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

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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.

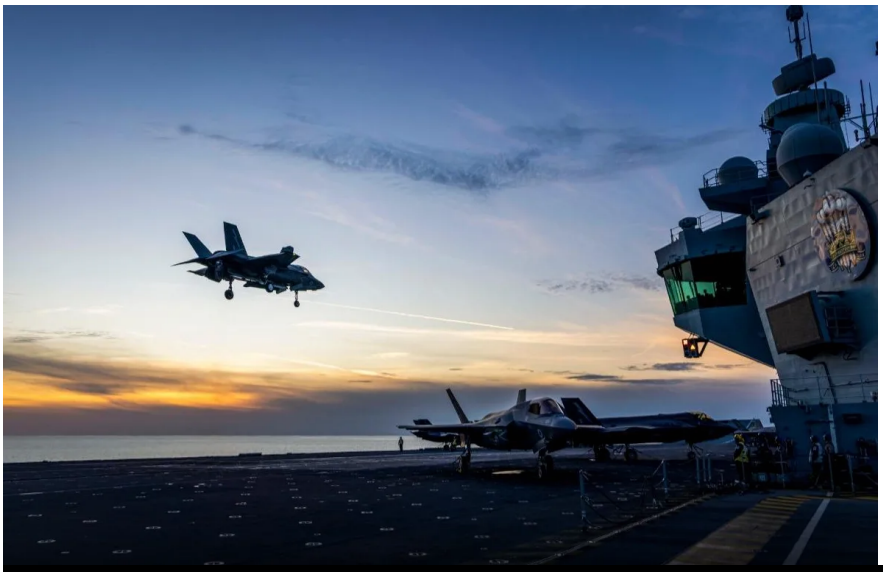
## Cavour under NATO command: the heart of the Italian contribution

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.

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