



Drones: Italy Faces the New Challenge of Defending Railway Stations, Ports and Airports

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The drone threat no longer concerns only battlefields. In Italy as well, airports, ports, power plants, refineries, military bases, rail hubs and logistics centers must now be considered potential targets for incursions carried out using unmanned systems.

The spread of **inexpensive, readily available and increasingly sophisticated drones** is challenging traditional air defense models. The issue is not merely detecting a suspicious aircraft, but neutralizing it quickly without creating risks for the public, civilian aircraft or the very infrastructure being protected.

For Italy, the issue is particularly sensitive. The presence of major international airports, strategic ports, energy facilities and military installations makes it necessary to develop **an anti-drone capability that also extends to protecting civilian infrastructure.**

Detecting small drones

Traditional air defense systems were designed primarily for aircraft, helicopters and missiles. Small drones have very different characteristics.

They fly at low altitude, may have a small radar signature and use commercial components. Their detection is even more complex in urban or industrial environments.

This is why effective anti-drone defense must integrate radar, radio-frequency sensors, thermal cameras and electro-optical cameras.

No single sensor is sufficient against every type of threat.

The case of airports is particularly sensitive, as even a false alarm can cause flights to be suspended and have significant economic consequences.

How to stop a drone

Detecting the target is only the first challenge. The second is neutralizing it.

Electronic warfare systems can disrupt communications and satellite navigation, but they are not effective against all aircraft and may interfere with civilian equipment.

Alternatives include interceptor drones, guns, missiles and other neutralization systems. In densely populated areas, however, the use of conventional weapons can entail high risks.

The real issue is also economic.

Shooting down a drone costing a few thousand euros with a far more expensive missile is not a sustainable large-scale strategy.

The war in Ukraine has clearly demonstrated how decisive the ratio between the cost of the threat and the cost of defense is.

For Italy, **low-cost, mobile and rapidly deployable interceptor systems** are therefore becoming essential.

Airports, ports and energy

Not all infrastructure can be protected in the same way.

Italy has thousands of potentially sensitive sites, and permanently protecting each of them would entail enormous costs.

It will therefore be necessary to establish priorities.

Airports, ports, military bases, power plants, refineries and major logistics hubs are the infrastructure for which permanent anti-drone protection could become increasingly important.

For other sites, mobile systems could instead be used, allowing rapid deployment in the event of an increased threat.

It will also be necessary to distinguish between a civilian drone that has accidentally entered a restricted area and a genuine hostile action. A system suitable for monitoring a small commercial drone may be insufficient against multiple autonomous aircraft heading toward strategic infrastructure.

The issue of responsibilities

Italy also faces an organizational and regulatory challenge.

The response to a hostile drone may involve the Armed Forces, police forces, aviation authorities, and infrastructure operators. However, their responsibilities and powers to intervene do not necessarily align.

In the event of a real threat, a few minutes can make all the difference.

It is therefore essential to determine in advance who must identify the target, who can authorize the response, and which tools may be used.

The lesson from Ukraine

The conflict in Ukraine has turned drones into one of the principal tools of modern warfare.

Attacks on energy and logistics infrastructure have shown that possessing technologically sophisticated systems alone is not enough.

Large numbers of sensors, interceptors, and electronic warfare systems are needed, supported by an industrial capability able to produce and upgrade them rapidly.

Excellent technology available in only small numbers risks being useless against a threat based on quantity.

This is probably the main lesson for Italy as well.

The real challenge will therefore be **industrial as well as military**.

Italy has significant expertise in the aerospace, electronics, and defense sectors, but the crucial step will be turning these capabilities into economically sustainable systems available at scale.

The defense of Italian skies will no longer concern only fighter aircraft and missiles.

Increasingly, it will mean being able to detect and neutralize **a small drone before it reaches an airport, a port, a power plant, or another critical point in the country.**