

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY SYMPOSIUM

Chişinău, Republic of Moldova | Friday, 23 October 2026

Symposium: "The Role of Civilian Expertise of Reservists in Military Duties"

Panel II: RESERVE FORCES AS A STRATEGIC CAPABILITY: READINESS, INTEROPERABILITY AND THE EU/NATO PERSPECTIVE

Speaker: Cdr. Giuseppe Filippo Imbalzano

Mobilizations in a case of great crisis

1. Premise

In NATO terms, a "great crisis" is not a manageable emergency. It denotes a systemic rupture of security: Article 5 activation, large-scale aggression against one or more Allies, or a hybrid crisis combining kinetic, cyber, energy and information effects with strategic consequences. In this scenario, deterrence has failed. What remains is the ability to mobilize faster than the adversary.

2. What do we mean by mobilization?

Public narrative reduces mobilization to the call-up of reservists. In a NATO collective perspective, it is a much broader and simultaneous concept, articulated on four levels:

a) Military Mobilization. It is no longer just force generation. It is the rapid activation of the NATO Force Structure, the Allied Reaction Force (ARF) replacing the NRF, and readiness tiers at 10-30-45 days. The issue is not quantity on paper, but sustainability and deployability. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that a high-intensity conflict consumes in one month what is produced in one year.

b) Mobilization of Movement. Without military mobility, there is no mobilization. The so-called "military Schengen": border-crossing procedures, availability of heavy rail wagons, bridges with adequate load capacity, fuel. NATO may have 100 brigades, but if it takes 60 days to move them from port to front, they are irrelevant.

c) Industrial and Logistic Mobilization. The European defence industrial base is still in peacetime logic. In a great crisis, we must shift from efficiency logic to overproduction logic of ammunition, drones, spare parts, advanced maintenance capacity. This requires pre-negotiated framework contracts and regulatory waivers ready in advance, not to be written during the crisis.

d) Civil Mobilization and National Resilience. Article 3 of the Treaty is clear: resilience is a national prerequisite for collective defence. Energy, secure communications, health capacity for mass casualties, protection of critical undersea and space infrastructure, continuity of government. If the home front collapses, the forward front will not hold.

3. The Central Problem: Time and Decision

During the Cold War, mobilization was procedural and almost automatic. Today, the NATO Crisis Response System (NCRS) provides a graduated progression, correct to avoid unwanted escalation,

but intrinsically slow.

In a hybrid great crisis, the adversary deliberately compresses decision times below 48-72 hours. Our processes of consultation at the NAC, approval of Graduated Response Plans (GRP) and formal Force Generation risk arriving after the fait accompli.

Mobilization, therefore, is no longer a problem of means. It is a problem of pre-delegated authority and pre-aligned political will.

4. Where to Act – Three Operational Proposals

To make collective mobilization credible, this paper proposes three lines of effort with low political cost but high operational impact:

1) Pre-authorize mobility. Transform "military Schengen" from a recommendation into a binding protocol within NCRS. In imminent crisis status, transit authorizations for NATO forces should be automatic, with notification rather than request.

2) Pre-negotiate production. Create a NATO list of critical ammunition and systems (155mm, air defence, low-cost ISR drones) with surge production contracts already signed by Allies with their respective industries. You do not buy in crisis, you activate.

3) Exercise mobilization, not just deployment. Exercises like Steadfast Defender excellently test deployment. We must start testing total mobilization: reserve call-up in a Member State, conversion of a civilian railway segment, activation of a reserve military hospital. Only then do we measure real bottlenecks.

4bis. The Italian Contribution as a Force Multiplier for the Alliance

In this collective framework, Italy represents a relevant case study due to its position and structure.

Not only for its geographic role as a logistic hub for the Southern Flank and the Wider Mediterranean, but for three concrete capabilities that in a great crisis become collective assets:

a) Deployable Command and Control. With JFC Naples and NRDC-ITA at high readiness, Italy provides one of the few rapidly deployable Corps-level HQs in the Alliance.

b) Logistic and Projection Platform. Ports, airports and railway network in Northern Italy, together with national sealift and airlift capacity, are essential for force inflow towards East and South-East.

c) Dual Industrial Base. An industrial fabric – aerospace, shipbuilding, defence electronics – that in mobilization logic can sustain not only national needs but a share of Allied needs, especially on medium-range guided munitions, air defence systems and drones.

In short, the Italian model demonstrates that in a great crisis the distinction between "Eastern Flank" and "Southern Flank" collapses: mobilization is one, and Italy is its hinge.

5. Conclusion

In a great crisis, NATO will not win because it has the best plan, but because it will mobilize the whole of its national resources faster.

Deterrence today is made of two messages: "we see you coming" and "we are already moving". Collective mobilization is the second message. Without it, the first is just rhetoric.

Cdr. Giuseppe Filippo Imbalzano – Draft V2 – 03 Oct 2026