

18th CIMIC Unit Commanders' Conference (CUCC): Venice, the capital of NATO civil-military strategy

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From June 3 to 6, 2025, the city of Venice hosted the 18th edition of the *CIMIC Unit Commanders' Conference* (CUCC), a key event in the NATO landscape dedicated to civil-military cooperation. The event, organized by the **Multinational CIMIC Group (MNCG)**, saw the participation of over 100 delegates from 21 nations, including allies and partners of the Atlantic Alliance, with a diverse composition that included representatives from NATO Command and Force Structures, academia, international organizations, and the private sector.

The conference was officially opened by **Brigadier General Editson Zarka**, in his capacity as SHAPE ACOS J9, who immediately outlined the conceptual direction of the event: «**CIMIC is not a support resource; it is a strategic capability to anticipate, understand, and interact with the civilian context.**» A statement that resonated throughout the conference, serving as a guiding thread for the sessions of discussion, analysis, and planning.

The CUCC in Venice focused on **strategic convergence** between the civilian and military spheres, emphasizing societal resilience, civilian preparedness, and the integration of new technologies – such as artificial intelligence – into decision-making and operational processes. The lagoon city, already a symbol of connection between different worlds, proved to be the ideal place to host an international forum where “bridges” are built between the armed forces and communities.

CIMIC Leadership and Doctrinal Innovation in NATO

One of the central themes of the conference was the in-depth exploration of the strategic role of **CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation)** in NATO's operational planning. The 2025 edition revolved around the theme: *“Integrating the understanding of civil factors of the operating environment to contribute to the decision-making process”*, highlighting how understanding the civilian context is now as crucial as traditional military capabilities.

Colonel Piero Furlan, Commander of the MNCG, reiterated the value of the conference as a junction between theory and practice: «**The CUCC is not just a conference. It is a strategic compass for the civil-military integration of the Alliance. In Venice, we shape the tools of the future, not just discuss challenges.**» A statement that reflects the MNCG's ambition not to limit itself to a training and operational hub role but also to act as a doctrinal promoter for the entire spectrum of civil-military cooperation in NATO.



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The Multinational CIMIC Group, the only CIMIC asset formally recognized by SHAPE, is composed of military personnel from six nations (Italy, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, and Slovenia) and is increasingly configured as a center of excellence both operationally and conceptually. The Italian component, joint forces, played a crucial role in organizing the event, confirming the **national leadership** in the sector.

The thematic panels of the conference addressed key issues for NATO's future: **crisis response, civilian preparedness, CIMIC doctrine evolution**, as well as **the impact of emerging technologies** and artificial intelligence in enhancing situational awareness and interaction with civilian actors.

A Shared Strategy for a Complex Future

The strong message that emerged from CUCC 2025 is clear: CIMIC is no longer a marginal support element but a **cross-cutting strategic function**, essential for addressing the challenges of an increasingly unstable and interdependent world. From emergency management to peacebuilding, from energy security to the protection of civilian infrastructure, civil-military integration is now a prerequisite for the success of NATO missions.

For this reason, the conference marked a **decisive step forward** in the convergence between the strategic components of the Alliance and the operational needs on the ground. The discussions highlighted the urgency of strengthening inter-institutional cooperation and developing **agile, digital, and interoperable tools** capable of connecting information, people, and diverse contexts in real-time.

No less significant was the symbolic connection with Venice, repeatedly recalled by the speakers. The **bridges of the lagoon city** have become an emblem of the CIMIC mission: connecting different worlds, overcoming barriers, building trust and collaboration between military forces and civil society. In an international context dominated by uncertainties, the ability to dialogue, understand, and engage becomes an indispensable operational lever.



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The conference's outcome was deemed **extremely positive**: high participation, strategically relevant content, and a shared commitment to making civil-military cooperation a pillar of NATO's future. A future in which – as reiterated by Colonel Furlan – «**words become weapons, and resilience is built through dialogue.**»