

ITALY

DEFENCE POLICY AND STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

INTRODUCTION

The strategic framework of Italian foreign policy has been stable since the Second World War, with European integration (EU), Atlanticism (close relations with the United States and NATO) and bilateral and multilateral relations with the countries of the so-called Enlarged Mediterranean (e.g. the Union for the Mediterranean) being the basic orientations and pillars of Italian foreign policy (GILLI et al. 2015). Although the traditional foreign policy framework remained largely intact in the early 1990s, with the birth of the second republic, its focus changed due to the different political values of the often-changing coalition governments. In today's deteriorating security and economic environment – with worsening U.S.–China and U.S.–EU relations, Russian aggression against Ukraine and growing interstate conflicts – the Meloni Government must both meet the sovereigntist and Eurosceptic demands of its electorate and maintain the traditional foreign policy stance while retaining the confidence of international partners (and with them the financial markets).

The goal of this chapter is to investigate the role of Italy in the implementation of initiatives related to the development of European Security and Defence policy and European strategic autonomy. The purpose of the first section is to provide a general picture of the characteristics and main directions of the country's foreign, security and defence policy with a short introduction to historical background. In the following section a general introduction to the concept of bandwagoning is provided. The third section presents Italian military missions and operations abroad. The Italian stance on European strategic autonomy is introduced in the fourth section. The last section examines the Italian participation in the capability development projects of the EU.

MAIN DIRECTIONS OF ITALIAN FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

Italy often described itself as a middle power with limited natural and military resources, which can achieve its foreign policy goals by increasing its influence within international organisations and through bilateral relations with major powers. The country's international standing is uncertain and can be summarised as "last among the big and first among the small ones" (BONVICINI-COLOMBO 2011: 12; ANDREATTA 2008).

Italy's foreign policy has often been seen as insignificant (marginalised) and inconsistent compared to the country's economic and demographic weight. After the birth of the republic in 1946, Italian foreign policy was gradually built around three interdependent circles: Atlanticism, Europeanism and Mediterraneanism, among which rapidly changing governments sought to strike a balance due to the bipartisan consensus (PARSI 2016). Atlanticism has been also based on a privileged relationship with the United States and NATO, a relationship which also serves to counterbalance Italy's relatively weak position to influence on the economic and security affairs of the European powers (CROCI-VALIGI 2013). Europeanism includes support for deeper European integration while promoting the EU's ability to act independently (ANDREATTA 2008). The main goal of the geopolitically motivated Mediterraneanism as a foreign policy direction is to extend Italian influence in the Mediterranean region, to achieve regional power status there, and to establish close bilateral and multilateral relations with the so-called "Enlarged Mediterranean" (e.g. within the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean initiative) (DAVIDSON 2011). The area referred to as Enlarged Mediterranean in Italian sources, due to the existing close connections and interactions, includes the Greater Middle East, and so the Gulf area (according to American geopolitical concepts), thus, it is bigger than the MENA region. According to one of the latest Italian strategic documents, the Enlarged Mediterranean indicates the "region of Europe (the Balkans and the Black Sea), the Middle East (the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf), North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf of Guinea" (Ministero della Difesa 2023a).

These three pillars of foreign policy are accepted and maintained by the parties in government and opposition. During the Cold War, Italy's foreign and security policy was largely determined by the international environment, as the country's security was inseparable from Atlantic and European relations. However, the Euro-Atlantic strategic framework was not enough to fully meet Italy's security needs, as Italy was bound to the Mediterranean by interests that were not always meeting

the priorities of the U.S. or European integration, thus, Mediterranean relations of Italy naturally evolved (CARBONE 2007; ALCARO 2010).

Although Italy's foreign and security policy became more active with the collapse of the Soviet Union – the country moved from being a security consumer to a security provider – the new post-Cold War political elites on the right and left continued to link Italy's security to NATO and the EU. Rome's foreign policy towards the Middle East and the Mediterranean has been influenced by the role it has chosen to play in the Euro-Atlantic spectrum. Basically, it depended on the coalition governments whether the respective governments prioritised European relations or bilateral relations with the United States. However, it can be observed that in some cases (e.g. illegal migration, energy security) Italy has gone its own way, because the government has assessed the situation as not being adequately guaranteed by the Euro-Atlantic framework, and such challenges have typically been in the Mediterranean direction (ALCARO 2010).

The new challenges after 1989 and 2001 led in Italy as in other NATO states to doctrinal changes and military reforms. In Italy, one of the stages of this process was building up a professional army in 1999, which meant the end of compulsory conscription. It became evident for the Italian defence policy that to prepare for external threats, reforms should be executed. Home defence exclusively was not enough; and an effective contribution to collective security (UN, NATO, EU) was required. The reforms were aiming at an efficient defence system built on the principle of collective security.

Although the traditional foreign policy framework, which was based on the European integration, Atlanticism and relations with the Enlarged Mediterranean, remained largely intact after the Cold War ended, with the birth of the Second Republic at the beginning of the 1990s its focus changed due to the different political values of the often-changing coalition governments. From the mid-1990s onwards, the foreign policy of centre-right governments focused primarily on national interests and Atlantic values (with strong ties to NATO, the United States and Israel). In addition, foreign relations with countries such as Libya and Russia were characterised by a deepening of bilateral diplomacy driven by personal and economic considerations. In recent decades, the foreign policy of centre-left governments has tended to focus on deepening European integration, being more open towards Arab states and favouring multilateralism over bilateralism. Overall, despite the shifts in emphasis, Italian foreign policy has been characterised by a particular mix of bilateral and multilateral relations related to geopolitical and goeconomic approach and a "Levante approach" focusing on Italian economic and foreign trade interests. The Italian Ministry of Defence's White Paper for International Security and Defence

(2015) emphasised a focus on the Euro-Mediterranean region and also prioritised the European cooperation, especially in military technology and procurement. It also emphasised the importance of strong Atlantic relations (GILLI et al. 2015).

The focus of the governments alternated mainly between the Atlanticist and the European direction, while a cross-party consensus existed on the Mediterranean direction, namely on the growing importance of an independent Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean region and the assumption of a regional power role in the Mediterranean (CARBONE 2007; DAVIDSON 2011). The Enlarged Mediterranean region is characterised by almost constant political unrest. Energy resources and their access routes have drawn the attention of Western countries to the region, making Italy at the same time vulnerable and difficult to circumvent in terms of control of the region.

The move away from traditional Italian foreign policy became only visible under the first Conte Government, which took power after the 2018 elections. Although the previous framework remained in place, the foreign policy of the coalition of anti-establishment parties (League and Five Star Movement) was characterised by sovereignty and Euroscepticism. The subsequent second government of Giuseppe Conte, and then Mario Draghi's government of national unity, returned to traditional foreign policy orientations (BONVICINI-COLOMBO 2011).

The foreign policy of the right-wing Meloni Government that took office after the 2022 parliamentary elections did not deviate significantly from the previous traditional framework. In today's deteriorating security and economic environment – with worsening U.S.–EU and U.S.–China relations, Russian aggression against Ukraine and growing interstate conflicts – the Meloni Government had to both meet the sovereigntist and Eurosceptic demands of its electorate and maintain traditional foreign policy orientations while retaining the confidence of international partners (and hence the financial markets) in being a trusted and politically and economically stable country. In her first year in power, the Meloni Government acted in continuity with its predecessor led by former ECB head Mario Draghi. Consequently, its core drive was that of fortifying Italy's Atlanticist positioning, expressed through its staunch support for Ukraine and contributions to NATO. Focus on Africa (and the Global South more generally) was one of the stated priorities of the Italian-led G7 in 2024. Although the international partners demonstrated concerns regarding the Meloni Government, Meloni was able to reassure its international partners and the markets regarding the Italian commitments towards the Euro-Atlantic partners (FASOLA-LUCARELLI 2024). One of the most pressing international concerns towards Georgia Meloni was her firm Euroscepticism, however, she toned this down after forming her government. The Meloni Government's attitude

towards the EU can be described as ‘sceptical pragmatism’: it avoids hostile political rhetoric, aware that the European institutions are essential for international success and Italy’s economic stability. At the same time the Government remains sceptical of further European integration, reiterating its view that the European institutions should focus “on the major issues on which the member states cannot act alone”, the Member States “on the issues closest to the lives of citizens, respecting the principle of subsidiarity and thus also strengthening the sovereignty of the Member States” (Governo Italiano 2023).

Following a strong Atlanticist stance serves multiple strategic interests. Demonstrating transatlantic loyalty enhances the government’s credibility within NATO, the broader Western security community, and its European partners. This approach was necessary because both Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) and its coalition partner, the League, were – compared to the other parties – relatively supportive towards Vladimir Putin, had supported Vladimir Putin maintaining a pro-Russian stance after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, opposing sanctions against Russia. However, this stance shifted following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when FdI unexpectedly supported the Ukrainian cause and fully aligned with the positions of the Draghi Government and the United States (FASOLA–LUCARELLI 2024: 202).

Italy’s foreign and security policy has historically attributed importance to the ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’ as a strategic region for protecting and promoting national interests. Although there has been a shift in foreign policy priorities towards Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the Enlarged Mediterranean still represents the most important region for Italian strategic interest (FASOLA–LUCARELLI 2024). The Russian aggression in Ukraine provoked a shift in Italy’s defence priorities from the crisis management to territorial defence and conventional operations. It also had a significant impact on the organisation of the armed forces (COTICCHIA–MORO 2023). The rising strategic competition between great powers in Asia has also had an impact on Italian security and defence policy (MOLNÁR–TAKÁCS 2020).

BANDWAGONING

Apart from defining the three circles that constitute the strategic directions of Italian foreign policy, it is important to highlight the major features of Italian foreign policy behaviour as well. According to realist theories of international relations, states can adopt one of two strategies to balance power in an anarchic

international system: they may either form alliances against the most powerful state (balancing) or align themselves with it, thereby pursuing a bandwagoning foreign policy. In bandwagoning behaviour, a weaker state aligns with a stronger, potentially, but not necessarily opposing power, recognising that the stronger ally stands to gain disproportionately from their cooperation. This strategy is typically the only viable option for the weaker party, based on the assumption that it requires a strong partner, as the stronger party will achieve its objectives regardless of the costs.

Since its creation in 1861, Italian foreign policy has been characterised by bandwagoning behaviour. When it was born, an external protector was needed not only to guarantee and safeguard Italy's external security but also its internal cohesion, thus, Italy immediately entered the international arena as a security consumer, which was then a means of survival. Its security and international status also depended on its ability to link up with stronger powers, alliances and coalitions. Italy's involvement in the two world wars is an example of the foreign policy bandwagoning that persisted during and even after the Cold War. The more independent initiatives of Italian foreign policy during the Cold War all concerned areas that were not of primary importance for the East–West confrontation.

The changed security environment of the new world order, which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, generated a lively debate within Italy about the country's international role, but this was only a symbolic and rhetorical debate. Three main arguments justified the preservation of the bandwagoning foreign policy: 1. the defence of Italian national interests (underlined in strategic documents) and security; 2. the enhancement of international status and recognition (by appearing as a trusted partner of a bigger power); 3. the possibility of posing as a country with having a say in key decisions shaping the international system, as had been the case during the Cold War.

Although Italy's increased participation in peacekeeping and crisis management operations after the Cold War enhanced its international image, overshadowing the perception of Italy as merely a security consumer, it did not alter the country's subsequent foreign policy commitment to ensuring its security and maintaining its involvement in international affairs. As in the preceding period, Italy has continued to pursue initiatives for regional autonomous action, aiming to augment its influence rather than disengage from the established alliance system.

Although foreign policy issues are rarely the subject of election campaigns in Italy, they can have a significant impact on the popularity of the government. The divisive nature of foreign policy can either contribute to the fall of a government or bring it to the brink of collapse. It is also influenced by the external environment in which a country's leadership must conduct its foreign policy. Since the end of the Cold

War, Italian governments have been subject to risks, uncertainty arriving from several directions as alliances and threats have become more dynamic than in the bipolar period, and the boundaries between national (domestic) and international (foreign) policy have begun to blur. Since the end of the Cold War, the external threat in response to which Italy's foreign policy is shaped has become much less clear, opening up more space for debate on foreign policy within the state.

ITALIAN MILITARY MISSIONS ABROAD

In the last couple of years, considerable defence sector reforms have been undertaken, while the Italian military is now one of the country's most trusted institutions, largely because of its 'peace missions'. In our days, the second goal of the Italian armed forces – after the defence of the State –

“is the defence of Euro-Atlantic spaces, with the Atlantic Alliance and European partners, actively participating in NATO's consolidated prevention, deterrence and collective defence mechanisms and contributing to the strengthening of the European defence pillar, in a perspective of complementarity of the efforts implemented by NATO and the European Union” (Ministero della Difesa 2023a; Ministero della Difesa 2023b; COTICCHIA – MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO 2023: 1).

Security and defence policy is supposed to support foreign policy goals, especially when security aspects of foreign policy – as it can be seen, for example, in the Mediterranean region – are gaining priority status, but current trends of Italian defence expenditures do not indicate this.

The active engagement of Italy as a robust peacekeeping force marks a departure from the post-World War II era's “low profile”, during which the responsibilities for preparing, deploying and employing the Italian military were predominantly delegated to NATO. Throughout the Cold War, Italy based its participation in collective defence on geopolitical advantages stemming from its geographical location and the use of military bases and infrastructure on its territory granted to the United States.

It was only in the early 1980s that Italy exhibited a shift towards a more dynamic and assertive external stance. The early 1990s, following the Cold War's conclusion, brought a radical transformation in Italy's foreign policy framework, prompting policymakers to grapple with the need to redefine strategic objectives, geopolitical priorities and operational modalities for international actions. The post-bipolar world

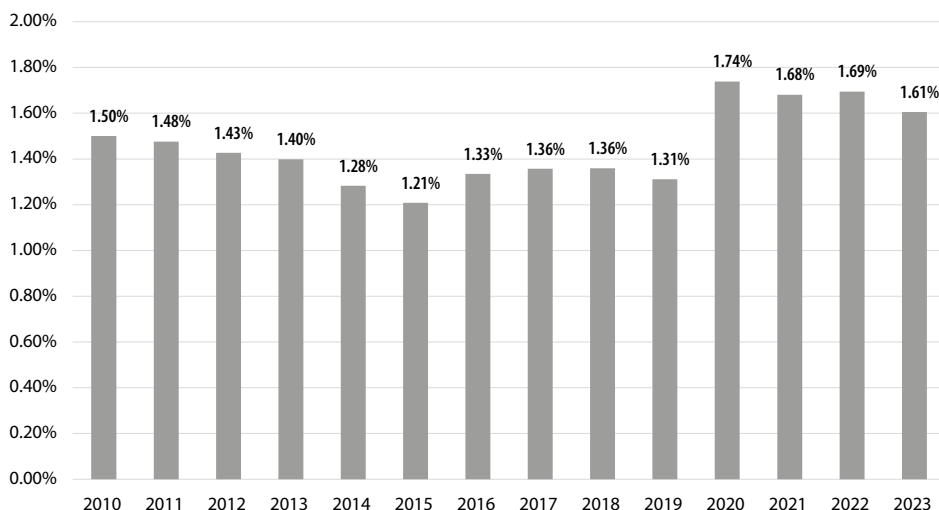


Figure 1. *Italian defence expenditure 2010–2023*

Source: Sipri 2024

heightened Italy's vulnerability due to its proximity to significant "crisis arcs" such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, former Soviet Central Asia, the North African coastal strip, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa. The loss of position rent associated with bipolarity and the certainty of continuous assistance from major allies, particularly the United States, further underscored Italy's strategic challenges.

Although the more active Italian participation in peacekeeping and crisis management operations after the Cold War contributed to the improvement of the country's international image, shadowing the image of Italy as a consumer of security, it did not change Italy's foreign policy willingness to guarantee its security and avoid exclusion from international affairs. As in the previous period, initiatives for regional autonomous action have been maintained, with the aim of increasing Italy's influence rather than pulling it out of the established alliance system.

Italy's engagement in international missions has remained a consistent element in its foreign and defence policy, transcending changes in governing coalitions. These missions are regarded as crucial tools for pursuing national interests, both in theatres directly impacting Italy and those aligned with broader alliance interests. Missions in Libya, the Balkans and Niger, for example, have yielded positive outcomes related to energy supplies, the management of migratory flows, counterterrorism efforts, regional security and socio-economic development in the Mediterranean region – a vital aspect for the Italian economy.

In addition, Italy's involvement in international missions aligns with broader national interests related to the alliance system, Italian positioning within key international organisations, including the UN, EU and NATO, and fostering relations with crucial European and North American allies. This dynamic is particularly evident in regions such as Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan. International missions serve as a pivotal element in the bilateral relationship with the United States, maintaining their relevance over time. Additionally, these missions contribute significantly to diplomatic ties with countries of strategic importance for Italy and the Mediterranean, including Turkey, Israel and Iran (MARRONE–NONES 2020).

These international missions often extend over decades, making it challenging to predict completion goals. Italy's military involvement in Afghanistan stands out as its most significant, demanding and costly mission since the Second World War. Over 50,000 armed forces personnel were deployed, resulting in approximately 700 injuries and 54 fatalities. This commitment was primarily driven by a sense of transatlantic loyalty, as Afghanistan would not typically be at the forefront of Italy's military and strategic priorities. Despite shifts in government, support for this mission remained consistent over two decades, highlighting the enduring importance of transatlantic relations in Italy's strategic calculus. The decision to disengage from Afghanistan only materialised once it became evident that the United States was preparing to withdraw. As Italy began its disengagement from Afghanistan, it redirected resources towards other theatres deemed more immediately relevant to its security, notably the Maghreb and the Sahel regions. The heightened political and security focus on Africa, viewed as a critical extension of the Mediterranean, is also recognised in Rome as a potential asset within the framework of the transatlantic partnership. This shift gains significance as the United States undergoes a reassessment of its global role (CRISTIANI 2021).

Italy perceives the extended Mediterranean region as strategically important, necessitating independent political, diplomatic and military actions to safeguard its strategic and vital interests. The ability to lead multinational coalition forces in this region is considered imperative. In the areas considered to be of strategic importance, the objective of Italian security policy is to be able to take unilateral actions – capabilities and capacities of the Italian armed forces must be developed accordingly – and not to be dependent on third countries. Italy's security interest, also due to its geographical position, lies in the naval freedom of maritime navigation, the security of the southern and eastern Mediterranean, securing energy supplies, keeping illegal migration under control, and the protection of the United States against threats from other major powers (TAYLOR 2019: 13).

Italian military operations also extend within national borders, as in the case of the Sicilian Operation *Vespri Siciliani*, aimed at maintaining law and order and assisting the police against organised crime. In the 2000s, military presence addressed challenges arising from mass immigration and the garbage situation in Naples. The ongoing domestic operation, *Strade Sicure*, initiated in 2008, primarily focuses on enhancing public safety and reducing crime, merging with earlier responses to mass immigration.

In the past decades Italy tried to balance its relatively low, decreasing defence expenditures by actively participating in international missions in the most important conflict zones. Since 2006, Italy is the European country with the highest number of military units involved in UN peacekeeping operations. In 2023, the Italian Armed Forces actively participated in 35 international missions across 24 countries under various multinational coalitions, including the UN, NATO, the European Union and bilateral agreements. Despite the high number of missions, the involvement of military personnel remains fragmented, the Italian *presenzialismo* (the Italian necessity to be present everywhere in order not to be excluded) remains an important characteristic of Italy's foreign and security policy. Notably, the centre of gravity for Italian missions shifted to Eastern Europe following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with over 1,250 military personnel deployed on NATO's eastern flank in Latvia, Hungary and Bulgaria.

Demonstrating reliability to international partners such as the United States and major international organisations like the UN, NATO and the EU has unquestionably been a crucial factor. Furthermore, these operations all exhibited a humanitarian dimension to varying degrees, rendering them justifiable in the context of Article 11 of the Italian Constitution, which unequivocally denounces war as a means of settling international conflicts.

Italy led missions in Iraq, Kosovo, the EU Mission in Somalia (EUTM), EUNAVFOR MED Irini in the Mediterranean, "EMASoH", a mission operating in the Strait of Hormuz, and the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon.

Military missions need to be approved by the Parliament each year. The government's obligation, as per Act 146 of 2016, involves presenting a detailed report on ongoing missions to Parliament by December 31 each year, ensuring transparency and parliamentary input. However, delays in the approval process mean that Parliament may deliberate on missions practically completed at the time of debate. It is important to note that Italian missions consistently receive robust political support across various political parties.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has brought some changes into Italian strategic thinking. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which represents the return of



Figure 2. *Italian military missions in 2023–2024*
 Source: Compiled by the authors.

conventional warfare between states on the European continent, has made it clear to all European countries that the security of their borders is by no means to be taken for granted. For this reason, Italy plans to focus on defence and deterrence, rather than deploying its military in a variety of international military missions, according to the Documento Programmatico Pluriennale 2023–2025 (DPP). DPP represents one of the most important documents for understanding the direction in which Italian defence is headed. In fact, the DPP provides an update on defence activities and outlines the Ministry's overall direction, defining the policy priorities that the Minister intends to pursue in the use of the financial resources made available during the three-year reference period.

Thus by today it has become apparent that the contribution to the collective security is at the same time the pre-requisite of the country's own security (DASSÙ–MASSARI 2008: 63–64). The Italian foreign policy, particularly in the sense of security policy, plays a really active and important role in the Western Balkans, in the Enlarged Mediterranean and in Eastern Europe.

Several strategic documents, including the ‘Direttiva per la Politica Militare Nazionale’ (May 2022), the ‘Strategia di Sicurezza e Difesa per il Mediterraneo’ (May 2022), the Strategic Concept of the Italian Chief of Staff (September 2022), and the Documento Programmatico Pluriennale della Difesa for the 2023–2025 period (October 2023), confirm that Italian defence policy remains focused on the Enlarged Mediterranean. Italy’s recent military presence in the Indo-Pacific constitutes a small fraction of its overall military deployments. Additionally, Italy’s new contributions to NATO initiatives on the Eastern front do not signal a departure from its established defence policy. Since the end of the Cold War, Italy has consistently been one of NATO’s key contributors. The Army’s decision to invest in tank capabilities further underscores Italy’s pro-NATO and multilateral foreign policy. Defence Undersecretary Rauti highlighted in September 2023 that acquiring German MBTs was necessary to fulfil NATO commitments. Moreover, Italy has maintained its focus on the Enlarged Mediterranean in its international operations. Despite increased commitments in Eastern Europe, Italy has not withdrawn from any other mission, underscoring its determination to balance deterrence against Russia with continued engagement in other regions. For example, Italy increased its troop presence in Bosnia, Kosovo and Niger while also deploying units in Qatar. The number of troops in Kosovo rose from 600 in 2021 to 1,483 in 2022, and in Niger, from approximately 300 in 2021 to over 500 in 2023. Italy also formally approved three bilateral missions in Burkina Faso, Niger and Libya, while other operations, such as the maritime surveillance operation ‘Mare Sicuro’, extended their mandate under the new name ‘Mediterraneo Sicuro’, ensuring a constant presence in the Mediterranean. Several significant drills within national and NATO frameworks took place in the Mediterranean in October–November 2023 (COTICCHIA – MAZZIOTTI DI CELSO 2023: 8).

ITALY’S STANCE ON EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

For certain nations, such as Germany and Italy – powers defeated in World War II and thus likely to have internalised a negative perception of military use – assuming greater responsibility for their own security remains a contentious issue, often viewed as taboo within the society. The Italian society have preferred using Italy’s military force for international missions, which have a clear and evident peace component. This sentiment does not always align with the political necessities for projecting Italian influence. Consequently, there is a preference to rely on the United States

to intervene militarily. Italy consistently emphasises that strategic autonomy is not about being autonomous from external actors but rather the capability to act independently. Germany and Italy are well-positioned to offer a balanced perspective on EU strategic partnerships with the U.S., the U.K. and NATO because they believe in the complementarity of these frameworks and have invested significant political and military resources in Atlantic alliances, particularly in out-of-area operations and collective defence measures (CRISTIANI 2021).

Italy's vision of strategic autonomy entails the ability to address crises and conflicts in regions surrounding the EU while actively contributing to Europe's collective defence via NATO. Although the Union's institutions will increasingly contribute to this, much will depend on the major European countries, given that defence is predominantly an intergovernmental domain.

To achieve this goal, Italy also promotes greater cooperation between the defence and security industries on both sides of the Atlantic. In the longer term, fostering interoperability between transatlantic security forces and encouraging major players in the respective industries to cooperate can be key to reinforcing both strategic autonomy and the transatlantic bond while also supporting their financial sustainability. There have been several examples of fruitful defence cooperation between Italy and the United States: the F35-Bs program, the delivery of the TH-73A helicopter, and the provision of laser pointers/trackers used in the Common Infrared Countermeasure system, to mention a few.

Rome favours the vision of Europe with a greater presence on the international geopolitical chessboard, arguing that the European integration project must necessarily require Member States to cede more sovereignty, including in defence matters. This was also proved by the fact that Italy, with other 13 EU Defence Ministers (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain), asked Josep Borrell (HR/VP) to establish a new rapid military response capacity (called First Entry Force) for crisis management outside the EU in 2021 (BARBOSA LOBO 2021; MEYER et al. 2022: 4).

However, Italy does not support the idea of creating a common European army, preferring a deeper integration of EU–NATO defence apparatuses, positioning itself as a “hinge” between the Atlantic Alliance and the EU due to its geographical location, history and relational fabric. Another aspect of the debate concerns the extent, both territorial and sectoral, of the application of the concept of autonomy. While France and Germany favour limiting European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) to the closest European neighbourhood, Italy aims for its extension to the wider Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa, areas considered of the highest strategic

interest. Finally, Berlin and Rome interpret ESA in a broader perspective than just security and defence policies, contrasting with the major French focus in this area. This discourse is creating a growing consensus among Member States, defining a path from the traditional interpretation of ESA based on the French model to a new paradigm, currently characterised as “open” strategic autonomy.

As the transatlantic community rethinks its priorities and looks to a future where great power competition looms, reinforcing complementarity and interoperability through joint programs involving European and U.S. defence companies could represent a significant step in rethinking the *raison d'être* of the alliance. From this perspective, Italy could become the European driver of a “transatlantically sustainable” definition of European strategic autonomy.

Since becoming Minister of Defence in 2019, Lorenzo Guerini has consistently stressed the need to shape the evolution of European strategic autonomy, with PESCO being a crucial element, to ensure its consistency and complementarity with the transatlantic alliance. He emphasises that building a common European defence is essential for Europe to play a more effective global role, stressing the importance of pushing the EU to take on greater responsibilities in defence and security, in full synergy with NATO, amidst the indissolubility of the solid transatlantic relationship. Italy stands out as a significant European supporter of the vision of strategic autonomy that is firmly complementary to the transatlantic alliance, while other EU countries – France above all – perceive it differently.

Despite the presence of different official documents related to security and defence, Italy does not have a National Security Strategy literally. The White Paper on International Security and Defence from 2015 can be interpreted as a kind of NSS. The Italian Ministry of Defence annually publishes the Multi-Year Defence Planning Document (*Documento Programmatico Pluriennale*, DPP). This annual decree can also be considered a short-term strategic document for the Italian security and defence policy. The current document for 2023–2025 highlights Italy's support to NATO as an organisation guaranteeing the security of the Euro-Atlantic space. At the same time, it emphasises that Italy will strengthen its contribution to the initiatives and operations of the EU CSDP, supporting its ambition of growing strategic autonomy (Ministero della Difesa 2023b: 16). Although the transatlantic relationship is extremely important for Italy, the Italian Government supported and played a decisive role in the elaboration of the EU GS under the work of Federica Mogherini as former HR/VP. ESA is seen in the country as a complementary tool for national and European security, and not as a tool for decreasing the dependence on Transatlantic relations (ZANDEE et al. 2020: 38).

An important Italian document on European common defence, which offers significant insights into Rome's approach to the issue, is the "Report on the Prospects for the Development of European Common Defence and Cooperation between Intelligence Services", approved by the Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic (Copasir) in July 2022. This report is the final outcome of an extensive investigation conducted by Copasir. The committee hopes that the EU "can establish itself as a leading geopolitical actor", aligning its economic influence with its diplomatic and military weight. Despite the fact that the 27 EU members "spend on defence as much as Russia and China", there has been a "reluctance to adhere to a core principle of the Union: the transfer of national sovereignty in favour of a common European sovereignty". Copasir identifies one of the causes as the EU's foundation on economics and competition, whereas the founding fathers had identified defence and energy as the pillars. Today, however, Copasir notes that Europe depends on the United States for the former and on Russia for the latter. In this context, the creation of a 5,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force, comparable to the unused EU Battlegroups, is seen as a starting point that needs to be integrated into a broader process. However, Copasir realistically acknowledges that the creation of a true "European army" is unlikely due to the traditional autonomy of national armed forces and the prevailing opposition of member state governments and parliaments to potential sovereignty transfers. Instead, the report emphasises the goal of complementing NATO's essential collective defence function with an autonomous European capability to intervene in crises outside NATO's scope but potentially destabilising to the EU's vital interests. According to Copasir, Italy should act as a bridge between the Atlantic Alliance and the EU, given its geographical location, history and relational network. Consistent with this view, the new European defence should not be conceived "as an alternative to the Atlantic Alliance" but rather as an "integrative and complementary pillar" that ensures Europe's security (Ministero della Difesa 2022).

ITALIAN PARTICIPATION IN THE CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS OF THE EU

In our days, France, Italy and Spain with Germany are the "defence frontrunners" in Europe (BLOCKMANS – MACCHIARINI CROSSON 2021). These countries are involved in most EDF and PESCO projects. Originally, the so-called Four Big

European countries were France, Germany, Italy and the U.K., but after Brexit, Spain can be considered one of the Four Big countries that intend to have a decisive role in the development of defence integration in Europe. This is shown by the fact that in 2020, the Ministers of Defence of France, Germany, Italy and Spain proposed to start the elaboration of the *Strategic Compass*, beginning the process with a threat analysis (ZANDEE et al. 2020: 24). Italy plays a major role in the development of the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB).

The multi-year planning document for the period between 2022 and 2024 highlights that the Global Strategy adopted in 2016 defined the achievement of strategic autonomy as a priority objective in the field of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. The objectives related to strategic autonomy concern both technological and industrial as well as operational capability development in order to make the EU a true global security provider. The Italian strategy document pays special attention to the Strategic Compass adopted in 2022. The Italian defence policy plans and activities are in line with the goals set out in it. Among these, it is worth highlighting the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Rapid Deployment Capacity (EURDC), the European Peace Facility (EPF), the hybrid and cyber toolbox. The document highlights that Italy supports the full implementation of a clear European strategy,

“to achieve a more mature and conscious role of the EU on global stage, in synergy, and not in opposition, with the Atlantic Alliance, therefore aimed at giving concrete implementation to the so-called ‘European pillar’ of NATO. In this context, collaboration between Member States (MS) will be sought for the development of common capabilities, which guarantees adequate involvement of national industries, and the effective implementation/strengthening of the aforementioned tools – operational, capacity-building and financial – in support of the Union’s military activities” (Ministero della Difesa 2022: 16).

The Italian approach to capability development suggests a connection between PESCO and the EDF. Although these two initiatives are recognised as distinct and separate, Italy views the former as an incubator for projects to be submitted to the latter (MARRONE 2018: 2). From the Italian perspective, CARD and PESCO are also conceptually linked, as the former reviews the capability development plans of Member States, while the latter aims to cooperatively address the deficiencies in the EU Member States’ armed forces. However, the lack of automatic links between these two initiatives may be a cause for concern.

According to the Italian multi-year planning document for the period between 2023 and 2025, the consolidation of the so-called “European pillar” of NATO remains among the national priorities, through the full realisation of the Integrated Approach of the European Union, the strengthening of synergy and complementarity between the EU and NATO (Ministero della Difesa 2023b: 12).

In recent years, Italy has actively participated in the implementation of EU defence capability development initiatives and projects. From this point of view, one of the most important initiatives for the country is PESCO, within the framework of which it participates in 43 out of 68 projects. Italy leads 13 projects, participates in 36 and is present as an observer in 17. Among the projects, the European Patrol Corvette (EPC) is very important, which aims to jointly develop new types of warships in cooperation with France, Greece and Spain.

Starting in 2019, Italy joined the programs (European Defence Industrial Development Program, EDIDP) created as a precursor to the resources of the European Defence Fund launched by the European Commission for the period between 2021 and 2027. In 2019, two Italian-led projects (FITS4TOP [Leonardo S.p.A] and PEONEER [E-GEOS S.p.A.]) submitted successful project proposals and Italy was involved in the implementation of 7 projects. As a leading nation in 2020, a total of 4 successful proposals (the JEY CUAS [Leonardo S.p.A], INTEGRAL [Vitrociset S.p.A], CARMENTA [Elettronica S.p.A.], VERTIGO [Associazione SAFE]) were presented and Italy participated in 9 others. With co-financing, the Ministry of Defence supported the actors of the defence industry that won the EDIDP calls (Ministero della Difesa 2022: 52–53).

Although Italy has played an active role in PESCO projects and some of the most important defence companies, like the Leonardo S.p.A, Fincantieri or MBDA are located in this Member State, Italian companies play only a modest role in leading EDF projects. Regarding the first EDF call in 2021, Italy leads 5 projects (while France 19, Spain 14, Germany 3) (FREYRIE 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

Italy has become a crucial NATO and EU member post-Cold War due to its strategic location and capabilities. It is a significant player in peacekeeping and crisis response operations. Despite not meeting the 2% GDP defence spending target, Italy's expertise makes it a valuable ally. Italy focuses on addressing security challenges within the Enlarged Mediterranean, where it is highly active. Additionally, Italy has

contributed to managing threats from the East in recent years. Its strategic location enhances its role in NATO and EU operations. Italy's naval and air capabilities are particularly notable in its contributions to their activities.

European strategic autonomy requires increased defence spending and military capability development by European states. Italy's defence spending has not significantly increased relative to its GDP, and it has reduced the size of its armed forces while modernising equipment. This raises questions about Italy's aspirations for strategic autonomy, especially in the short term, where full independence from the United States may not be in Italy's best interest. The war in Ukraine and the second Trump Administration highlight the importance of autonomy but also the current dependence on the U.S. Despite increasing defence spending within NATO, Italy still views NATO and the U.S. as primary guarantors of security in Europe.

The war in Ukraine has underscored the need for Italy to reassess its defence strategy and spending. While autonomy is a long-term goal, short-term realities necessitate continued cooperation with the U.S. and NATO. Italy is going to the need for autonomy with the practical benefits of NATO membership.

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