

MORE IN THE MED

How NATO Can Refocus its Efforts in the South and Italy Can Lead the Charge

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As NATO commemorates its seventieth anniversary in 2019, the Alliance has made considerable progress in restoring deterrence in the east against an aggressive, revanchist Russia. But, NATO continues to fall short in its “southern strategy.” This is not only a missed opportunity to mitigate the real, and growing, threats and challenges along NATO’s Mediterranean and Black Sea frontiers; the lack of a more effective southern strategy also puts at risk the solidarity and cohesion that are essential to transatlantic security in an era of intensifying great-power competition.

At the heart of NATO’s south is the Mediterranean, a strategic conduit between the Middle East, Africa, and Europe that is intrinsically linked to transatlantic security. An emerging flashpoint where challenges such as instability, terrorism, and uncontrolled migration coalesce alongside renewed competition from an increasingly assertive Russia and China, the region should be a priority—not just for Southern European nations, but for the whole Alliance.

For years, NATO’s approach to the region has centered on the use of partnership tools to project stability toward its neighbors in order to mitigate fragility and address some of the root causes of terrorism and migration. While the buildup of NATO’s activities in this area—including a new framework for the south, an expanded maritime presence, and a “Hub for the South”—has been well received by NATO partners in the Middle East and North Africa, the impact has been limited. Insufficient financial contributions from NATO allies, local sensitivities, and competing national interests inside NATO, among other issues, have complicated the Alliance’s approach to the region. The lack of regional leadership from southern allies to drive forward a collective agenda for the south has further inhibited NATO’s ability to make an impact.

Going forward, NATO needs a more strategic vision of what it wants to accomplish in the Mediterranean and its broader southern neighborhood. NATO’s mission in the south still requires projecting stability, but also increasingly calls for a stronger focus on defense, deterrence, and containment. NATO’s strategy needs to adapt to reflect these realities.

The following recommendations, laid out in greater detail later in the report, are intended to revitalize NATO’s southern strategy in light of the above considerations.

These ideas seek to bring together disparate national and multinational efforts into a more detailed plan of action, while building political will, encouraging additional resource contributions, and promoting regional leadership. Importantly, the paper argues that Italy—NATO’s strategic anchor at the heart of security challenges in the Mediterranean—should play a central role in boosting NATO’s efforts as the leading framework nation for the south.

“Going forward, NATO needs a more strategic vision of what it wants to accomplish in the Mediterranean and its broader southern neighborhood. NATO’s mission in the south still requires projecting stability, but also increasingly calls for a stronger focus on defense, deterrence, and containment. NATO’s strategy needs to adapt to reflect these realities.”

The recommendations set forth three major courses of action: revamping the projecting-stability agenda to be more effective; strengthening the defense-and-deterrence pillar of NATO’s southern strategy; and promoting regional leadership for the south within NATO:

Projecting Stability, Better

- Make capacity-building more effective through substantially more common funding, an increased focus on military-specific training missions, and a new facility to develop mobile training teams or a training brigade.
- Enhance NATO-EU cooperation in the south by moving toward a more functional division of labor in capacity-building.

- Improve the perception of NATO in the south by reinvigorating the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) partnership frameworks and, in the long term, establishing a NATO-Africa Cooperation Initiative.
- Empower the Southern Hub to fulfill its potential with greater resources, more qualified personnel, and increased connectivity with NATO headquarters and across the Alliance.

Making the South the New East

- Strengthen the defense-and-deterrence pillar of NATO's southern strategy by establishing an enhanced Southern Presence.
- Boost preparedness in the south as an extension of the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI), which would involve undertaking more large-scale exercises and more specific contingency planning focused on southern scenarios.

- Invest in the capabilities needed to compete with great powers and deepen defense-industrial cooperation toward this end.

Leading from the South

- Embrace the need for regional leadership, with Italy at the forefront.
- Make Italy the lead “framework nation” for the south, while reinvigorating Italy's own national approach to southern issues, through the development of a national security strategy and establishment of a national security council.
- Recommit to the region through the US-Italy strategic dialogue. Use that dialogue to leverage US and Italian investment and engagement to catalyze a broader European effort in the south, and convene periodic meet-ups of NATO defense ministers from the south, along with the United States, to boost regional defense cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

NATO has made enormous strides since 2014 in restoring deterrence along its eastern flank. But the Alliance’s “southern strategy”—its effort to strengthen defense and stability along its Mediterranean and Black Sea frontiers—continues to fall short.

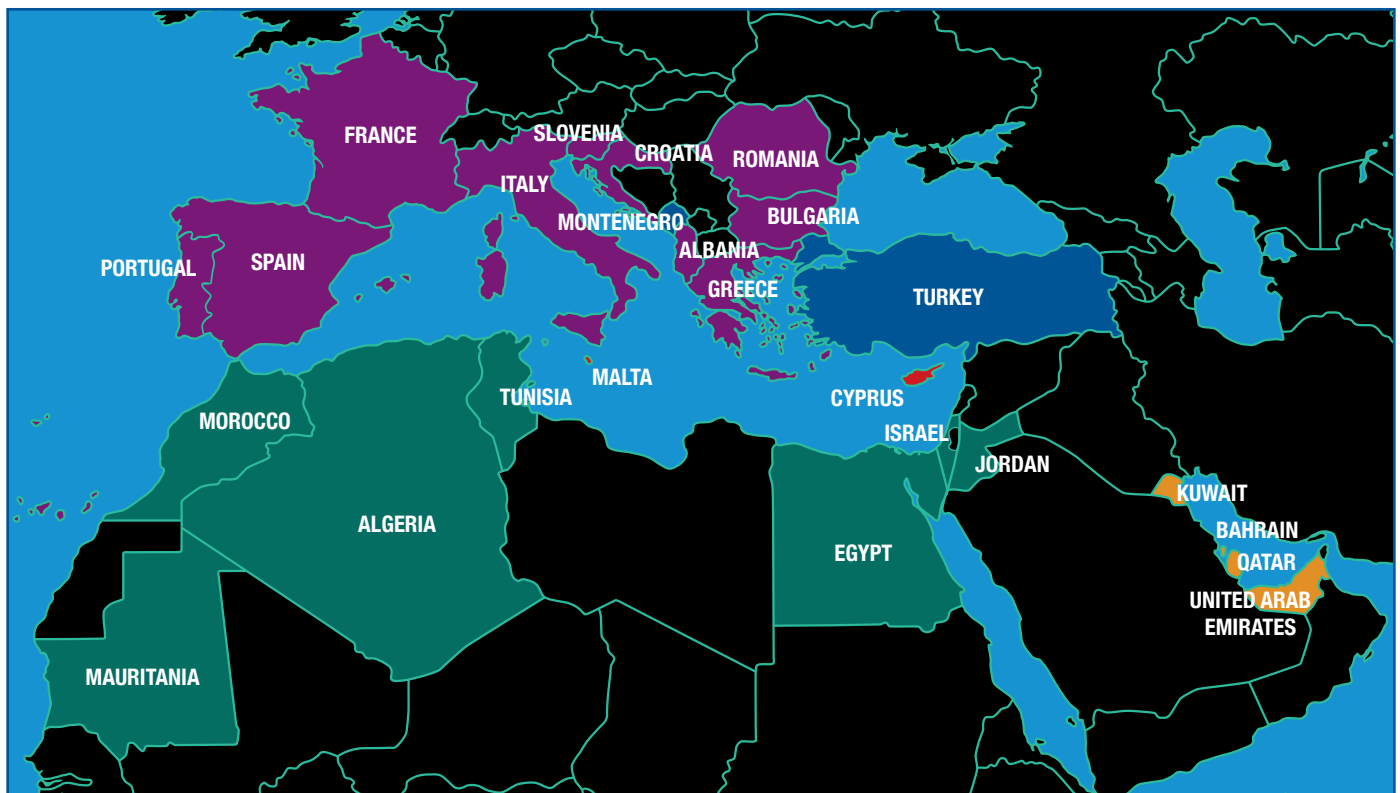
This represents a missed opportunity to mitigate the diverse and growing security challenges along NATO’s southern periphery—instability, terrorism, and uncontrolled migration, together with a more aggressive Russia. Moreover, neglecting the threats closest to home for southern allies also threatens the solidarity and cohesion among allies that are essential to transatlantic security in an era of intensifying great-power competition.

The time has come for allies to generate the political will needed for NATO’s southern strategy to fulfill its

potential, and to provide the resources to match. The United States should support this effort, but the southern allies need to take the lead. If the allies in the region continue to disagree about the contours of a more robust NATO role in the south, they will doom the alliance to irrelevance in the eyes of their own publics. And, they will risk creating a north-south divide within NATO that Russia and China will be only too happy to exploit.

This paper offers ideas for reinvigorating NATO’s southern strategy. Its major recommendations focus on three core areas: revamping the projecting-stability agenda; enhancing NATO’s defense, deterrence, and containment efforts in the south; and bolstering regional leadership. It also argues that Italy—the ally with the largest Mediterranean navy, which is located at the geographic epicenter of the new security challenges in the region—should play a central role in boosting NATO’s efforts as the leading framework nation for the south.

Greater Mediterranean Region — NATO/EU Countries and NATO Partners



- Mediterranean NATO Members
- Mediterranean EU Countries
- Mediterranean NATO Members and EU Countries
- Mediterranean Dialogue Countries
- Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Countries

WHY THE SOUTH MATTERS

The Mediterranean world is at the core of NATO's south. As a strategic conduit between Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, the Mediterranean has long been a centerpiece of the transatlantic community for geopolitical, economic, and security reasons. NATO and the European Union (EU) both have serious interests at stake in the region. Nine NATO allies—six of them also EU members—have Mediterranean coastlines (France, Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro). Two additional EU members (Malta and Cyprus) are Mediterranean islands. Given the interconnected nature of the region, the challenges of the Mediterranean cannot be divorced from those emanating from the Middle East, much of Africa, or the Black Sea, all of which comprise NATO's broader southern neighborhood and impact the security of the wider Euro-Atlantic area.

For the past three decades, the transatlantic agenda in NATO's south has focused on mitigating the “arc of crisis” stretching through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and the threats percolating across the Mediterranean and into Europe. Failing states, weak governments and militaries, economic stagnation, poverty, and violent conflicts in the region have given rise to terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah. These factors have also produced a range of illicit flows, including the smuggling of weapons, goods, people, and extremist ideas into Europe and beyond. Terrorist attacks on European soil and the refugee crisis, which at its peak saw more than three thousand migrants die in the Mediterranean trying to reach European shores,

have forced European leaders to act, despite political and economic crises inside their own countries.¹

These threats are not likely to dissipate any time soon. Today, many key states in the region—such as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and others—still face uncertain political outlooks, and a minor disruption to the delicate balances in these countries could plunge the entire region into chaos. The asymmetric demography of the region only heightens concerns for the future, as booming youth populations of the MENA region increasingly turn to Europe for new opportunities. As a result, addressing this instability and fragility must remain a top priority for NATO.

At the same time, the south is no longer just about projecting stability. In fact, many of the conventional defense and deterrence challenges associated with NATO's east are now reemerging in the south. Russia is back in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, with an enhanced military footprint and challenging anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities that could limit NATO's freedom of movement in the region.² Moscow's growing military infrastructure in Syria, continued hybrid actions in regional states, and provocative behavior in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov have further ratcheted up tensions.³ The China factor is also on the rise in the south, with Chinese flags flying over a base in Djibouti and in military drills off of Africa and in the Mediterranean, occasionally alongside Russian ones.⁴ Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing is also investing in and operating critical infrastructure on both sides of the Mediterranean, including telecommunications networks and port facilities, posing a range

1 Anealla Safdar, “IOM: Refugees Dying at Quicker Rate in Mediterranean,” Al Jazeera, September 17, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/09/iom-refugees-dying-quicker-rate-mediterranean-170917035605080.html>.

2 By the end of 2018, Ukrainian media reported that Russia had deployed roughly thirty-two thousand troops, one hundred and twenty-two aircraft, seventy-one ships, sixteen long-range surface-to-air missile systems, and up to seven submarines to the Crimean Peninsula. See “Russia Deploys Murmansk-BN EW Complex in Occupied Crimea,” Unian, March 12, 2017, <https://www.unian.info/society/1819362-russia-deploys-murmansk-bn-ew-complex-in-occupied-crimea-media.html>; Ruslan Minich, *Russia Shows its Military Might in the Black Sea and Beyond*, Atlantic Council, November 6, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-shows-its-military-might-in-the-black-sea-and-beyond>.

3 Andrew Roth, “Kerch Strait Confrontation: What Happened and Why Does It Matter?” *Guardian*, November 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/27/kerch-strait-confrontation-what-happened-ukrainian-russia-crimea>; Alexander Smith and Yuliya Talmazan, “Ukraine-Russia Sea Clash: Sea of Azov Incident Raises Tensions—and Questions,” NBC News, November 27, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-s-sea-azov-clash-ukraine-raises-tensions-questions-n940536>.

4 Tyler Headley, “China's Djibouti Base: A One Year Update,” *Diplomat*, December 4, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/chinas-djibouti-base-a-one-year-update/>; David Scott, “Russia-China Naval Cooperation in an Era of Great Power Competition,” Center for International Maritime Security, June 12, 2018, <http://cimsec.org/russia-china-naval-cooperation-in-an-era-of-great-power-competition/36773>.

of security risks for the United States and its allies in the region.⁵

Another growing threat to regional security is Iran—increasingly the subject of US preoccupation—which has struck opportunistic deals with Syria and other regional players, including non-state actors, to expand its infrastructure, presence, and sphere of influence in the south.⁶ Meanwhile, Turkey—once the Alliance’s strategic anchor in the south—could become a constraint on allied decision-making on regional issues, in light of its domestic political turbulence, disregard for NATO’s shared values, and rapprochement with Moscow.⁷ These new patterns of pragmatic cooperation between Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and others have foreshadowed a potentially dangerous coalition for the transatlantic community—and yet, allies still do not see eye to eye on this threat. At the same time, tension in the area is only increasing, with new gas discoveries in the Mediterranean fueling turbulence between Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, and other actors in the region. As the south becomes more congested and contested, and great-power competition intensifies, NATO’s defense, deterrence, and containment mission in the south is increasingly urgent and more complex.

NATO’s Current Efforts and Why They’re Not Enough

For NATO, 2014 was a watershed year. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—its illegal annexation of Crimea and undeclared war in eastern Ukraine—brought collective defense back to the top of the Alliance’s agenda. Since 2014, NATO has overhauled its strategy and force posture to deter Russia from doing to NATO what it had done to Ukraine; that is, using “little green men,” backed by overwhelming conventional power, to change borders by force and overturn the post-Cold War security order.

Russian aggression was not the only game changer in 2014. This was also the year when ISIS emerged. Its

attempt to create a state-like caliphate took the war on terrorism to a qualitatively new level. It exacerbated the arc of crisis and instability extending across much of the MENA region, killing hundreds of thousands of people, causing an upsurge in refugees fleeing the chaos, and inspiring a spike in terrorist attacks within NATO’s own borders. The situation intensified with Russia’s sudden entry into Syria in 2015 to save the Bashar al-Assad regime and Moscow’s deliberate fueling of refugee flows as part of Vladimir Putin’s campaign to destabilize the West.

To meet the renewed threat from the east, NATO went “back to basics.” At three seminal summit meetings in Wales (2014), Warsaw (2016), and Brussels (2018), NATO has taken steps to rebuild and strengthen its deterrence posture, including the deployment of multinational battalions in the Baltic states and Poland, an increased capacity to bring reinforcements rapidly to the eastern flank, and a more robust NATO command structure capable of conducting high-intensity, multi-domain warfare with little warning.⁸ All of this was underpinned by progress by the majority of the allies in increasing their defense spending, in accordance with the Wales Summit pledge to reach 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2024.⁹

NATO’s response to the increasing dangers from the south has been less focused. The main line of effort has been finding new ways to project stability to the Middle East and North Africa, using defense capacity-building and other partnership programs to shore up weak states and counter terrorism. The rationale was that by helping southern neighbors build reliable defense institutions, secure their borders, and fight terrorism in their own regions, NATO could help reduce the chances that they would become “failed states and safe havens for ISIS. It would be a tangible way for NATO to address the root causes of the migration crisis and home-grown terrorism” and avoid the “need for more costly military interventions down the road.”¹⁰

5 Trudy Rubin, “Are China and Russia Going to Dominate the Mediterranean Sea?” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.philly.com/opinion/nato-china-russia-italy-israel-ports-mediterranean-european-union-20190405.html>.

6 Sami Moubayed, “Syria Leases Mediterranean Port to Iran,” *Asia Times*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/04/article/syria-leases-mediterranean-port-to-iran-raising-alarms/>.

7 “Turkey, Russia Ramp Up Military Cooperation with Joint drills in Black Sea,” *Ahval*, March 9, 2019, <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/turkey-russia-ramp-military-cooperation-joint-drills-black-sea>.

8 “Brussels Summit Declaration,” NATO, press release, July 11, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm; “Warsaw Summit Communiqué,” NATO, press release, July 9, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm; “Wales Summit Declaration,” NATO, press release, September 5, 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.

9 “The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2018,” NATO, March 14, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_164187.htm.

10 Alexander Vershbow, “One NATO: The Political Adaptation of the Alliance,” *GLOBSEC*, July 8–9, 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/one-nato-political-adaptation-alliance/#I5Jy2aBBEjy7Bi9H.99>.

Over the last two decades, this cooperation has expanded through two key frameworks: the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).¹¹ Using its Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program (IPCP) with each partner, NATO has worked closely with MD and ICI countries to develop individualized approaches for capacity-building and defense-modernization activities, tailored to the context and specific needs of partners to maximize their utility. These IPCPs have enabled partners to adopt NATO standards and increase interoperability with the Alliance, as demonstrated by their contributions to NATO-led operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya, and Afghanistan.

In 2014, building on these efforts, NATO launched a defense capacity-building (DCB) initiative to help several Mediterranean partners, including Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, to reform their militaries and improve their capacities to fight terrorism. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO formally adopted projecting stability as a part of its overall defense and deterrence strategy. It announced plans for additional capacity-building programs with Iraq and other Middle Eastern partners, including the Building Integrity (BI) Policy and Action Plan, through which NATO works with partner countries to promote good governance, integrity, transparency, and accountability in relation to security and defense-sector reform.¹² NATO also agreed to establish a “Hub for the South” at Joint Force Command (JFC) in Naples, which became operational in 2018, with the mandate to increase understanding of regional threats and challenges, and to improve dialogue and cooperation with partners in the MENA region.¹³ Later in 2016, NATO launched Operation Sea Guardian to reinforce “maritime situational awareness, counter-terrorism efforts ... and capacity-building in the Mediterranean Sea.”¹⁴ It also deployed its Standing Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) to the Aegean Sea to support international efforts to curb human trafficking and illegal migration.¹⁵ In 2017, NATO joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (in which most NATO member nations were already involved on an individual basis) and provided reconnaissance and other support to coalition forces.¹⁶ A full-fledged NATO training and capacity-building mission in Iraq, led by Canada, was launched at the 2018 summit.¹⁷

Overall, these activities have been well received by NATO partners in the MENA region, but their impact has been limited. In fact, the majority of NATO’s programs and efforts remain very small in scale and receive little or no common funding. Most defense capacity-building programs depend on voluntary national contributions, civilian trainers, and cash donations to trust funds, which are few and far between. In a similar vein, NATO’s operations in the southern maritime domain have remained limited, with many nations unable to afford the costs of operating ships and personnel at sea required to fulfill NATO activities. Members often have competing national or EU commitments, leaving NATO without sufficient assets to maintain a consistent presence in the south. This has made it increasingly difficult for the Alliance to project stability, let alone deter revisionist powers such as Russia and China.

NATO’s effectiveness has also been constrained by local sensitivities and negative attitudes toward the Alliance in the south. In part, this is a result of its problematic interventions in Libya and elsewhere, but it also reflects some regional nations’ skepticism about closer defense ties with former colonial European powers and the United States, the leader of the Alliance. NATO has sought to address this and encourage more routine engagement with its southern neighbors through the MD, ICI, and various related programs—with some success. As one example, NATO’s ICI Regional Center in Kuwait has been able to convene all the ICI and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries for security and military-training activities, despite broader regional tensions. But, ultimately, these partnership mechanisms lack the high-level political engagement and ambition required to deliver concrete results. Even when these groups convene with NATO, it is more often in a bilateral (29+1), rather than multilateral, format. Although the bilateral approach can be useful in tailoring efforts for specific contexts, it has produced an inconsistent approach across the region.

Competing national interests inside NATO have also complicated the Alliance’s approach to the south. Differing threat perceptions regarding the relative

11 “NATO Mediterranean Dialogue,” NATO, February 13, 2015, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_60021.htm?; “Istanbul Cooperation Initiative,” NATO, November 18, 2011, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_58787.htm?.

12 “Building Integrity,” NATO, February 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68368.htm.

13 “Warsaw Summit Communiqué.”

14 “Operation Sea Guardian,” NATO, June 27, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136233.htm.

15 “NATO’s Deployment in the Aegean Sea,” NATO, July 2016, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160627_1607-factsheet-aegean-sea-eng.pdf.

16 “NATO to ‘Formally Join’ Anti-ISIL Coalition,” Al Jazeera, May 25, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/nato-formally-join-anti-isil-coalition-170525041232746.html>.

17 “Brussels Summit Declaration”; “Warsaw Summit Communiqué.”



An Italian commander gives instructions to his boarding team during Operation Sea Guardian, Sept. 2018. In this part of the operation, the Croatian Navy vessel HRMV Vukovar and the Royal British Navy vessel HMS Echo joined the Italian Navy frigate ITS Espero and other associated vessels and aircraft in patrolling the central Mediterranean. (Photo: NATO/Flickr)

urgency of the issues in the south versus the east have impeded more meaningful action. Compounding this are the political and bureaucratic obstacles to NATO-EU cooperation, which—despite substantial progress since 2016—inhibit what could be a more coherent approach for these two primary players in the region. On top of that, as it focuses more on the Chinese and Russian threats, the United States appears relatively disengaged in the Mediterranean compared to the last 25–30 years, with no one else stepping up to set the collective agenda or rally allies to action. The outcome has been a significant bilateralization of efforts in the south; to avoid the challenges of working through NATO, individual allied countries have tended to undertake southern-focused initiatives on a bilateral basis with Middle Eastern or African partners. In some cases, small clusters of allied nations have acted as a modest coalition of the willing, but rarely operate formally under the NATO framework. This has resulted in a patchwork approach across the south, where efforts have been disjointed, overlapping, and dilutive to NATO's added value in the region.

Given the modest overall level of effort, it is hard to call NATO a strategic actor in seeking to improve security conditions on the opposite side of the Mediterranean. NATO needs to do much more if it wants to make a real difference in building partners' capacity to stabilize their own regions and to address the root causes

of instability and illegal migration. That said, NATO is not the only player in the region and does not have all the tools. The EU and individual nations have the capacity and responsibility to act, alongside other institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU). But, as the institution with most of the major stakeholders, NATO should do more to galvanize the wider international response.

The Way Forward

The bottom line is that NATO needs a more strategic vision of what it wants to accomplish in the Mediterranean and its broader southern neighborhood. The mission in the south still requires projecting stability—currently the core of NATO's approach—but also calls for an increasing focus on defense, deterrence, and containment. NATO's strategy must be adjusted to account for these new realities. While NATO's framework for the south has helped to bring more coherence to NATO's activities and ambitions in the region, it remains a broad collection of intentions and disparate efforts. What is needed now is a clearer end state and a more detailed plan of action for how to get there, backed by political will, regional leadership, and sufficient resources. And Italy, NATO's strategic anchor at the heart of the south, in coordination with the United States, can help lead the charge to bring the Alliance to that point.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Projecting Stability, Better

Make capacity-building more effective through more common funding, an increased focus on military-specific training missions, and a new facility to develop mobile training teams or a training brigade.

Projecting stability is still an integral pillar of NATO's strategy for the south, but one that could be implemented and resourced much more effectively. Even before officially adopting the concept in 2016, NATO has been projecting stability for years, in contexts such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Iraq, and elsewhere, albeit with mixed results. To make this line of effort more effective and sustainable across the board, NATO and its member states should work to dedicate more common funding for defense capacity-building—at least 20 million euros per year. While challenging to secure, this funding would particularly help to avoid the bilateralization that occurs through current instruments, such as trust funds. This common funding could go toward additional civilian-led NATO projects in partner countries such as Tunisia, Algeria, and Jordan, and perhaps others such as Ethiopia, where conditions are such that NATO could have a significant impact. This said, additional resources should increasingly go toward more militarily-focused train, advise, assist, and equip missions—such as the one in Iraq established in 2018—as this is where NATO's greatest added value lies. Additional capacity-building activities should leverage and employ the gendarmerie (or military police) forces of several southern allies, including Italy's Carabinieri, Spain's Guardia Civil, and France's Gendarmerie Nationale, as well as the special-operations forces (SOF) of NATO nations. These highly capable units have specific expertise that can be useful for training missions that build partners' lasting capacity, as well as for counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, border management, and other issues that need to be addressed in partner countries in the Middle East and Africa.

Allies should also take advantage of Italy's proposal to provide a multinational divisional headquarters (HQ) to focus on bringing more coherence to capacity-building and other partnership activities in the south. Such a headquarters could be used not for military operations, but for developing mobile training teams (MTTs),

ensuring greater capacity and focus than would be possible at JFC Naples. MTTs can be a valuable asset for enhanced defense capacity-building missions and coordinating regional exercises with southern partners. Even more effective would be the development of a multinational training brigade, which would be more permanent and impactful over time. One model to consider could be the US Army's security force assistance brigades (SFABs), which are specifically formed to train, advise, assist, enable, and accompany operations with allied and partner nations, with the intention of freeing up traditional brigade combat teams to focus on their primary combat missions.

Enhance NATO-EU cooperation in the south by moving toward a more functional division of labor in capacity-building.

NATO and the European Union should seek to develop a more coherent shared strategy for the south. Since 2016, NATO-EU cooperation has improved significantly. One important example is the information sharing and practical cooperation between Operation Sea Guardian and the EU's Operation Sophia in the southern maritime domain. Still, there is scope for more substantial cooperation in the south. Capacity-building is indeed one key area of opportunity, where NATO and the EU have complementary sets of expertise and tools to bring to bear and should move toward a more functional division of labor.

The EU currently operates fourteen civilian and military missions in the region, primarily focused on peacekeeping, conflict prevention, strengthening international security, promoting the rule of law, and preventing piracy and human trafficking, in some places where NATO is also present.¹⁸ In practice, a more focused division of labor could mean NATO leading on military capacity-building and security-sector reform, where its demonstrated expertise lies, while the EU focuses on police training and broader capacity-building efforts related to economic, technology, social, rule-of-law, and other issues. Because NATO does not have the mandate, nor the tools, to address issues such as socioeconomic imbalances (e.g., unemployment, inflation, growth issues) that often contribute to broader instability, this is a natural sphere for the EU, which has capabilities in these areas, to take the lead. To facilitate

18 "Military and Civilian Missions and Operations," European External Action Service, March 3, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations_en.



An Italian soldier observes as a Mauritanian soldier fires his weapon during Exercise Flintlock, Feb. 2019. (Photo: Defense Visual Information Distribution Service/Pvt. Justice Tilley, US Africa Command)

this cooperation and coordination, NATO's Southern Hub should increase practical information sharing and communication with individual EU mission teams on the ground, as well as relevant units such as the EU's South StratCom Task Force. While the appropriate balance would need to be formulated on a case-by-case basis, this approach would further strengthen practical coordination between NATO and EU teams operating on the ground in the same space. This could also provide an alternative path for NATO to engage in a more targeted and effective way in contexts where it may have a perception problem, allowing it to work alongside trusted actors like the European Union, African Union, or United Nations.

Improve the perception of NATO in the south by reinvigorating the MD and ICI partnership frameworks and, in the long term, establishing a NATO-Africa Cooperation Initiative.

To further address NATO's image problems and better engage partners in the south, allied leaders should prioritize more high-level political engagement with MD and ICI countries to reinvigorate those frameworks. This could include more frequent visits by key figures like NATO's secretary general, who has rarely traveled

to the region in the last several years, as well as more multilateral high-level engagements.

Another key priority in this regard should be conducting a more systematic analysis of perceptions of NATO in the south, to better inform whether and how NATO should engage in the region. NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe could task the Southern Hub to do this recurrently and report on the main findings. Comparisons between different audiences and years may also be useful to analyze the impact of various NATO activities and better prioritize going forward. To build a more complete picture, NATO should continue to focus—through the MD, ICI, and its Southern Hub—on efforts that gather perspectives from the regions in which NATO is working or aiming to work. This should include more pragmatic “inside-looking-out” work designed to push the Alliance to answer fundamental questions about what NATO stands for, what it does, and why, with a view toward understanding its own mission in the south and how its strengths and weaknesses can be leveraged. Ultimately, this could help NATO articulate clearer goals for its southern strategy, and more effectively explain NATO's purpose and activities to regional audiences that are largely unfamiliar with, or skeptical of, the Alliance. In the short

term, NATO should focus on beefing up its current activities with partners in the MENA region to enhance their utility and impact. Over time, NATO could also look to establish a broader NATO-Africa Cooperation Initiative, which could help extend NATO's reach beyond the Sahel, the current limit of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. As those challenges currently further afield become more pressing for NATO, such an initiative could be a useful platform for engaging key partners—including the African Union, Arab League, and others—in a more sustained and intentional way.

Empower the Southern Hub to fulfill its potential with greater resources, more qualified personnel, and increased connectivity across the Alliance.

To enable these efforts, NATO HQ and member states should equip the Southern Hub with more of the resources required for its effectiveness. The hub is already engaging in a series of productive open exchanges with various stakeholders on the ground in the south that have links to local communities, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as the European Union and African Union. Their activities include webinars, newsletters, and educational online dialogues designed to gather perspectives, share information, and clarify misperceptions about the Alliance and its engagement in the region. While this produces valuable insights, the hub requires a larger operational budget and additional high-quality personnel—including more civilian-military staff and civilian subject-matter experts on the region—to process this information into relevant analyses and assessments. The hub should also be given dedicated resources to establish in-house liaison officers with key partner organizations, including African nations, the EU, and others. These individuals could be stationed at the hub on a rotational basis, or could be double-hatted representatives from relevant nations' consulates or embassies in Naples or Rome. The hub could also have liaisons or, at a minimum, more interaction with US Central Command (CENTCOM) and US Africa Command (AFRICOM), which are already engaging in productive work in the region that the hub could build upon.



US Army SGT Evelyn De La Cruz, Delta Forward Support Troop, 7-10 Calvary Regiment, 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO, passes out candy to kids at the Kho Ja Abdulla Ansare, Herat, Afghanistan, May 2011. (Photo: NATO Training Mission Afghanistan/Flickr)

The communication and information flows from the hub to the rest of NATO must also improve, to ensure its outputs reach the proper points within the NATO command structure and NATO's civilian headquarters in Brussels, and appropriately inform the Alliance's work. One option could include establishing multiple channels of dialogue to allow the hub to communicate directly with NATO's international staff and other relevant teams and authorities working on the region, rather than filtering everything through Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). Building on the cooperation already underway at JFC Naples, hub staff should be able to temporarily embed with other commands and advisory bodies within NATO. This would allow the hub to assist with planning and exercises designed to reflect the current strategic environment, and to advise on specific regional dynamics. The Alliance should also consider sending hub staff to take courses and complete rotations at the NATO Defense College in Rome, to build expertise as well as linkages across the NATO community in the south and

beyond. Moreover, increasing the hub's utility and visibility may also generate more buy-in from the NATO bureaucracy and member states, encouraging them to contribute more resources, personnel, and critical information to the hub as it seeks to aggregate and take stock of ongoing capacity-building efforts across the Alliance.

Making the South the New East

Strengthen the defense and deterrence pillar of NATO's southern strategy by establishing an enhanced Southern Presence.

The resurgence of Russia and China in the south means that allies also need to get more serious about defense, deterrence, and containment in the region. The same energy with which NATO reinvigorated its posture in the east over the last five years must now be applied to the south. This could take the form of an enhanced Southern Presence (eSP). In contrast to the more land-centric approach of the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the east and tailored Forward Presence (tFP) in the southeast, the eSP would look further southwest and incorporate a stronger maritime focus. As part of this package, NATO should beef up its naval presence in the Mediterranean and Black Seas to check Russian ambitions and keep pace with Russian A2AD capabilities and submarine threats. One useful effort could include establishing a dedicated task force under a NATO flag, with a mission focused on maintaining freedom of navigation, protecting sea lines of communication, and securing critical infrastructure across the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and broader region.¹⁹ The presence should also account for NATO's needs in the case of a horizontal expansion of an eastern conflict; this could include additional air, cyber, space, and special operations forces elements present and ready in the south.

To fill out and maintain this presence, allies should provide more personnel and greater operational budgets to conduct NATO activities in the region for more consistent and sustained periods of time. Allies also need to provide additional assets, including surface, sub-surface, and above-surface capabilities for high-end warfare, many of which have atrophied over the last several years. They should focus on key capability gaps including destroyers, amphibious capabilities and

forces, anti-submarine warfare capabilities, minesweepers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), fuel, ammunition, and other enablers.

Boost preparedness in the south as an extension of the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI), which would involve undertaking more large-scale exercises and more specific contingency planning focused on southern scenarios.

NATO's "Four Thirties" Readiness Initiative, adopted at the 2018 Brussels Summit, has gone a long way in improving preparedness across the Alliance, but the major focus has been rapid mobilization and reinforcement for conventional eastern contingencies.²⁰ Moving forward, NATO should expand the southern dimension of the NRI to enhance both planning-related and materiel readiness. In the first instance, this should be used to ensure that NATO exercises—both annual Crisis Management Exercises (CMXs) and conventional exercises in theater—increasingly incorporate a southern dimension to enable more effective planning and response. Although a portion of NATO's CMX for the coming year is set to simulate a major event in the southern neighborhood, the Alliance should also consider conducting a large-scale naval exercise in the Mediterranean in the summer of 2020, similar to Exercise Baltic Operations (BALTOPS), the premier maritime-focused exercise in the Baltic region. This would send a deterrent signal and demonstrate NATO's presence and capabilities in the region. While deterring Russia in the south should be a key factor in southern scenarios, NATO should also be ready to support expeditionary crisis-response operations in the broader region, which could be NATO-led, NATO-supported EU operations, or ad hoc coalitions. To be effective, the enhanced southern dimension of the NRI should cut across both of these core tasks.

As part of this initiative, NATO should also expand its ongoing generic contingency planning for the south to encompass advance planning for a wide range of conventional defense and nonconventional crisis-response scenarios in the region. These plans should consider specifics of which assets and personnel would be designated for the region, given other NATO and national requirements under the overall NRI and other frameworks. In particular, NATO should be prepared to contribute to a broader effort to stabilize Libya, if an agreement is reached inside the country. Complementary to this, to

19 Operating under the NATO flag and rotating national contributions could help ensure this presence could operate in accordance with the Montreux Convention. See "Montreux Convention," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Montreux-Convention>.

20 "NATO Readiness Initiative," NATO, June 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_06/20180608_1806-NATO-Readiness-Initiative_en.pdf.



An Italian air force Eurofighter Typhoon from the 4th Fighter Wing, Grosseto, Italy, conducts pre-flight checks in preparation for take-off during Red Flag 16-2 March 3, 2016 at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., for Red Flag 16-2. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jake Carter)

help increase materiel readiness, allies should invest in much-needed enablers for contingencies in the south. As an example, Italy could lead groups to jointly purchase ammunition, fuel, and other consumables, which could help equip NATO to respond concurrently to eastern and southern contingencies.

Invest in the capabilities needed to compete with great powers, and deepen defense-industrial cooperation to do so.

Allies need to invest in key technological capabilities to maintain superiority over competitors like Russia and China, while still retaining crisis-response capacity in the region. Areas for greater investment should include cyber, intelligence capabilities including artificial intelligence, and electronic-warfare capabilities such as GPS jamming.

To this end, greater defense-industrial cooperation between the United States and its closest allies in the south could be helpful. One idea could involve expanding the United States' National Technology Industrial Base structure (beyond the current arrangements with the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia) to include closer cooperation in some capacity with other geostrategic allies, such as Italy in the south. The aim would be to move toward harmonizing procurement and acquisition requirements, technology-transfer laws and regulations, and related policies and practices between the countries to develop critical capabilities for the region.²¹ Building on existing joint work on programs like the F-35 and C-130J, areas for cooperation between Italy and the United States could include: sensors, radars, and communications for airborne, land, naval, and underwater applications; ships and other major naval assets; cyber-defense and resilience

²¹ For more, see William Greenwalt, *Leveraging the National Technological Industrial Base to Address Great Power Competition*, Atlantic Council, April 23, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/leveraging-the-national-technology-industrial-base-to-address-great-power-competition>.

technologies, especially for critical infrastructure protection; and cutting-edge capabilities, such as machine learning to better process ISR data. While Rome would need to substantially increase its defense budget to do this, these projects would incentivize greater regional leadership from the south and spur more capability development.

Leading from the South

Embrace the need for regional leadership, with Italy at the forefront.

As the leading southern NATO member, Italy has borne a lot of the burden stemming from the lack of a more effective NATO and international response to southern threats. Between 2011 and 2016, Italy received some 630,000 irregular migrants and refugees via the central Mediterranean, as a result of the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the broader MENA region. To cope with this, the Italian government launched Mare Nostrum, a year-long naval and air operation in 2013, which helped at least 150,000 migrants arrive safely in Europe. The EU attempted to replace this with its Frontex-led Operation Triton, but, in 2014, Italian authorities and personnel still represented three quarters of the effort. Since then, Italy has undertaken important bilateral efforts to support the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy in the fight against terrorism and illegal trafficking, including through a new Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC). Italy also agreed to host an EU Regional Task Force (EURTF) to assist with identification and relocation of migrants. While its defense spending falls well short of NATO's 2-percent benchmark, Italy remains one of the highest contributors to NATO international missions, including by commanding NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission since 2013, sending forces and commanding NATO operations in western Afghanistan under NATO's Resolute Support mission, and being a reliable provider of assets and personnel for fleet missions in the south and beyond.²²

Italy and the other southern allies have pressed for the Alliance to give equal attention to threats from the east and the south, but often cannot agree among themselves about what should be done. Key regional players including Italy, France, and Spain have opposing views on how to address the crisis in Libya, the role of

NATO as a military actor in the region, and the value of working through the EU instead of NATO as a less US-dominated framework, among other issues. These differences give other allies an excuse to reduce NATO's level of engagement in the south. But, most allies from Northern and East-Central Europe are ready to support increased NATO efforts in the south, if the southern allies can get their acts together. Indeed, there's a general understanding that, while it is natural that threat perceptions differ among those allies directly facing Russia and those more preoccupied with threats from the south, NATO's solidarity and cohesion depend on every ally supporting policies and capabilities that address the priority security concerns of other allies. Moving forward, renewed regional leadership and ownership will be paramount in setting the southern agenda and bringing other allies along.

Italy has an important role to play in leading that charge. Strategically, current Italian officials and emerging leaders are eager to make Italy a better, more active partner for the United States. Operationally, Italy brings key capabilities to bear for more robust efforts in the south, including the largest Mediterranean navy and a capable military police force (the Carabinieri), which are well suited for capacity-building and counterterrorism. Geopolitically, Italy has close strategic relationships—with the United States, with other NATO and EU members, and on the opposite side of the Mediterranean—that can be leveraged to catalyze action. Given its pragmatic relationships with Russia and China, Italy can also serve as a unique interlocutor between these players and the West, including those European allies who favor softer approaches to Russia and China.²³ With Germany embroiled in its own political debates with the United States, France focused on developing “strategic autonomy” for Europe within the EU framework, and the United Kingdom caught up in Brexit debates and domestic turbulence, there is a new opportunity for Italy to step into a more prominent role. To counter Italian public fears of being left alone by Europe to cope with the challenges in the south, Italian leadership needs to embrace and guide the Alliance to make its southern strategy truly effective.

Make Italy the lead “framework nation” for the south, while reinvigorating Italy's own national approach to southern issues.

22 Italy also commanded KFOR for short periods in 2000, 2002, 2005, and 2008, before taking over consistently in 2013. See “Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures,” NATO, February 2019, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_02/20190215_2019-02-RSM-Placemat.pdf.

23 Similar to how Silvio Berlusconi brought together US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Rome Summit in 2002 to establish the NATO-Russia Council. See “Text of the Joint Declaration by President George Bush and President Vladimir Putin on the New Strategic Relationship Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation,” *Guardian*, May 24, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/may/24/usa.russia>.

In the spirit of NATO's "framework nation" concept, Italy should distinguish itself as the leading nation in the south, similar to how the United Kingdom and Norway play outsized roles in their neighborhoods in the north. Mirroring Germany's approach in the Baltic Sea region, Italy would provide the impetus for action in the south and play a coordinating function to bring in other allies willing to participate and provide support. In practice, this means that Italy should take the lead in implementing some of the recommendations outlined above and providing the seed resources, plans, capabilities, and personnel to bring a new effort to fruition. It should then outline clear opportunities for other nations to engage and supplement. For example, Italy could stand up a training brigade for capacity-building in the south, as a priority mission for the multinational divisional HQ it has offered, and work with other NATO members, including US AFRICOM and CENTCOM, who could provide required capabilities, logistics, and support for the brigade. Other southern allies, including France and Spain, should be first to sign up for supporting (or, in some cases, leading) activities, which could include contributing to the HQ or even providing their own on a rotational basis. A similar approach could be applied to the proposed eSP in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. This would build and expand upon the current Italian-led Framework Nations Concept Initiative (ITA-FNC), which includes Albania, Austria, Hungary, Montenegro, and Slovenia. In some cases, Italy may need to operate on its own or with a coalition of others, with NATO itself as a *supporting* rather than *supported* organization. While this model may require a shift in thinking within NATO, this could provide more flexibility for southern allies to act swiftly and decisively.

To better enable itself to play this role, and to set a positive example for other allies to follow, Italy needs to reinvigorate its own national approach to southern issues. Primarily, this should involve spending more on defense and adopting a whole-of-government approach for the challenges it is facing in the south. In Italy's case, two important steps would be developing a national security strategy and establishing a national security council to streamline and better integrate its own instruments of power, as well as increase their effectiveness. These actions would help Italy continue to forge consensus among southern allies and the rest of the Alliance to do more in the south.

Recommit to the region through the US-Italy strategic dialogue, use that dialogue to leverage US and Italian investment and engagement to catalyze a broader European effort in the south, and convene periodic meet-ups of NATO defense ministers from the south, along with the United States, to boost regional defense cooperation.

A useful forum to reinvigorate NATO efforts in the south could be the recently launched US-Italy strategic dialogue, which includes a security and defense focus coordinated through the US State Department and Pentagon.²⁴ Through the dialogue, the United States could reaffirm its commitment to the Mediterranean with stronger political rhetoric and limited operational activities (e.g., exercises or ship deployments) to galvanize support from Italy and other allies and generate a greater European effort to take on southern challenges. Italian leadership should seize this momentum to engage in targeted political efforts to catalyze broader support for these efforts, within NATO and beyond. This should involve articulating a clear plan for leveraging US support to take on an enhanced role in the south, and how NATO and other allies can then step in to fill remaining gaps. One specific example could include encouraging allied nations to prioritize providing personnel needed for mobile training teams at Italy's proposed HQ and for NATO's longer-term training missions, including the latest one in Iraq. Such a strategy would allow Rome to address some of its own burden-sharing issues with the United States and NATO, and to strengthen domestic public support along the way, as more allies contribute to addressing southern challenges.

Beyond the political sphere, to facilitate more specific defense cooperation, Italy and the United States should meet periodically with the other allied defense ministers from the south to coordinate their efforts. The group could include the nine NATO allies with Mediterranean coastlines, but could also consider having representation from southern-facing nations like Portugal and, when appropriate, other Middle Eastern and African partner nations in the region. This would provide an ad hoc platform or caucus to discuss regional initiatives. The series of recommendations above could be a useful initial agenda for the group, with a particular focus on enhancing maritime posture and readiness in the south and providing more common funding and appropriate personnel for capacity-building and the Southern Hub.

24 "Joint Statement on US-Italy Strategic Dialogue," US Embassy and Consulates in Italy, November 20, 2018, <https://it.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-u-s-italy-strategic-dialogue/>.

CONCLUSION

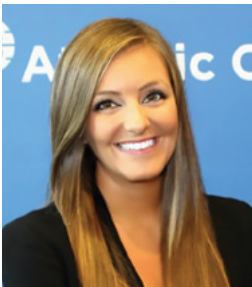
More must be done to revamp NATO's approach to its southern neighborhood and adapt for today's security environment. Italy has a key role to play in bringing southern leadership and ownership to NATO's efforts in the south, while also catalyzing broader allied support and consensus for action among the United States, Europe, and regional actors. The recommendations above outline several practical steps that Italy, the United States, and the Alliance as a whole should take in pursuit of a more effective NATO southern strategy. The focus on

Italy and regional leadership is not intended to diminish the importance of other ongoing national efforts; indeed, some of what needs to be done in the south can continue to be achieved bilaterally and multilaterally through the European Union and other institutions. But, overall, there must be greater coordination and coherence across NATO, and Italy can help spearhead this effort in a meaningful way. Taken together, these proposed actions would bolster security, stability, and cooperation in the south—and across the transatlantic community—at one of its most vulnerable moments.

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