

**DOCUMENTI
IAI**

**SECURITY POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF NATO,
THE EU AND THE UN:
ITALY'S GROWING BURDEN OF CHOICE**

by Roberto Menotti

Paper presented at the International Conference on “The Challenges of the Transatlantic Agenda and the Prospects of US-Italy Cooperation”,
Rome, Palazzo Rondinini, 11 June 2007

SECURITY POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF NATO, THE EU AND THE UN:
ITALY'S GROWING BURDEN OF CHOICE

by Roberto Menotti

The present article will attempt to identify the key features, and some unresolved dilemmas, of Italy's diplomatic and security policies. I will first describe, in brief, the tripartite institutional setting (NATO, the EU, the UN) of the country's fundamental choices: this continues to provide the foundation for current policies, but is also undergoing major changes that create a very unpredictable international environment.

I will then show how the evolving security agenda, certain choices made by key allies (beginning with the United States), and domestic political forces, constantly interact to produce pressures on Italian decisionmakers and defense planners. Resource constraints are a mounting concern, but the country has yet failed to make clearcut choices based on inevitable tradeoffs – opting instead for an uneasy mix of continuity and change (due to the political orientation of successive coalition governments).

Introduction: enduring framework and objective constraints

NATO, the EU (previously European Communities) and the UN constitute the framework of Italy's foreign and security policy since WWII, embodying both the constraints and opportunities that have characterized the country's international action. However, a common feature of NATO and the EU is that they have changed almost beyond recognition since the Cold War era, which implies that they can hardly represent a reliable set of points of reference.

NATO is the traditional environment in which Italy has developed its security and defense policy, also providing the multinational channel through which a close bilateral relationship with the US has been cultivated. In practical terms, NATO has consistently provided most of the security assets that proved crucial to Italian foreign policy for at least half a century – also serving as a “power equalizer” in Europe, thus affording Italy a sort of overestimated relative weight.

The Alliance (as well as the bilateral Italy-US relationship within it) has undergone a rapid adjustment in the course of the 1990s, moving from a static defense pact protecting well defined territorial frontiers (land and maritime) to a much more dynamic organization capitalizing on the valued added of interoperability across a wide range of potential deployments.

However remarkable this evolution (and perhaps precisely because of its rapid pace), it has left some important questions unanswered for the allies, particularly with regard to very different lessons learned on the two sides of the Atlantic: on the part of the US (especially the Pentagon) major reservations have taken root toward “war by committee”; among the Europeans a better appreciation of the need to develop autonomous capabilities at least for limited contingencies on the European continent or

for relatively small UN-mandated missions¹. A more profound difference of approach concerns specifically the use (and the usefulness) of military force: we might say that, partly as a reaction to 9-11, the US views the offensive application of military power as one important instrument in a wider toolbox. In contrast, most European governments would have a hard time arguing to their voters that there is indeed an appreciable value added (in terms of security) to be gained from each additional euro spent on the defense budget, especially in countering terrorism-related threats. This inevitably relegates military force – particularly combat operations – to the very margin of the available set of policy options. Therefore, in Italy as well as elsewhere in Europe, there is a serious danger that a vicious circle has been set in motion: flat defense budgets constrain the application of military power, which in turn leads to policy choices designed mainly to minimize military commitments in combat roles; this ultimately reduces the political usefulness of raising defense budgets.

The widening Transatlantic “capability gap” that has resulted may truly become a political and strategic cancer for the Alliance.

Some of the unanswered questions over NATO’s main functions (and the capabilities required) are currently being tackled on the ground in Afghanistan, precisely in terms of both available resources and the political will to deploy them in combat roles. This ongoing mission will inevitably determine much of the future evolution of the Alliance and, by implication, Italy’s role in it.

The EU is a latecomer in the security and defense arena, and its complex relationship with NATO (particularly with the US) reflects several unresolved ambiguities which continue to affect Italy’s options. Rome is an active participant in the complex development of more coherent links between the EU (through the European Security and Defense Policy, ESDP) and NATO – formally based on the “Berlin Plus” arrangement but practically in a state of continuous flux². However, given Italy’s budgetary constraints there is acute sensitivity for the potential conflict between the NATO priority of ensuring adequate national contributions to the Nato Response Force (and the Transformation concept more broadly), on one hand, and the EU priority of fully equipping the Battle Groups³ as an expanding operational asset, on the other.

We will return to this very delicate issue when assessing the overall balance of Italy’s security policies.

In the UN context, the commitment to peacekeeping and UN-mandated stabilization operations has been a hallmark of Italy’s international projection since the 1980s. Over the past few years, the issue has become intertwined with the debate on reforming the UN Security Council: Italy has put forth its candidacy and a pretty complex reform

¹ The benchmark for such “robust peacekeeping” missions has become, somewhat unexpectedly, the French-led operation in the Republic of Congo.

² In fact, it can be argued that the Berlin Plus arrangement is not sustainable, although attempts to circumvent it through purely European initiatives are almost certainly doomed to fail. A more realistic path would be to renegotiate the EU-NATO deal in a way that gradually expands the EU’s areas of direct responsibility while also strengthening, rather than weakening, NATO as a potentially global organization. See Roberto Menotti and Paolo Brandimarte, “It’s time to clarify the ‘constructive ambiguity’ in the NATO-EU security relationship”, *Europe’s World*, n.5, pp. 32-25.

³ An EU Battle Group is a battalion-size (1.500 troops), mostly multi-national force, based on interoperability and high deployability, tasked with supporting existing forces; preparing the ground for larger forces; and implementing small scale rapid response missions.

proposal that would have fulfilled its aspiration. However, the international constellation of interests and alignments practically forced Rome to engage in a defensive diplomatic battle (according to some critics, to the point of obstructing reform, at least in some variants). In essence, the key Italian interest has become to prevent the “quick fix”, or any other UNSC reform proposal which would discriminate it in favour of Germany and Japan – although, to be fair, Italy has consistently supported a solution that would make a common European seat more likely.

In the process, Rome has consistently worked to somehow compensate for the failure to obtain a permanent UNSC seat by behaving as a major contributor in the same league as Japan and Germany. It did so mostly by capitalizing on its experience with complex multinational missions, particularly in areas where it has distinctive assets of special value such as gendarmerie forces (Carabinieri). Italy is involved in 24 ongoing operations abroad (of widely varying sizes), 6 of which are fully United Nations missions (out of the 18 ongoing UN missions in the world)⁴. This implies the deployment of approximately 9,000 soldiers.

This strategic choice – in conjunction with the continuing contributions to NATO and growing pledges to ESDP – has put very serious strains on both the armed forces and, more broadly, on the domestic consensus underpinning Italian security policy.

Resource constraints are indeed very serious⁵. Looking at the defence budget, the picture over recent years is rather clear: Italy’s expenditure is more or less static, around 1% of GDP, with a particularly low level of investment and unmet growth commitments – including reiterated NATO pledges and the goal of 1.5% of GDP set in the 2002 Defense “White Paper”.

By widening the scope of the analysis to also include the Foreign Affairs Ministry – i.e. the overall foreign and security policy complex, so to say – the problem comes in even sharper relief.

The latest available (official) data on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly indicate that Italy is at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the three major EU countries in important respects, although its network of embassies and consulates is wider than that of its European counterparts⁶. Three indicators are particularly worrisome: the number of personnel is around half that of the UK and France, and around two thirds that of Germany. The budget of the Foreign Affairs Ministry (which amounts to 1,564 million euro in 2005, minus the resources for Development Aid) is significantly lower than that of the UK (2,862), France (2,391) and Germany (2,206) – both as an absolute figure and as a percentage of GDP.

As for Italy’s contribution to the United Nations, Italy ranked sixth in 2006, with a share of the regular budget of around 5%. This figure is on a downward trend, but this is true of all European countries vis-à-vis emerging economies, especially from Asia.

A somewhat crude quantitative approach should lead us to conclude that Italian security and defense policy has been – for several years now – living beyond its means. A more qualitative analysis shows that hard choices cannot be postponed for long.

⁴ http://www.difesa.it/Operazioni+Militari/missioni_attività_internazionali/

⁵ Analyses of Italy’s foreign policy options based on existing (and projected) resource constraints are relatively rare: see for instance Marta Dassù e Stefano Silvestri, “Risorse e obiettivi: alla ricerca di coerenza”, *Italianieuropei*, 3/2005, pp.93-104.

⁶ *Il Ministero degli Affari Esteri in cifre. Annuario statistico 2006*, http://www.esteri.it/ita/6_40_258.asp

When the pillars shake: Italy's tough adjustment

If we assume that an updated version of the overall framework sketched above (NATO, the EU, the UN) remains valid as the main conceptual anchor of Italian security policy, a fundamental problem over the past few years has been the shift – sometimes cyclical or almost erratic – in functions, capabilities and legitimacy of all three organizations.

The focus of NATO's activities as political-security stabilizer has clearly been the Western Balkans in the 1990s, in the context of the wider regional package comprising NATO's eastward enlargement and the Partnership for Peace initiative. Even more importantly, the type of contingency for which the Alliance thought it should prepare itself since the mid-1990s had become that of a "regional conflict", very much modelled after the Bosnia crisis and later the Kosovo intervention. This produced various consequences on the EU as well, as both organizations designed structures and capabilities to counter these risks and meet these challenges. Italy – certainly not alone among the European countries – found itself in the midst of a complex transformation of its military instrument (to overcome the Cold War legacy and the sheer obsolescence of many of its national assets) and logically used the "NATO plus EU" framework to define the parameters of the transition. However, these parameters proved much more fluid than initially anticipated, partly as a consequence of the pre-eminence of US choices in the context of the Alliance and partly because of the multifaceted repercussions of 9-11.

In recent years the EU's efforts to develop a Rapid Reaction Force have been redefined as the more modest (and probably transitory) objective of the so called "Battle Groups". The fact remains that there is a tension between some of the goals set at the NATO level in the context of the NATO Response Force (NRF) and the EU's rather slow progress toward a pooling of the members' key capabilities for crisis management.

In addition, the various institutional/multilateral efforts have, at times, almost conflicted with each other for political reasons. This has been the case, for instance, with the UN since a broadening of the UNSC has become a topic for discussion, and Germany (supported by other key countries) has rather blatantly ignored its political commitment to an "EU option" in the UNSC. A different type of friction has emerged whenever the EU has been presented, intermittently, as a sort of potential alternative (or counterweight) to NATO – in practice, to the US. This was clearly the case with the embryonic EU planning cell informally discussed at the infamous "praline summit" of April 2003⁷, at the height of the Transatlantic crisis over Iraq.

A more general problem has emerged as a consequence of the evolving international security agenda at the turn of the century: the difficulty of reconciling the pursuit of specific goals in the Italian neighbourhood (essentially the Mediterranean basin) and global commitments (which tend to be costly even when small in size). It is just natural for a "middle power" like Italy to pursue regional interests as a top priority orienting the allocation of scarce resources; it is more tricky to rank and precisely define the priority

⁷ In April 2003 Belgium, France, Germany, and Luxembourg discussed the establishment of an autonomous EU headquarter, to be located in Tervuren (Belgium). The proposal sank almost immediately, after several EU members – as well as the United States – firmly opposed it, arguing that it would have brought about an improper overlap with NATO's headquarters (SHAPE).

to be assigned to international endeavours which certainly affect the country's security environment but do so in an indirect manner – such as, for instance, participation in the International Assistance Security Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

A 2004 study – conducted jointly by CeMiSS (the research arm of Italy's Defence Ministry) and the RAND Corporation – captures the key choices Italy faces in allocating its defense resources: there are two most attractive options in keeping with the country's stated security policy goals, defined respectively as “Global Niche” and “Regional Full Spectrum”⁸.

The “Global Niche” option focuses on selected capabilities for coalition operations, potentially anywhere in the world. It is designed to maximize Italian ability to contribute to coalition efforts in addressing security problems by either participating in the most demanding dimensions of expeditionary operations (first sub-option) or providing assets for the later stage of a coalition operation (second sub-option). The former would certainly imply more emphasis on rapid deployment, and the latter on sustainability. Emphasis on combat tasks would probably be equally important for both.

The “Regional Full Spectrum” option envisages that Italian armed forces will be used almost exclusively in the Mediterranean-Balkan region, across the entire range from low to high intensity operations. This would allow Italy to significantly raise its profile in the region, although its forces would still be designed mainly as part of coalition efforts.

Clearly, there would be trade-offs in any of the options (and sub-options): in particular, the Global Niche option seems to make a more relevant contribution to NATO and probably to EU objectives, although it may be somewhat easier to gain domestic support for the Regional Full Spectrum option. In terms of political risks, the specific sub-option of contributing to the later stage in the Global Niche context seems comparatively safer and less demanding.

Interestingly, the current Italian role in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan can be described almost exactly as a Global Niche contribution (in the context of the second sub-option sketched above) while the UNIFIL II mission in Lebanon fits neatly into the Regional Full Spectrum approach.

While the two options, as presented in the 2004 study, may not correspond precisely or completely to the scenarios envisaged by Italian decisionmakers and defense planners, they do seem to reflect the ongoing debates on the country's security policies as well as current trends and international challenges.

It is no accident that the Ministry of Defense's 2005 “Strategic Concept”⁹ (the latest official policy document of its kind) essentially laid out the rationale for a mix of both approaches, and refrained from making a clearcut choice, thus almost mirroring the mood of the political elites.

The Persian Gulf and North Africa regions (to which Italy's economy is closely tied due to energy dependence) are described as a nexus of several risks and potential threats: political instability, weapons proliferation (both conventional and non-conventional, including ballistic missile capabilities), international criminal networks, terrorist organizations. Even worse, the combination of these factors makes it very hard to

⁸ *Transforming Italy's Military for a New Era: Options and Challenges. A Joint Research CeMiSS-RAND*, also available at <http://www.difesa.it/backoffice/upload/allegati/2006/{F25AA8D6-7628-41CF-94C7-9058EEAFFAF3}.pdf>

⁹ *Il Concetto Strategico del Capo di Stato Maggiore della Difesa – The Chief of the Italian Defence Staff Strategic Concept*, <http://www.difesa.it/SMD/CaSMD/concetto-strategico-ca-smd/>

foresee the rise of conflicts and thus early action to prevent or counter them. The analysis also draws a less geographically narrow conclusion, however, precisely in consideration of the difficulty of “geographically isolating” potential conflict situations. Thus, the ultimate strategic scenario offered by the document explicitly identifies geographical priorities based on Italy’s national interest, while linking such priorities to a practically global set of challenges¹⁰:

- *Areas of ‘strategic interest’ which, at the moment, comprise the national territory and adjacent areas: NATO, the European Union, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, North Africa and the Horn Africa, the Near and Middle East and the Persian Gulf. These are areas in which the Political Authorities are more likely to take action for the safeguarding of the Country’s vital and/or strategic interests;*
- *“other areas”, i.e. geographical areas in which the Political Authorities may decide to intervene according to the situation. Among these the most likely interventions would be for low- or middle-intensity crisis management operations, or for humanitarian assistance in the continent of Africa.*

The specific reference to Africa is illustrative of the moving target that Italian planners must chase. The scenario of humanitarian/stabilization operations in (mostly Sub-Saharan) Africa echoes the widespread expectation in EU circles that this may become an area of specialization for ESDP and a sort of special responsibility for the EU as a whole. And Operation Artemis in 2003 has reinforced this perception. However, recent developments such as China’s growing activism in several African countries and the creation of the US Defense Department’s Africa Command (announced by the Bush Administration this February) may call for a partial reassessment. To the very least, such a fluid strategic reality in a large and diverse continent is bound to raise issues of consultation and coordination with the US.

Evidently, the regional focus of Italian defense policy is very demanding by virtue of its sheer size and complexity – stretching from Morocco to the Caucasus, from the Balkans to Somalia. In addition, the transnational and multidimensional nature of many threats is consistently stressed in the document, making an already vast region a point of departure more than a straitjacket. The impression is that there has been, to date, great reluctance to discuss the NATO and EU commitments, or the regional and global roles of the armed forces, in terms of explicit trade-offs.

Admittedly, some of the dilemmas faced by Italian policymakers undoubtedly have to do with the stark geopolitical reality that underlies the 2005 Strategic Concept: Italy’s geography makes risks and threats in the Mediterranean basin immediately relevant to the country’s security, to an extent that is not common to the three major EU countries (with the partial exception of France in relation to its large Muslim and Middle Eastern community). In any case, while countries like the UK and Germany can certainly be drawn into the region, Italy simply has no alternative to a high level of engagement. This complicates choices on how to configure the Italian armed forces in various global and/or regional scenarios. In addition, Rome can hardly ask its EU partners to allocate more “common” (or at least jointly usable) resources for Mediterranean contingencies and share more of the burden, unless Italy is clearly committed to raising its national profile in the region – which almost inevitably would imply tough budget decisions.

¹⁰ Op.cit., pp.27-30.

In parallel, Italy is engaged in an effort to plug into the multinational (but largely US-led) system of highly trained, rapidly deployable and flexible forces, as clearly stated in the Defense Ministry's Strategic Concept¹¹. Partly as a consequence, the document specifies that

*A certain amount of highly combat-ready forces for brief and intense engagements must be planned from the initial phases of any possible crisis*¹².

Decision time has not arrived yet, but it cannot be far, given the resource crunch of the past few years.

The policy trend is rather clear: under both center-left and center-right governments, Italy has been at the forefront of efforts to pursue the Civilian Headline Goal¹³ in the ESDP framework, as launched in June 2000, and has reiterated its commitment to cover "up to 15%" of the assets and capabilities in the context of the original EU Rapid Reaction Force. It has subsequently confirmed its position as a leading contributor in the context of the EU "Battle Groups", formally launched in November 2004 – one wholly national battalion and two combined battalions with Hungary and Slovenia. Rome has been equally active in the promotion of an EU gendarmerie/constabulary force since September 2004, hosting it in Vicenza¹⁴.

This array of commitments might suggest a "wide spectrum" (if not full spectrum) approach, and is indeed confirmed by the circumstance that Italian troops have been involved in almost all the EU-led operations; however, a closer look at the allocation of resources actually indicates that priorities have emerged¹⁵. The only major operation – probably unique in political significance as a precedent – in which Italy has not directly participated is Artemis, a French-led military mission in the democratic Republic of Congo in 2003; and the Italian contribution to the Aceh Monitoring Mission (in Indonesia) was pretty limited in 2005-06. These observations suggest – or at least are compatible with – a conception of ESDP which views it as a primarily regional instrument. It is thus natural that Italy decided to play a leading role in the nearly simultaneous EUBAM Rafah operation (along the Gaza-Egypt border).

It is worth emphasizing that the latest developments in both the NATO and EU frameworks are all formally predicated on the assumption that the two organizations will become more – not less – complementary and interdependent. However, it is no secret that obstacles abound on this path. An additional difficulty is that a significant number of multinational operations have recently been launched outside these institutionalized channels. As a consequence, on the basis of sheer practical experience, it is very hard for planners to confidently put all their eggs in one basket (or two

¹¹ Op.cit., p.37

¹² The previous approach is qualified by the following statement: *emphasis will be placed less on 'combat' capabilities and more on 'combat support', 'combat service support' and availability of adequate command structures*". However, this caveat does not seem to change the overall mixed nature of Italy's defense posture.

¹³ The so called "Civilian Headline Goal" was agreed by the EU Council in 2004 to boost development of the civilian dimension of an EU crisis management capability in the context of ESDP. In particular, civilian ESDP capabilities should be deployable within 30 days of the decision to launch a mission, either autonomously or jointly with military operations. Highly trained personnel include border police officers, justice administrators, civil protection officers.

¹⁴ See www.difesa.it for official data on Italy's commitments and missions.

¹⁵ For a richly documented review of Italian security policy in recent years, see Antonio Missiroli, "Italy's security and defence policy - between EU and US, or just Prodi and Berlusconi?", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 2/2007.

baskets, for that matter). In fact, a good argument can be made for preserving some freedom of national action, i.e. a limited national option, at least as a hedging strategy.

Italy's prominent role in the UNIFIL II mission corroborates this hypothesis. In Summer 2006, Italy took on a leading (and high risk) security role in Southern Lebanon by providing the backbone – alongside a French contingent – of an “enhanced” UNIFIL mission (based on UNSC Res. 1701) to upgrade the tiny UN presence in the aftermath of the “Summer war” between Hezbollah militants and the Israeli forces. Although, as the name indicates, this is undeniably a UN operation, the deployment required reaching an ad hoc arrangement¹⁶ to ensure that Italian and French authorities had full control over all operational decisions. The fact that this proved necessary is further evidence that the UN's role in multinational interventions continues to shift and cannot offer a stable point of reference for planning.

The problem goes well beyond the UN: the force generation process for UNIFIL II has been described by some observers as an EU success, given the political support provided by the EU Council at the critical juncture (in the presence of the UN Secretary General)¹⁷. However, there has been no formal EU commitment to the mission as such on the ground, and the procedures of ESDP were not activated in relation to Lebanon. This somewhat ambiguous interpretation of the “EU role” – coming in the form of national contributions by individual EU members – has been offered by none other than Javier Solana in a couple of interviews in August 2006¹⁸. But the phenomenon is not simply an attempt to boost the prestige of the Union or rally its more reluctant members to the help of those that have taken more active measures; it is rather a manifestation of the much wider trend toward institutional overlap and even confusion at the international level.

After all, the risky adjustment to this reality of weak or incomplete institutional frameworks for security operations had begun as early as 1997 for Italy, when Rome decided to undertake Operation Alba – in Albania – with very little international support, despite having sought such support in all existing fora at the time¹⁹. The fact the mission was almost unanimously considered a success does not detract from the observation that it had a very problematic gestation.

The burden of choice: how the government's colour makes a difference

A key to understanding Italy's recent behaviour in the main international settings is the gradual and difficult adaptation to what can be called the “burden of choice”, i.e. the need to take concrete responsibilities in the field of international security in an uncertain

¹⁶ A “Military Strategic Cell” was set up in New York, within the Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), led initially by an Italian General and currently by a French General. Although the Director of the Cell reports to the UN Secretary General, the key innovation is that the commander on the ground in Lebanon responds directly to the Cell (not to DPKO as such).

¹⁷ See for example <http://www.isis-europe.org/ftp/Download/ESR30.Lebanon.pdf>

¹⁸ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/IT/sghr_int/90890.pdf He stated that “Without the UN force there would be no peace. Without Europe there would be no UN force. The Europeans constitute the backbone of the contingent”.

¹⁹ In the face of a collapse of law and order in nearby Albania, Italy obtained a mandate from the UNSC and staged a one-off coalition operation with limited contributions by half a dozen European countries. Although lacking any institutional basis, this became the first operation conducted exclusively by European forces.

environment. The degree of widespread consensus that was painfully reached in the course of the Cold War on the main elements of national security policy, has proved of little use in a radically changed international scenario.

The Italian political system has come under great strain in this regard, and both center-right and center-left governments in recent years have failed to develop a fully coherent policy approach to replace – or at least update – the previous one.

Unlike the UK and France, and certainly to a greater extent, Italy is a country whose foreign policy style and rhetoric are significantly affected by the type of parliamentary majority at any given time, even in the framework of an agreed set of constraints and institutionalized international commitments. A mixture of change and continuity is obviously to be expected in any democratic country going through its normal political-electoral cycles. What seems to distinguish the Italian case over the last decade or so is the fact that the rhetorical innovations introduced by the Berlusconi government between 2001 and 2006 have been more pronounced than at any time since the Second World War. So the question arises: was it a break with the past?

Although “counterfactual” analyses – based on purely hypothetical scenarios which failed to materialize – are always tricky, it may be instructive to develop a couple of counterfactuals to illustrate both the importance and the limits of different political majorities in affecting security policy. The first counterfactual has to do with the direct impact of 9-11: would the Berlusconi governments have taken a more cautious (and less pro-US) course in the absence of the 9-11 choices imposed on all its allies by the Bush Administration – essentially based on the question “with us or against us”? The answer is: probably yes. In other words, circumstances largely determined the extent to which the center-right interpreted the role of close ally to President Bush, and cast Italy’s contribution by giving a clear priority to the Rome-Washington link vis-à-vis the three layers of NATO, the EU, and the UN.

But it seems fair to say that several elements of continuity with the past figured prominently, even under such exceptional conditions, most notably in the practical decision not to contribute directly to the invasion of Iraq: Italy’s military contribution was thus constrained by the official declaration that the country considered itself a “non belligerent”. Italy played no active role in the invasion per se.

The second counterfactual is more straightforward: would a center-left government have taken a different stance on the Iraqi invasion in 2003? The simple answer is: certainly yes. There can be virtually no doubt that a center-left Prime Minister would not have signed the “letter of 8” published in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 30, 2003, which politically sanctioned the split between “new” and “old” Europeans.

It is widely recognized that the particular attitude of the Bush administration to international security in the aftermath of 9-11 has significantly complicated relations with the allies. Thus, we might conclude that part of the difficulty in adjusting to the changing international environment is not structural but contingent. Be it as it may, Italian governments since 2001 have had to navigate uncharted waters and still have to find a reliable map; in the meantime, both a center-right and a center-left coalition government opted for declaratory policies which claim to embody the best tradition of the country’s foreign policy – i.e. a balanced mix of its Transatlantic and European dimensions. In practice, however, such a stance has become increasingly hollow.

The Iraqi affaire has cast such a dark shadow over Transatlantic relations largely because choices made in Washington have produced ripple effects in the entire Middle East region while de facto depriving both NATO and the EU of any meaningful influence. Even worse, the handling of the decision to invade the country divided not just the Atlantic but also the Europeans among themselves, thus polarizing Italian domestic politics so deeply that the Iraqi experience continues – four years on – to reduce the chances of wide and sustained bipartisan support for other missions – including Afghanistan, despite the uncontested UN legitimacy enjoyed by ISAF.

According to the same logic, the climate of Transatlantic relations can also positively affect the incentives to reach compromises with the US and other traditionally pro-US European countries. For instance, in hindsight the case can be made that in the course of the 1990s a Democratic President in Washington produced a Transatlantic climate which was more conducive to compromise choices by center-left political forces on the Continent. This was probably true for NATO enlargement and for the very controversial decision to activate the Alliance in managing the violent collapse of Yugoslavia. These choices, in turn, enabled Italy to take a higher profile in common security endeavours than would have been otherwise possible: witness how a Prime Minister from the former Italian Communist Party, Massimo D'Alema, was able in 1999 to gather sufficient domestic support for the active Italian participation in a NATO military operation (over Kosovo) that lacked an explicit UNSC mandate. The D'Alema government had to rely for Parliamentary approval on the votes of part of the opposition (hence it was argued that a different majority existed on foreign policy issues), but a very controversial decision was made and carried out nonetheless²⁰.

The presumed “special ties” among a generation of leaders from the moderate left – more or less coinciding with Anthony Giddens’ “Third Way” – probably smoothed out some serious political obstacles when it came to work in a multilateral setting. It proved certainly easier for the Italian center-left to reach compromises with leaders like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair than it would have been – and has been – with a figure like G.W. Bush.

In a 2004 analysis of Italian foreign policy toward the US²¹, the prediction was made that one key feature of “life after Iraq” would be a realignment in Europe: away from the artificial division between “new” and “old” Europeans and toward a new balance based on the lessons of the Atlantic crisis over Iraq. The underlying assumption was that both the French and the British approach to the “American problem” before the Iraqi invasion had failed badly (the French could not stop the invasion and could not rally “Europe” behind its opposition to Washington; the British could hardly influence the Americans both before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein) – and that Italian foreign policy would be under great strain unless that gap was somehow bridged.

The Transatlantic pillar (Euro-American relations) and the European pillar (CFSP/ESDP) have become inextricably intertwined, and we may be on the verge of a push to restructure both. The good news is that the new constellation of power in Europe (Merkel’s Grand Coalition in Berlin, Sarkozy at the Elysée, and soon Brown at

²⁰ Significant components of the governing coalition abstained in the Senate.

²¹ Marta Dassù and Roberto Menotti, “Italy and the United States: from Old to New Atlanticism – and Back”, in Christina V. Balis and Simon Serfaty (eds.), *Visions of America and Europe. September 11, Iraq, and Transatlantic Relations*, the CSIS Press, Washington, D.C., 2004, pp.159-180.

10 Downing Street) seems about to change the policy mix as anticipated in the 2004 analysis – which implies that convergence toward more pragmatic and balanced positions is realistically possible. The bad news, from Italy’s perspective, is that Italian security policy remains dangerously vulnerable to the dynamics – sometimes the vagaries – of domestic politics, at the risk of inhibiting its ability to fully contribute to the new phase.

In the meantime, a strong sense of urgency is being imposed by events unfolding very far away – notably in Afghanistan. There, the role of Italian troops in the ISAF framework enjoys wide bipartisan support and uncontested international legitimacy, and yet poses a constant dilemma to the current government – as it would, arguably, to any government in Rome. The issue of “national caveats”, however important to NATO solidarity and to certain specific military objectives, practically diverts attention from the deeper problem of how to best integrate military force in a wider strategy.

The fundamental question that now bears on our presence in Afghanistan should be at the heart of a fresh and open debate on Italy’s international security role: what is exactly the additional contribution we can make for each additional euro spent on defense and each additional citizen (in uniform or otherwise) sent to distant lands in harm’s way? Until this question is convincingly answered, the burden of choice will continue to grow without a comparable increase in Italy’s global standing and ability to achieve its objectives.