review culminated in the publication of a document entitled NATO Policy on Reserves, whose purpose is to promote the use of reserve forces among Allies¹. To this end, the Policy sets out principles that Allies can follow to adapt their reserve forces to Alliance requirements.

At present, Italy's reserve forces are not sufficiently aligned with the principles set out in the NATO Policy on Reserves. The Italian reserve is structured to provide specific expertise, primarily for operations abroad or at home, but not to generate mass². The Italian military authorities appear to have understood for some time the need to reform the reserve and have therefore put forward several proposals. However, the Italian political context has never appeared particularly receptive to these initiatives.

Against this background, this contribution has two objectives. First, it outlines the fundamental features of the NATO Policy on Reserves. Second, it assesses the extent to which Italy's reserve forces meet the principles established by that Policy. To this end, the essay is divided into three parts. The first briefly explains the reasons that led NATO to revise its reserve policy. The second outlines the principles of the document and analyses how they relate to the requirements of the changed security environment. The third presents the Italian reserve and assesses its consistency with the principles of NATO policy. The contribution concludes with a set of final observations.

2. The Importance of Reserve Forces in Today's Security Environment

Within NATO, reserve forces were an instrument of fundamental importance during the Cold War. In that period, they supplemented regular units in order to increase the mass that could be generated. In

¹ NORTH ATLANTIC MILITARY COMMITTEE, MC 0441/3 - *NATO Policy on Reserves*, approved on 31 October 2024.

² For further discussion of the Italian reserve, the principal studies are: SCOLLO, L.P. - BERTOLINI, M. - CHIAPPERINI, L. - MARINI, D. - GIACOBBE, A., *Forze di Riserva 2020*, in «Centro Studi Esercito», Quaderno no. 1 (2020); BUSCEMI, M., *Il Mondo del Lavoro e i Riservisti. Rapporto di Reciproco Sostegno Non Competitivo*, in «Ricerca CeMiSS C10/Z» (2006); DIELLA, F. - MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO, M., *Una Forza di Riserva per l'Italia*, in «Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale», Note no. 111 (November 2024).

the event of mobilisation, they would therefore have expanded the size of the regular forces without providing any particular additional capabilities.

The end of the bipolar confrontation inevitably reduced the importance of reserve forces for NATO. In the emerging security environment, the ability to increase rapidly the number of personnel under arms was not perceived as an urgent requirement. Many Allied states therefore opted for a radical reduction of their reserve forces and mobilisation systems. The size, capabilities and readiness of NATO reserve forces began to decline rapidly. In this context, reserve units in many member countries assumed a complementary rather than supplementary role in relation to regular forces, becoming extremely limited in size but capable of providing the armed forces with advanced specialist expertise.

For many Allies, however, this period of reserve-force decline proved temporary. The demands arising from participation in the conflicts in Iraq and, above all, Afghanistan imposed an extremely heavy burden on the regular forces of the states involved, which soon became unsustainable without the support of reserve units. This was particularly true for the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, which soon had to deploy thousands of reservists to these theatres. The countries that contributed most extensively to US-led operations in the war on terror therefore had to revisit their mobilisation systems.

The launch of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 inevitably influenced NATO's internal debate on reserve forces. The conflict compelled the Alliance to accelerate its reorientation towards the first of its core tasks, namely defence and deterrence. The need to confront a so-called peer adversary, one possessing advanced military capabilities, also requires the ability to absorb a substantial volume of losses³. The war in Ukraine therefore made it necessary to reassess member states' capacity to mobilise reservists not only in a complementary role, but also in a supplementary one, intended to reinforce the ranks of regular forces without providing additional specialist capabilities.

3. NATO Policy on Reserve Forces

As part of the process of revising its plans, NATO also updated its policy on reserve forces, which dated from 2012. The new NATO Policy on Reserves, developed with the support of the International Military Staff - the permanent body assisting the Military Committee - was approved on 10 October 2024 by the NATO Military Committee, the Alliance's highest military authority.

The Policy starts from the premise that the organisation of reserve forces remains a national responsibility and prerogative. NATO therefore does not intend to impose a common model or determine how Allies should recruit, organise or employ their reservists. Rather, the document seeks to promote greater use of reserves across NATO's three core tasks, with particular emphasis on collective defence. To this end, it sets out a common vision and offers recommendations on how Allies can use reserves to meet the growing demand for military personnel.

The rationale of the new Policy is closely linked to the changed security environment. According to the document, the renewed possibility of large-scale conventional war requires NATO to strengthen its collective-defence capacity and its ability to sustain a protracted conflict. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the continuing relevance of attritional warfare and, consequently, the need for greater mass⁴. This issue is particularly important for implementing the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), which requires Allies to make available a broader pool of combat-ready and sustainable forces. According to the Policy, a potential shortage of adequately trained and rapidly available personnel is one of the principal obstacles to implementing the Alliance's new defence plans.

Although the document places considerable emphasis on mass, it also recognises that the value of reserves is not limited to generating additional units. Reservists can bring to the armed forces expertise acquired in their civilian professions, helping to fill shortages rapidly in specialist fields such as

³ WHISLER, G. - KOFMAN, M., *A Return to Mass: Russian Force Expansion in the War with Ukraine*, in «War on the Rocks», 14 June 2026 (<https://warontherocks.com/a-return-to-mass-russian-force-expansion-in-the-war-with-ukraine/>; accessed 19 July 2026).

⁴ GADY, F.S. - KOFMAN, M., *Making Attrition Work: A Viable Theory of Victory for Ukraine*, in «Survival», 1 (66), 2024, pp. 7-24.

cyberspace, space and emerging technologies. They can also foster innovation, strengthen relationships with industry and academia, and reinforce the link between society and the military institution.

On these premises, the Policy introduces a NATO Vision for Reserves based on five principles. The first is to strengthen deterrence and defence. Reserves must enable Allies to increase the personnel and capabilities available during the transition from peace to crisis and conflict. States are therefore encouraged to expand their reserve components and, above all, to ensure a level of readiness consistent with NATO defence-planning requirements.

The second principle is to strengthen interoperability. Reserves must be trained and equipped in accordance with NATO standards so that they can integrate rapidly with regular forces. A reservist can reinforce or replace regular personnel only when he or she has reached the level of readiness required for the post to be filled. The Policy also recommends increasing reservists' access to NATO education, training and exercises.

The third principle is to provide strategic depth. Reserves must contribute to the ability to sustain a protracted conflict by supplying additional personnel and ensuring continuity of operations. At the same time, they can provide specialist expertise derived from civilian professions and personnel with previous military experience who can train and mentor new recruits.

The fourth principle is to support crisis response. Reserves can contribute to emergency management, humanitarian operations and disaster relief, including through their ability to connect the military sector with civilian administrations and organisations.

The fifth principle is to strengthen societal resilience and Alliance cohesion. Reservists provide a bridge between society and the armed forces and can contribute to preparing society as a whole for crisis and conflict. The Policy nevertheless stresses the need to prevent mobilisation from drawing essential personnel away from critical civilian sectors such as healthcare, transport, logistics and industrial production.

The remainder of the document provides Allies with a series of recommendations intended to facilitate the development of reserve forces consistent with the proposed Vision. One of the most significant issues concerns the recruitment of reservists. This is a critical matter and, in many countries, a major challenge. NATO encourages Allied countries to take measures to improve the living conditions of reservists' families, ensure that periods of service do not jeopardise the employment relationship of recalled personnel, and maintain high levels of motivation within reserve forces.

4. Italy's Reserve Forces

To understand the extent to which Italy's reserve forces are aligned with the principles set out in the new NATO Policy on Reserves, it is necessary to examine the process that produced their current structure. The evolution of the Italian reserve system has been profoundly influenced by the country's perception of the prevailing security environment and by the nature of the relationship between the armed forces and society⁵. Since the end of the Cold War, Italy's political authorities have never genuinely perceived a direct conventional military threat to the national territory and have therefore not considered it necessary to maintain a reserve capable of rapidly mobilising large numbers of personnel for territorial defence. The principal operational requirement has instead been to support limited deployments both abroad and at home. The Italian armed forces have been extensively employed in domestic operations, particularly during emergencies and in support of the police forces⁶, and have participated in the main international missions conducted by NATO and the United Nations⁷. The reserve was therefore organised to support these activities rather than large-scale mobilisation.

Relations between the armed forces and society have also influenced the development of the reserve. Compared with many other European countries, the Italian armed forces enjoy relatively limited

⁵ ILARI, V., *Storia Militare della Prima Repubblica 1943-1993*, Inverio, 2009.

⁶ MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO, M., *Military Policing in Advanced Democracies: Italy in Comparative Perspective*, 2026.

⁷ VIGNOLI, V. - COTICCHIA, M., *Italy's Military Operations Abroad (1945-2020): Data, Patterns, and Trends*, in «International Peacekeeping», 29:3 (2022), pp. 436-462.

social prestige and have long faced recruitment difficulties⁸. To compensate for these difficulties, governments expanded opportunities for permanent employment, making career prospects one of the principal incentives for recruitment. This strategy, however, reduced personnel turnover and, consequently, the number of former service personnel available to form an operational reserve. Moreover, many of those leaving the armed forces subsequently join the police forces through preferential recruitment channels, further reducing the pool of personnel available for recall⁹.

The Italian reserve is currently structured around two broad categories of personnel. The first consists of military personnel who, on leaving active service, declare themselves Available for Recall (Disponibile al Richiamo – DAR)¹⁰. When required by the armed forces, DAR personnel may be invited to return to service for a period of fewer than 180 days, calculated cumulatively within a year, with no limit on the total number of recalls over the course of their career. In theory, this category constitutes Italy's genuine operational reserve: a force capable of supplementing regular forces or replacing them in their duties, thereby providing additional mass that can operate both at home and abroad.

In practice, however, this force does not operate as intended¹¹. First, the armed forces no longer possess the capacity to track and mobilise DAR personnel. This capacity was lost during the transition from conscript to all-volunteer armed forces, when the limited salience of the requirement for a reserve - understood as a supplementary force - meant that the few available resources were directed towards other purposes. Second, the armed forces lack the resources required to train this personnel. Before DAR personnel can be employed, they must be trained. Training, however, requires their recall for a period of varying duration, depending on the requirement. This inevitably entails expenditure on reservists' pay, instructors' pay, equipment and accommodation. Once again, the limited salience of the requirement prevents the military instrument from receiving the necessary resources.

Third, the number of DAR personnel who are actually available is likely to be very small. The armed forces do not disclose the number of DAR personnel who could be recalled, but the Italian recruitment model makes it reasonable to assume that the figure is fairly limited, mainly because turnover in the Italian armed forces is low, at least in relative terms. This applies particularly to officers and non-commissioned officers. Unlike in many other countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, almost all Italian personnel in these categories remain in the armed forces permanently once commissioned or promoted; by the time they leave service, they are no longer practically available for recall. The number of enlisted personnel leaving service is naturally higher, because the armed forces cannot offer everyone permanent employment. Most of this personnel, however, generally join the police forces and are therefore no longer effectively available for military service even when they have declared DAR status.

The second category consists of personnel belonging to the so-called 'Selected Reserve'. This expression - which is in fact informal, as it is not recognised in the Military Code - refers to civilians who, after formally applying to one of the armed services, may be called upon to perform specific duties requiring specialist expertise. Such personnel enter the officer category and may be called to service for a maximum of one year, renewable once at their request or with their consent. Officers who have been discharged for more than five years must also complete a period of refresher training before any operational employment. Unlike the first category of reservists, these personnel are intended to perform a complementary role for the armed forces by providing expertise that the services do not possess. The rationale of the Selected Reserve is therefore qualitative rather than quantitative reinforcement¹².

Overall, therefore, Italy currently lacks a reserve force genuinely capable of generating mass. The component that should perform this function, composed of DAR personnel, formally exists but is not

⁸ MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO, M., *Many Applicants but at What Cost? Italy's Alternative Model of Military Recruitment*, working paper presented at the 18th Biennial ERGOMAS Conference, Aarhus, 1 June 2026.

⁹ SCOLLO, L.P. - BERTOLINI, M. - CHIAPPERINI, L. - MARINI, D. - GIACOBBE, A., op. cit.

¹⁰ SEMPRINI, L., *Una Riserva a Base Volontaria*, in «Rivista Militare», no. 5 (2000), pp. 32-47.

¹¹ MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO, M., *The Italian Reserve Model*, working paper presented at the workshop 'Reserves at the Ready: Transforming Total Defence Forces in War and Peace', Kingston, Ontario, 15 July 2026.

¹² DIELLA, F. - MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO, M., op. cit.

supported by an effective system of tracking, mobilisation and training. The component actually employed is the Selected Reserve, which operates exclusively as a complementary force: it consists mainly of civilians recruited for their professional expertise and, in most cases, possessing very limited military experience and preparation. The Italian model is therefore effectively misaligned with the new requirements identified by NATO.

5. Strategic Outlook

The return of high-intensity warfare has profoundly changed NATO's requirements for reserves. The Italian model, however, was designed for a different strategic context: not to generate mass rapidly in the event of conflict, but to provide a limited number of reservists for operations abroad and on the national territory. Consequently, the Italian system contributes only marginally to NATO's objectives of strengthening deterrence and defence, increasing interoperability and ensuring strategic depth. The reserve's societal function also remains weak: unlike in many Allied countries, it does not provide a significant link between the armed forces and society and therefore contributes little to national resilience.

The Italian military authorities, long aware of these limitations, have repeatedly advanced reform proposals. The first dates back to 2001, when the armed forces proposed establishing an Italian National Guard¹³. At the time, the impetus did not come from NATO, but from concerns among the military leadership regarding both the ability of the armed forces - particularly the Army - to recruit a sufficient number of volunteers and the foreseeable consequences that ending conscription would have for civil-military relations in Italy. The proposal, however, failed to gain political support. In 2022, following the launch of Russia's offensive in Ukraine, the issue returned to prominence. The armed forces proposed the establishment of a State Auxiliary Reserve composed of approximately 10,000 volunteers¹⁴. The proposal initially received a measure of support, to the point that the government was granted legislative authority to implement it. The mandate was subsequently allowed to expire.

The proposal currently under discussion again seeks to address the shortfall through three distinct components: an operational reserve of former service personnel, a specialist reserve and a territorial reserve intended mainly for emergencies and domestic operations¹⁵. The latter would be particularly useful, above all because it would enable the Army to disengage from Operation 'Strade Sicure', which has been under way for almost two decades, diminishes the professional role of military personnel¹⁶ and, according to the military authorities, removes almost 20,000 personnel from training each year¹⁷. This reform, however, must confront the same obstacle that affected previous attempts: establishing a genuine operational reserve requires considerable resources to train, recall and incentivise personnel. In a country where support for increased defence expenditure remains weak and the armed forces continue to be associated primarily with emergencies and domestic security, the political incentives to invest in an instrument intended mainly for high-intensity warfare remain limited.

¹³ BUSCEMI, M., op. cit.

¹⁴ DIELLA, F. - MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO, M., op. cit.

¹⁵ CARLI, A., *Difesa, ecco la riforma Crosetto. L'Italia gioca la carta della riserva*, in «Il Sole 24 Ore», 10 June 2026 (<https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/difesa-ecco-riforma-crosetto-l-italia-gioca-carta-riserva-operativa-AINSy4aD>; accessed 19 July 2026).

¹⁶ MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO, M., *The Impact of Military Policing on Armed Forces: The Case of Italy*, in «Armed Forces & Society», 51(3), 2024, pp. 690-711.

¹⁷ 4TH COMMITTEE OF THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES, *Fact-finding Inquiry into the Conditions of Military Personnel Employed in Operation Strade Sicure - Hearing of the Chief of Staff of the Army, Lieutenant General Salvatore Farina* [Verbatim Record], 25 June 2019, p. 3.

The Italian energy landscape: past, present, and future prospects

Silvio Labbate

Executive Summary

Energy security has become a central priority on the government agenda, particularly for a country such as Italy, which has historically lacked sufficient domestic energy resources. This structural condition has inevitably shaped both the country's historical development and its current energy system, making decisions regarding future energy supply of paramount strategic importance. Within this context, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 revived concerns over Italy's excessive dependence on Russian natural gas, which, at the outbreak of the conflict, accounted for approximately 40% of the country's total methane imports. This contribution examines the current Italian energy landscape through the analysis of key historical developments in order to assess possible medium and long-term scenario.

1. The Italian Energy Landscape and Key Historical Milestones

Despite its chronic shortage of domestic energy resources, successive Italian governments failed to develop a coherent energy strategy until the first oil crisis. Nevertheless, considerable investments in the nuclear sector enabled Italy, by the early 1960s, to become the third-largest Western country – after the United States and the United Kingdom – in terms of installed nuclear generating capacity. This trajectory slowed significantly following the establishment of ENEL, the newly created national electricity utility, which decided to suspend temporarily the construction of additional nuclear power plants¹. At the same time, the petroleum sector achieved promising results, largely owing to the initiatives promoted by Enrico Mattei. A firm advocate of Italian energy independence, Mattei founded ENI in 1953 and succeeded, albeit only briefly, in establishing an autonomous national oil policy that frequently challenged the dominance of the so-called “Seven Sisters”.

Following Mattei's sudden death on 27 October 1962, ENI gradually shifted its role from oil exploration and production to that of a purchaser of crude oil from foreign suppliers, while domestic refining activities progressively lost momentum. The company's new management instead prioritized securing long-term import contracts. As a consequence, Italy became increasingly dependent on imported fossil fuels, a trend that gradually extended to natural gas.

From 1967 onward, this strategic orientation became irreversible. Italy concluded natural gas agreements with the Netherlands, Algeria, and the Soviet Union. Owing to the profound transformations taking place in the international energy market, however, the effects of these agreements became fully visible only in the early 1980s².

When the first oil shock erupted in 1973, Italy proved largely unprepared because of its overwhelming dependence on oil imports from the Middle East, which supplied nearly 80% of the country's domestic energy requirements. In response to this crisis, alongside efforts to strengthen energy cooperation with Mediterranean producers, the government sought to revive the national nuclear programme.

Nuclear energy became the cornerstone of Italy's first National Energy Plan (Piano Energetico Nazionale, PEN), presented in July 1975 by Minister Carlo Donat-Cattin and approved by the Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning (CIPE) in December of the same year. The plan

¹ For more information cfr. Cfr. LABBATE S., *Il governo dell'energia. L'Italia dal petrolio al nucleare (1945-1975)*, Firenze, 2010, p. 34 e ss.

² Cfr. LABBATE S., *Le politiche energetiche in Italia. Dalle crisi petrolifere alla rinuncia al nucleare (1975-1987)*, Roma, 2025, p. 21 e ss.

envisaged the construction of twenty new nuclear generating units by 1985. However, significant obstacles soon emerged. Policymakers had underestimated environmental concerns, which had previously prompted local authorities to resist authorizing new nuclear facilities. Subsequent attempts to overcome these difficulties proved unsuccessful.

Environmental movements effectively shaped public opinion by highlighting the potential risks associated with radioactive contamination and its consequences for human health. These concerns intensified following the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in the United States in March 1979. Furthermore, the financial resources allocated under the National Energy Plan proved insufficient, while the high capital costs associated with nuclear power plants induced ENEL to continue investing primarily in oil-fired generating facilities. Consequently, Italy's dependence on fossil fuels continued to increase.

The outbreak of the second oil shock (1978–79) found Italy in a situation that differed little from that of 1973. Once again, the country was largely unprepared, as demonstrated by its continued heavy reliance on imported oil, which still accounted for more than 70% of domestic energy consumption³. This situation prompted the government to pursue additional agreements aimed at increasing imports of alternative fossil fuels, with natural gas once again receiving priority. Alongside the expansion of the existing agreement with Algeria – which included the construction of the Transmed pipeline – Italy also decided, despite considerable concerns within the Atlantic Alliance, to participate in the Trans-Siberian gas pipeline project with the Soviet Union. This infrastructure was intended to transport substantial volumes of Soviet natural gas to Western Europe, thereby reinforcing Italy's long-term strategy of diversifying energy imports while simultaneously deepening its dependence on external suppliers.

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster in April 1986 represented the decisive turning point in Italian energy policy. It prompted the referendums held the following year, through which Italian voters effectively sanctioned the country's withdrawal from nuclear power generation. This decision marked the end of Italy's civilian nuclear programme and further reinforced the country's dependence on imported energy resources.

2. Toward Contemporary Energy Crises and Dependencies

Beginning in 1988, the last National Energy Plan (PEN) assigned an even more prominent role to natural gas imports. Italy consequently became increasingly dependent on natural gas alongside petroleum, while simultaneously relying on imports of nuclear-generated electricity from neighbouring countries – primarily France and Switzerland, but also, to some extent, the Soviet Union⁴. These developments unfolded during a period of profound transformation in the international political and economic landscape, which required substantial adjustments in national energy policy. The international oil market once again experienced significant instability, particularly during the Gulf Crisis, which threatened the security of crude oil supplies. At the same time, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the political transition in Eastern Europe opened new commercial opportunities and created broader prospects for cooperation between Western enterprises and the former socialist economies. Meanwhile, the forthcoming completion of the European Single Market on 1 January 1993 represented a crucial milestone in European integration, while also requiring member states to improve the efficiency and competitiveness of their energy sectors and to strengthen environmental protection policies.

Although these developments offered important opportunities, they also compelled Italy to further increase its dependence on imported energy, especially natural gas, which continued to be regarded as the

³ Cfr. Historical Archives of the Carlo Donat-Cattin Foundation (ASFDC), Fondo Ammassari, “Comitato Nazionale Energia Nucleare”, FDC TO Amm 21, *Rapporto al ministro dell'industria sulla situazione energetica italiana e sua probabile evoluzione*, Roma, 18 luglio 1979.

⁴ Cfr. ENEL Historical Archives (ASENEL), Fondo Direzione Generale, s. Presidenza Franco Viezzoli, b. 100, *Fornitura di energia elettrica dall'URSS all'Italia*, Promemoria interno della Direzione Esteri dell'ENEL, Roma, 17 aprile 1991.

most economically advantageous fuel⁵. In addition to expanding imports from the Netherlands, ENI signed a new agreement with Algeria at the end of 1990 that provided for the doubling of the Transmed pipeline’s capacity, enabling annual imports to reach approximately 24 billion cubic metres of natural gas⁶. Energy relations with Moscow likewise continued to expand. Although temporarily interrupted by the collapse of the Soviet Union, they quickly resumed through Gazprom, established in 1989. Over time, dependence on Russian natural gas increased not only in Italy but across the European Union, particularly following the construction of the Yamal–Europe pipeline, one of the principal gas corridors transporting approximately 33 billion cubic metres of natural gas annually from the Yamal fields in north-western Russia to Germany via Belarus and Poland⁷. In Italy alone, on the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, imports from Russia amounted to approximately 29 billion cubic metres of natural gas, representing around 40% of total national gas supplies⁸. This level of dependence was the direct consequence of an energy policy that had consistently failed to adopt a sufficiently long-term strategic perspective.

A further structural transformation occurred during the late 1990s with the privatization of the major state-owned energy companies and the liberalization of the electricity market. As a consequence, the Italian government progressively relinquished direct control over the energy sector, particularly with regard to security of supply, which increasingly became the responsibility of joint-stock companies operating under state shareholding rather than direct public ownership⁹. At the same time, although the 1988 National Energy Plan had formally identified renewable energy as a strategic priority, its implementation encountered numerous legislative, administrative, and political obstacles. In compliance with European directives, the Italian Regulatory Authority for Electricity and Gas was established in 1995 to oversee market regulation and ensure effective competition among operators. Nevertheless, the gradual withdrawal of the state from the direct management of ENI and ENEL ultimately strengthened the influence of these companies, allowing them to play an increasingly prominent – almost quasi-monopolistic – role in shaping both Italy’s domestic energy policy and its international energy relations. As reflected in the most recent indicators published by ISPRA, Italy continues to exhibit one of the highest levels of energy dependence in Europe. In 2024, dependence reached 100% for solid fuels, 95.5% for petroleum products, and 95.8% for natural gas, while renewable energy sources showed a dependence rate of only 6.1%. Overall, imported energy accounted for 75.8% of Italy’s total energy availability, confirming the country’s persistent structural reliance on foreign energy supplies.

Dependency Indicator	Value (%)	Reference Year
Solid fuels (wood, charcoal, coal, etc.)	100	2024
Petroleum products	95,5	2024
Natural gas	95,8	2024
Renewables	6,1	2024
Total	75,8	2024

Table 1: Key Data on Italy’s Energy Dependence¹⁰

⁵ Cfr. ENI Historical Archives (ASENI) ENI, *Relazioni e bilancio al 31 dicembre 1990*, Roma, 1991, p. 33 e ss.
⁶ Construction was completed in 1997, making it possible to supply the Italian market with an additional 11 billion cubic meters per year; in 2000, the pipeline was renamed “Enrico Mattei” in honor of the founder of ENI, who was the first to envision the project just a few months before his death.
⁷ Designed in 1992, the Yamal-Europe gas pipeline was constructed beginning in 1994 and began supplying gas in 1997.
⁸ Cfr. CLÒ A., *Il ricatto del gas russo. Ragioni e responsabilità*, Milano 2022, p. 23.
⁹ For further information, please refer to, among others, BARUCCI E. – PIEROBON F., *Le privatizzazioni in Italia*, Roma, 2007.
¹⁰ Cfr. <https://indicatoriambientali.isprambiente.it/it> (accessed on July 9, 2026).

In the early 2010s, the Berlusconi government attempted to revive Italy's nuclear energy programme. However, the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan in 2011, triggered by a powerful earthquake and the ensuing tsunami despite the plant's high safety standards, prompted calls for a new national referendum. Once again, Italian voters expressed their opposition to the use of nuclear energy. This outcome effectively prevented any substantial restructuring of the country's energy mix. Consequently, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the urgent need to replace Russian gas imports with supplies from alternative sources, Italy was forced to implement emergency diversification measures.

Within this context, the Mediterranean's Southern Flank regained strategic importance, both directly and indirectly. Italy has consistently maintained a significant presence in the Mediterranean energy sector, largely owing to ENI's entrepreneurial dynamism and the sustained diplomatic support provided by successive governments. Among the most notable examples are the company's enduring operations in Egypt and Libya, which continued despite the political challenges posed by the Regeni affair and the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. In 2004, the Greenstream pipeline entered into operation, linking Tripoli to Sicily with an annual transport capacity of approximately 11 billion cubic metres of natural gas. More recently, in 2020, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) was completed. Beginning at the Greek-Turkish border, the pipeline crosses Greece and Albania before reaching the Adriatic coast in the province of Lecce, transporting natural gas from Azerbaijan. With an annual capacity of 10 billion cubic metres, TAP forms part of the Southern Gas Corridor, a strategic infrastructure promoted by the European Commission with the objective of strengthening European energy security while positioning Italy as a major regional gas hub.

To compensate for the loss of approximately 29 billion cubic metres of Russian natural gas, the Italian government adopted a multidirectional diversification strategy. Under Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Italy secured an additional three billion cubic metres per year from Algeria through the Transmed pipeline, with plans to double this volume in the following year. Further agreements expanded gas production and exports from Angola, increased supplies from Egypt, and strengthened cooperation with the Republic of the Congo, whose additional production was expected to contribute approximately 4.5 billion cubic metres annually to the Italian market. At the same time, policymakers considered the construction of additional Mediterranean gas pipelines, although priority was ultimately assigned to the expansion of the TAP corridor. Parallel initiatives included the construction and expansion of liquefied natural gas (LNG)¹¹ regasification terminals. Italy currently operates facilities at Panigaglia (La Spezia), Porto Viro (Rovigo), Livorno, Piombino, and Ravenna, thereby increasing storage capacity and improving resilience against future supply disruptions. Another strategic decision involved expanding LNG imports. In recent years, the United States has effectively replaced Russia as one of Europe's principal LNG suppliers. Most of these imports consist of shale gas extracted through hydraulic fracturing (fracking), a technique involving the injection of water, sand, and chemical additives under extremely high pressure to fracture shale formations and release trapped hydrocarbons. Although this approach has enhanced diversification, it also raises significant economic and environmental concerns. Shale gas extraction is highly capital-intensive and, before the market changes triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war, had become economically unattractive for many American producers. Moreover, hydraulic fracturing has been associated with considerable environmental impacts and geological risks. The transportation of LNG by specialized tanker vessels further increases both financial costs and environmental externalities, including greenhouse gas emissions, marine pollution resulting from hydrocarbon spills, the release of microplastics and toxic substances, and underwater noise pollution.

Overall, Italy's energy costs have risen substantially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Neither national nor European policies have thus far succeeded in identifying rapid solutions capable of ensuring

¹¹ It is natural gas that has been cooled to approximately -162° C until it becomes a liquid. This process reduces its volume by as much as 600 times, making it easier to store and transport by ship.

greater energy security. More recently, tensions involving Iran have generated additional uncertainty. Approximately one-fifth of global energy supplies transit through the Strait of Hormuz, making the region a critical geopolitical chokepoint. At present, the principal challenge does not lie in the physical availability of alternative suppliers but rather in the rising costs associated with market uncertainty. Concerns over the possible closure of the Strait, together with the prospect of new transit tariffs and other trade-related measures currently under discussion, have significantly increased energy prices. Consequently, Italy remains heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels – particularly natural gas – and continues to face persistently high and rising energy costs.

3. Strategic Outlook

Energy markets are inherently volatile, and the succession of ongoing and potential international crises makes the long-term strategic outlook increasingly uncertain. Nevertheless, several developments deserve particular attention in assessing Italy's future energy security. First, the European Union is currently pursuing an ambitious decarbonization strategy within the broader framework of the energy transition. However, achieving climate neutrality by 2050 appears increasingly challenging given the persistence of geopolitical instability¹². Current conflicts and tensions – including those affecting the Strait of Hormuz, Gaza, Lebanon, the Gulf of Aden, and the Suez Canal – are likely to continue disrupting international energy markets in the foreseeable future. Against this backdrop, the European Union has identified both natural gas and civilian nuclear power as “clean” or transitional energy sources capable of complementing renewable energy within a diversified energy mix. According to this approach, these technologies should guarantee the continuity of energy supplies during periods of market disruption.

Regarding natural gas, several infrastructure projects previously set aside have recently regained strategic relevance, once again positioning Italy as a potential European energy hub. Among the most significant proposals are: GALSI, designed to strengthen gas connections between Algeria and Sardinia; Nabucco, intended to transport natural gas from the Caucasus, the Caspian Basin, and potentially the Middle East; EastMed–Poseidon, connecting the Levant Basin in the Eastern Mediterranean to Italy through the Adriatic coast near Otranto; the expansion of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). Despite their strategic value, all these projects remain subject to considerable uncertainty. The worsening geopolitical instability in the Middle East – particularly following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 – has further complicated their political and economic feasibility. Moreover, even under favourable circumstances, the approval and construction of such infrastructures would require many years before becoming operational.

Similarly, the Meloni government's proposal to relaunch nuclear energy through the deployment of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) faces many of the same structural obstacles that have historically hindered nuclear development in Italy. Long-standing issues – including the management of radioactive waste, the absence of a national repository, the need for local authorizations, and the possibility of another national referendum – remain unresolved. Even under the most optimistic assumptions, a new nuclear programme would require at least a decade before contributing to electricity generation. More importantly, it would not eliminate Italy's dependence on foreign energy sources. Following the 1987 referendums, Italy progressively lost much of its domestic nuclear expertise and withdrew, through ENEL, from major international nuclear development programmes. Consequently, a renewed investment in nuclear power would necessarily depend on imported reactor technologies, foreign nuclear fuel – such as enriched uranium or plutonium – and specialized maintenance services provided by international suppliers. In other words, nuclear power would require substantial upfront investment while generating returns only over the long term, without resolving the country's structural dependence on foreign technological and fuel supply chains. These considerations are in addition to environmental concerns, Italy's widespread geological vulnerability, and the significant public opposition that any new nuclear programme would almost certainly encounter.

¹² Cfr. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/energy/energy-and-green-deal_it (accessed on July 10, 2026).

From a short-term perspective, Italy should instead continue strengthening its partnerships with the principal energy-producing countries of the Mediterranean. In this regard, the so-called Mattei Plan represents a potentially valuable strategic framework, provided that it is redesigned within a coordinated European policy. Only through a genuinely collective European approach would the initiative have realistic prospects for success. Within such a framework, the Italian government should assume a leading diplomatic role by capitalizing on the long-standing relationships established by Enrico Mattei, whose legacy continues to command considerable respect across many Mediterranean and African partner countries. At the same time, Italy should continue expanding its national strategic reserves of fossil fuels in order to enhance resilience against future supply disruptions

Finally, the Italian government could launch an ambitious programme of incentives for renewable energy sources while simultaneously encouraging the European Union to adopt a coordinated industrial strategy. Among all available options, renewable energy represents the only long-term solution capable of exploiting Italy's abundant domestic natural resources, particularly solar radiation, wind, and marine energy. However, achieving this objective will require sustained investments in scientific research, technological innovation, and energy storage systems. A promising example is ENEL's redevelopment project at the former Grazia Deledda coal-fired power station in Portoscuso (Sardinia), where the existing plant is being progressively decommissioned and replaced by a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) with a capacity of approximately 125 MW. Projects of this kind should constitute the foundation of Italy's future energy strategy. Indeed, one of the defining challenges of future energy policy will be the development of efficient energy storage technologies capable of ensuring continuous electricity supply during periods of limited solar radiation, weak wind conditions, or reduced wave activity. China recognized the strategic importance of this technological field several decades ago and has consequently emerged as the world's leading producer of renewable energy technologies. Other European countries, particularly Germany, are now pursuing similar strategies. Although Italy may initially remain dependent on imported technologies – for example, through the large-scale installation of photovoltaic systems on suitable public buildings – it should simultaneously invest heavily in domestic research and industrial innovation. The ultimate objective should be the development of advanced national technologies capable of reducing dependence on foreign suppliers while strengthening Italy's competitiveness in emerging sectors, including battery production, component recovery, and the recycling of renewable energy technologies. The Chinese experience clearly demonstrates that long-term investment in technological innovation, industrial policy, and research can transform initial technological dependence into global leadership. For Italy, pursuing a similar strategy would represent not only an opportunity to improve energy security but also a pathway toward greater industrial competitiveness and sustainable economic growth.

Hybrid and asymmetric threats

From narrative to coercion: Iranian influence in Europe and the vulnerability of the cognitive space

Claudio Bertolotti

Executive Summary

Iranian influence projection in Europe is an adaptive system in which state *media*, digital platforms, local intermediaries and criminal networks contribute to a strategy of influence and pressure. Europol's May 2026 action against 14,200 items of content linked to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the IRGC's inclusion on the EU list of terrorist organisations confirm European concern over Tehran's activism. In Italy, the sources document the reframing of Iranian narratives, but not a chain of command extending to local movements. "Askatasuna", the subversive group based in Turin, nevertheless shows how the rhetoric of "resistance" can connect the Palestinian cause, anti-Atlanticism and confrontation with the state, creating an environment in which hostile narratives consistent with the Iranian worldview can be relaunched.

1. From propaganda to an influence ecosystem

Tehran does not need to persuade the majority of European public opinion. It has understood that it is sufficient to exploit pre-existing vulnerabilities, provide language and imagery to predisposed and receptive groups, and make a shared political response more difficult. This is an influence strategy that does not seek to generate support for Iran and its allies; rather, it has the power to alter the environment in which citizens and decision-makers observe a crisis and assign responsibility. It is an induced and structured conditioning of public opinion designed to generate internal tensions within states and ideological polarisation among social and political groups.

What is emerging within European Union countries is an influence dynamic that may be defined as "full-spectrum": a combination of emotional narratives, media and community infrastructures, digital activity and the possible use of intermediaries tasked with transforming communicative pressure into intimidation or violence¹. The message is embedded within an ecosystem in which it does not necessarily move through a vertical chain, but passes through interpreters, amplifiers and receptive audiences, each driven by its own interests².

Within this continuously evolving framework, the European category of *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference* (FIMI) shifts attention from individual items of content to behaviours, actors, infrastructures and intended effects. Consistent with this approach, the fourth annual report of the European External Action Service³ stresses the need to make manipulation activities more costly and less sustainable for those conducting them. The limits of an exclusively information-centred interpretation are nevertheless evident: in the Iranian model, propaganda may operate alongside cyber intrusion, surveillance of dissidents within the diaspora, fundraising, intimidation and the planning of hostile actions. From this perspective, the issue is therefore not only what the network says, but what it enables actors to do.

¹ BERTOLOTTI C., *Dal pulpito al tweet. Pro-Pal, pro-Hamas e anti-semitismo: la strategia d'influenza "a spettro completo" dell'Iran e la resilienza europea* [From the pulpit to the tweet. Pro-Palestinian, pro-Hamas and antisemitism: Iran's "full-spectrum" influence strategy and European resilience], in «Sicurezza, terrorismo e società» 22 (2025), pp. 25–45, DOI 10.69117/SICTERSOC.2025.2.002.

² BERTOLOTTI C., *Iran-linked influence in Europe: propaganda, proxy ecosystems and cognitive resilience. An Italian case, discussion paper*, EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation, European Commission, draft version for conference use, presented on 16 June 2026.

³ EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE, *4th EEAS Annual Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats*, Brussels 2026, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/4th-eeas-annual-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en; accessed 29 July 2026.

2. A distributed model: content, infrastructure and proxies

The operation coordinated by Europol and made public on 18 May 2026 identified 14,200 links or items of content associated with IRGC *online* activity. Their dissemination involved *social media*, *streaming* services, *blog*-hosting platforms and standalone websites, with material in Arabic, Indonesian, English, French, Persian and Spanish⁴. Italian does not appear in the public list of detected languages, suggesting the existence of a European ecosystem but not a campaign specifically targeting Italy. This is a necessary distinction, because sound strategic analysis must separate what is documented from what is merely plausible.

On 19 February 2026, the Council of the European Union placed the IRGC on the EU list of terrorist organisations⁵. This decision was not based on treating every item of content favourable to Iran as unlawful; rather, it changed the context in which material support, fundraising, the provision of resources and links with structures formally attributable to the IRGC must be assessed.

At the technical level, artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly making a significant contribution to the production and dissemination of content intended to influence Western public opinion. AI has substantially increased the capacity to produce texts, translations, profiles and images, although it does not guarantee that an influence operation will be effective. It is, however, already widely used and is likely to become progressively more functional to Iranian objectives. In 2024, the disinformation activity known as “Storm-2035”⁶ used generative models to create content concerning US elections, the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and Israel’s participation in the Olympic Games, although the observed reach remained limited⁷. While this finding does not reduce the threat, the mass use of AI lowers experimentation costs, allowing operators to test different languages, identities and topics and rapidly abandon what proves ineffective. This offers scalability and adaptability, but does not automatically ensure persuasive impact.

External contributions to Iranian influence activity also play a significant role in disseminating narratives favourable to Tehran, but *proxies* are not homogeneous. Some share Iran’s orientation; others relay content opportunistically; others still provide services without any ideological commitment. This heterogeneity, which lacks genuine centralised command and control, makes the influence ecosystem resilient because removing one node does not interrupt the process.

3. When influence becomes coercion

Narratives do not automatically produce mobilisation or violence. To become action, they require interfaces capable of providing proximity, logistics and access to targets. Moreover, ideological affinity is not evidence of external direction, because attribution requires verifiable financial, communicative or operational links.

The case of the Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg in Germany clarifies a first point. In July 2024, the German Federal Ministry of the Interior banned and closed the organisation, describing it as a “direct representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader and a centre of extremist Islamist propaganda”⁸. Germany’s

⁴ EUROPOL, *EU targets Iran’s Revolutionary Guard propaganda ecosystem in an online crackdown*, 18 May 2026, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/eu-targets-iran-revolutionary-guard-propaganda-ecosystem-in-online-crackdown>; accessed 29 July 2026.

⁵ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, *EU terrorist list: Council designates the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation*, 19 February 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/02/19/eu-terrorist-list-council-designates-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-as-a-terrorist-organisation/>; accessed 29 July 2026.

⁶ Storm-2035 is the codename assigned by Microsoft and cybersecurity companies to an Iran-linked disinformation and cyber-influence network. The group became widely known internationally in August 2024, when OpenAI and Microsoft disclosed and disrupted its activities. The network used ChatGPT accounts to generate opinion articles and polarising comments intended to manipulate public opinion.

⁷ OPENAI, *Disrupting a covert Iranian influence operation*, 16 August 2024, <https://openai.com/index/disrupting-a-covert-iranian-influence-operation/>; ID., *Disrupting malicious uses of our models: an update*, February 2025, <https://cdn.openai.com/threat-intelligence-reports/disrupting-malicious-uses-of-our-models-february-2025-update.pdf>; accessed 29 July 2026.

⁸ FEDERAL MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR AND COMMUNITY, *Federal Interior Minister Faeser bans the Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg and its affiliated organisations*, 24 July 2024, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/EN/2024/07/exekutive3-en.html>; accessed 29 July 2026.

political decision is not a model that can automatically be transferred to other European settings, but it demonstrates how a religious or cultural infrastructure may assume a political and organisational function.

The most critical factor is criminal *outsourcing*. In May 2024, the Swedish Security Service announced that it had established that the Iranian regime was using criminal networks present in the country to carry out violent acts against states, groups and individuals regarded as threats.⁹ The most prominent and dangerous of these networks is the Foxtrot group, led by Rawa Majid. In March 2025, the US Department of the Treasury sanctioned the group and attributed to it an attack against the Israeli embassy in Stockholm carried out on behalf of Iran. Less than a month after Washington's decision, the United Kingdom adopted similar restrictive measures¹⁰.

The sanctions imposed do not amount to final criminal judgments, but they nevertheless constitute converging official attributions that point to a state strategy of “outsourcing” violence – and influence – through the exploitation of local criminal networks. These networks are composed of individuals associated with the diaspora, generally second-generation, very young or underage and therefore below the threshold of criminal responsibility, who can provide criminal skills and manpower while allowing the state to remain formally removed from the offences it commissions. The perpetrator may be a criminal motivated by payment or an intermediary unaware of the broader design. By separating the political motive of the principal from the economic motive of the perpetrator, this method reduces the visibility of the threat.

4. The Italian case: exposure and the limits of attribution

For Italy, open sources support a more cautious assessment. The use of Iranian state propaganda by radical political groups reveals a mechanism of “selective translation”: local intermediaries do not passively reproduce Iranian discourse, but select those elements compatible with identity politics, traditionalism, anti-liberalism, anti-Atlanticism and the idea of a multipolar order¹¹.

Following the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hamas's attacks against Israel on 7 October 2023, the war in Gaza broadened the potentially receptive audience. Since then, Iranian international media have given visibility to strikes, port blockades, university occupations and boycott campaigns in Italy, framing them in anti-Israeli, “pro-Palestinian” and antisemitic terms. In September 2025, ACLED — Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, an independent non-profit organisation that collects, verifies, analyses and geolocates disaggregated data on conflicts, political violence, protests and disorder worldwide—recorded a more than sixfold increase in pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the country. Press TV placed these events within a narrative centred on “genocide”, Western “complicity” and disruption of the “war supply chain”¹². Press TV is an Iranian international television broadcaster operating 24 hours a day in English and primarily targeting foreign audiences. It forms part of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Iran's state broadcasting system, and its leadership operates within the IRIB World Service. Press TV's editorial line presents the Iranian political and strategic perspective on international affairs, with particular emphasis on the Middle East, the Palestinian question, Israel, the United States,

⁹ SWEDISH SECURITY SERVICE, *Iran is using criminal networks in Sweden*, 30 May 2024, <https://sakerhetspolisen.se/ovriga-sidor/other-languages/english-engelska/press-room/news/news/2024-05-30-iran-is-using-criminal-networks-in-sweden.html>; accessed 29 July 2026.

¹⁰ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY, *Treasury Sanctions Swedish Gang and Leader Serving as Proxies for the Iranian Regime*, 12 March 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0047>; FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH & DEVELOPMENT OFFICE, UK sanctions Iranian organised crime network, 14 April 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-iranian-organised-crime-network>; accessed 29 July 2026.

¹¹ See RIVETTI P., *The reception of Iran's state propaganda by the Italian far right: recasting the diffusion of authoritarian discourse and narratives*, in «Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica» 54, 1 (2024), pp. 36–53, DOI 10.1017/ipo.2023.18. The cited work is a partial study based on a limited analytical sample that does not examine the full range of actors constituting the phenomenon. Moreover, it has not been quantitatively verified or independently confirmed and should therefore be treated exclusively as a theoretical proposition requiring further validation.

¹² ACLED, *Europe and Central Asia Overview: October 2025*, 3 October 2025, <https://acleddata.com/update/europe-and-central-asia-overview-october-2025>; PRESS TV, *Italy disrupted as protests over Gaza genocide sweep through cities*, 22 September 2025, <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2025/09/22/755515/Italy-Giorgia-Meloni-UN-Palestine-Israel-Gaza->; accessed 29 July 2026. Press TV is used here as a primary source of the Iranian narrative, not as an independent source of fact.

NATO, sanctions against Tehran and movements described as part of the “resistance”. The broadcaster presents itself as an alternative to major Western media outlets and as a “voice for the voiceless”; analytically, it is a primary source of Iranian institutional communication and strategic narrative, including propaganda and disinformation.

A parallel issue is the emergence – or, more precisely, the growth – of an “antisemitic” narrative. The Foundation for Jewish Contemporary Documentation (Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea, CDEC), the Italian research, documentation and training institute devoted to the history of Jews in contemporary Italy, the Holocaust, anti-Jewish persecution, the memory of deportation and the study of antisemitism, recorded 963 antisemitic incidents in 2025 alone, 643 of them *online*¹³. This figure describes a vulnerable social environment; it cannot be attributed directly to Iranian propaganda. The strategic indicator is not temporal coincidence, but the possible convergence of content, *accounts*, infrastructures, financial flows, calls to action and targets. From this perspective, public sources portray Italy primarily as a space for receiving and relaunching propaganda, disinformation, hate speech and influence. Its Mediterranean position, military and industrial infrastructure and role within NATO may also make it a *target* of a structured operation that exploits a favourable narrative environment as a platform for more intrusive activities.

5. Askatasuna’s political violence: convergence of struggles and alignment with Iranian narratives

Askatasuna is not merely a Turin social centre. Over almost three decades, it has operated as a political and symbolic node of radical antagonism, connecting student collectives, the No TAV movement, antimilitarism and internationalist mobilisation – including, for example, the group’s aggregating role during the violence surrounding the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. Its function is the “convergence of struggles”: different disputes are incorporated into a single conflict in which the state represents repression, NATO imperialism, and violence a response made necessary by the adversary¹⁴.

The Palestinian cause has acted as a multiplier and amplifier for this framework. After the eviction on 18 December 2025 of the group’s historic premises, which had been unlawfully occupied for almost thirty years in central Turin, Askatasuna’s spokesperson identified the movements opposing the “genocide in Palestine” as the starting point for renewed mobilisation; No TAV and Palestinian flags appeared together at the subsequent march¹⁵. On 18 April 2026, a demonstration opened by the slogan “Long live popular resistance. Free Palestine – Free Lebanon – Free Iran” ended in clashes outside the former premises at 24 Corso Regina Margherita. “Resistance” thus became a meta-frame capable of connecting Gaza, Iran, Lebanon, infrastructure and confrontation with law-enforcement agencies¹⁶.

Although it is not currently possible to attribute operational direction of the action to Askatasuna, the 25 July 2026 assault on the Chiomonte high-speed rail construction site in the Susa Valley confirms the persistence of a repertoire based on organised action, damage and clashes with the police, using distinctly military techniques, tactics and procedures. These methods partly reflect the combat experience acquired in Syria alongside Kurdish fighters by some members of Askatasuna’s anarcho-insurrectionist and far-left milieu. Individuals within this environment had already faced allegations of terrorism,

¹³ FONDAZIONE CDEC, *Rapporto annuale sull’antisemitismo in Italia 2025* [Annual Report on Antisemitism in Italy 2025], Milan 2026, <https://www.cdec.it/rapporto-annuale-sullantisemitismo-in-italia-2025/>; accessed 29 July 2026.

¹⁴ BERTOLOTTI C., *Askatasuna nel segno della devastazione. Comunque contro* [Askatasuna in the name of devastation. Against, regardless], ReaCT, 27 July 2026, <https://www.osservatorioreact.it/askatasuna-nel-segno-della-devastazione-comunque-control/>.

¹⁵ ANSA, *Quasi trent’anni di Askatasuna a Torino, fortino degli autonomi* [Almost thirty years of Askatasuna in Turin, the autonomists’ stronghold], 18 December 2025; ID., *Askatasuna, scontri al corteo a Torino: 11 agenti feriti* [Askatasuna, clashes at the Turin march: 11 officers injured], 20 December 2025.

¹⁶ RAI NEWS TGR PIEMONTE, *Manifestazione pro Palestina, alcune centinaia in corteo a Torino. Tensione in serata* [Pro-Palestinian demonstration: several hundred march in Turin; tensions in the evening], 18 April 2026, <https://www.rainews.it/tgr/piemonte/articoli/2026/04/manifestazione-pro-palestina-alcune-centinaia-in-corteo-a-torino-dbe21e6e-49cf-428d-9b2c-9e599b9aa802.html>.

criminal association and devastation; prosecutors are now proceeding in relation to devastation, bodily harm and resisting a public official, also in light of the large number of injured police officers, Carabinieri and military personnel. The strongest conclusion emerging from observation of the group's structure and operations is its role as a model and network in which relationships, language and militant legitimisation may survive the loss of a physical headquarters¹⁷.

Violence thus acquires a communicative function. It provokes a state response which, once isolated from its context and presented as evidence of repression, is used to justify further violence in the name of "resistance", the struggle of "oppressed peoples" and "the Susa Valley as Gaza". These themes are consistent with the Iranian narrative. Tehran does not create this framework and does not exercise effective command and control over local developments, but it can amplify it by relaunching the same vocabulary – resistance, genocide, colonialism and imperialism – through television, *social* media and "news" websites. Press TV has devoted numerous reports to Italian mobilisation, describing strikes, blockades, university occupations and port initiatives through the now-established language of "genocide", Italian "complicity", boycott and disruption of the war supply chain. In a report dated 22 September 2025, Press TV covered the national strike promoted by the Unione Sindacale di Base, emphasising its spread across 81 Italian localities and citing the slogan "Free Palestine from the river to the sea", student occupations linked to Cambiare Rotta, mobilisation in Milan, Turin, Florence, Naples, Bari and Palermo, as well as blockades of major high-speed railway stations, Milan and Turin airports, and the ports of Genoa and Livorno, carried out in opposition to arms shipments to Israel¹⁸⁻¹⁹.

Askatasuna is not a recognised *proxy* of Tehran, but an autonomous actor whose grammar of conflict is compatible with the delegitimisation of the West promoted by the pro-Iranian and pro-Palestinian ecosystem.

6. Implications for the Defence, Security and Intelligence sectors

First and foremost, there is a need to improve attribution capabilities, because conflating dissent, propaganda and hostile activity undermines analytical credibility and feeds the narrative of repression. Assessments – confirmed, probable, possible or unverified – must be explicit and associated with the sources supporting them.

The second requirement is to integrate OSINT, *cyber-intelligence*, socio-political analysis, financial *intelligence* and strategic communication. No component is sufficient in isolation: while the first identifies content and networks, the others reconstruct infrastructure, reception, resources and effects on freedom of decision.

With a view to improving or acquiring new capabilities, bodies responsible for preventing and countering influence activity should prioritise combinations of indicators, including content adapted to Italian audiences, fictitious or artificially constructed digital profiles, the coordinated reappearance of content after removal, fundraising, reconnaissance activity and attention directed towards Jewish communities, Israeli interests, Iranian dissidents, US representations, Defence installations, ports and logistics infrastructure. Within the domestic domain, attention must also focus on the convergence between external narratives and antagonistic networks capable of translating appeals to "resistance" into confrontational mobilisation. Protecting the cognitive space should not become a merely censorial exercise intended to sterilise debate; it should instead prevent legitimate protest from becoming cover, a recruitment pool or an unwitting force multiplier for a hostile design.

¹⁷ ANSA, *Meloni nei cantieri Tav: «I magistrati facciano il massimo»* [Meloni at the TAV construction sites: "Prosecutors must do their utmost"], 28 July 2026; SKY TG24, *Scontri No Tav in Val di Susa, la procura chiede il carcere per i due tedeschi fermati* [No TAV clashes in the Susa Valley: prosecutors request pre-trial detention for two German nationals], 28 July 2026.

¹⁸ In OSINT analysis, *Press TV is treated as a primary source of official or pro-government Iranian communication and narrative, not as a neutral or independent source*. See: <https://www.presstv.it/> "PressTV".

¹⁹ PRESS TV, *Italy disrupted as protests over Gaza genocide sweep through cities*, 22 September 2025. See: <https://www.presstv.it/Detail/2025/09/22/755515/Italy-Giorgia-Meloni-UN-Palestine-Israel-Gaza->.

7. Strategic outlook

Over the next twelve to twenty-four months, low-intensity, multilingual and AI-assisted influence operations are likely to continue, with increasingly effective campaigns designed to appear locally produced. The decisive variable will be the adaptation of the same frame to different audiences: traditionalism and sovereigntism on one side; anti-imperialism, the Palestinian cause, environmentalism and opposition to NATO on the other.

A less likely but more dangerous development would involve the convergence of cyber access and influence. This could include disruption of services and functions affecting ports, logistics, transport and the defence industry. The institutional response to a technical disruption would seek to attribute responsibility, but an ineffective response would simultaneously generate distrust and increase the political cost.

The risk of coercive actions entrusted to criminal networks – including the growing role of youth and ethnic *gangs* – and subversive networks will also remain: intimidation, arson, rudimentary explosive devices or actions against symbolic targets. This form of pressure is deniable and replicable, and its probability would increase following a new *escalation* between Iran and Israel, additional sanctions or military operations perceived by Tehran as receiving European support.

For Italy, the baseline scenario is one of narrative amplification, radicalisation of language and social and political polarisation. Structured antagonistic networks could use Gaza as a meta-frame linking territorial disputes, opposition to NATO and confrontations with law-enforcement agencies. This would not amount to coordination with Tehran, but it would constitute a compatibility that the Iranian ecosystem could exploit. Within this broader framework, the high-impact scenario remains a shift from narrative availability to the activation of small cells or intermediaries against specific targets symbolically or materially linked to Israel, the United States, NATO or transport infrastructure.

Overall, the principal challenge is to interpret the process of development before it becomes action. This requires avoiding the attribution of every protest to Iran, while recognising both when an external actor exploits existing conflicts and when a local actor normalises violence through a framework of “resistance”.

Such an approach must be grounded in the awareness that democratic resilience depends on the ability to distinguish autonomous dissent, narrative capture and operational support.

Focus

Ali Khamenei's Funeral: Ritual, Power and Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Giusy Criscuolo

Introduction

In the West, a funeral closes a story. In the Middle East, very often, it opens another. Anyone familiar with this region knows that major state funerals rarely speak only of the past; they speak of the future. They reveal who inherits power, which balances the regime wishes to display, and which messages it intends to send to its allies and to its adversaries. This is the key through which Ali Khamenei's funeral should be read. What Tehran is staging is not merely the death of the Supreme Leader; it concerns the future of the Islamic Republic.

In the Middle East, power is not read only in official statements. It is manifested in symbols, rituals, images, presences and, above all, absences. It is a language that the region's regimes understand perfectly and use to convey messages simultaneously to the population, the state apparatus, neighbouring countries and the international community. Khamenei's funeral must therefore be observed as a geopolitical event before it is considered a religious one. What Tehran staged did not concern only the death of Iran's former Supreme Leader; it anticipated the new balance of the Islamic Republic that is now beginning to take shape.

The Iranian regime appears intent on transforming a moment of inevitable vulnerability into a demonstration of continuity. Images circulated by official media emphasise popular participation, the symbolism of the Islamic Revolution and the figure of the Leader as a 'martyr'. The message is clear: a man may die, but the system does not. It is a carefully constructed representation, because perceived stability matters almost as much as actual stability.

Understanding this language does not in any way mean legitimising the Islamic Republic. It means analysing its mechanisms. The same regime that now stages its own continuity continues to repress dissent, imprison opponents, restrict individual freedoms and target that part of the Iranian population which, for years, has demanded a different future, removed from a system founded on the strictest interpretation of sharia. Analysing power does not mean absolving it. It means understanding how it communicates, how it organises itself and how it seeks to survive even at moments of greatest fragility.

This is not the first time that the Islamic Republic has used a major public ritual to reaffirm the continuity of the state. It happened in 1989, with the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Then too, the funeral did not merely mark the end of a leadership; it was the moment in which the system demonstrated its determination to survive its founder. The succession that brought Ali Khamenei to the summit of the Islamic Republic showed that the institutions created by the Revolution were by then capable of ensuring political continuity even after the disappearance of the man who had shaped them.

Today, almost forty years later, Tehran appears to be reproducing the same pattern: transforming a moment of vulnerability into a demonstration that power continues to exist beyond the man who embodies it. The difference is that the system no longer needs merely to prove that it can survive its Leader. It must also make a new distribution of power credible at a time of far greater regional instability than in 1989.

At that time, the succession took place at the end of the war with Iraq, in a country still scarred by conflict but embedded in a less fragmented regional system. Today, the Islamic Republic must simultaneously confront international pressure, competition with Israel¹, its relationship with the United States, the resilience of its regional networks and domestic discontent. Continuity, therefore, cannot merely be proclaimed through ritual. It must be demonstrated by the regime's ability to keep its apparatus united, preserve the chain of command and prevent the transition from opening spaces of conflict within the elite.

This is the first element that the weeks following the funeral will have to clarify. The ceremony displayed the image that the Islamic Republic wishes to project. The decisions taken afterwards, appointments, meetings among political and military leaders, and the management of relations with

¹ NASR V., *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 34-39.

regional allies will instead reveal whether that representation corresponds to genuine continuity of power or whether new balances are emerging behind the unity on display.

1. The Geography of Power

The route chosen for the ceremonies also carries a meaning that goes beyond protocol. Tehran, Qom, Najaf, Karbala and Mashhad are not merely stages along a journey. They form a geography of power through which the Islamic Republic sought to represent the continuity of its institutional order. The political capital, the heart of the Iranian clergy, the great Iraqi shrines and the city that houses the mausoleum of Imam Reza describe a projection that extends beyond national borders and enters the regional space in which Iran has exercised its influence for decades. In his reading of the region, Vali Nasr describes the Shia world as 'a geopolitical space', a geopolitical space in which faith, identity and power relations are constantly intertwined¹.

In the Middle East, even the route of a ceremony can acquire geopolitical significance. The cities through which it passes speak not only to the faithful, but also to the state apparatus, regional allies, religious partners and governments closely observing the transition opened by the Supreme Leader's death. The message Tehran appears intent on conveying is one of continuity that concerns not only institutional succession, but also the Islamic Republic's ability to preserve its network of relationships and its regional influence.

This is a form of communication that has accompanied the regime's strategy for years. In Iran, major state ceremonies are not directed at a single audience; they speak simultaneously to the population, which is expected to perceive stability; to the political and military apparatus, which must recognise itself in the continuity of the system; to partners and actors within the regional Shia space; and finally to adversaries, to whom Tehran seeks to convey the image of a state capable of navigating even the succession of its Leader without calling the structure of power into question. Afshon Ostovar's analysis highlights how Iranian strategy has long rested on the ability to integrate the religious dimension, security and regional influence into a single political-strategic architecture². More than accompanying a leader to burial, this itinerary accompanied the representation of a political system intent on presenting itself as still cohesive.

Understanding this language does not mean granting it political legitimacy. It means observing how the regime uses symbols, places and ceremonies to communicate stability at an inevitably delicate moment. In a region where the perception of strength often matters as much as strength itself, even the choice of a funeral route can become part of the strategic communication of power. This is a grammar that leading research centres devoted to Iran have analysed for years: not because those symbols should be accepted as representations of reality, but because they help explain how the Islamic Republic constructs and projects its image, both within and beyond its borders.

There is another aspect that deserves attention. In Iran, images are never left to chance. Every shot is carefully composed. Who appears beside the coffin, who leads the prayer, who occupies the front rows and who remains outside the camera's view all become part of the message. To a Western observer, these may appear to be marginal details; to those familiar with Iranian politics, they are often the most important clues. In the Middle East, protocol itself is part of the communication of power.

Several weeks later, those images can be re-read through a different lens. The funeral offered a representation of power; subsequent developments make it possible to assess whether that representation has remained coherent with institutional communication. This is the passage from observation to analysis: not assigning arbitrary meanings to individual frames, but comparing them with what the political system continues to display over time.

The representation constructed during the funeral privileged the continuity of institutions over the centrality of the individual. Images broadcast by state television and official agencies emphasised the presence of President Masoud Pezeshkian, Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, senior judicial officials, leading religious authorities and military commanders. The visual narrative did not remain confined to national mourning; it proposed the image of a state intent on presenting itself as orderly, cohesive and fully operational at the most delicate moment in its recent history.

The analysis of these images does not automatically lead to the conclusion that such continuity was already consolidated. It does, however, make it possible to identify the representation that the Islamic

² OSTOVAR A., *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 6-20

Republic chose to project, both to its own public and to regional and international interlocutors. This distinction is fundamental: the object of analysis is not the stability of the system in itself, but the way in which the system decided to represent it.

Official communication in the weeks that followed also appears consistent with this approach. Public appearances, institutional statements and state-media coverage continued to emphasise the visibility of state bodies, religious institutions and the political-military apparatus, avoiding any concentration of the narrative on a single figure. Rather than personalising the succession, the regime privileged the representation of continuity within the institutional architecture.

This methodological approach is reflected in the specialist literature on the Islamic Republic. Mehdi Khalaji has long observed that understanding the Iranian system requires looking beyond official statements³ and analysing the balances that sustain power. Emblematic in this respect is his reflection that ‘my greatest concern for the future is not who will become the next Supreme Leader, but who will become the next commander of the Revolutionary Guards’. Attention therefore shifts from the name of the successor to the structure of power and the relationships among the institutions that guarantee its continuity. From this perspective, observing protocol, institutional symbolism, official communication and the construction of public visibility becomes an essential instrument for understanding the internal balances of the Islamic Republic.

The images that reach public opinion are not merely documentation of the event. They are an integral part of the event itself. In an Islamic Republic where institutional communication is tightly controlled, every shot, every close-up, every visible presence and every absence contributes to the construction of the political message that the regime intends to convey. The analyst, therefore, is not simply observing a funeral. The analyst is observing the funeral that the regime has chosen to show.

If the grammar of power serves to construct a representation of continuity, the analyst’s task is to determine whether elements emerge behind that representation that reveal a more complex reality. In highly centralised political systems, communicated stability does not necessarily coincide with actual stability. It is precisely during transitions that the representation of power must be examined alongside the more discreet signals emerging from within the system.

From this perspective, what is not shown also becomes significant. During the principal funeral ceremonies for the Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei never appeared publicly, while official images gave broad visibility to other members of the family, senior institutional figures, religious authorities and military commanders. No conclusion can be drawn from this element in isolation. Assigning it a definitive meaning would be methodologically incorrect. Nevertheless, in an Islamic Republic where institutional communication is subject to rigorous control, even an absence becomes an indicator to be observed and compared with subsequent developments.

The interest generated by this communication choice is not confined to Western observers. Within circles of Iran’s political clergy, the issue of succession also continues to attract attention. Outlets close to the Qom *hawza*, such as *Rasa News*, and some channels linked to the *talabeh* show that the internal debate is not limited to the institutional continuity proclaimed by official communication. Despite different languages and sensitivities, questions emerge concerning the relationship between religious authority, the state apparatus and the future balance of the Islamic Republic. These sources do not constitute proof of facts and cannot be used as such; they do, however, represent useful qualitative indicators of the issues circulating in environments closest to the system.

It is precisely the existence of this debate that calls for caution. The representation of cohesion constructed by the regime does not necessarily exhaust the complexity of internal balances. The history of the Islamic Republic shows that succession phases are often accompanied by negotiations, redefinitions of power relations and differing sensitivities among religious institutions, political structures and the military apparatus. In this context, Ali Alfoneh’s studies have documented how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has progressively extended its influence well beyond the military sphere⁴, becoming a central actor in the political and economic life of the Islamic Republic. As Alfoneh himself observes, the IRGC has become ‘a political, military, social, and economic force’, a force that now permeates the entire Iranian

³ KHALAJI M., *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, Washington D.C., The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008, pp. 5-12.

⁴ ALFONEH A., *Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards Is Transforming Iran from Theocracy into Military Dictatorship*, Washington D.C., AEI Press, 2013, pp. 13-24.

institutional system. For this reason, analysis cannot stop at the surface of images; it must verify whether the official narrative is confirmed by the evolution of the system.

It is from this perspective that the analyses of the principal research centres devoted to the Islamic Republic acquire particular value. Rather than seeking explicit declarations, scholars such as Mehdi Khalaji, Ali Alfoneh and other specialists on the Iranian system examine the distribution of public visibility, the role assumed by the various centres of power, the relationship between religious institutions and the security apparatus, and the construction of legitimacy during transitions. The aim is not to assign automatic meanings to individual events, but to read a plurality of indicators which, considered together, make it possible to understand the direction in which the system is moving. Emblematic in this respect is Mehdi Khalaji's observation that 'my greatest concern for the future is not who will become the next Supreme Leader, but who will become the next commander of the Revolutionary Guards'⁵. Attention is thus shifted away from the successor's name and towards the balances that make the continuity of the system possible.

The grammar of power therefore serves to represent continuity. The analyst's task is to verify whether, behind that representation, there are signs of tension, redistribution of power or differing sensitivities within the system. These dynamics do not always produce a visible fracture. They often emerge through apparently marginal details, discussions confined to religious or institutional environments, and communication choices that, considered in isolation, appear irrelevant. It is precisely the systematic observation of these elements that makes it possible to distinguish the representation of power from its actual functioning.

2. The Balance of Succession

Reducing succession to a dynastic question would, however, be a mistake. The choice of the future Supreme Leader will not depend on one man alone, but on the balance among the Assembly of Experts, the Shia clergy, the security apparatus and, above all, the Revolutionary Guards. It is through the interaction among these different centres of power that the Islamic Republic constructs its institutional continuity.

Over recent decades, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has assumed a role that extends far beyond the military sphere. It controls major sectors of the economy, influences regional policy, manages a significant part of Iran's external projection and represents one of the system's principal pillars. It is no coincidence that Mehdi Khalaji, one of the most authoritative scholars of the Islamic Republic, has observed that '*my greatest concern for the future is not who will become the next Supreme Leader, but who will become the next commander of the Revolutionary Guards*'. Rather than identifying the successor by name, the analyst's attention therefore shifts to the institution that has consolidated its influence within the system over recent decades.

The Assembly of Experts itself, which the Constitution entrusts with appointing the Supreme Leader, does not operate in a political vacuum. Its decision takes place in a context in which religious authority, state institutions and long-established power relations must find a point of equilibrium. Succession therefore represents far more than an institutional passage: it is the moment in which the entire architecture of power must demonstrate its ability to ensure continuity without compromising the stability of the system.

The relationship between the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is also more complex than it may appear. Khalaji describes it as a '*reciprocal*' relationship: although the Supreme Leader formally holds command of the Armed Forces, the Revolutionary Guards are simultaneously one of the principal pillars on which the Ayatollah's authority rests. It is a balance built over time, in which religious legitimacy and the power of the apparatus reinforce one another.

This is precisely why, during a ceremony such as the Supreme Leader's funeral, the most experienced observers do not focus exclusively on the coffin or popular participation. They examine the arrangement of officials, the presence of commanders, the role assigned to religious institutions, the composition of delegations and the language of official communication. Every element contributes to representing a balance that the system intends to display as firm and coherent.

From this perspective, the grammar of power serves not only to represent continuity. It also represents the balance among the different actors that make that continuity possible. Understanding the

⁵ KHALAJI M., *op. cit.*, pp. 10-12.

Islamic Republic therefore means observing how these institutions interact, rather than searching for a single decision-making centre or one dominant protagonist.

For this reason, analysts closely observe not only the crowd, but also the faces of the commanders present at the ceremony. In Iran, power rarely announces itself; it allows itself to be read.

3. The Funeral as a Geopolitical Message

The presence of foreign delegations also reveals far more than official statements. In Europe, we are accustomed to counting who attends. In the Middle East, the level of representation is weighed. There is a difference between an ambassador, a minister and a head of state. Every diplomatic choice communicates a different degree of proximity, caution or interest. In a region where diplomatic language is often entrusted to gestures rather than declarations, the level of representation itself becomes part of political communication. It is no coincidence that numerous studies on Middle Eastern diplomacy emphasise that, during phases of political transition, protocol and the level of representation acquire a significance⁶ that extends beyond the ceremonial dimension, becoming instruments of strategic communication in their own right.

The absence of the principal Western leaders was predictable. Far more significant was the presence of representatives from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iraq and several countries in the region. Among these, Saudi Arabia stands out, not because its presence signals a definitive reconciliation with Tehran, but because it reflects a far more pragmatic reality. After years of regional competition, Riyadh knows that understanding the new balance of Iranian power is a strategic necessity. Observing a phase of transition does not mean legitimising it; it means preparing to understand its possible consequences.

This is one of the great paradoxes of the contemporary Middle East. States that continue to distrust Iran profoundly nevertheless take part in a ceremony of considerable political significance. Not out of ideological adherence, but because a power vacuum often represents an even greater risk than power itself. In this region, predictability in the balance of power is frequently considered preferable to the uncertainty that accompanies transition. Geopolitics thus imposes a realism that transcends rhetoric and compels even adversaries to keep channels of communication open. Several analysts have described this logic as characteristic of contemporary Middle Eastern politics, where strategic competition often coexists with forms of dialogue intended to preserve regional stability.

The same reasoning applies to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman. The Gulf monarchies are observing this transition with extreme attention because the balance of the entire region depends on the stability of the Islamic Republic. From the Strait of Hormuz and global energy flows to proxy conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and relations with the United States, every change at the summit of Iranian power produces effects extending far beyond the country's borders. Understanding the succession to the Supreme Leader therefore means understanding part of the strategic balance of the Middle East. As numerous studies on Gulf security emphasise, Iran's institutional continuity is a factor closely watched by all regional actors, irrespective of their political relations with Tehran⁷.

There is, however, one risk that must be avoided: confusing the representation of power with consent. Images of crowds, flags, processions and the rhetoric of martyrdom show the face that the regime chooses to present to the world. This representation performs a precise political and symbolic function, but it cannot encompass the complexity of Iranian society.

Alongside the official images, another reality exists: that of a part of Iran which continues to demand freedom, rights and reform, often paying an extremely high price. These are the same men and women who, from the protests following Mahsa Amini's death to the most recent waves of repression, have openly challenged the system. Ignoring this dimension would mean replacing analysis with the regime's own communication. This too is the Islamic Republic, and understanding it means holding together the power that represents itself and a society that continues, in different forms, to confront it. As numerous scholars of Iranian society remind us, reducing Iran exclusively to the regime's institutions means overlooking the political, social and cultural plurality that continues to characterise the country⁸ even during periods of the harshest repression.

⁶ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, *Iran After Khamenei: Strategic Transition and Regional Implications*, Brussels, 2025.

⁷ INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES (IISS), *The Military Balance 2025*, London, Routledge for IISS, 2025, pp. 320-327.

⁸ ABRAHAMIAN E., *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 201-223.

For this reason, Ali Khamenei's funeral does not represent only the end of a leadership. It was the first act of a new phase in the Islamic Republic. The real contest, however, was not played out before the cameras during the processions; it continues within the centres of power, where religious institutions, the state apparatus and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will be called upon to preserve the balance of the system.

In the coming months, the evolution of relations among these actors will constitute the principal indicator of the system's stability.

Rather than searching for dramatic announcements or prematurely identifying the successor by name, it will be necessary to observe the distribution of power among institutions, the role assumed by the Revolutionary Guards, the decisions of the Assembly of Experts and the Islamic Republic's capacity to maintain its regional projection. As much of the literature on Iran emphasises, transitions do not unfold in a single moment, but through a process in which balances are progressively redefined, often through signals that only appear marginal.

Understanding who will truly make the decisions means understanding not only Iran's future, but also that of a region in which every internal change inevitably produces effects.

Türkiye versus Israel: Critical Theatres and Scenario Analysis

Dario Citati

Executive Summary

The confrontation between Türkiye and Israel, intensified by the regional instability surrounding the US-Iran conflict, is taking on an almost systemic character. This study examines three geographical theatres in which this confrontation is unfolding: the Eastern Mediterranean, where the two countries compete over maritime energy infrastructure and influence in Syria; the Horn of Africa, where support for opposing factions serves the struggle for control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and may reshape regional alliance patterns; and the South Caucasus, where Azerbaijan maintains a precarious balance but could mediate between Türkiye and Israel.

1. Blue Homeland and Greater Israel: Comparing Turkish and Israeli Strategic Depth

The war waged by the United States and Israel against Iran is undoubtedly the most significant international event of the first half of 2026. The conflict, which is still ongoing, is having a profound impact on the recalibration of alliances among the various regional actors. Among the area's most important countries, Türkiye has maintained, since the outbreak of hostilities, a posture characteristic of its diplomatic tradition: so-called "active neutrality" (Aktif Tarafsızlık in Turkish). This approach, which in the recent past found an exemplary application in the Black Sea region during the war between Russia and Ukraine¹, is characterised by a refusal to support either belligerent – hence its professed "neutrality" – while simultaneously adopting clear-cut positions and seeking to influence events – hence the adjective "active". Consistent with these principles, Ankara opposed the US Operation Epic Fury and, even more strongly, Israel's Roaring Lion campaign. The Turkish authorities likewise condemned Tehran's retaliatory actions against the Arab Gulf monarchies and called for conciliation. On at least four occasions between February and March 2026, Türkiye shot down missile systems attributed to Iran after they entered Turkish airspace, while avoiding involvement and remaining outside the armed conflict².

Turkish neutrality has also demonstrated its distinctly "active" character through a policy of persuasion intended to shape events in Ankara's favour. According to some sources, pressure exerted by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on Donald Trump proved decisive in persuading the US President to abandon the initial US-Israeli plan. Following the air campaign, the plan reportedly envisaged large-scale uprisings by Iraqi and Iranian Kurds, previously trained and equipped by the CIA and Mossad, to overthrow the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the ayatollahs³. Türkiye's active neutrality has also been accompanied by an intensification of public statements against Israel. On several occasions, the Ankara authorities have levelled fierce accusations at Tel Aviv, linking the wars in Gaza and Iran, denouncing what they describe as the "genocidal" policy of the Jewish state and going so far as to call explicitly for its destruction⁴. The perception of an almost existential mutual hostility is, moreover, widely reciprocated. Threats are exchanged frequently between Netanyahu and Erdoğan, while the IDF accuses the Turkish state of protecting Hamas officials, whom Ankara proudly refuses to regard as members of a terrorist organisation⁵. Addressing the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in February 2026, Naftali Bennett declared that "Türkiye is the new Iran", accusing Ankara of constructing a

¹ AKSOY M., UĞUR Ö., Turkey's Active Neutrality in the Black Sea Region: Practices and Analysis, «Karadeniz İncelemeleri Dergisi», 40 (2026), pp. 269-288.

² AKIN E., Turkey Says NATO Defenses Intercepted Fourth Missile From Iran, «Al Monitor», 30/03/2026, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/03/turkey-says-nato-defenses-intercepted-fourth-missile-iran>.

³ See Erdoğan Convinced US to Halt Plan to Arm Iranian Opposition: Report, «Daily Sabah», <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/erdogan-convinced-us-to-halt-plan-to-arm-iranian-opposition-report/news>. The Kurdish uprisings would reportedly have been followed, at least temporarily, by the installation of former President Ahmadinejad, about whom considerable speculation followed the investigation Inside Israel's Secret Operation to Cultivate Ahmadinejad, «New York Times», 13/07/2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/13/us/politics/israel-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-iran.html>.

⁴ Erdogan Calls for Israel Destruction, NatSec Brief, Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA), 23/04/2026, https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/erdogan-calls-for-israels-destruction/.

⁵ BOURCIER N., Le chaos au Moyen-Orient attise la rivalité entre la Turquie et Israël, «Le Monde», 07/04/2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2026/04/07/le-chaos-au-moyen-orient-attise-la-rivalite-entre-la-turquie-et-israel_6677855_3232.html.

new alliance of Sunni countries designed to encircle Israel through the use of proxies, with the Muslim Brotherhood acting as the principal transnational vector of influence⁶.

The succession of verbal clashes between the two countries falls within a framework of strategic communication that both reflects and amplifies a geopolitical antagonism that is also clearly visible at the theoretical and doctrinal level. Türkiye's principal reference is the concept of Mavi Vatan, meaning "Blue Homeland" in Turkish. Formulated by Turkish Rear Admiral Cihat Yaycı in the first half of the 2000s, it contains the core principles that have gradually shaped the "neo-Ottoman" foreign policy of Erdoğan's Türkiye⁷. Its central element is the assertion of sovereignty over a maritime area of approximately 462,000 square kilometres, including waters claimed by other states and therefore conflicting with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which Ankara has never ratified. This is accompanied by a preference for strengthening the navy within the Turkish Armed Forces. In this sense, "blue" carries a dual symbolic meaning: on the one hand, it is the traditional colour of Turkish nationalism; on the other, it evokes command of the sea as its privileged sphere of expression. The 2019 agreement between Türkiye and Libya, which established Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in waters also claimed by Greece and Cyprus, is a practical application of the principles of Mavi Vatan.

In direct conflict with Türkiye's geopolitical projection is the notion of "Greater Israel", which is assuming an increasingly important role in Tel Aviv's foreign policy. It is a concept rich in historical meanings within Zionist thought, particularly within Vladimir Jabotinsky's so-called "Revisionist Zionism", which inspired the contemporary secular Israeli right⁸. In its most recent development, however, the concept extends far beyond disputes over the borders of the Jewish state with Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt and Syria. By the expression "Greater Israel", Tel Aviv's leadership now refers to the development of a policy of international agreements aimed at creating a "hexagon of alliances" around the Middle East, comprising India, the Arab states of the Gulf and North Africa, the two Euro-Mediterranean countries of Greece and Cyprus, and the Jewish state as the system's hub⁹. On the basis of their respective doctrines, Ankara's and Tel Aviv's ambitions appear increasingly destined to collide, particularly in the geographical theatres where both countries have developed projects and invested resources.

2. The Israel-Greece-Cyprus Triangle and the Contest over Syria in the Eastern Mediterranean

The first and most evident area of friction between Türkiye and Israel is the vast maritime region of the Eastern Mediterranean, which includes the southern coast of Anatolia, the Levantine Sea and the Sea of Marmara, the Syrian, Lebanese, Israeli and Egyptian coasts, the Greek islands of the Dodecanese and the Aegean Sea, extending as far as the Libyan Sea. The EastMed project, a pipeline designed to transport natural gas to Europe from the fields of the Levantine Sea through Greek and Cypriot waters, was perhaps the first Israeli-led initiative in which a clear clash of interests with Türkiye emerged. Listed among the European Union's "Projects of Common Interest" since 2013, EastMed has never taken off, largely because of Ankara's consistent opposition. Despite a formal commitment signed by the governments of Israel, Greece and Cyprus in early 2020, the absence of diplomatic support from the United States created a stalemate that persists today, although the project has never been formally abandoned¹⁰.

Tel Aviv, Athens and Nicosia have nevertheless continued to propose joint initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean, relaunching energy cooperation not only in the gas sector but also in electricity. The Great Sea Interconnector (GSI), also known as the EuroAsia Interconnector, forms part of this effort. The project envisages linking the electricity grids of Israel, Greece and Cyprus through more than 1,200 kilometres of subsea cables – 310 kilometres between Israel and Cyprus and almost 900 kilometres between Cyprus and Greece – with an estimated capacity of 2,000 megawatts. The GSI has also received strong EU support, as it would connect Cyprus to the continental European electricity grid, from which

⁶ See AL-AZZAWI J., The Next Iran? Why Israel's Turkey Anxiety is Becoming Doctrine, «Middle East Monitor», 21/06/2026, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260621-the-next-iran-why-israels-turkey-anxiety-is-becoming-doctrine/>.

⁷ See ÇANDAR C., Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist Moment: A Eurasianist Odyssey, London, 2021.

⁸ See CITATI D., Le due sponde del Giordano. Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky e la Terra di Israele tra poesia e combattimento, «Gnosis. Rivista Italiana di Intelligence», 4/2021, pp. 65-79.

⁹ LEVY D., What Benjamin Netanyahu and The Israeli Right Really Mean When They Invoke 'Greater Israel', «The Guardian», 13/04/2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/apr/13/benjamin-netanyahu-middle-east-greater-israel>.

¹⁰ EastMed: A Pipeline Project that Ran Afoul of Geopolitics and Green Policies, «Politico», 18/01/2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eastmed-a-pipeline-project-that-ran-afoul-of-geopolitics-and-green-policies/>.

the island is currently isolated. As with the EastMed pipeline, however, the project has no firm completion timetable, owing not only to disagreements over cost sharing and technical management but above all to Turkish obstruction. Ankara's sovereignty claims over the waters through which the cables would pass remain a matter of open dispute¹¹.

It is in the military sphere, however, that Israel, Greece and Cyprus appear to have laid the foundations for a genuine alliance aimed at countering Türkiye's Mavi Vatan approach. The turning point may be identified in the tenth trilateral summit, held in Jerusalem on 22 December 2025, where Prime Ministers Netanyahu, Mitsotakis and Christodoulides signed a programmatic joint declaration¹². During the same period, a Joint Action Plan (JAP) was signed in Nicosia by the armed forces of Greece, Cyprus and Israel, together with a Military Cooperation Programme (MCP) between Greece and Israel. These agreements broadened the scope of joint military activities in exercises, personnel training and information sharing.

From a specifically geopolitical perspective, Israel views the strategic triangle with Greece and Cyprus as one of the building blocks of the "Greater Israel" hexagon of alliances – mirroring the 2020 Abraham Accords, which formalised understandings with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in the Gulf, and with Sudan and Morocco in Africa. The intention to establish a programmatic partnership with India completes the proposed hexagon. At present, the principal instrument through which the Israel-Greece-Cyprus triangle could extend to the Indian subcontinent while involving the Arab Gulf monarchies appears to be the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a multimodal transport network designed to provide a Western alternative to the Silk Road and given fresh impetus by the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz¹³. The construction of this Greater Israel hexagon of alliances is nevertheless a gradual process, whose first serious obstacle is precisely the antagonism with Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In recent years, Ankara has not remained passive in the face of its rival's initiatives. If the previously mentioned EEZ agreements with Libya represent a practical diplomatic and economic implementation of Mavi Vatan, the strengthening of the Turkish Naval Forces is their military counterpart. Alongside the progressive modernisation of numerous surface and subsurface units – including Reis-class submarines, Istif-class frigates and Ada-class corvettes – the most ambitious programme has concerned the amphibious assault ship TCG Anadolu. Commissioned in April 2023 as a helicopter carrier, it is also regarded as the world's first true drone carrier¹⁴. Another vessel, however, is intended to become the flagship of the Turkish fleet: the future "national aircraft carrier" MUGEM, currently expected to be delivered by 2032. Designed to accommodate up to 60 aircraft, with a length of 285 metres and a displacement of 60,000 tonnes, it would be the largest flagship in the Mediterranean¹⁵. In parallel with the modernisation of its fleet, the Turkish government has not neglected diplomacy and negotiations, seeking to establish itself as a regional security partner and guarantor.

Syria is undoubtedly the principal focus of these efforts. In July 2026, a delegation led by Admiral Ercüment Tatlıoğlu, Commander of the Turkish Naval Forces, visited the port of Latakia as part of bilateral cooperation to modernise the Syrian Armed Forces, an undertaking in which Ankara intends to play a leading role¹⁶. Since the fall of Assad in 2024, Türkiye has sought to influence the entire political and institutional structure of the Syrian Arab Republic, pursuing objectives opposed to those of Israel. Ankara supports a united and centralised state and opposes autonomy for the Kurds of Rojava in north-eastern Syria, whom it continues to regard as a threat capable of triggering Kurdish separatism in Türkiye. Tel Aviv, by contrast, favours a federal Syria and promotes the protection of certain minorities, such as the Druze in the south of the country, as a means of controlling the areas of the Golan Heights annexed by Israel in 1981.

¹¹ Turkey Obstructs Israel-Cyprus-Greece Power Grid Connection, «Globes», 23/12/2025, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-turkey-obstructs-israel-cyprus-greece-power-grid-connection-1001544222>.

¹² Joint Declaration – The 10th Trilateral Summit of Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, 22/12/2025, <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2025/12/22/37647>.

¹³ DE PALO F., Perché il trilaterale Israele-Cipro-Grecia si traduce con IMEC, «Formiche», 23/12/2025, <https://formiche.net/2025/12/perche-il-trilaterale-israele-cipro-grecia-si-traduce-con-imec/#content>.

¹⁴ Turkish Navy Commissions TCG ANADOLU Amphibious Assault Ship, «Defence Turkey», 06/04/2023, <https://defenceturkey.com/news/turkish-navy-commissions-tcg-anadolu-amphibious-assault-ship>.

¹⁵ Turkish Navy Confirms 2032 Delivery Date for MUGEM Aircraft Carrier, «Naval News», 07/06/2026, <https://www.navalnews.com/event-news/cne-2026/2026/06/turkish-navy-confirms-2032-delivery-date-for-mugem-aircraft-carrier/>.

¹⁶ Turkish Envoy Says Türkiye-Syria Naval Cooperation, «Anadolu Ajansı», 14/07/2026, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkish-envoy-says-turkiye-syria-naval-cooperation-expanding/3997587>.

The contest between Israel and Türkiye on Syrian territory is particularly evident in their respective attempts to establish military outposts in the country's southern and central-northern regions. As publicly stated by the Israeli Defence Minister, the IDF has built nine military bases in southern Syria, across Quneitra and Daraa provinces and the Damascus Governorate¹⁷. Türkiye, in turn, is seeking to establish a presence at one of Syria's most important military installations: the T4 air base, located near the village of Tiyaş in Homs Province, approximately 60 kilometres from Palmyra. Control of this facility would serve several strategic and operational purposes: preventing hostile armed groups from organising in the desert regions of central Syria; forestalling the creation of another autonomous Kurdish region; and creating conditions for the repatriation of Syrian refugees currently living in Türkiye¹⁸. A second Turkish objective is to establish a base within Menagh Military Airbase in Aleppo Governorate. As a warning and a challenge to the Turkish advance, Israel had already bombed T4 Airbase in April 2025. According to most analysts, central Syria is the area where the probability of kinetic contact between the two countries' deployed air and ground assets is highest¹⁹.

This risk does not exclude the possibility of a naval confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean, in the context of the territorial-water claims discussed above. According to several Israeli press reports, the IDF is considering the acquisition of maritime patrol and multirole aircraft, such as the Boeing P-8 Poseidon, amid concern over the continuing deployment of Turkish submarines. Israel's Minister of Diaspora Affairs has also stated that contact with the Turkish Naval Forces is now a possibility that could materialise at any time²⁰.

3. The Somalia-Somaliland Dispute in the Horn of Africa and its Implications for Türkiye's and Israel's Alliances

A second critical theatre, in which Turkish-Israeli competition is developing to the point of approaching military escalation, is the Horn of Africa. Here too, the available data and information appear to provide empirical confirmation of the incompatibility between the doctrines of Greater Israel and Mavi Vatan. In February 2024, Türkiye signed a ten-year military and economic cooperation agreement with Somalia, focused on counter-terrorism, anti-piracy operations, combating smuggling and illegal fishing, under which Ankara undertook to provide operational support for patrolling the Somali coastline. This bilateral agreement represents the culmination of years of Turkish diplomatic efforts that have made Mogadishu a privileged partner. Since 2017, the Somali capital has hosted Türkiye's largest military base outside its national territory: Camp TURKSOM, where the Turkish Armed Forces have trained tens of thousands of Somali soldiers over almost a decade, particularly to support the fight against the terrorist organisation Al-Shabaab. In 2025, Türkiye also signed a military cooperation agreement with Djibouti²¹.

Türkiye's presence in the Horn of Africa is first and foremost the result of the exponential growth of its global military projection: with an estimated 133 active bases, in 2026 Türkiye overtook the United Kingdom and now ranks second only to the United States in the number of military installations located outside its national borders²². At the same time, the particular significance of this theatre is once again linked to the importance Ankara assigns to the Mavi Vatan doctrine – in the Red Sea region, where Türkiye has also launched its first offshore drilling operations to locate hydrocarbons. Off the Somali coast, approximately 372 kilometres from Mogadishu, the Turkish Ministry of Energy announced the discovery of potential oil reserves. Under an agreement with the Somali government, the ultra-deep-water drillship Çağrı Bey, operated by the national company Turkish Petroleum (TPAO), began exploration at the Curad-1 site in early spring 2026. The results, including confirmation of the estimated reserves, are

¹⁷ FABIAN E., IDF Has Built 9 Military Posts Inside Syria Buffer Zone, Reveals Defense Chief, «Times of Israel», 23/02/2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-has-built-9-military-posts-inside-syria-buffer-zone-reveals-defense-chief/.

¹⁸ Is a Turkey–Israel War Actually Coming?, «Modern Diplomacy», 12/07/2026, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/07/12/is-turkey-israel-war-coming/>.

¹⁹ KARATAŞ I., Israeli-Turkish Competition Intensifies in Syria and Beyond, «Middle East Council of Global Affairs», 02/07/2026, https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/israeli-turkish-competition-intensifies-in-syria-and-beyond/.

²⁰ IDF Considering Purchase of Anti-Submarine Aircraft Amid Growing Turkish Threat, «The Jerusalem Post», 23/07/2026, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/defense-news/article-903332>.

²¹ Türkiye, Djibouti Sign Military Cooperation Agreement, «Anadolu Ajansı», 23/07/2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkiye-djibouti-sign-military-cooperation-agreement/3639841>.

²² Turkey Has the Second Most Foreign Military Bases in the World After the US, «IntelliNews», 14/04/2026, <https://www.intellinews.com/turkey-has-the-second-most-foreign-military-bases-in-the-world-after-the-us-437291/>.

expected by the end of the year, while exploration of a second well, Curad-2, is already under consideration²³.

Alongside its economic and military activities, Türkiye has also attempted to mediate the complex Somaliland issue. This breakaway region, whose capital is Hargeisa and which overlooks the Gulf of Aden, declared itself an independent state in 1991 but remains internationally unrecognised. More recently, Somaliland has sought an ally in neighbouring landlocked Ethiopia, which is interested in opportunities capable of mitigating the constraints created by its lack of access to the sea. The two governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding under which, in return for launching a process towards diplomatic recognition, Somaliland allows Ethiopian goods to reach the Red Sea through the port of Berbera and grants access to several kilometres of coastline on the Gulf of Aden. In this context, Türkiye – while continuing to oppose the independence of the breakaway region – attempted to mediate between Somalia and Somaliland, also with the objective of reducing tensions between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa following the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Somaliland. According to some observers, however, the landmark 2024 agreement between Türkiye and Somalia marked Ankara's transition from potential mediator to unilateral supporter of Somalia. As noted above, the agreement provides for an operational Turkish role in defending the Somali coastline, including the Gulf of Aden areas over which Somaliland claims sovereignty and that have been granted to Ethiopia. By supporting one of the parties, critics argue, Türkiye is no longer suited to acting as an arbiter between Somalia and Somaliland²⁴.

Within this complex dynamic in the Horn of Africa, Israel has entered the picture on the side opposed to Ankara's position. On 26 December 2025, Israel formally recognised Somaliland, a step that even Ethiopia has not yet officially taken. The Israeli government publicly stated that cooperation with the Hargeisa authorities had in fact been under way for years. From the first months of 2026, official delegations were exchanged and initial agreements were signed in agriculture, water resources, defence and security. In the short term, Tel Aviv's tactical objective appears to be the acquisition of a military outpost close to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, enabling it to counter the Houthis in Yemen and thereby supporting its war effort against Iran. According to a CNN investigation that received wide coverage in the Somali media, the Israeli Air Force had already used bases in Somaliland for some attacks against Tehran during Operation Roaring Lion²⁵. From a strategic and medium-to-long-term perspective, however, recognition of Somaliland also appears consistent with the Greater Israel project. The Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait form the natural maritime link between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, which in turn connects through the Suez Canal to the Eastern Mediterranean. The ability to maintain a presence in the waters of Aden and Bab el-Mandeb therefore supports the security of connections between India and the Persian-Arabian Gulf.

In early July 2026, an investigation by the French newspaper *Le Monde* – based on satellite imagery and anonymous institutional sources – revealed that the United Arab Emirates was also supporting Somaliland by constructing ammunition and fuel depots at Berbera Airport on behalf of the United States and Israel²⁶. The United Arab Emirates is a party to the Abraham Accords, and its involvement in expanding Somaliland's military infrastructure confirms its alignment with Israel in opposition to Türkiye. Other sources report that direct cooperation between Israel and Somaliland is already highly developed: Tel Aviv is said to have deployed dozens of military personnel and intelligence officers in the breakaway region²⁷.

The Horn of Africa therefore appears to contain all the ingredients required to become the theatre of a proxy conflict between Türkiye and Israel. The level of support provided to their respective allies also determines the risk of incidents and direct clashes between Turkish and Israeli military contingents

²³ Somalia, Turkish Petroleum Company Expect Curad-1 Oil Well Results by End of 2026, «Hiiran Online», 18/07/2026, https://www.hiiran.com/news4/2026/Jul/205726/somalia_turkish_petroleum_company_expect_curad1_oil_well_results_by_end_of_2026.aspx.

²⁴ OSMAN M., Turkey's Shift: From Neutral Mediator to Strategic Adversary, «Times of Israel», 19/02/2026, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/turkeys-shift-from-neutral-mediator-to-strategic-adversary/>.

²⁵ BASHIR M., Israel Deployed Forces to Somaliland During Iran War: Reports, «Somalia Today», 06/06/2026, <https://somaliatoday.com/security/israel-deployed-forces-to-somaliland-during-iran-war-reports-2026-06-06/>.

²⁶ HOCHET-BODIN N., UAE Discreetly Builds Military Base in Somaliland for US and Israel, «Le Monde», 06/07/2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2026/07/06/uae-discreetly-builds-military-base-in-somaliland-for-us-and-israel_6755184_124.html.

²⁷ Israel Deployed Troops to Somaliland After Recognition, Source Says, «Middle East Eye», 22/06/2026, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-deployed-troops-somaliland-after-recognition-official>.

deployed there. For the moment, however, Israel's recognition of Somaliland has generated broader effects. On 21 June 2026, at a summit in Cairo, the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Türkiye and Pakistan met for the fourth time in a matter of months within a new international format known as the "R4" (Regional Four), where they jointly condemned the recognition of Somaliland²⁸. Other sources refer to the new format by the acronym "STEP", derived from the initials of its four members – Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Egypt and Pakistan – all Sunni-majority states affected, albeit in different ways, by the instability generated by the war against Iran²⁹. Although many issues divide these four countries – from their relations with Israel to their differing approaches towards religious organisations and minorities – the mere creation of the new format is a significant development in international politics.

The Somalia-Somaliland dispute in the Horn of Africa, apparently a controversy of merely local importance, thus appears capable of acting as a trigger for potential changes in alliance patterns. On one side stands Israel, with Greece and Cyprus as allies in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in the Gulf. On the other stands Türkiye, which pursues maritime strategic projection through the Mavi Vatan doctrine while also attempting to repair relations with other Sunni Muslim countries and overcome longstanding rivalries and mutual suspicions. In this respect, Saudi Arabia may prove to be the decisive swing actor. Although de facto aligned with Israel against Iran, the Saudis support Somalia alongside Türkiye in the Horn of Africa. Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, in turn, remain deeply divided over the Muslim Brotherhood – supported by Ankara and banned by Riyadh – while holding more compatible positions on the Somalia-Somaliland dispute.

Saudi Arabia's choices may therefore constitute an important indicator for monitoring the evolution of Türkiye-Israel relations. Riyadh could, for example, sign the Abraham Accords, move closer to Israel and retain an ambiguous role within the R4 format, as suggested by the nuclear agreement unexpectedly proposed by the United States³⁰. Alternatively, the Saudis could strengthen relations with Türkiye, Egypt and Pakistan, thereby confirming Israeli fears about the emergence of a new axis of Sunni states potentially becoming increasingly hostile towards the Jewish state.

4. Between the Caspian Sea and Central Asia: The Azerbaijan Variable in the South Caucasus

Alongside the Eastern Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, there is a third theatre in which Türkiye and Israel may instead find room for mediation: the South Caucasus. This region includes Azerbaijan, a country that has acquired considerable importance in recent years precisely because of its ability to maintain excellent political, diplomatic and military relations with both Israel and Türkiye. Geopolitics, understood in its scientific sense – namely, the technical and analytical study of how geography conditions states' political choices – helps explain the foundations of these close relationships.

Azerbaijan is first and foremost a Turkic-speaking country. Its majority population, the Azerbaijani ethnic group, belongs to the "Turkic" linguistic family – traditionally classified as a subgroup of the Altaic family – and is therefore closely linked to Anatolian Türkiye, while retaining its own national distinctiveness. Geographically, the country also lies midway between Anatolia and Central Asia, where four other Turkic-speaking republics are located – Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – separated from, yet connected to, Azerbaijan by the Caspian Sea. Because of this shared linguistic and cultural code and its position in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is naturally suited to acting as a bridge between Türkiye and the Turkic-speaking republics of Central Asia. Alongside the predominantly maritime dimension of the Mavi Vatan doctrine, however, a second strand of Turkish foreign policy is more closely connected to the continental domain: Pan-Turkism. This concept affirms the unity of the Turkic peoples and, on that basis, seeks increasingly structured forms of cooperation among them. Not without contradictions, Erdoğan's Türkiye has in recent years attempted to reconcile the recovery of Islam and the Ottoman tradition – of which Mavi Vatan is the geopolitical expression – with this Pan-Turkic orientation, which is considerably more secular and more inclined towards cooperation than

²⁸ CHIACCHIO G., L'R4, il "QUAD" islamico contrapposto a Israele e Iran, Centro Studi Politici e Strategici Machiavelli, 23/07/2026, <https://www.centromachiavelli.com/2026/07/23/r4-quad-islamico-anti-israele-iran/>.

²⁹ ALKHATHLAN S., STEP (Saudi Arabia–Turkey–Egypt–Pakistan): A New Framework for Regional Stability in the Middle East, Gulf Research Center, 02/07/2026, <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/404>.

³⁰ Trump Says 'It's Time' for Saudi Arabia to Normalise Ties With Israel, «Al Jazeera», 24/07/2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/7/24/trump-says-its-time-for-saudi-arabia-to-normalise-ties-with-israel>.

confrontation, and which consistently emphasises the role that Turkic-speaking countries can play as a continental bridge between Europe and Asia³¹.

The Pan-Turkic direction of Ankara's foreign policy is institutionally codified in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), a platform that brings together Türkiye, Azerbaijan and the four Turkic-speaking republics of Central Asia³². In recent years, the organisation has strengthened considerably, partly as a result of Russia's declining prestige and attractiveness. The former Soviet republics of Central Asia – including Tajikistan, which is not an OTS member because it is Persian-speaking rather than Turkic-speaking – are increasingly distrustful of Moscow because of the war against Ukraine. In October 2025, the twelfth OTS summit was held in Gabala, Azerbaijan, and concluded with a programmatic declaration that significantly raised the organisation's visibility. A growing number of observers and analysts have consequently begun to highlight its potential, including in defence and military cooperation³³.

One of the Organization's most important projects is the TITR (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), also known as the "Middle Corridor": a multimodal transport network linking China and Central Asia to Europe through the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye. Azerbaijan is one of the principal actors involved and is also engaged in developing the Zangezur Corridor, one of the TITR's most important segments. At a subsequent summit of the Organization, held in June 2026 and dedicated to artificial intelligence, the Turkic states reaffirmed their interest in developing the Middle Corridor. On that occasion, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev stated that the alliance of Turkic nations had now become a new geopolitical power centre in the international arena³⁴.

Azerbaijan's privileged relationship with Türkiye, both bilaterally and within the OTS framework, has not prevented Baku from developing strong ties with Israel. Relations between Baku and Tel Aviv have grown against the background of Azerbaijan's difficult relationship with Iran, with which it shares a border of almost 700 kilometres and, more importantly, the presence of a sizeable Azerbaijani population within the Islamic Republic. Concentrated in the Iranian provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, Qazvin and Hamadan, Iranian Azerbaijanis are estimated to number between 15 and 20 million – more than the entire population of Azerbaijan itself, which stands at 10.5 million – making them Iran's second-largest ethnic community after the indigenous Persian majority. Although largely integrated into Iranian society, Tehran regards Iranian Azerbaijanis as a potential source of instability and separatism. In Baku, meanwhile, irredentist sentiments persist: the theory of "Greater Azerbaijan" (Bütöv Azərbaycan in Azerbaijani), which advocates the unification of all Azerbaijanis within a single state, remains alive in some sectors of society and the institutions, although it is not part of the country's official doctrine³⁵.

Against this background, military cooperation with Israel developed almost inevitably, first and foremost through Azerbaijan's procurement of Israeli weapons. These include Gabriel-5 anti-ship missiles, Barak-5 surface-to-air missiles and the Hermes-900, Harop and Orbiter K UAV platforms. The latter were used extensively during the 2020 "44-Day War", in which Baku delivered decisive blows against the defence systems of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, paving the way for the annexation achieved through the September 2023 blitzkrieg³⁶. In parallel with procurement, Azerbaijan has allowed the IDF to establish a discreet but widespread network of Israeli outposts on its territory. Several studies have reported that Baku, under conditions of strict secrecy, granted Tel Aviv access to Azerbaijani military

³¹ ROZYEEVA G., Pan-Turkic Renaissance or Geopolitical Pragmatism?, The Hague Research Institute for Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus & Central Asia, December 2025, <https://hagueresearch.org/pan-turkic-renaissance-or-geopolitical-pragmatism/>.

³² See KARAVELI H., Türkiye and the Organization of Turkic States: A Quest for Pan-Turkism?, in S.E. CORNELL (ed.), Türkiye's Return to Central Asia and the Caucasus, Washington, 2024, pp. 40-48.

³³ AVDALIANI E., Turkey Reshapes the Organization of Turkic States, «Manara Magazine», 16/06/2026, <https://manaramagazine.org/2026/06/turkey-reshapes-org-of-turkic-states/>.

³⁴ KHASSENKANOVA G., BRKIC B., Turkic Leaders Drive Their Alliance Towards an "Influential Geopolitical Power Centre", «Euronews», 17/05/2026, <https://www.euronews.com/2026/05/17/turkic-leaders-drive-their-alliance-towards-an-influential-geopolitical-power-centre>.

³⁵ For a detailed analysis of Azerbaijani irredentism, see ASTOURIAN S.H., Origins, Main Themes and Underlying Psychological Disposition of Azerbaijani Nationalism, in DORFMANN-LAZAREV I., KHATCHADOURIAN H. (eds.), Monuments and Identities in the Caucasus: Karabagh, Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan in Contemporary Geopolitical Conflict, Leiden, 2023, pp. 206-236.

³⁶ See CITATI D., Il caso del Nagorno Karabakh. Cosa insegna la vittoria dell'Azerbaijan sugli Armeni?, «Rivista Militare», 4/2024, pp. 34-37.

facilities, particularly the Sitalchay base, located 50 kilometres from the capital, where Israel is said to have installed counter-UAV radars and several missile systems³⁷.

According to some accounts, Israeli bases on Azerbaijani territory were already used for operational purposes during the Roaring Lion campaign. For example, the killing of Rahman Moghaddam, head of the intelligence division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), on 4 March 2026 was reportedly planned from Azerbaijan. Two days later, Azerbaijani security services, working with Mossad and Shin Bet, foiled an IRGC attempt to sabotage critical infrastructure in Azerbaijan³⁸. Despite its cooperation with Israel, Azerbaijan's involvement against Iran remained limited: notwithstanding the incursion of several drones attributed to Iran, Baku kept a low profile and did not participate in the hostilities.

What role, then, might Azerbaijan play in the confrontation between Türkiye and Israel? An interpretation of the available data and information reveals a situation different from the theatres examined above. Unlike the Mavi Vatan-Greater Israel dualism in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, there appears to be no direct antagonism between Ankara's Pan-Turkic foreign-policy direction involving Azerbaijan and bilateral Israel-Azerbaijan cooperation directed against Iran. On the contrary, the principal projects are largely complementary. The IMEC corridor, for example – central to the India-Gulf connection underpinning the Greater Israel hexagon of alliances – appears compatible with the TITR Middle Corridor: both are logistical routes that bypass Russia and Iran. This is reinforced by Azerbaijan's generally carefully calibrated foreign policy, which has enabled Baku to carry out even highly controversial actions with timing and methods designed not to compromise its international image, as illustrated by the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh.

An ex post indication of the balance characterising Azerbaijani foreign policy is provided by Baku's approach during the US-Israel-Iran conflict: although it supported Israel, Azerbaijan avoided becoming directly involved. This position gives Baku an opportunity to play a diplomatic role in preventing potential escalation, or to mediate should relations between Türkiye and Israel deteriorate into an open crisis. At the same time, however, Azerbaijan could come under pressure from both contenders, not only politically but also in the field of intelligence collection. Aware of Baku's strong relations with both sides, Ankara and Tel Aviv could undertake aggressive intelligence activities directed at Azerbaijan in order to obtain information on the adversary's plans.

Nor is the evolution of Turkish-Israeli relations predetermined. While some analysts regard the Ankara-Tel Aviv rivalry as having reached a structural level, describing Türkiye and Israel as "indispensable enemies"³⁹, others take a more cautious view. In a 2020 study on the development of the Israel-Greece-Cyprus alliance, published by one of Israel's most prominent think tanks, the conclusions recommended avoiding confrontation with Ankara and distinguishing the enduring character of the Turkish state – which remains secular and allied with the West – from Erdoğan's contingent political course⁴⁰. In assessing the future of Türkiye-Israel relations, monitoring Azerbaijan's position is therefore no less important a variable than the political and military tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa.

³⁷ ISRAYELIAN A., The Israeli Factor in Iran-Azerbaijan Relations (2005-2013), «Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental Studies», Vol. I (XXXIV), Issue 1, September 2021, p. 149.

³⁸ SHALEV T., LISTER T., Exclusive: Israel Sent Troops to Azerbaijan During Iran War as Part of Secret Network Across Region, Sources Say, «CNN World», 05/06/2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/06/05/middleeast/azerbaijan-israel-iran-war-intl>.

³⁹ GRIGORIADIS I.N., NISIDOU E., Indispensable Enemies: The Shifting Dynamics of Israeli-Turkish Relations, Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, 23/10/2025, <https://www.eliampep.gr/en/indispensable-enemies-the-shifting-dynamics-of-israeli-turkish-relations/>.

⁴⁰ MIZRAHI O., Israel's Policy in its Triangular Relations with Greece and Cyprus, Institute for National Security Studies, July 2020, https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/israels-policy-in-its-triangular-relations-with-greece-and-cyprus/.



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