



Estonia, Italian F-35s in Action: Russian Jets Intercepted

Published on 13/08/2025

August 13, 2025 – For the first time, two Italian F-35 fighters took off from the Ämari military airport in Estonia to intercept Russian aircraft as part of NATO's enhanced air patrol mission. The episode marks a significant milestone for the Italian Task Force Air, engaged since the beginning of the month in the *Baltic Eagle III* operation for the surveillance of Baltic skies.

According to the Atlantic Alliance Air Command, the two F-35s from the 32° Stormo, on 24/7 operational readiness (mode **Quick Reaction Alert - QRA**), were alerted to identify a Russian **Antonov An-12**. The aircraft, with its **transponder turned off** and **without a flight plan**, was heading towards the Kaliningrad enclave and was flying over international waters of the Baltic Sea. The operation was conducted without incidents, in accordance with NATO rules for managing interceptions.

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Change of Command and Start of the Mission

The operational takeoff comes just days after the handover ceremony between the Portuguese and Italian Air Forces at the Estonian base of Ämari, within the framework of **NATO enhanced Air Policing (eAP)**. With this event, Italy has assumed command of the *Baltic Eagle III* mission, which will last four months, with the task of ensuring the integrity of the airspace of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The ceremony was attended by the Minister of Defense **Guido Crosetto** and the Commander of the Joint Operational Command (**COVI**), Army Corps General **Giovanni Maria Iannucci**.

Crosetto emphasized that “assuming command of the Baltic Air Policing mission confirms Italy's strategic commitment to collective security on the eastern flank of the Alliance, a concrete contribution to the deterrence and defense of Euro-Atlantic borders.”

General Iannucci highlighted the importance of cooperation among allied nations and the strategic value of air surveillance in an area of increasing geopolitical relevance.

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The Role of Italy and the Strategic Context

This is the **third Italian participation** in the NATO mission in Estonia, following the 2018 and 2021 editions. The **Task Force Air - 32° Stormo**, equipped with fifth-generation F-35 fighters and highly specialized personnel, will operate under the coordination of the **Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC)** in Uedem, Germany, responsible for managing the Alliance's air operations in the sector.

The operational context is marked by **increasing tensions with Russia**, especially in the Baltic airspace, where flights of Russian military aircraft with deactivated identification systems are frequent. These activities, often interpreted as tests of NATO's reaction capabilities, make the readiness and efficiency of allied air forces a key element of the deterrence strategy.

With the start of *Baltic Eagle III*, Italy reaffirms its central role in NATO's collective defense operations, confirming a qualified and technologically advanced military presence on the eastern flank of the Alliance.