



The Italian Government and NATO's New Strategic Concept

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Abstract

The conservative report on NATO's new Strategic Concept, written by a group of experts chaired by Madeleine Albright, suits Italy's status-quo oriented agenda. As long as NATO does not shift its focus away from Europe, the renewed emphasis on expeditionary capabilities is acceptable to the Italian government. The Italians could also find comfort in the report's insistence on calibrating NATO ambitions to its actual resources and capacities. Italy could insist on making the advantages of NATO-EU cooperation more explicit, as this would favour EU defence integration, which in turn may help save money and maintain acceptable military standards. The section on NATO's relationship with Russia is the part of the Albright report with which Italy is perhaps most uncomfortable, as it seems to perpetuate NATO's ambiguity towards Russia. In the final analysis, assuming that the Albright report is a credible preview of the next Strategic Concept, the Italian government seems to have little reason to lose sleep over it.

Keywords: *NATO's military doctrine / Italy / Italian military policy / European Union / Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) / NATO-EU cooperation / Russia*

The Italian Government and NATO's New Strategic Concept

by Riccardo Alcaro*

Introduction

On May 17, 2010, a group of twelve experts, chaired by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, handed NATO's Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen a report recommending a number of policy options for reviewing NATO's Strategic Concept. NATO leaders are expected to endorse the new strategic document at the Alliance's summit in Lisbon next November.

The Albright report – *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement* – has disappointed those who thought that entrusting such an intellectual exercise to an independent group of experts could result in out-of-the box proposals that would challenge the conventional wisdom and strategic assumptions deeply rooted in NATO members' political and security communities. Indeed, the overall impression is that the group of experts deliberately opted for a text which could be deemed acceptable by most, if not all, allies. Even though it is not yet possible to guess exactly what the next Strategic Concept will look like, one can bet that it will not differ that much from the experts' output. From this point of view, the Albright report offers at least the advantage of providing a credible preview of the Alliance's new strategic document.

This is not to say that all members agree with everything the report says. Each member state has its own list of priorities, and it is no secret that a comparison of such lists would expose, at the very least, as many differences as commonalities. The Strategic Concept is, after all, a consensual document based on compromise, as is the report that the experts chaired by Madame Secretary (as Ms Albright was also known during her heyday at the State Department) worked out after months of internal debate and external consultations (the group organised a number of conferences and workshops, and also paid visits to some of NATO's most important interlocutors, Russia included). This makes any attempt at spotting the differences between the report's conclusions and the position of individual member states a rather difficult task, as a compromise-oriented approach is by default incorporated into the strategic thinking of the allies (or at least should be).

Nonetheless, taking into consideration how the report has been received in individual member states cannot be reduced to an academic exercise. Instead, it can lead to a better understanding of the level of individual allies' commitment to NATO's declared objectives. In the case of Italy, the analysis would begin best by recalling why successive Italian governments since the end of the Cold War have retained that NATO still matters, and greatly matters, for national security.

In sum, as of today, what are the key interests at stake in Italy's participation and membership in NATO?

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Why NATO still matters for Italy

The first and also the most obvious rationale for Italy's continued membership in NATO is that the Alliance provides it with a much stronger guarantee of territorial integrity than the Italian armed forces would ever be able to provide alone. A second reason is that participation in NATO implies the standardization of armed forces and serves as a steady and constant incentive for Italy to upgrade its military capabilities. Moreover, the standardization of armed forces is also a prerequisite for upholding the competitiveness of Italian defence products in allied markets. The Italian defence sector is characterized by a deep imbalance between the supply side and the demand side, as Italian defence companies such as Finmeccanica are oversized with regard to the resources the state devotes to defence. Thus, in order to maintain or expand their size, they need to access much bigger markets: the European market in the first place, and the US market in the second place. Another factor is that NATO is the key guarantor of stability in an area which is absolutely fundamental for Italian security such as the Balkans. NATO also continues to offer privileged access to the US for midsize countries such as Italy. Finally, membership in NATO is a strong asset in Italy's relations with two key partners, Russia and Turkey.

These are, broadly speaking, the primary reasons for NATO's persisting relevance to Italy's security interests. Of course, NATO also provides a layer of protection from such threats as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, piracy, cyber security breaches, maritime security threats, regional crises and so on. And yet all these risk factors, for all their importance, can hardly be seen as being as vital as the ones mentioned above. This is also true for crisis management. While the latter was crucial in the 1990s, when the crises NATO mostly focused on were in the Balkans, which is in Italy's immediate vicinity, it is less so nowadays.

Italy and the Albright report

In light of the above, how does the Italian government see the Albright report on NATO's new Strategic Concept? What is Italy's position on the various issues into which NATO leaders will need to delve deeper next November, when they convene in Lisbon to endorse the new document?

One need not go through the whole document, as Italy does not have a specific position on each aspect covered by the report. For a preliminary assessment, it will suffice to concentrate on those parts of the report that are most relevant to Italian interests. In synthesis, these are:

- the so called strategic dilemma between NATO as a Europe-centred organisation and the drive that brings NATO to be active far away from the Euro-Atlantic area;
- NATO's relations with the European Union;
- and NATO's partnership with Russia.

Regional vs. global NATO

Regarding the first point: a regional or a global NATO?¹, Italy, by instinct, is definitely a supporter of a Europe-centred NATO. The size and geographic location of Italy make it a country whose primary security interests are regional. Italy has a strong interest in avoiding insecurity spillovers from troubled neighbouring regions. In this regard, the experience of the Balkan wars in the 1990s has taught Italian policy-makers and defence planners some lessons. The first is that national security may imply intervening in unstable areas in the country's vicinity, including through military means, in the framework of a pacification and then a stabilisation effort. During the 1990s Italy did so three times in the Balkans: in Bosnia, Albania (in an ad hoc mission conducted in 1997), and Kosovo. Another lesson is that NATO is not only an added value, but a necessary asset in Italy's policy of stabilising its neighbourhood. The third lesson the Italian political and military leadership learned from the Balkan experience is that such stabilisation efforts are hugely demanding in terms of personnel, political capital (and all the more so if not carried out within a multilateral framework and under UN auspices), and financial resources. At least in theory, Italy would do best to join in these missions only when its direct security interests are at stake. So Italy has a strong interest in keeping NATO – its main military asset – anchored to Europe.

On the other hand, however, both the political leadership (and this includes the current opposition as well) and security and defence strategists clearly and explicitly acknowledge the need for NATO to further develop its crisis management profile, including by envisaging a potential military role for the Alliance far away from the Euro-Atlantic area. There are several reasons for this. First, to a certain extent Italy feels exposed to threats such as terrorism, illicit trafficking, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, which tend to proliferate where state control is very weak or absent. So, Italy does see the need to manage crises even though they are not taking place in the immediate vicinity of the Euro-Atlantic zone. The second reason behind Italy's support for NATO as a crisis manager/responder is that the US wants NATO to evolve this way. Italian governments of every colour, and in particular the one currently in power, attach great importance to how they are considered in the US. The quite simple calculation is that drawing Washington's attention also implies meeting US demands halfway. The Silvio Berlusconi governments have gone the extra mile in abiding by this non-written principle of Italian foreign policy, for instance by supporting the American invasion of Iraq or responding positively to the Obama administration's call for sending additional troops to Afghanistan last winter. Italy agreed to send in one thousand more soldiers, a considerable increase of its military presence there. The need to develop expeditionary force capability for Italy also hinges on its concern about being left behind by other NATO countries and consequently losing influence and prestige within the Alliance.

To conclude the point on this first issue, Italy is mid-way between those NATO member states that think of NATO as basically a Europe-centred military organisation and those other members who would like to see it ever more active across the globe. By default, Italy is a supporter of NATO as a territorial defender and a regional stabiliser; by strategic calculations, Italy recognises the importance of sharpening NATO's crisis

¹ I summarize this problem this way, although under 'global' NATO I do not mean a NATO whose membership extends globally, but rather a NATO that operates across the globe as a sort of international security agency.

management/response capacity irrespective of the geographical area where such capacity is used. Italy does see the intrinsic tension between these two drives, but still it retains that this tension must be constructively managed, for this is the only way for NATO to continue to have some relevance in the future (and, through NATO, for Italy itself to have some relevance).

NATO-EU cooperation

The second point in the Albright report that concerns Italy's interests the most is NATO's relations with the EU. The language on EU-NATO relations in the report is quite minimalistic and it would come as no surprise if the Italians were to push for putting some more substance into the new strategic document's section dedicated to this issue. In Italy's eyes, ensuring smooth EU-NATO cooperation is the only way by which the foreign and security policy platforms of their member states might reach a greater degree of coherence. Precisely because of this, Italian governments tend to look favourably upon a situation in which NATO's European membership is as close as possible to the European Union's membership. They are consequently strongly in favour of integrating the Balkan countries into both bodies and equally supportive of the integration of Turkey into the EU. Again for the same reason, Italy is sceptical of further expanding NATO eastwards. In fact, both right-of-centre and left-of-centre governments have opposed the idea of accepting Georgia and Ukraine into NATO.

Creating synergy between NATO and the EU is important for Italy also because this has the potential to reduce, at least partially, the pressure on its stretched military budget. In sync with the majority of allies, the Italian government must have appreciated the emphasis the Albright report places on calibrating NATO's tasks with a realistic assessment of the available resources. Recently Italy, like other countries in Europe, has struggled to maintain its support for NATO-, EU-, and UN-led peace-support operations. For the time being and also for the foreseeable future, any Italian government is unlikely to raise the defence budget. On the contrary, military expenditures are bound to decline sharply as the government adopts fiscal austerity measures in order to contain the effects of the economic crisis on its troubled public finances. For Italy, therefore, containing the rising costs of military equipment and personnel is a *sine qua non* for maintaining its military commitments abroad. From this point of view, integration of EU defence markets and integration of EU member states' security and defence policies is an obligatory path. But this would hardly be achievable if it were not carried out in line with NATO's broader strategic orientation. Italy thinks that its role as a security actor is structurally linked to EU integration, which should happen in a way consistent with the way NATO is developing. Italy's leadership is firmly convinced that NATO and the EU can indeed develop useful synergies and be complementary. The Italian government would probably support the new Strategic Concept hinting at a kind of 'reverse Berlin plus' arrangement, according to which NATO could count on the EU's provision of civilian crisis management assets.

NATO's relationship with Russia

The section of the Albright report on NATO-Russia relations is arguably the one the Italian leadership feels most uncomfortable with. As a matter of fact, the report

perpetuates an ambiguity which has characterized NATO's stance towards Russia since 1991. Italy fears that NATO's ambivalent approach to Russia risks producing less, rather than more, security in the Euro-Atlantic area, as was painfully shown by the heated tensions that characterised the second terms of the US and Russian presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir V. Putin.

Italy certainly agrees with the report when it states that Moscow should be seen as a partner and NATO should double its efforts to build a constructive partnership with Russia. It also agrees with the idea of reviving the NATO-Russia Council (which Berlusconi sees as a personal accomplishment, as the council was established during the 2002 summit in Pratica di Mare, a town close to Rome), and certainly welcomes the call for reactivating key arms control and other confidence-building measures such as the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. But it is wary of the upgrading of military infrastructure in Eastern Europe, it is opposed to reactivating full contingency planning for a conflict in Europe, and does not look upon exercises simulating a war in Europe favourably, since all these measures would likely be seen in Moscow as implicitly hostile and would feed Russian leadership's zero-sum game mentality.

Italy has a strong national interest in good relations with Russia, in particular due to the flourishing energy relationship between the two. But Italy's strategic thinking on Russia goes beyond energy. Italy sees Russia as a fundamental component of the European security architecture and part of NATO's process of self-definition. NATO and the EU, according to Italy, would be better off if they adopted an engagement-oriented approach towards Moscow because at the end of the day, this is the best option for ensuring Europe's long-term security.

Italy's keen interest in having good relations with Moscow has contributed to spreading the opinion that it is ready to accord Russia preference over its commitments to policies agreed upon at the NATO or EU level. In fact, Italy has sometimes pursued its Russia-friendly approach at the expense of inter-allied and, above all, intra-EU solidarity. The Italian-Russian bilateral agreement over the South Stream project, the gas pipeline under the Black Sea which runs counter to the EU's policy of diversifying energy source countries, is the main case in point. The image of Italy as an 'appeaser' vis-à-vis Russia is easily conveyed by the media because of the strong and highly publicised personal connection between prime minister Putin and prime minister Berlusconi. This way of personalizing an interstate relationship has probably done more harm than good to Italy, because it dents its reputation within NATO and the EU as a reliable ally and partner. But Italy would seek good relations with Russia irrespective of who sits in the office of the president (or prime minister, for that matter!) in Moscow or Rome.

Describing Italy as an 'appeaser' vis-à-vis Russia would however be unfair. That Italy favours engagement over confrontation with Russia does not mean that it sides with Russia on all issues. While championing a policy of dialogue with Russia, Italy is convinced that it needs some leverage in order to have Russia cooperate constructively, and this leverage is provided by the EU in the first place and NATO's security assets in the second place. Accordingly, the Italian government has expressed strong support for the Obama administration's reformulation of Bush's missile defence scheme. The government likes Obama's plan and did not like Bush's not only because the former seems to be less contentious for the Russians. An equally important reason is that Obama's missile defence plan, in contrast with Bush's, is apparently designed to protect NATO allies and not mainly the continental US. Italy favours the idea, put forward by Secretary General Rasmussen, of possibly cooperating with Russia in the development of a missile defence capacity. But it would continue to support the missile

shield even if Russia were to drop its so far rather moderate stance and shift towards a confrontational attitude the way it did during the last two years of Putin's presidency. The Italian government is also against any significant change, at least in the short term, in the deployment of US tactical or sub-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, not least because it thinks that they continue to provide some leverage on Russia. Italy is a bit concerned about Germany and the Benelux countries' intentions on this issue. What the government in Rome fears is not that Germany may decide to remove the bombs from its territory at once, as it trusts that Berlin would not act unilaterally. The Italian leadership is worried that the German government could fail to take a decision on the upgrading of the delivery systems (the US tactical nuclear weapons are gravity bombs carried by host countries' aircraft) which would extend their life beyond 2020. If such a decision is not taken in a couple of years, the weapons deployed in Germany would become completely useless. This might produce pressure to move the arms to other NATO member states. Even though there is currently an understanding that NATO's tactical nuclear weapons should not be transferred to other members, this could change. Since the only allies possibly willing to accept those weapons are in Eastern Europe, where countries once under Soviet rule continue to feel threatened by Russia, a development of this sort would risk provoking a serious escalation with the Kremlin. Italy is very conservative on this specific issue and as such is in tune with the report, with the exception of the line which hints at the possibility of the geographical redistribution of tactical nuclear weapons (if this means redistribution inside Europe and not return to the US).

Conclusion

The overwhelmingly conservative orientation of the Albright report is unlikely to be reversed during the elaboration of the first draft of the Strategic Concept by the NATO Secretary General's staff or during the ensuing negotiations among the Alliance's member states. If anything, the end result could be even more low profile than the report itself. An outcome of this sort would suit Italy's status quo-oriented agenda, even though there would certainly continue to be aspects of the new strategy which Italy does not feel fully comfortable with.

The call for NATO to continue transforming its military along an expeditionary force pattern, for instance, will result in lingering pressure on Italy to devote more resources to defence. But one must reckon that the Italian government has long come to terms with the fact that NATO needs to equip itself for military operations at a 'strategic distance' (in NATO jargon, this means any region on Earth where allies feel compelled to act). As long as NATO's evolution into a kind of international security organisation does not shift its focus away from Europe, the insistence on expeditionary capabilities is acceptable to – and accepted in – Rome. Moreover, even if the emphasis put on this point by the Albright report is entirely reflected in the Strategic Concept, the Italians might find some comfort in the fact that the report also insists on calibrating the ambitions according to the resources.

On this basis, Italy could insist on making the advantages of smooth NATO-EU cooperation more explicit, as it is firmly convinced that this would favour EU defence integration, which in turn is the only way to save money and maintain acceptable standards at the same time.

NATO's relationship with Russia is the part of the Albright report which Italy is most

likely to expend some energy trying to soften. Beyond the short-sighted defence of parochial interests – especially in the energy dimension – and the unwise tendency of prime minister Berlusconi to take Putin's defence at every occasion, Italy's concern about treating Russia with ambivalence stems from the sincere conviction that this is counterproductive. Even if it were to accept that the Strategic Concept contains language similar to that of the Albright report on contingency planning, military exercises and infrastructures upgrade, the Italian government would probably continue to work on watering down the effect of such measures.

In sum, if one is right to assume that the Albright report anticipates much of the content and tone of NATO's next Strategic Concept, the Italian government is hardly losing sleep over it.

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