Strategic Airlift: Italy Must Strengthen Its Personnel

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In the context of modern defense, **strategic airlift** represents an essential enabling capability for force projection, operational sustainability, and deterrence credibility. Its centrality is fully recognized within NATO, where strategic mobility is considered an indispensable condition to ensure the **rapid deployment of forces and systems** on a regional and intercontinental scale.

The experience of the last two decades has shown that individual European national capabilities are insufficient to support complex and continuous operations. Hence the creation of multilateral programs based on **pooling and sharing**, aimed at ensuring interoperability, economies of scale, and shared access to platforms otherwise unsustainable for individual states. The fact that these programs are now continuously employed in military operations, humanitarian missions, and responses to civil crises confirms that strategic airlift is not an accessory function, but a **force multiplier**.

Despite this framework, European and national investment priorities continue to favor combat platforms, leaving strategic mobility in a subordinate position. This results in a discrepancy between operational ambitions and actual deployment capabilities, particularly critical in high-intensity scenarios where the **time factor** is decisive.

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Shared Capabilities, Oversized Loads, and Vulnerabilities

NATO mechanisms for strategic airlift cover a wide range of needs: from the transfer of oversized loads to personnel transport, from medical evacuation to in-flight refueling. These capabilities have demonstrated high flexibility, proving decisive in military operations, supporting stabilization missions, managing health emergencies, and responding to natural disasters.

An often underestimated element is that the main bottleneck is not weight, but **volume**. Modern military systems – C2 platforms, radar, disassembled aircraft assets, medical modules – quickly saturate cargo spaces. The ability to transport **complete and ready-to-use systems** is therefore an operational requirement, not a logistical convenience. From this perspective, reliance on contractual solutions and reduced fleets exposes the Alliance to systemic vulnerabilities, exacerbated by the deterioration of the European security context.

Multilateral initiatives have mitigated these issues, but have not eliminated them. The limited availability of platforms, the rigidity of usage quotas, and the need for medium-term planning poorly align with scenarios characterized by sudden crises and rapid escalations. The lesson is

clear: **strategic airlift remains a scarce capability**, and precisely for this reason, it is strategically decisive.

The Italian Case: Structural Dependence and Capability Inconsistency

In the outlined framework, Italy's position deserves particularly critical analysis. The country is fully integrated into NATO and European strategic mobility mechanisms and contributes to multilateral cooperation initiatives. However, **the national strategic airlift capability remains limited**, and not consistent with the declared operational, industrial, and political ambitions.

In recent years, Italy has significantly invested in **advanced combat platforms**, complex systems, and high-tech capabilities. These investments implicitly assume the availability of a solid long-distance projection and logistical support capability. In the absence of adequate national strategic airlift, this assumption translates into a **structural dependence on shared or allied assets**, with a direct impact on freedom of action and operational readiness.

This asymmetry reflects an incomplete vision of the military instrument, in which strategic logistics is considered a support function rather than a **first-level capability**. It is an approach that risks reducing the overall effectiveness of the investments already made, especially in scenarios where access to shared capabilities could be limited or highly contested.

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Paradoxically, Italy has industrial and technological levers that could help bridge this gap. The involvement of the national industrial system in programs related to large aircraft and advanced transport platforms offers the opportunity to strengthen not only the industrial base but also the **capability sovereignty** of the country and Europe. However, without a clear political and programmatic priority, such opportunities risk remaining disconnected from an overall strategic vision.

In conclusion, **strategic airlift** must be recognized as a central capability in Italian defense planning. Continuing to predominantly invest in combat systems without rebalancing strategic mobility means accepting a **capability inconsistency** that limits the effectiveness of the military instrument. In a context of increasing instability, the ability to move forces and systems quickly and autonomously is not a complement, but a necessary condition for the operational and political credibility of the country.

News link: https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/strategic-airlift