



Neptune Strike 25-4: Cavour and Italian F-35s at the Forefront of NATO Shield

Published on 21/11/2025

From November 19 to 26, 2025, the aircraft carrier ITS *Cavour* and the Italian fifth-generation F-35 fighters will be among the main protagonists of **Neptune Strike 25-4**, the fourth edition of NATO's main enhanced Vigilance Activity (eVA).

The exercise, led by the [Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO \(STRIKFORNATO\)](#) command in Oeiras, Portugal, integrates the capabilities of two allied carrier groups: the British one of HMS *Prince of Wales* and the Italian one centered on the *Cavour*, both deployed in the Mediterranean but with the ability to project over a vast area, from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the southeastern flank of the Alliance.

Cavour under NATO command: the heart of the Italian contribution

The aircraft carrier ITS *Cavour*, flagship of the Italian Navy, will operate **under NATO operational command**, confirming Italy's role as a maritime pillar of the Alliance in the Mediterranean.

From its flight deck, the *Cavour* will provide Neptune Strike 25-4 with:

- a carrier platform designed for prolonged operations far from national waters;
- command and control capabilities for managing complex air-naval assets;
- full integration with NATO standards, an essential requirement for joint operations with the *Prince of Wales* and other allied units.

The simultaneous presence of two Carrier Strike Groups (CSG) in the Mediterranean, including the Italian one, is a political and military signal of great significance: NATO demonstrates its ability to **rapidly concentrate air-naval power** in a strategic area, while maintaining the capability to operate towards the North (Baltic Sea) and towards the East (Black Sea and southeastern flank).

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Italian F-35s: the spearhead of Neptune Strike

At the center of the Italian contribution are the **F-35s embarked on the Cavour**, part of the fifth-generation capabilities deployed by Italy and the United Kingdom.

During the exercise, the latest-generation aircraft will operate from the Mediterranean but will conduct **long-range strike missions** on ranges in:

- Bulgaria
- Poland
- Romania

This is a clear example of **long-distance power projection**: the F-35s take off from the carrier in open sea, penetrate deep into allied training airspace, and return to the ship, integrating with other Alliance assets, including:

- strategic B-52 bombers of the U.S. Bomber Task Force;

- NATO's RQ-4D remotely piloted aircraft;
- numerous air and naval assets from ten allied countries.

The combination of **Cavour carrier and F-35s** allows Italy to deploy a complete **fifth-generation carrier strike capability**, in line with the most advanced allied countries and perfectly integrated into NATO's deterrence and defense posture.

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Italy's role in airspace and information domain

Neptune Strike 25-4 is not just about maritime operations. Italy is also at the center of the **information and surveillance domain**, thanks to the contribution provided by the **Sigonella** base in Sicily.

From here, the remotely piloted aircraft of the **NATO Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Force (NISRF)** operate, which in this edition of the exercise will carry out:

- long-range radar reconnaissance missions;
- continuous surveillance, independent of weather conditions and time of day;
- real-time informational support to deployed naval and air forces.

This capability, unique within the Alliance, further strengthens Italy's role as a **strategic hub in the Mediterranean** for NATO operations, both operationally and infrastructurally.

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Interoperability and deterrence: what it means for Italy

Neptune Strike 25-4 is part of the **Project Neptune**, launched in 2020 to demonstrate that NATO can rapidly integrate multinational naval and strike forces, even over long distances.

For Italy, this exercise means:

- validating, in a real and complex context, the capabilities of the **Cavour as a fully interoperable NATO carrier**;

- testing the integration of the **Italian F-35s** with the British ones and with allied assets of different generations;
- confirming the role of Italian bases, such as Sigonella, in the Alliance's surveillance and command chain.

The activities of Neptune Strike are **long-planned, defensive in nature** and in full compliance with international law. At the same time, they send a clear message: Italy, with its carrier and F-35s, is **at the forefront** in ensuring collective security and defending “every inch” of allied territory.

News link: <https://sfn.nato.int/newsroom/news-archive/2025/nato-launches-the-fourth-iteration-of-neptune-strike-2025>