

## ATLANTIC COUNCIL

### “A conversation with Italian Chief of Defense Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone”

April 19th, 2023

Washington

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#### *Admiral Cavo Dragone Keynote speech*

I would like to thank the Atlantic Council for organizing this event.

I also appreciate very much your invitation to be here today.

I think it is appropriate to start my speech by taking a walk through the past. The scene is the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. The date is April 27, 1961, and President John F. Kennedy is addressing the American Newspaper Association:

*“I want to talk about our common responsibilities in the face of a common danger. The events of recent weeks may have helped to illuminate that challenge for some; but the dimensions of its threat have loomed large on the horizon for many years. It requires a change in outlook, a change in tactics, a change in missions by the government, by the people, by every businessman or labor leader, and by every newspaper. It is a system, which has conscripted vast human and material resources into the building of a tightly knit, highly efficient machine that combines military, diplomatic, intelligence, economic, scientific and political operations”.*

Today, we are living through critical times indeed.

On September 2022, I released my [Strategic Concept](#) and, after a few months, I can easily assess that the international outlook is evolving at an extraordinarily fast pace and without precedent in modern history.

As we enter the 14th month of military operations in Ukraine, China has taken its position in the conflict. In doing so, Beijing has released a twelve-point document proposing a framework for a political settlement to the conflict raging in Europe. At the same time, in the Middle East, we see the Chinese brokering an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the resulting resumption of diplomatic relations.

Saudi Arabia recently ratified a decision awarding Riyadh the status of “dialogue partner” in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; a political, security and trade regional agreement, that lists China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and four other central Asian nations as full members.

At the same time, Iran is trying to improve its relations with UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Egypt. Türkiye and Syria are in a phase of rapprochement supported by Russia and Iran (and several Arab states are ready to rebuild ties with Damascus). While we observed these actions, in the background, Syria and Iraq signed a security agreement in a further attempt to stabilize relations.

After Algeria, a failing African economy, Tunisia seeks to join the BRICS, as we know, a group of fast growing emerging industrial countries with diversified economies that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

The demand for security has been surging in the "Wider Mediterranean" and in many African regions. This is especially true where the Wagner Group, Russian and Iranian proxy States, and other transnational actors are active. Furthermore, we have to remind that terrorism is still a vicious threat that we cannot underestimate ever, even if it was not the most topical issue nowadays.

These are major changes indeed.

What is happening? Are the events I have just recounted connected?

I have no easy answers. I merely provide with some ideas to feed our later discussion.

Watching from the sky, the earth looks like as a giant chessboard where all the pieces are in full motion.

The Eastern flank is the military priority for our Alliance and we must deploy every possible effort to win this fight for democracy, freedom and the indisputable right of each country to choose its own destiny. No doubt, we can never go back to the world we knew before Ukraine was invaded. There is now a widening consensus that NATO needs permanent forces and high-end capabilities deployed in Eastern Europe to deter Russia.

Accordingly, I see with great favor the task of the Joint Force Command Norfolk to over watch and connect the Atlantic with northern Europe and the Arctic region. Right here are clear signs of a competitive push by some countries – Russia, above all – aimed at securing privileged positions in this strategic arena. In the medium term, there is a possibility that new routes of communication (North-West passage) will emerge as an alternative to current ones and that a huge amount of mineral and energetic resources will be soon exploitable.

The 40+ nations participating to the so-called Ukraine Contact Group are rightly focused on providing defense capabilities to Ukraine as well as on coordinating future support (including reconstruction plans after the war). While such Group is focused on a single task, China is carrying out a vast and deliberate political and diplomatic offensive. Its goal is to expand Chinese influence across the countries in the so-called "Global South", that accounts for almost two thirds of global population. Some of those countries have not condemned the Russian invasion and stick to a "neutral" posture.

In an unspoken challenge, Russia and Iran are deploying every possible political and military effort in an attempt to flank the Chinese strategy, break their international isolation, and enlarge their sphere of influence. All these efforts also aimed at opening new fronts to weaken our willingness to defend democracy and freedom.

These actions must be actively countered. Perhaps this is the right time to reflect on our current strategy. Could it be that we are missing something important or neglecting countries and areas that are strategic for our security?

The Ukraine crisis is clearly a geopolitical earthquake and is having ripple effects throughout the international scene. Crucial areas such as the Mediterranean basin, the Persian Gulf, and many strategic areas in Africa are at stake.

We should react promptly to face these threats to peace and the international stability.

We are now aware that Russia made a bet on wrong assumptions based on the perception of America's disengagement and of a divided Europe. Both these factors were regarded by Russia as a prerequisite for their success in the Ukraine invasion. Russia's bet proved to be disastrous. Moscow instead has been confronted with an extraordinary cohesion within NATO, European Union, and other countries in Asia and the Pacific. The active support to our Eastern and Southeastern partners to strengthen their deterrence and defense posture has been prompt and swift within NATO and on a bilateral basis.

NATO is "The Alliance," our very "shield" for defense and deterrence.

The Madrid Summit was the most important "decision-making" event of the last decade. The summit went far in confirming that NATO is keeping pace with the quickly changing security environment. The adoption of the "2022 Strategic Concept" makes us better prepared to tackle the threats of the next decade.

The fact that we are a strong and cohesive Alliance is shown by our ability to come to agreement on our major interests and concerns. This can be seen through the implementation of the Eastern Posture, the renewed focus on our Southern flank, the clear confirmation of Russia as an active menace, and the recognition of terrorism as a continued threat. In addition to our traditional trans-Atlantic concerns, our ability to reach a consensus in labelling China as a "systemic challenge" further underlines the cohesiveness of the Alliance.

The enlargement of NATO to include Sweden and Finland might require some additional "decision making" and steering efforts; but in the end we will become a stronger Alliance.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has dramatically changed the perception of security in Europe. At this juncture of our effort to support Ukraine, we remain duly committed – with our Allies and partners – at the political and diplomatic level. What will happen this Spring might be a turning point. The stalemate on the ground, a possible counter offensive by the Ukrainian Army, and the effects of sanctions on Russian economy could encourage the relevant parties to address the conflict through political and diplomatic means.

Italy showed no hesitation in assuming a proactive stance in support of the eastern and southeastern allies. We readily contributed and continue to support our fielded forces that include air, land, and naval assets. Our round-the-clock operations actively reinforce the overall Alliance posture in continued response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

I would highlight that Italy has once again proven to be a committed member of the NATO alliance by deploying troops and capabilities in reassurance of allies along the Southeastern and Eastern flank. Our overall effort account for more than 2,000 soldiers. As always, Italy will continue to support the commitments undertaken by the Alliance while being especially mindful of and as flexible as possible regarding the involvement of US assets based in Italy.

Even with the ongoing war in Ukraine, we could identify additional challenges and threats stemming from other strategic directions. We are fully aware that the safeguarding of the Southern Flank implies yet more responsibilities for the Italian Armed Forces.

We are reacting swiftly and effectively to these threats as shown by the parliamentary approval in 2022 of our deployments abroad. This amounts to an average of about 8000 personnel besides dozens of aircraft and ships deployed on a daily basis and operating from the Gulf of Guinea to the Northwestern Indian Ocean.

The Mediterranean is a strategic crossroads making transit possible for the good and the bad. Yet the political and socio-economic conditions of the countries of the Southern shore are precarious and unstable indeed. On top of all this, sea routes are used for the transit of illicit drugs, smuggling, and the ever-present tide of illegal migration of those attempting to cross from Africa to Europe in the hope of a better life.

The importance of the Mediterranean has skyrocketed over the years due to the discovery of rich energy reserves, mostly gas, in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Mediterranean also hosts several important energy pipelines, cables and other infrastructures. Europe's energy security will be increasingly interconnected with supplies from North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Gulf, not only of fossil fuels but also of green energy products, in the perspective of the transition to a decarbonized economy.

The war in Ukraine, the sanctions on Russia, as well as the Russian use of energy as a weapon against Europe, have vastly increased the importance of the Mediterranean. The resulting need for Italy to continue to increase its capability to control these critical sea lines of communication alongside the Sixth Fleet is paramount.

The processes underway call for increasing and pragmatic presence. We intend to combine realism and the ability to create operational and institutional relationships that foster lasting and respectful collaboration and dialogue and facilitate the management of existing tensions. The military policy should be regarded as a reliant "Bridge of Dialogue and Cooperation". This approach relies on the ability to project internationally our capacity to provide security and capacity building.

These commitments are of a magnitude without precedent for Italy and our Armed Forces and illustrate our "can-do" burden-sharing attitude in fostering international peace and security. We are, and will be, ready to accept additional burden resulting from a higher level of inclusion in the NATO and US-led force contribution and decision mechanisms.