

Unlocking Strategic Potential Outside the EU: Italy-Turkey Bilateral Partnership in Defence

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This paper analyses the evolving Italy-Turkey partnership in the field of defence within the broader framework of NATO and the European Union. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and growing instability in the Middle East, Italy – particularly in its role within the “Enlarged Mediterranean” – has reinforced its commitment to Euro-Atlantic security, positioning itself within both NATO structures and the EU's ongoing efforts to enhance its defence capabilities. Turkey occupies an ambiguous position: while remaining a key NATO ally, it is largely excluded from emerging EU defence initiatives. The EU's limited willingness to structurally engage Ankara has created a structural gap between European defence integration and NATO's southern flank, prompting Italy to explore bilateral cooperation as a complementary channel. The paper argues that Italy-Turkey relations thus reflect a triangular balancing act between national interests, NATO commitments and the evolving architecture of EU defence.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the renewed and growing instability in the Middle East, Italy has ramped up its engagement with international partners in the realms of defence and security. Its proactive foreign policy approach coincides with Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's vision, which sees Italy as an independent and proactive power keen to cultivate old and new partnership. In this context, Turkey has been confirmed by Rome as a key partner to enhance regional security, even if President Erdoğan's ambitions to reinforce Turkey as a regional player and as a flexible international interlocutor only partly align with Italy's outlook. A clear example of this shift is demonstrated by the June 2025 agreement between Italy's Leonardo and Turkey's Baykar to jointly develop drones, indicating deeper defence industry collaboration. Moreover, the growing insecurity of the contemporary international order – formally still “rule-based” yet increasingly multipolar – has in theory reinforced

the strategic argument for the European Union to value Turkey as a relevant partner in advancing Europe's defence and security objectives. In practice, however, the EU has so far shown limited willingness to structurally engage Ankara in its emerging defence initiatives, despite Turkey's role as a NATO ally. This gap between strategic rationale and political implementation helps explain why cooperation has increasingly developed outside the EU framework, notably through bilateral partnerships such as that between Italy and Turkey.

The issue of Italy-Turkey relations is of considerable importance, yet it remains relatively marginal in recent IR literature and expert analyses. Precisely because of this mismatch – between the strategic relevance of the topic and the limited scholarly debate – it is particularly valuable to address this gap by examining more closely the bilateral relationship, highlighting their cooperation within NATO and beyond,

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while stressing the pragmatic approach adopted by both countries. While Rome and Ankara aim to strengthen their respective strategic influence, their approaches diverge: Italy leans toward aligning with European and NATO security priorities, whereas Turkey adopts a “trading state” approach, building ties with China, Russia, India and others in the Global South, while positioning itself as a secondary military power within NATO.

Other disagreements persist, including their respective roles in Mediterranean and concerning broader regional geopolitics. The relationship is shaped by a careful balancing act: Rome collaborates with Turkey when feasible but stays cautious in areas of strategic contention, reflecting broader European scepticism toward Ankara, driven by ongoing political and security challenges.

1. Partners with nuances: Italy-Turkey strategic dynamics

Italy and Turkey, due to their positions and strategic interests, share a geographical and geopolitical area of critical importance for today’s international balance.

Italy, historically a border country along the so-called “Iron-Curtain” during the Cold War, has over the years pursued a foreign policy heavily influenced by the importance (and the nuanced, shifting concept) of borders. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Italy seemed to have lost its position and practical function at the borders with the former Communist world and consequently tried to redefine its position on NATO’s southern flank, making use of its location in the central Mediterranean. This appears as more than a strategic calculation: Rome also sought to reaffirm its place as a founding member of European integration and a partner that could be relied upon in the transatlantic framework, even if its influence was sometimes underestimated. The 1990 proved decisively: Italy played an active role in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and later in Kosovo, while at the same time it was investing political capital in Europe’s transformation, from the Maastricht Treaty to the adoption of the euro in 2002. These years showed how Rome could combine regional activism with a stronger

political commitment with historical allies. After 9/11, Italian foreign policy became even more complex. Loyalty to the United States led to the participation in Afghanistan and, more controversially, in Iraq with the operation “Ancient Babylon”, started on July 2003 (under the second Silvio Berlusconi’s government) and ended on December 2006 (with the second Romano Prodi’s government).¹ Yet this Atlantic dimension coexisted with Rome’s ambitions to help shape a common European foreign and security policy. The leadership of UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) and MIBIL (*Missione bilaterale di addestramento delle Forze Armate in Libano*) in Lebanon, as well as the frequent commands of EU and NATO operations in the Western Balkans and the significant contribution to those in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, are among the clearest indicators of Italian international engagement in this period, that required both credibility and diplomatic skills.²

Italy’s path has been steadier, though not without its own contradictions. Since the aftermath of World War II, Italy’s foreign policy has been shaped by governments and politicians which worked to position the country in a way that alleviated the constraints imposed by a polarised and ideologically divided political system.³ Rome has consequently tried to keep

¹ Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Iraq - Antica Babilonia*, <https://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni-oltremare/iraq--antica-babilonia/94119.html>.

² In 2025, the Italian Parliament has approved the extension of deployment of a militar contingent in Lebanon and the Eastern Mediterranean. The decisions concerns UNIFIL, MIBIL and a third mission, MIADIT (Bilateral Mission to Train the Palestinian Security Forces). The maximum size of the national contingent employed in the three missions amount to 1,650 personnel, 376 land vehicles, 1 naval unit and 5 aircraft. The financial requirement for the period from 1 January to 31 December 2025 is 177,640,912 euros, of which 46,289,000 corresponds to obligations payable in 2026. It should be recalled that in 2024 Italy participated in UNIFIL with a maximum of contingent of 1,292 personnel, 375 land vehicles, 7 aircraft and 1 naval unit. See Italian Government, *Relazione analitica sulle missioni internazionali in corso e sullo stato degli interventi di cooperazione allo sviluppo a sostegno dei processi di pace e di stabilizzazione, riferita all'anno 2024*, 19 febbraio 2025, <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1446078.pdf>.

³ As Carlo Maria Santoro noted in 1991, Italy’s status was often seen as uncertain and ambivalent, positioned somewhere between being the “least of the great powers” and the “largest of the smaller powers”. Santoro, Carlo Maria, *La politica estera di una media potenza. L'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*,



three plates spinning at once: its Atlantic alliance with Washington, its role in the European project and its responsibilities in the Mediterranean.⁴ Italian governments, regardless of political colour, learned to use this balancing act as a survival strategy in the Cold War years and beyond. Being a founding member of European integration process helped Italy reduce overdependence on the United States, while still maintaining credibility as a NATO ally. At the same time, the Mediterranean remained a constant point of reference, partly for the geography and partly for the identity. Italian diplomacy invested heavily in maritime security, energy corridors and stability operations, from Lebanon to Libya, often punching above its weight thanks to a mix of credibility and persistence.

From its own side, Turkey, linking geographically Europe, Asia and the Middle East, holds a pivotal position between the Black Sea and the (Eastern) Mediterranean, controlling the Bosphorus Straits, a key transit point in both peacetime and wartime, especially considering the Convention of Montreux signed in 1936. Over the last twenty years, Turkish foreign policy has shifted in ways that would have been difficult to imagine in the 1990s. Under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), Ankara revived the idea of neo-Ottomanism – not as a nostalgic dream, but as a framework to project influence across former Ottoman lands. This strategy mixed cultural diplomacy, political outreach and economic ties, while also reasserting Turkey’s sense of historical depth in regional affairs. What started as a soft-power narrative soon become more pragmatic. Turkey increasingly behaved like a “trading state”,⁵ using commerce, mobility and economic diplomacy as key tools of leverage. These choices were not abstract: they reshaped relations with Mediterranean neighbours, from North Africa to the Levant, and tied Turkey’s external reach to tangible concerns such as energy security, migration routes and the

Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991.

⁴ Andreatta, Filippo, “Italian Foreign Policy: Domestic Politics, International Requirements and the European Dimension”, in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2008), p. 169-181, DOI 10.1080/07036330801959564.

⁵ On this concept see among others Kirişçi, Kemal, “The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State”, in *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40 (2009), p. 29-57, DOI 10.1017/S0896634600005203.

management of regional conflicts. The result has been a foreign policy that blends ambition rooted in history with the pragmatism of a state eager to remain relevant in a volatile environment.⁶

Yet, for much of the modern era, the so-called “Enlarged Mediterranean” was not central to Turkey’s self-image.⁷ The region was often reduced to a handful of issues – the Cyprus dispute, the Arab-Israeli conflict, or the occasional crisis spilling over from the Middle East. Turkey resisted being branded a “Mediterranean power”, worried that such a label would weaken its European credentials or distract from its Central Asian outreach. This ambivalence became clear in 2007, when Ankara opposed French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s proposal for a Mediterranean Union, fearing that it would sideline Turkey’s EU accession bid at a delicate moment.

Put side by side, these two stories underline a paradox. Italy and Turkey are both indispensable to the Mediterranean, but in very different ways. Italy, steady and cautious, has often acted as a stabiliser. Turkey, restless and ambitious, has sought to expand its reach and reinvent its regional role. Their overlapping concerns – security, energy, migration – create natural opportunities for cooperation. And yet, the asymmetry between Rome’s balancing posture and Ankara’s expansive drive often produces tensions, a stark reminder that proximity does not always translate into partnership.

During the trilateral meeting in the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul on 1 August 2025, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan welcomed Italian Minister Giorgia Meloni (together with Libyan Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah).⁸ In a

⁶ Kirişçi, Kemal, “Turkey and the Mediterranean: What Has Changed?”, in *IEMED Mediterranean Yearbook 2011*, p. 195-199, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/turkey-and-the-mediterranean-what-has-changed>.

⁷ The “Enlarged Mediterranean” is an Italian geopolitical concept, emerged during the 1970s, centred on the Mediterranean but also including parts of North Africa, the Middle East, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, as well as continental Europe. The concept treats the region’s interconnected security, migration, trade and energy issues as integral to Mediterranean geopolitics. Italian Ministry of Defence, *Atto di Indirizzo. Edizione 2022, 2023*, https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/26763/atto_di_indirizzo_2022_2023-2025.pdf.

⁸ The meeting focused on cooperation between Turkey, Italy and Libya, especially to combat illegal migration. However, due to the broader geopolitical context, the discussion



statement, Ankara highlights “the importance of cooperation between Turkey, Italy and Libya”, for the entire Mediterranean. For Erdoğan, this cooperation is “essential”.⁹ After all, Turkey has long been regarded by Italian government sources as a “fundamental” partner for Italy, a perception that has gained renewed relevance in the current phase of heightened geopolitical uncertainty.¹⁰ Furthermore, it is the defence sector that has come under the spotlight during the summit: on 5 March 2025, Leonardo and the Turkish company Baykar (led by Erdoğan’s son-in-law, Selçuk Bayraktar, which recently acquired the Italian firm Piaggio Aerospace) established a joint-venture to develop and produce unmanned aerial systems (UASs). This move on a key defence capability comes at a time when the debate on security is at the centre of European politics whether within NATO or EU. Concerns over defence and security have brought Ankara closer to Europe, also thanks to the growth of Turkey’s defence industry in recent years.

On a wider scale, relationships between Ankara and Rome are shaped by three key areas of cooperation and contention: NATO collaboration, defence industry partnerships and geopolitical rivalries in the Mediterranean. Within NATO, both countries align on a number of operational and tactical issues, working together on counterterrorism efforts, selected military exercises and a shared interest in regional stability. However, this alignment remains partial and is underpinned by fundamentally different approaches to the Alliance’s southern flank as a framework for projecting stability and managing regional crises. By contrast, Turkey has repeatedly opted for autonomous military action outside the NATO framework – most notably in Libya, Syria and Iraq – engaging selectively with partners

inevitably touched upon the dramatic situation in Gaza Strip, stressing the wider humanitarian and security implications of the crisis in the Mediterranean region.

⁹ “Meloni vola da Erdogan, trilaterale con il premier libico Dbeibah: focus su immigrazione e Gaza”, in *RaiNews24*, 1 August 2025, <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2025/08/meloni-vola-da-erdogan-per-incontrare-anche-dbeibah-patto-su-migrazioni-e-sostegno-alla-libia-7a8886b4-82f7-44f8-98bd-3fe0d5128769.html>.

¹⁰ Grossi, Lorenzo, “Sfida unitaria per combattere il traffico di migranti. Il patto Meloni-Erdogan a Istanbul”, in *Il Giornale*, 1 August 2025, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica-internazionale/meloni-erdogan-incontro-istanbul-2518045.html>.

and pursuing national objectives that at times diverge from broader Alliance priorities. This asymmetry represents a structural source of tension rather than a temporary friction within the Italy-Turkey relationship. In terms of defence industrial cooperation, Italy and Turkey have found some common ground in technological development, where they jointly work on areas such as helicopters and drones that bolster their respective military capabilities. However, the growth of Turkey’s defence industry, including its ambition for greater self-sufficiency and exportation of military products, has raised concerns in Italy, as it competes within the same global defence market with lower labour costs and legal constraints. Finally, their geopolitical rivalry in the Mediterranean, especially concerning territorial disputes and energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean, complicates their defence collaboration. These tensions highlight the complex dynamics in their relationship, where shared interests in regional security are often balanced by conflicting national priorities.

This paper examines the nuanced relationship between Italy and Turkey, particularly in light of security and defence agendas and shifting regional and international dynamics. It explores whether Italian policymakers and experts perceive Turkey’s actions as a challenge or an opportunity and evaluates potential areas for collaboration, particularly within EU and NATO frameworks. Firstly, by examining both historical and contemporary situations, the study explores the Italian stance and understandings of European security, its reorganisation in response to risk assessment and threat perceptions, as well as its institutional pillars and military and defence capabilities. Following this, the paper analyses whether the relations between Italy and Turkey could be considered pivotal in addressing security and defence issues within NATO and the EU frameworks. Finally, it will attempt to foresee how the current geopolitical landscape, including conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, shapes the likelihood of more intense competition or strategic cooperation between these two powers in the Mediterranean.

The analysis is based on interviews with Italian foreign policy experts, supplemented by informal



discussion and official documents. Finally, it is important to note that, although the potential for defence cooperation between Italy and Turkey is crucial, there are areas such as energy collaboration and migration management that cannot be overlooked, as they also intersect with defence issues and significantly impact regional security. These aspects, while only briefly touched upon in this paper, are essential elements that must be addressed for a comprehensive and realistic analysis of the relationship between the two countries.

2. Italy in a changing international environment: Old and new foreign policy visions

Historical context and contemporary threats have shaped Italy's approach to defence policy, which has at times displayed a certain degree of fluctuation, reflecting above all the strong imprint of domestic politics. While governments have consistently sought to poise Italy's involvement across the major spheres of influence, achieving lasting coherence has often been difficult.

During the Cold War, Italy's foreign and security policy revolved around a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, the country was firmly committed to the Atlantic alliance; on the other, its domestic politics were shaped by the presence of one of the strongest Communist parties in Western Europe. This tension inevitably influenced Rome's international posture: Italy was both anchored in NATO and a founding member of European integration process yet constantly adjusting to reconcile internal divisions with external obligations. Frequent political turnovers – including 68 governments in power since 1946, when the Italian Republic was officially proclaimed, through 19 legislatures, alternating since the 1990s left-wing and right-wing ruling coalitions) also weighed heavily on Rome's international standing. Such instability limited Italy's ability to project a sustained influence abroad and made long-term strategic consistency difficult to achieve.

Even so, moments of innovation did emerge. In the mid-1950s, under the Presidency of Giovanni Gronchi (from the party Democrazia Cristiana),

a period of relative discontinuity opened up in foreign policy. This phase encouraged a more autonomous posture within the Western alliance and a proactive role in the Mediterranean and Middle East, particularly as Italy sought to fill the space left by the waning colonial influence of Britain and France.¹¹

Gradually, a broader consensus emerged in the political spectrum on Italy's international position. The Socialist Party's break with the Communists in 1956 marked an early shift, followed later by the Communist Party's reluctant acceptance of the European Community and, eventually, of NATO in the late 1970s. These developments consolidated democratic support for Italy's external orientation and tied foreign policy ever more closely to the country's democratic identity. From that point on, Rome could present itself as a reliable actor in NATO, the European Community and the United Nations.¹²

Thus, Italy's geopolitical positioning is often described through the "Three Circles Approach", which highlights its involvement in three distinct spheres of interest: the Atlantic, the European and the Mediterranean circles. However, rather than implying a clear-cut shift away from one circle toward another, Italy's foreign policy has historically been characterised by a variable prioritisation among the three circles.

Firstly, the Atlantic circle represents Italy's stable and longstanding relationship with the United States, which dates to the early 20th century but was solidified after the end of World War II and particularly in 1949 when Italy joined NATO. Despite Italy's geographic distance from the Atlantic, it became an essential part of Western alliance during the Cold War, relying on the US for military and economic support. While the Berlusconi's governments placed a stronger emphasis on the Atlantic dimension – particularly following the 9/11 attacks and through close alignment with the US in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq – this did not translate into a disengagement from the European sphere,

¹¹ Varsori, Antonio and Federico Mazzei (eds), *Giovanni Gronchi e la politica estera italiana (1955-1962)*, Pisa/Pontedera, Pacini/Fondazione Piaggio, 2017.

¹² Andreotti, Giulio, "Foreign Policy in the Italian Democracy", in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 109, No. 3 (Summer 1994), p. 529-537, DOI 10.2307/2152618.



as evidenced by Italy's role in key EU integration milestones, including the signing of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2004. Similarly, more explicitly pro-European governments sought to rebalance Italy's external posture as demonstrated by Italy's continued military presence in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2008 despite domestic political tensions. This pattern points to a flexible hierarchy of priorities rather than to alternating or mutually exclusive strategic orientations. However, this Atlanticism was short-lived, as subsequent governments sought to rebalance Italy's international priorities.¹³

Italy's involvement in Europe, particularly in the post-WWII period, was further shaped by its attempt to preserve a degree of strategic autonomy within an increasingly dense regional and transatlantic institutional framework. As a founding member of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, Italy played a pivotal role in the European integration and to the gradual enlargement and in shaping its economic and political landscape. Yet Italy's engagement with the European project has often been characterised by a degree of ambivalence, driven less by ideological contestation than by domestic political volatility.

Since the 2010s, issues such as the management of migratory flows across the Mediterranean have exposed recurrent tensions between Rome and Brussels, while, more broadly, frequent government turnover has complicated Italy's ability to sustain long-term strategic priorities across both the European and Atlantic arenas. Rather than affecting specific policy positions alone, this instability has primarily constrained Italy's policy-making process: it has limited continuity in agenda-setting, weakened the consolidation of personal and political ties with key partners, and reduced Rome's capacity to consistently advance national priorities through successive summits, councils and other multilateral decision-making forums.

In the Mediterranean, Italy carved out a role that was cautious but not passive. It sought to preserve regional stability, manage sensitive relations with North Africa and the Middle East

and participate in international operations and missions. True to its diplomatic tradition, Rome often favoured negotiation and multilateral frameworks over unilateral action or the use of force.

The country's national aspirations and security interests led Rome to engage actively with Mediterranean countries, especially in the aftermath of WWII. Over time, Italy developed strong political and economic relations with its southern neighbours, which became even more important in the post-Cold War era. The Mediterranean Circle, which had been considered secondary to the Atlantic and European Circles, gained renewed significance after the 2006 Lebanon War. Italy took a leadership role in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), reaffirming its position as a key player in the Mediterranean security.¹⁴

While the Mediterranean is central to Italy's foreign policy, it has also presented challenges, particularly with the rise of the Arab revolutions in 2011 and the collapse of Libyan state. The political instability and the lack of a coherent strategy among successive Italian governments – Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti, Enrico Letta and Matteo Renzi – have made it difficult for Italy to assert consistent leadership in the region. However, Italy's involvement in each of the three circles remains interconnected and mutually reinforcing, shaping its foreign policy decisions at home and abroad.

A significant shift in security and defence policy can be observed between the two last Italian governments, led respectively by Mario Draghi (from 13 February 2021 to 22 October 2022) and then Giorgia Meloni. While Draghi's approach emphasised a centrist, pro-European stance with a focus on multilateralism and strong ties with the EU framework, Meloni's executive has introduced a distinctly conservative tone, prioritising Italy's strategic and national interests. This change reflects not only the differing priorities of the two administrations but has also been influenced by international developments. The complexity of current geopolitics, the

¹³ Del Pero, Mario, "Italy and the Atlantic Alliance", in Erik Jones and Gianfranco Pasquino (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Italian Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 685-697.

¹⁴ Marrone, Alessandro and Michele Nones (eds), *Italy and Security in the Mediterranean*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, 2016, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/6851>.



profound global polarisation and the polycrises that have emerged in recent years have led Italy to broaden its strategic interest beyond these three traditional circles. The re-emergence of traditional state-based threats, particularly from Russia, has prompted Italy to recalibrate its security priorities. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Italy's foreign and security priority were largely concentrated on the so-called Enlarged Mediterranean. Migration flows, the threat of terrorism and the multidimensional fragility of its southern and eastern neighbourhood dominated the agenda in Rome. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed this picture. It pushed Italy to widen its strategic outlook and to devote far more attention to Europe's eastern flank.

This rebalancing underscored Italy's reliance on NATO and the transatlantic partnership as the cornerstone of its security, while also reminding policymakers of the need for greater defence spending and military preparedness. At the same time, it created new momentum for closer engagement with EU initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and subsequent defence industrial initiatives included in the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 vision. Italian defence industries have taken a prominent role in EDF-funded projects, and political commitments increasingly point toward stronger European defence cooperation, always, however, with the understanding that these efforts complement, rather than replace, NATO.

2.1 The defence strategy of Giorgia Meloni: Tradition reinforced by conservative values

"Italy is rightfully part of the West and its system of alliances, a founding member of the European Union [...] and the Atlantic Alliance". Furthermore, "the Atlantic Alliance guarantees our democracies a framework of peace and security, which we take for granted too often: it is Italy's duty to fully contribute, because, whether we like it or not, freedom has a cost and that cost, for a nation, is its ability to defend itself and prove it is a reliable partner within the framework of alliances to which it belongs".¹⁵

¹⁵ Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address on the Government Programme*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21000>.

These two sentences, pronounced by Giorgia Meloni during her first speech as Prime Minister at the Italian Parliament in 2022, are quite explanatory of the geopolitical orientation and of the defence policy of her government.

Indeed, after 2022 Meloni continued to work within the three traditional circles of foreign policy, albeit with some differences in approach and vision compared to the past and, as already mentioned, her predecessor Draghi. In fact, during his tenure as Prime Minister, Draghi advocated for a more autonomous and integrated European defence, emphasising the need for the EU to develop its own capabilities in response to new geopolitical threats (particularly those linked to economic competition between EU and China, and the repercussion of the Covid-19 pandemic). Both Draghi and Meloni governments viewed the Atlantic Alliance and European defence as two sides of the same coin, mutually reinforcing rather than competing. However, Meloni's approach prioritises NATO as the cornerstone of Italy's security, emphasising the importance of the Atlantic Alliance over European autonomy on defence matters.

When it comes to the European Union, Meloni has tried to strike a pragmatic balance between engagement with Brussels and a distinctly nationalist critique. Her government is not openly ant-EU, but it speaks with a more assertive voice, promoting the idea of a "Europe of nations". In practice this means backing reforms that give member states greater room to manoeuvre, prioritise national sovereignty and strengthen the principle of subsidiarity.

This approach is most visible in migration policy, which Meloni treats as inseparable from security. Here, Rome has pushed for more autonomy within EU frameworks, seeking solutions that leave greater discretion to national governments. Meloni's role at the head of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group fits into the same pattern: positioning Italy as part of a wider conservative alliance, one that champions subsidiarity and supports EU action only in areas where individual states are unable to act effectively on their own.

This nuanced approach allows Meloni to tone down her party's previously Eurosceptic rhetoric



while still advocating for Italy's interests. She has extended this strategy to the international conservative arena, as evidenced by her participation as a keynote at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in the United States on 23 February 2025. Through these engagements, she seeks to bolster her domestic and international standing, aligning Italy with the global conservative movement and promoting a shared ideological vision across Europe and the United States.

The issue of the EU rearmament remains highly relevant in the face of the renewed Russia's military campaign in Ukraine, the Russian drone incursions into Scandinavian and Polish airspace in September 2025, and the negotiation attempts in recent months involving Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. On 6 March 2025, EC President Ursula von der Leyen presented the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030. Meloni, during her speech to the Senate on 18 March, expressed her views on the plan: "I pointed out even then that I did not agree with this name [...] the name 'ReArm Europe' is misleading for citizens. What I mean by that is that today we are undoubtedly being called upon to strengthen our defence capabilities in the face of new geopolitical challenges, our greater responsibilities within NATO and the need to strengthen Europe's role in this context. Today, however, boosting our defence capabilities does not simply mean purchasing weapons. Firstly, because it is not about purchasing them, perhaps from foreign countries, but if anything it is about producing them."¹⁶

Meloni during the same occasion spoke about the importance of hybrid threats, border control, the fight against terrorism, the significance of cybersecurity in the age of artificial intelligence, the protection of the underwater domain, the need to secure gas pipelines and other energy infrastructures, the guarantee the safety of commercial routes and food supply chains, and the protection of the outer space. These are all priorities on the political agenda of Fratelli d'Italia, the party led by Meloni, which includes

the Minister of Defence Guido Crosetto among its prominent members. In June 2025, Minister Crosetto discussed the use of European funds for defence, emphasising the need to leverage these resources effectively. Crosetto further highlighted the complexity of modern defence, which requires a balance of cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, alongside traditional military power, thus advocating for a multi-layered approach to defence and security to address complex challenges.¹⁷ On July 2025, the Meloni government requested 14,9 billion euros of EU loans through the SAFE programme, which is one of the main pillars of ReArm Europe, to be invested in defence technologies and capabilities by 2030. Rome also actively negotiated the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) regulations finalised by the European Union in December 2025.

As already mentioned, Meloni – like Draghi – has maintained Italy's commitment to NATO. Italian government officials also underscore the importance of transatlantic relations, particularly highlighting the strong and historically rooted alliance with the United States. As mentioned before, Italy's relationship with Washington has been the cornerstone of its foreign and security policy since 1945, underpinned by shared democratic values, economic ties and strategic interests. This long-standing alliance is not merely a product of contemporary geopolitics but is deeply embedded in Italy's historical trajectory as a founding member of NATO and a steadfast partner in Euro-Atlantic security frameworks. Against this backdrop, Meloni has moved quickly to establish a direct and functional relationship with President Donald Trump following the victory in the 2024 US elections. While this bilateral engagement reflects Italy's longstanding emphasis on maintaining close ties with Washington, it also unfolds in a context marked by renewed uncertainty over the future direction of US foreign and security policy. Trump's return to office has reintroduced ambiguities regarding transatlantic burden-sharing and alliance

¹⁷ Carli, Andrea, "The Value of Italian Defence Is 16 billion Euro. Crosetto: 'Asked for Threat Picture, I Will Inform All Leaders'", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 9 June 2025, <https://en.ilssole24ore.com/art/the-value-of-italian-defence-is-16-billion-euro-from-the-industrys-drive-for-innovation-thats-why-AHVdia8>.

¹⁶ Italian Government, *President Meloni's Address to the Senate ahead of the European Council Meeting on 20-21 March*, 18 March 2025, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/28024>.



cohesion, making Rome's diplomatic outreach less a sign of uncritical alignment than an effort to preserve strategic relevance and mitigate potential disruptions within the Euro-Atlantic framework.

During the summit between NATO heads of state and government on June 24-25, 2025, in The Hague, allied commit to invest 5 per cent of GDP annually on core defence requirements as well as defence-and security-related spending by 2035, allocating at least 3.5 per cent of GDP annually based to resource core defence requirements, and up to 1.5 per cent of GDP annually to *inter alia* protect critical infrastructure, networks, ensure civil preparedness and resilience, unleash innovation and strengthen defence industrial base.¹⁸ Achieving NATO's target of 3.5 per cent of GDP for core defence spending will represent a significant challenge for debt-constrained and politically fragmented countries such as Italy. This difficulty is compounded by domestic political constraints, including long-standing reluctance toward increased defence spending among centre-left wing parties¹⁹ and the NATO-sceptical, Russia-ambivalent stance of the right-wing Lega party within the Meloni government coalition. To date, these factors have constituted the main obstacle to sustained defence budget increases, Italy's participation in EU defence instruments such as SAFE and the provision of military assistance to Ukraine. Even with financial assistance from the EU's ReArm Europe Plan and the SAFE Programme, Meloni's coalition will have to overcome substantial obstacle to meet these commitments. To reach the 3.5 per cent target by 2035, Italy will need to increase its defence spending, considering that the Italian defence expenditure in 2024 was around 1.5 per cent.²⁰ In 2025, Rome declared to spend 2 per cent GDP on defence thanks on the one hand to a limited increase (+7,2 per cent) of the Ministry of Defence budget and, on the other hand, above all to a

technical "recalculation" of defence expenditures – such as the inclusion of costs associated with the Coast Guard – rather than the allocation of new resources.²¹ While formally aligning with NATO's (somewhat ambiguous) parameters and long-term target of 3.5 per cent of GDP for core defence requirements by 2035, alongside an additional 1.5 per cent for security-related investments, the right-wing government underscored a broader, more flexible interpretation of security.²² This approach was particularly significant in a context marked by widespread public scepticism toward European remilitarisation.

While the Meloni government committed more defence assets on NATO eastern flank, including through the forward presence in Bulgaria and the air policing, the Alliance's southern flank remains vital to Italy, both for its own national security and for maintaining regional stability. Rome has consistently advocated for stronger Allied engagement in Mediterranean, stressing the need to contain destabilising factors such as terrorism, migration, fragile governance and threats to maritime security. This tradition continues under Meloni, who frames the transatlantic partnership as vital to Italy's security and economic well-being, even as the war in Ukraine has shifted much of NATO's attention eastward. For Italy, the southern flank is not a peripheral concern: the May 2024 NATO expert report on the Alliance's Southern Neighbourhood, which Rome hoped would have informed the Washington Summit communiqué, reaffirmed its importance.²³ The report's more than one hundred concrete recommendations called for revitalising frameworks such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, broadening outreach to new actors and prioritising themes closely aligned

¹⁸ NATO, *The Hague Summit Declaration*, 25 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

¹⁹ Bruno, Valerio Alfonso et al., "The Disunity of the Italian Center-Left Opposition on Ukraine", in *The Loop* (blog), 22 November 2022, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/?p=9256>.

²⁰ NATO, *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2024*, April 2025, p. 57, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2025/4/pdf/sgar24-en.pdf.

²¹ Marrone, Alessandro and Gaia Ravazzolo, "Il Documento Programmatico della Difesa 2025-2027: priorità, budget e domini operativi", in *AffarInternazionali*, 22 October 2025, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=114484>.

²² "Crosetto-Tajani: l'Italia centra il 2% del Pil per la NATO. L'opposizione: 'Ci siamo arrivati in una notte?'" in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/crosetto-tajani-l-italia-centra-2percento-nato-dubbi-dell-opposizione-ci-siamo-arrivati-una-notte-AHqk1Cm>.

²³ Independent Expert Group Supporting NATO's Comprehensive and Deep Reflection Process on the Southern Neighbourhood, *Final Report*, 7 May 2024, https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf.



with Italy's agenda (from counter-terrorism and maritime security to climate resilience and governance). It also underlined the value of closer coordination with organisations such as the EU, African Union, Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League, strengthening synergies that support both NATO and Italy's bilateral partnerships. However, the Washington Summit overall did pay little attention to the southern flank, and most of the report recommendations did not find their way in the NATO agenda dominated by the Russian threat.

Italy sees the Mediterranean as integral to transatlantic security, not least because Russia projects influence there, from its presence in Libya to its destabilising role in the Sahel and Syria, directly affecting migration flows and military dynamics close to Italian shores.²⁴ The challenge for Rome, as recent academic analyses note, is to reconcile its longstanding regional priorities with the new demands of European and transatlantic security imperatives after 2022.²⁵

Within this framework, Meloni's government has reaffirmed traditional concerns (counter-terrorism and anti-trafficking operations, migration management and stability in Maghreb) while introducing new tools such as the Mattei Plan for Africa.²⁶ This initiative, built on six pillars (education and training, agriculture, health, energy, water and infrastructures) aims to renew Italy's influence in Africa through equal partnerships, promote development, investments and cooperation across various sectors – *in primis* energy – and reduce migratory pressures. It functions both as an instrument of economic diplomacy and as a vehicle for positioning Italy as a bridge between Europe and Africa across the Mediterranean.

²⁴ Holleis, Jennifer and Maria Katamadze, "Libya: Russia's Wagner Group Makes Further Inroads", in *Deutsche Welle*, 29 February 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-68394810>.

²⁵ Coticchia, Fabrizio, "Muddling Through? Defense Policy Paradigms after the War in Ukraine between Transformation and Readjustment: The Case of Italy", in *International Politics*, Vol. 62, No. 5 (2025), p. 1002-1022, DOI 10.1057/s41311-024-00648-8.

²⁶ Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address on the Government Programme*, cit.

3. Italy's defence spending and strategic modernisation: Key insights

3.1 Engagement and reprioritisation: Italy's military trajectory

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the second Trump administration further accelerated an ongoing process of institutional and economic enhancement of EU military capabilities, ranging from support to Kyiv's armed forces to the development of an European defence industrial strategy, within a broader context of rising military expenditures among member states.²⁷ Furthermore, the second Trump term raised both expectations and concerns for European defence, potentially prompting reluctant states to increase military spending through public debt. At the same time, persistent protection of national defence industries and structural difficulties in countries such as Italy, Spain and Belgium hindered meeting NATO's 2 per cent of GDP defence target.

Italy represents both the challenges and the opportunity of European defence, remaining a key actor within EU initiatives and NATO operations. When NATO large-scale expeditionary operation in Afghanistan was scaled down, Italian troops deployed there decreased from about 5,000 to roughly 1,000.²⁸ In the 2010s Italy redirected resources to its immediate neighbourhood, with sustained commitments in Lebanon, Iraq and the Mediterranean Sea, and new missions in the Sahel²⁹ pointing to a greater interest for Africa. However, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent NATO demands for deployment in Eastern Europe, notably with the Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and the participation into the mission "Prima Parthica", started in October 2014 in the context of the international mission "Inherent Resolve" in Iraq to counteract the Islamic State of Iraq and

²⁷ Nones, Michele and Gaia Ravazzolo, "Politica industriale europea a sostegno della Difesa", in *L'Europa della Difesa. Tra sfide e opportunità* (Informazioni della Difesa No. 5/2024), p. 47-55, https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/49486/supplemento_europa.pdf.

²⁸ Italian Parliament website: *Temi dell'attività Parlamentare: La missione ISAF in Afghanistan*, <https://leg16.camera.it/561?appro=769>.

²⁹ Perlo-Freeman, Sam et al., "Military Expenditure", in *SIPRI Yearbook 2012*, 2012, p. 173-180.



the Levant, revitalised the country's traditional military engagement. These shifts were largely driven by external pressures rather than domestic enthusiasm, amid persistent public and political scepticism toward international operations abroad.³⁰

Meanwhile, the 2015 White Paper on International Security and Defence (*Libro Bianco per la sicurezza internazionale e la difesa*) marked a strategic reorientation toward the Enlarged Mediterranean, leading to a redeployment of military assets across the Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, Mediterranean Sea and Horn of Africa.³¹ This focus reflected Italy's concerns over terrorism, irregular migration and energy security, demonstrating a more regionally attentive defence posture.³²

Despite the rise of populist parties (identified in the Five Star Movement and Lega Nord prior to its transformation into Lega on 2017) criticism on international operations increased, yet Italy's defence policy remained largely consistent, maintaining alliance commitments, ongoing missions abroad and procurement programmes. Domestic political changes produced symbolic rather than substantive shifts, constrained by institutional, financial and international factors. From 2019 onwards, defence spending, especially investment in procurement, began to rise, helping Italy move closer to NATO benchmarks. Prime Minister Draghi in 2021-2022 highlighted explicitly the strategic necessity of higher defence investment, partly in response to NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the broader push for European strategic autonomy. Parliamentary initiatives also sought to halt reductions in personnel initiated in 2012, reflecting continued institutional support for maintaining force levels.³³

³⁰ IAI and LAPS, *Gli italiani e la politica estera*, October 2017, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/8352>.

³¹ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Libro Bianco per la sicurezza internazionale e la difesa*, April 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20150921013003/http://www.difesa.it/Primo_Piano/Pagine/20150429Libro_Bianco.aspx.

³² Italian Senate, "Disegno di legge A.S. n. 2728 recante Riorganizzazione dei vertici del Ministero della difesa e delle relative strutture", in *Dossier di documentazione*, No. 41 (September 2017), <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01044674.pdf>.

³³ Cotichia, Fabrizio et al., *Reluctant Remilitarisation. Transforming the Armed Forces in Germany, Italy and Japan after the Cold War*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

3.2 Institutional architecture, budgetary allocation and strategic evolution of Italy's defence policy

Italy's defence policy in recent years has been shaped not only by external and domestic pressures but also, and increasingly, by significant institutional reforms designed to regulate its international military engagements. While instability at Europe's southern and eastern frontiers, great-power competition, migration flows and humanitarian crises provided the strategic backdrop, and domestic political volatility and financial constraints imposed recurring limits, the most decisive change has arguably come through the establishment of a clear legal framework for authorising and financing missions abroad. Public debate on defence, however, has remained limited, reflecting persistent pacifist tendencies in Italian public opinion.³⁴

Law 145 of 2016³⁵ marked a turning point: it replaced the previous reliance on ad hoc "mission decrees" with a comprehensive system that clarified governmental and parliamentary responsibilities. For the first time, Italian participation in international missions was anchored in a structured procedure, distinct from the constitutional provisions on declarations of war. The Italian Constitution only envisages the declaration of war (Art. 78), which differs fundamentally from participation in international missions in peacetime. Under Law 145/2016, the Government decrees outlining mission participation are submitted to the President of the Republic (who may involve the Supreme Defence Council) and subsequently to Parliament, which retains the power of approval or rejection. Yet, while the law closed a long-standing regulatory gap, the flexible procedures for parliamentary deliberation introduced a certain opacity in accountability, as individual votes in committee are not systematically recorded.

Building on this framework, Law 168 of

³⁴ Isernia, Pierangelo et al., "Populist Attitudes and Foreign Policy Postures: A Comparative Analysis of Four European Countries", in *European Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2025), p. 22-40, DOI 10.1017/S1755773924000122.

³⁵ Italy, Law No. 145 of 21 July 2016: *Disposizioni concernenti la partecipazione dell'Italia alle missioni internazionali*, <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2016-07-21;145>.



31 October 2024 introduced then important reforms aimed at streamlining procedures and aligning them with the fast-paced evolution of the international security environment. The new law increased flexibility in the use of personnel and resources across missions within the same region, improved the rapid deployment capacity of high-readiness units and simplified financial flows by centralising them under the Minister of Economy and Finance, replacing the Prime Minister Decrees that had previously created administrative delays. It also enabled advance funding of up to 25 per cent of mission budgets to ensure continuity of ongoing operations, broadened the scope of urgent acquisitions and mandated a comprehensive annual report by the Government to Parliament, thereby reinforcing oversight and strategic planning.

Taken together, these reforms represent a decisive step forward in the institutionalisation of Italy's international military posture. They balance operational flexibility and financial efficiency with democratic accountability, offering Italy a more predictable and responsive framework for defence policy. In this way, the evolution of the legal architecture has become a central element of Italian defence transformation, even more than the external and domestic pressures that traditionally shaped its posture.³⁶

The reforms discussed above consolidated the central role of the executive and specialised agencies, while clarifying the responsibilities of Parliament in overseeing Italy's international missions. The executive branch and specialised agencies play indeed a vital role in Italy's security and defence policy. At the forefront is the Prime Minister, who has increasingly become the central figure in shaping national security decisions, which is supported by diplomatic and military advisors with their own staff. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees Italy's diplomacy, international alliances, bilateral commitments and participation in multilateral organisations. In parallel, the Ministry of Defence provides politico-civilian leadership on the Armed Forces. Within the Ministry of Defence, as in many other European countries, the Joint Defence Staff

and those of the single services (army, navy air force), the Joint Operations Command (COVI) and the National Armaments Directorate runs the operational and technical aspects of defence. In addition, Italy relies on specialised agencies, including the intelligence and security services: the Department of Information for Security (DIS) includes the External Intelligence and Security Agency (AISE); and the Internal Intelligence and Security Agency (AISI). These institutions supply expertise, operational planning and intelligence support, complementing the leadership of the government and the oversight of the Defence Committees in the Parliament – Committees which primarily exercise control functions with only a secondary role in policymaking.³⁷

Italy's security and defence policies have been largely underpinned by a broad political consensus, with key parties – such as the Democratic Party (PD) and Forza Italia (FI) – supporting core decisions in this area over the last three decades. This unity has enabled successive governments to sustain Italy's participation in international operation, particularly under NATO, the EU and the United Nations, where missions are framed in multilateral terms and often associated with peacekeeping, stabilisation, crisis management or humanitarian goals. While pockets of opposition have persisted, especially from the far-left and at times the Five Star Movement, they have rarely been strong enough to derail parliamentary approval. Over the past twenty years, this approach has allowed Italy to maintain a steady presence in NATO-led missions across the Balkans and the Middle East, as well as other operations in Africa, reinforcing its reputation as a reliable partner in collective security.³⁸ More recently, in response to the evolving security landscape and rising threats in

³⁷ Italian Senate Impact Assessment Office, "Present Arms! From Conscripts to Military Professionals: How Is the New Model of the Italian Armed Forces Working?", in *Focus Difesa*, July 2018, https://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/English_Focus_Difesa.pdf.

³⁸ Regarding the NATO-led missions and Italy's steady presence, possible examples include: the NATO Training Mission Iraq (NTM-I), a non-combat advisory and capacity building mission, in which General Iannucci served as commander from May 2022 to May 2023; the Kosovo Force (KFOR), in which Italy contributes up to 852 personnel, 137 vehicles, and 1 aircraft. In addition, non-NATO deployments include AMISOM mission in Somalia, with a particular focus on relief assistance.

³⁶ Italian Government, *Relazione analitica sulle missioni internazionali in corso*, cit.



Europe, Italy has significantly adjusted its defence posture. The country has increased its military budget, particularly for acquiring new platforms such as main battle tanks and fighter aircraft, reversed the previously scheduled personnel's reductions and deployed thousands of troops to Eastern Europe to contribute to NATO's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.³⁹ These steps reflect a more assertive stance in defence policy, driven both by Italy's strategic location in the Mediterranean and the need to respond effectively to contemporary security challenges, while remaining constrained by societal expectations and economic considerations.

According to the 2025-2027 Budget Law (Law 207/2024), the Ministry of Defence's final expenditure for 2025 will be 31,3 billion euros on an accrual basis, representing more than 3 per cent (3.4 per cent) of the state's total budget expenditure. It's important to note, however, that Italian defence funded not only by the Ministry of Defence's own resources but also by funds allocated to other ministries' budget chapters. Notably, the Ministry of Enterprise and Made in Italy contributes to financing programmes to procure equipment from national industries, while the Ministry of Economy allocates funds for the operational costs of international missions. Altogether, the integrated defence budget in 2025 amounts to 35,5 billion euro.

A key reference in this regard is the Italian Defence Multi-Year Planning Document (*Documento programmatico pluriennale* – DPP) for the 2024-2026 period, which outlines defence programmes, ongoing operations and additional priority needs for funding.⁴⁰ The same document referred to the period 2023-2025 affirmed that: "Over the last 30 years [...] Italy has been able to use its military instrument primarily in the conduct of operations and missions for the maintenance of the international peace and stability [...]. It is a luxury that today, especially in light of the current international context, Italy can no longer

³⁹ Ravazzolo, Gaia and Alessandro Marrone, "La politica di difesa e il ruolo della NATO", in Ferdinando Nelli Feroci and Leo Goretti (eds), *Il governo Meloni alla prova. Rapporto sulla politica estera italiana. Edizione 2023*, Rome, IAI, January 2024, p. 59-66, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18027>.

⁴⁰ See Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Documenti di programmazione*, <https://www.difesa.it/amministrazione-trasparente/documento-di-programmazione/3756.html>.

afford".⁴¹ The DPP 2025-2027 highlights that the aforementioned integrated defence budget 2025 (35,5 billion) is significantly higher than 2024 (32,3), 2023 (30,8) and 2022 (29,4): compared to 2022, the Meloni government increased this budget by 6 billion euros (20 per cent) in three years, spread across the three main expenditure areas: personnel, operations and investments.⁴²

Based on the information from MIL€X, the Observatory on the Italian military expenditures, Italy's military expenditure in 2025 includes 5.9 billion euros allocated to the Army, 2.3 billion euros for the Navy and 2.8 billion euros for the Air Force. These amounts cover direct costs, primarily for personnel. The DPP for 2025 highlights that the International Mission Fund is allocated 1,390.2 million euros, with an additional 25.5 million euros expected from payments made by the UN for Italy's participation in UN-led missions, which contribute to the Ministry of Economy and Finance Fund. For 2025, the available resources are currently set at 300 million euros.⁴³

The structure of the armed forces has seen limited transformation: the cuts initiated with the 2012 reform adopted by Defence Minister Giampaolo Di Paola, which proposed to reach a model of 150,000 personnel by 2024, have slowdown over time and were formally suspended in 2022. The new law presented by the Meloni government on 11 December 2025 sets the target of 160,000 military personnel (including army, navy and air force) to be reached by 2033.⁴⁴

In the last decade new commands have been created, including the Space Operations Command and the Network Operation Command, along with regiments dedicated to cyber, drones and targeting, such as the "3° Reggimento Supporto Targeting Bondone" and the "9° Reggimento

⁴¹ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Documento programmatico pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2023-2025*, 2023, p. ii, <https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/2569/4acffd61-84fa-4df3-bdab-806066fa5d56.pdf>.

⁴² Italian Ministry of Defence, *Documento programmatico pluriennale della Difesa per il triennio 2025-2027*, 2025, https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/3756/documento_programmatico_pluriennale_2025-2027_pdfa.pdf.

⁴³ Ibid.; MIL€X, *Proposta budget difesa UE dal 2028: per l'Italia un costo di 2,4 miliardi l'anno*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.milex.org/?p=3370>.

⁴⁴ Italian Government, *Comunicato stampa del Consiglio dei Ministri n. 151*, 11 December 2025, <https://www.governo.it/it/node/30565>.



Sicurezza Cibernetica Rombo". Meanwhile, the "Riserva Ausiliaria", designed to introduce 10,000 volunteers into the military reserve, has not yet been implemented.⁴⁵

On 27 November 2024, the evolving international landscape prompted General Luciano Portolano, Chief of Defence Staff, to warn the Italian Parliament that "nothing will be the same again".⁴⁶ He argued for a major transformation in Italy's defence posture, highlighting the need for both increased spending and larger military personnel. Minister Crosetto echoed this perspective on several occasions, emphasising that the Italian armed forces are neither ready nor adequately prepared to face a larger scale conflict, particularly given Italy's vulnerability to the new technologies employed by potential adversaries. These pronouncements mark a clear shift from the longstanding bipartisan focus on "peace missions", which for decades had largely downplayed the operational military role of Italy's forces.⁴⁷ This change of narrative signals a deliberate departure from the long-standing bipartisan emphasis on Italy's participation in "peace missions", which has traditionally framed the armed forces primarily as stabilisation and crisis-management tools. By contrast, recent statements by both military leadership and the political executive explicitly foreground deterrence, readiness for high-intensity conflict and structural vulnerabilities in Italy's defence posture. In doing so, they reflect a growing awareness of the strategic implications of the Russia-Ukraine war for Europe, NATO and national security, while also seeking to recalibrate domestic public opinion by legitimising higher defence spending and a more operational understanding of the military's role.⁴⁸

Despite Italy's active role in NATO deterrence

⁴⁵ "Innovazione, tecnologia e nuovi reggimenti per l'Esercito", in *Analisi Difesa*, 26 January 2024, <https://www.analisedifesa.it/?p=172114>.

⁴⁶ Italian Senate, *Audizione del Capo di Stato Maggiore della Difesa, generale Luciano Portolano, sul Documento programmatico per la Difesa, per il triennio 2024-2026*, 27 November 2024, p. 4, <https://www.parlamento.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/443256.pdf>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ Marrone, Alessandro (ed.), *Russia-Ukraine War's Strategic Implications*, Rome, IAI, February 2024, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18118>.

against Russia, the management of crises in the "Enlarged Mediterranean" continue to be strategically important for Rome. Among the three new deployments abroad approved in 2024, one involves the EU naval security operation "Aspides" in the Red Sea, and another entails a humanitarian naval mission near Gaza. The Southern Flank of NATO and the EU remain significant for Italian foreign and defence policy, as reflected in the complex political negotiations preceding the Alliance's Washington Summit in July 2024. Italy's ongoing focus on the region is also evident in the aforementioned Meloni government's Mattei Plan for Africa.⁴⁹

The development of a new defence policy paradigm coping at the same time on one hand with collective deterrence and defence needs and on the other hand with the stability operations in the Enlarged Mediterranean is hindered by economic, political and cultural constraints. Limited financial resources, tied to the burden of public debt, intersect with a public opinion largely hesitant about increased defence spending and a longstanding societal pacifism that rejects the idea of military conflict between states. These factors generate "friction or excessive incoherence" between two strategic directions,⁵⁰ each requiring distinct tools and understanding threats differently. Such tension has tangible consequences for the functionality of defence policy: the sustainability of the armed forces is already under pressure due to the overstretch of military commitments – ranging from operations in Africa and the Middle East to the deployment of 5,000 troops in Italian cities under the controversial "Strade Sicure" mission – and to the limited portion of the defence budget allocated to operational expenses covering maintenance, training, exercises and logistics.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Cotichia, Fabrizio and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso, "Still on the Same Path? Italian Foreign and Defence Policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2025), p. 650-659, DOI 10.1080/13629395.2023.2294252.

⁵⁰ Capano, Gilberto, "Reconceptualizing Layering—From Mode of Institutional Change to Mode of Institutional Design: Types and Outputs", in *Public Administration*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (September 2019), p. 590-604, DOI 10.1111/padm.12583.

⁵¹ Diella, Francesco and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso, "Una forza di riserva per l'Italia", in *Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale*, November 2024, <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/note/PI0111Not.pdf>.



Reforms aimed at increasing troop numbers do not resolve longstanding structural issues, such as the disproportionate share of the budget devoted to personnel salaries and the unusually high median age of Italian troops and officials compared with other European armed forces.

3.3 The EU's influence on Italian policies: Balancing foreign and domestic interests

As previously mentioned in this paper, Italy's foreign policy is firmly anchored in its identity as a founding member of the European community.⁵² Before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Rome approached European strategic autonomy and the Europeanisation of defence with pragmatism, consistently aligning its initiatives with transatlantic commitments. While supporting efforts to strengthen European defence cooperation, Italy carefully situated them within the broader NATO framework, viewing the Alliance as the cornerstone of European security and remaining wary of any initiative that might undermine it. As mentioned before European defence, from Italy's perspective, should complement rather than replace NATO.

Within this framework, Italy has engaged actively in EU defence mechanisms despite what it has often been described as a "landscape of fragmented tools and modest budgets" during the Ursula von der Leyen's first mandate.⁵³ Alongside its participation in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the EDF, Rome has supported other recent instruments, such as the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA). Italy sees these initiatives as opportunities to enhance European capabilities, foster industrial cooperation and sustain its own defence industries, while ensuring that European efforts remain compatible with NATO. This pragmatic posture reflects Rome's enduring attempt to balance its European commitments

with transatlantic obligations, advancing national strategic and industrial interests while contributing to collective European security.

Since the launch of the first wave of PESCO projects in 2018, Italy has consistently ranked among the most active participating states, both in terms of project leadership and overall involvement. Across successive waves, Rome has led and participated in a significant number of initiatives spanning military mobility, training and capability development, confirming its sustained commitment to EU defence cooperation. This proactive role has been particularly visible within the so-called "PESCO Four" format – France, Germany, Italy and Spain – which has played a central role in steering the framework, reflecting both the political weight and operational engagement of these countries.⁵⁴

Italy has also been proactive within the framework of the EDF, which is designed to support collaborative defence research and development projects among EU member states. The Italian defence industry, including major companies such as Leonardo and Fincantieri, has been actively involved in bidding for EDF-funded projects, reflecting Italy's industrial presence within European defence cooperation. In recent EDF cycles, Italy's has ranked among the countries with a high number of participations, particularly in research and development projects across multiple technological domains.

However, participation levels do not necessarily translate into leadership or commensurate capability development. As highlighted by several analyses, Italian industries often engage in EDF projects with relatively limited roles, while leading only a small share of initiatives compared to their French and German counterparts – and, in some cases, also to Spanish and Greek actors. This pattern constraints Italy's ability to shape technological trajectories, retain intellectual property and maximise strategic returns from

⁵² Diodato, Emidio, *Il vincolo esterno. Le ragioni della debolezza italiana*, Milan, Mimesis, 2014.

⁵³ Ravazzolo, Gaia and Alessandro Marrone, "EU Defence Industrial Initiatives: A Quantum Leap is Needed", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|79 (December 2024), p. 1, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19309>.

⁵⁴ According to data available on the PESCO official website as of mid-2025, Italy participates in over thirty PESCO projects and leads more than a dozen, placing it among the most active member states alongside France, Germany and Spain. Given the evolving nature of the framework, including the closure and launch of new projects, figures should be read as indicative rather than exclusive. See: Beatriz Cózar Murillo, "Bring Back the Spirit of PESCO!", in *Egmont Policy Briefs*, No. 308 (June 2023), <https://egmontinstitute.be/?p=44837>.



EDF participation. While companies such as Leonardo remain involved in a number of high-profile projects, Italy's overall performance within the EDF framework suggests a persistent gap between quantitative participation and qualitative industrial leadership.⁵⁵

4. Relations between Italy and Turkey in the shadow of a changing European security order

Italy and Turkey share a long relationship, underpinned by their roles as NATO members as well as by broader political, economic and cultural ties. Beyond defence cooperation, the relationship encompasses trade partnerships, energy collaboration and shared interests in Mediterranean stability and migration management. Cooperation exists in the economic, military and diplomatic realms.

Italy's Mediterranean security concerns align with Turkey's role as a key NATO ally and its geopolitical position as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. There has been limited attention and relatively little literature on the bilateral relations between the two countries, at least compared to the analyses and narratives produced by scholars and expert on relations between Turkey and, for example, Britain, the US and Germany, as well as on the larger broader context of European security since the Cold War.⁵⁶

Rome's attention to Ankara has gradually increased over the past decades, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rise to power of Erdoğan and the AKP, and even more so following the fall of the Gaddafi Libyan regime. The 2011 conflict in Libya, Turkey's subsequent intervention in support of the UN-recognised government in Tripoli in 2019, and the resulting redefinition of geopolitical dynamics between Italy and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean – affecting energy, migration and military issues – are central factors in the bilateral relations, both

endogenous and exogenous.

In contrast to the areas of cooperation that often characterise their engagement in the Mediterranean, Italy and Turkey tend to act more as competitors in Sub-Saharan and Central Africa. Ankara has been active on the continent for nearly two decades, having declared 2005 as the “Year of Africa” and subsequently established an extensive diplomatic and economic presence.⁵⁷ Through a deliberate strategy of soft power – combining cultural outreach, education, humanitarian aid and trade – Turkey has cultivated long-term partnership across the Sahel and the Horn of Africa.

While Turkey remains a key player due to its strategic location and military strength, the growing divergence in security priorities and values between Ankara and its European partners presents a long-term challenge. These tensions underscore the need for careful diplomacy to manage differences and preserve the cohesion of NATO and broader European security architecture. Furthermore, Turkey's military presence in Africa is rapidly growing, with a deployment of approximately 6,000 personnel in Niger, Somalia and Libya.⁵⁸ Italy, by comparison, has entered this arena more recently with the Mattei Plan for Africa, which aims to consolidate a stable and strategic presence through targeted cooperation with selected group of partner countries including Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco and Tunisia among others. The initiative reflects Rome's intention to relocate itself in a region where Ankara already wield significant influence, turning Africa into a subtle, though increasingly visible, arena of competition between the two countries' development and foreign policy models.

Another complicating factor is the role of national identity and regional positioning in terms of legacy with, in general, the European countries, and more precisely with the EU. Historically, Turkey has sought to align itself more closely with Europe, but in recent years it has shifted toward

⁵⁵ European Commission DG for Defence Industry and Space, *Results of the EDF 2023 Call for Proposals*, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/node/647_en.

⁵⁶ Barlas, Dilek, “Friends or Foes? Diplomatic Relations between Italy and Turkey, 1923-36”, in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (May 2004), p. 231-252, DOI 10.1017/S0020743804362045.

⁵⁷ Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Turkey-Africa: Solidarity and Partnership*, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_africa_-solidarity-and-partnership.en.mfa.

⁵⁸ Parens, Rapahel and Marcel Plichta, “Turkey's Return to Africa”, in *FPRI Analyses*, 10 March 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/?p=42731>.



a more assertive, independent foreign policy, to gain a proactive role on several fronts (especially in the relations with states from Middle East or Asia, like China and Russia). This raises fundamental questions about whether Turkey sees its future as part of a European security framework or as an independent power.

4.1 Turkey's integration into European institutions and the defence-industrial relationships

Since the end of the Second World War and the opening of Turkey's multiparty era – following the end of the political monopoly of Ataturk's Republican People's Party (CHP) – Italy, like many other European countries, saw an opportunity to deepen its ties with Ankara, which was seeking closer integration with Europe. Italian-Turkish relations consolidated further during the 1960s, when Turkey joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and, through the 1963 Ankara Agreement, set the long-term objective of accession to the European Economic Community (EEC). A rich exchange of diplomatic correspondence between the Italian ambassador in Ankara, Massimo Magistrati, and the Presidency of the Italian Republic under Giovanni Gronchi, in the period immediately surrounding and following the first military coup led by Colonel Alparslan Türkeş against the government of Adnan Menderes, testifies to Rome's interest in Turkey at a delicate juncture in international politics.⁵⁹ This concern reflected Italy's own foreign policy orientation toward “neo-Atlanticism” and its apprehension that Turkey, amid Cold War tensions, might drift toward the Soviet bloc and distance itself from the Atlantic Alliance.

Since the 1967 Cyprus crisis and the subsequent embargoes imposed on Turkey following its 1974 invasion of Northern Cyprus, Italy (with Germany) has emerged as a principal European supplier of military equipment to Turkey. “Since the mid-1960s, there have been some 139 million US dollars in agreements and 52 million in deliveries.

⁵⁹ Chiriatti, Alessia and Alessandro Ginammi Albanese, “L'impatto del conflitto russo-ucraino sulla sicurezza del Southern Flank della NATO: Turchia e Grecia”, in *Europa*, No. 19 (July 2025), p. 129-147, <https://www.rivistaeuropa.it/index.php/rivistaeuropa/article/view/267>.

During the latter part of 1974, Turkey signed two agreements with Italy, valued at approximately 86 million US dollars, for the purchase of 18 F-104 fighters (including spare parts and training) and 20 AB-204B helicopters”.⁶⁰ Then, starting in the 1980s, under the liberalising economic reforms of Turgut Özal, Turkey adopted a strategy of acquiring military equipment through joint ventures with foreign companies.⁶¹

Relations between Italy and Turkey have then undergone significant transformation with the end of the Cold War, particularly within the European context. In the 1990s, Italy advocated strongly for Turkey to be integrated into EU structures, recognising the country's economic and geopolitical value.⁶² Turkey's position at a crossroads between Europe and the Middle East reinforced the idea that it was an important partner for regional stability, including issues such as migration and energy security. Italy actively promoted the EU eastern and south-eastern enlargement process, seeing Turkey as a key partner. In 1999, the European Council in Helsinki officially recognised Turkey as a candidate for EU membership. This was a crucial step in strengthening the relations between Rome and Ankara. This path was not without obstacles however, mainly due to internal resistance within the EU and political and economic challenges in Turkey. Frictions already emerged at the Helsinki Council: the EU launched the Helsinki Headline Goal to establish a 60,000-strong European Rapid Reaction Force,⁶³ an objective that at the time appeared achievable primarily through the capabilities of EU member states. While Turkey's role was politically relevant given its geographical

⁶⁰ US Department of State, *Greece and Turkey: More Arms from Western Europe*. Intelligence Note Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR IN-109), 28 May 1975, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v30/d49>.

⁶¹ The most notable of these initiatives began in 1983 with a series of agreements that enabled the final assembly of the F-16 Fighting Falcon in Turkey.

⁶² Aydın-Düzgüt, Senem et al., *Global Turkey in Europe. Political, Economic, and Foreign Policy Dimensions of Turkey's Evolving Relationship with the EU*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, 2013, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/127>.

⁶³ Quille, Gerrard, “The European Security and Defence Policy: From the Helsinki Headline Goal to the EU Battlegroups”, in *European Parliament Notes*, 12 September 2006, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/sede/dv/sede030909notesdp_/sede030909notesdp_en.pdf.



location and position within NATO, tensions emerged regarding NATO-EU cooperation and Turkey's non-EU status. As a result, the emerging EU defence initiatives developed from the outset largely separated from Turkey.

4.2 Turkey's strategic ambitions under the AKP and the relations with Italy

From the early 1990s onwards, Turkey's foreign and security policy towards Europe developed within an increasingly pragmatic and strategically ambitious framework. Cooperation between the European Union and Turkey in this domain dates back to Ankara's associate membership in the Western European Union (WEU) in 1992. At the same time, Turkey was entitled to attend meetings of the WEU Council and its working groups without voting rights, while being allowed to appoint liaison officers and participate in operations on an equal footing with full members. As a NATO ally, Ankara could also be consulted and involved in operations making use of NATO assets, as a way to reinforce cooperation among allies inside or outside the EU.

This framework was reshaped at the turn of the 2000s, following both the progressive marginalisation of the WEU after 1999, when the EU began to assume its crisis management functions, and the rise to power of the AKP in 2002, which introduced a more assertive and multidimensional approach to Turkish foreign policy.⁶⁴ Under the AKP, Ankara sought to diversify its strategic partnerships while maintaining its NATO commitments, pursuing closer engagement with the European Union as part of a broader effort to position Turkey as a regional power with global reach. The Berlin Plus Agreement, concluded in 2002 and implemented in 2003, represented a pivotal moment in this process, institutionalising EU-NATO cooperation and allowing EU-led operations to draw upon NATO planning capabilities, command structures and military assets. The framework also enhanced coordination in crisis management, counterterrorism and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. For Turkey, Berlin Plus offered a crucial guarantee: as non-EU NATO

member, it could participate in EU missions relying on NATO resources. Ankara subsequently became one of the EU operations' most active third-country contributors, taking part in nine EU-led missions and ranking overall as the fourth-largest contributor after France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Notably, on 31 March 2003, the European Union formally assumed responsibility for the NATO mission "Allied Harmony", launching Operation Concordia⁶⁵ at the explicit request of the government of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). The operation involved Turkey and other 13 non-EU countries (Bulgaria, Canada, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary) alongside 13 EU member states (excluding Denmark and Ireland), totalling 400 personnel. A Contributor's Committee was established to coordinate the mission, and operational costs were borne by participating countries according to the principle "the costs lie where they fall". Concordia was part of the EU's broader commitment to support FYROM's government, marking the second European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) mission launched by the Union in 2003 and its first military peacekeeping operation. This operation exemplifies how the Berlin Plus framework enabled the EU to assume a more active role in crisis management while leveraging NATO capabilities, setting a precedent for subsequent EU-led missions such as Althea in Bosnia-Herzegovina and illustrating the deepening critical cooperation between the two organisations.⁶⁶ The implications of these arrangements extended beyond Turkey, as the Atlantic Alliance, NATO-EU cooperation and European defence are reference points for Italian defence policy. As mentioned before for Italy, NATO membership remained the cornerstone of national defence, ensuring a level of territorial security that could not be

⁶⁵ Mace, Catriona, "Operation Concordia: Developing a 'European' Approach to Crisis Management?", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2004), p. 474-490, DOI 10.1080/1353331042000249055.

⁶⁶ Zeppa, Laura, "Le 'operazioni di gestione delle crisi' dell'Unione Europea", in *Sistema informativo a schede*, No. 5-6 (May-June 2004), <https://www.archiviodisarmo.it/view/ydi mmjgoyG1SdrUvXeWVz5C0lIkks9r9RiKk-Hv5FKA/2004-4-5-zeppa.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Yavuz, M. Hakan, *Nostalgia for the Empire. The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.



achieved independently. The Alliance also played a decisive role in driving the standardisation and modernisation of Italian military capabilities, indirectly strengthening the international competitiveness of national defence industries such as Leonardo (formerly Finmeccanica). NATO thus underpinned Italy's stabilising role in the Balkans, its privileged transatlantic ties and its strategic partnership with Turkey.⁶⁷

While the Euro-Atlantic security architecture evolved in the post-Cold War period, Italy and Turkey's security relations have evolved too around shared interests in maintaining regional stability and preventing uncontrolled escalation in the Mediterranean. Since the AKP's consolidation of power in the 2000s, in fact, bilateral cooperation has largely revolved around two main axes: Turkey's contribution to NATO's southern strategy, where Italy has often played a leading operational role also in the second decade of this century (for instance in missions such as Active Fence – in the period between January 2018 and November 2019 – and Sea Guardian, launched on November 2016) and the growing securitisation of the Eastern Mediterranean, where Rome and Ankara overlapping yet sometimes competing objectives in maritime security, energy exploitation and regional diplomacy. For example, Turkey's military interventions in Syria (beginning in August 2016 with Operation Euphrates Shields, followed by Olive Branch in 2018, Peace Spring in 2019 and Spring Shield in February 2020) exemplify its determination to counter both Kurdish militias and the Assad regime's advances along its southern border. Similarly, its decisive military support for the Government of National Accord in Libya in 2019-2020, including the deployment of drones and military advisors, marked a turning point in Ankara's projection of power into North Africa and the broader Mediterranean region. At the same time, Turkey's increasingly close coordination with Russia – particularly in energy cooperation and arms procurement, such as the S-400 missile system deal in 2017-2019 – has complicated its role within NATO, raising concerns about its ability to balance conflicting partnership

amid renewed East-West tensions.

Meanwhile, in a broader sense, Turkey's path towards EU membership has been long and tortuous, and the difficulties have inevitably affected Italian-Turkish relations. Although Italy has long supported Turkey's entry into the Union, progress has been hindered by internal political issues within the EU, such as concerns over human rights and democracy in Turkey, as well as the resistance to Turkish free movement in Europe and concerns over a very large and instable economy. Furthermore, the political repression following the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016 complicated relations with Europe and put accession negotiations on ice. While criticising some of the actions taken by the Turkish government, Italy has maintained a pragmatic approach. Although political challenges do exist, the partnership between Rome and Ankara is based on shared interests beyond EU membership.

Turkey's candidacy for EU membership has been a central issue in the broader debate about the Union's capacity to address emerging security threats. The Italian political elite's perception of Turkey's role is deeply intertwined with security concerns, particularly due to the latter's strategic position at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. As Turkey shares direct borders with conflict zones, its engagement with the EU is seen as critical to managing and mitigating security risks, especially regarding migration flows, regional instability and potential escalation of conflicts.

While Turkey's potential accession raises important questions, particularly regarding its political and cultural alignment with the EU, foreign and security policy considerations often favour closer integration. Ankara has substantial potential to bolster the EU's security architecture, given its geographical position and military capabilities. However, this potential is balanced by the challenges posed by the ongoing instability in the Middle East, where the EU has struggled to maintain a coherent and active role. An area in which EU and Turkey have tried to cooperate in the past is the counterterrorism, for instance organising Counter-Terrorism Consultations in Ankara on 28 November 2017. They decided

⁶⁷ Alcaro, Riccardo, "The Italian Government and the NATO's New Strategic Concept", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 10|12, (July 2010), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/4070>.



“to explore ways of enhancing collaboration on information sharing, law enforcement and judicial cooperation, and countering financing of terrorism, among other subjects”.⁶⁸ However, Turkey’s broad domestic definition of terrorism remains a significant concern, as it conflicts with European standards and violates the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The key international relations issues surrounding Turkey’s candidacy – such as national identity, regional influence and the EU’s future role as a global political actor – remain unresolved. These challenges highlight the complex interplay between geopolitics and security, which Italy – and the EU member states – must navigate carefully in the coming years.

Turning to NATO, Italy and Turkey have cooperated in many NATO missions, mainly in the Balkans and in Afghanistan, sharing common concerns about regional and global security. Stability in the Balkans, which is strategically important area for both countries, has seen joint Italian and Turkish participation in peacekeeping and stabilisation operations. Turkey assumed command of NATO’s KFOR in October 2023, further strengthening its role in the region. Italy, which has historically maintained a strong military and diplomatic presence in the Western Balkans, including recurring leadership of the KFOR mission, views Turkey’s involvement as complementary to its own stabilisation efforts. Rome has consistently advocated for maintaining a robust NATO presence in the Balkans, seeing it as crucial to preventing instability and managing migration flows towards Europe.

Within NATO military posture, Turkey played a leading role in establishing the Southeast European Brigade (SEEBRIG), which is a collaborative initiative involving also Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Macedonia and Romania; its first commander was indeed a Turkish general. Italy’s engagement in SEEBRIG demonstrates its commitment to multilateral military frameworks that enhance regional stability. Italy’s strategic approach aligns with NATO’s broader objectives while also serving its national interest in promoting security in its

immediate neighbourhood.

The upcoming NATO summit in Turkey in 2026 represents a key opportunity for Ankara to reaffirm its strategic relevance within the Alliance. Hosting the event allows Ankara to showcase its centrality in managing Eastern Mediterranean security, its influence over regional hotspots such as Libya and Syria, and its pivotal contribution in migration control. The summit could also serve as a platform for Turkey to assert its priorities for NATO’s southern flank, engage in discussion on defence procurement and interoperability, and signal its expectations for burden-sharing. Turkey’s influence in Libya, combined with its role in Syria and broader Mediterranean security, makes it a critical actor for Italy in managing regional risks. Both countries are focused on stabilising Libya, promoting an inclusive government and preventing the escalation of conflicts that could spill over into the Mediterranean. Migratory flows via Libya, particularly from areas under Khalifa Haftar’s control, remain a key security concern for Rome, especially given potential manipulation by external actors such as Russia. Italian officials, including Minister of Defence Guido Crosetto, have framed these flows as a form of hybrid threat affecting both Italy and Europe.

Beyond Libya and migration, Turkey’s geopolitical and economic weight, its sway in the Balkans and its broader regional influence position it as an essential partner in Italy’s efforts to safeguard Eastern Mediterranean stability. Close dialogue with Ankara is seen as vital not only to manage migration and conflict spillovers but also to strengthen Italy’s capacity to engage in wider regional security initiatives, from Syria to Central Asia, and to respond to emerging crises.

While Italy has decided to “gradually increase its defence budget once out of an European Union excessive deficit procedure”,⁶⁹ Turkey has supported the NATO’s decision to more than double its defence spending target to 5 per cent of GDP by 2035. As NATO’s second-largest army and one of the top five contributors to allied operations and missions, Turkey has met all

⁶⁸ EU and Turkey, *Joint EU-Turkey Press Release: EU-Turkey Counter-Terrorism Consultations*, 29 November 2017, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/36411_en.

⁶⁹ “Italy to Hike Defence Spending once out of EU Deficit Procedure, Minister Says”, in *Reuters*, 12 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/italy-hike-defence-spending-once-out-eu-deficit-procedure-minister-says-2025-11-12>.



NATO capability target and continues to invest in defence industry's development and research activities. One of its main priorities is the national "Steel Dome" project,⁷⁰ aimed at establishing a nationwide, layered air defence network.⁷¹

On the Italian side, and considering the importance for Rome and Ankara to secure the Eastern Mediterranean space, Meloni's engagement in Istanbul on 1 August 2025 highlights the centrality of the bilateral partnership regarding defence, economic cooperation and regional stability, and reflects shared NATO commitments and recent military industrial agreements, including drone production and the acquisition of the Italian Piaggio Aerospace firm by the Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar.

5. Italian-Turkish defence cooperation: Adapting to operational and regional challenges

Since 2004, Turkey has shifted from the liberal economic policies of Turgut Özal (the President of Turkey in the period between 1989 and 1993) to prioritising the development of domestically designed defence equipment, aiming to strengthen its defence industrial autonomy. While pursuing this strategy, Turkey has maintained collaboration with Italy, alongside other partners such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. Defence procurement has taken two main forms: programmes supported by national industries and joint development projects with foreign partners

⁷⁰ The Turkish project "Steel Dome" (*Çelik Kubbe*) seeks to integrate multi-layered air defence systems, sensors and other weapon platforms into a unified network, both on land and at sea. Turkish authorities describe it as a true "system of systems", enabling the real-time generation and dissemination of a common air picture (recognised air picture – RAP) enhanced by artificial intelligence. The project will build on existing air defence capabilities, particularly around Ankara and along the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits, while addressing emerging requirements such as the protection of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. The Steel Dome project received the formal approval by the Executive Committee of the Defence Industry (SSIK) on 6 August 2024.

⁷¹ "Turkey Backs NATO's 5% Defence Spending Goal, Plan Nationwide Air Shield, Source Says", in *Reuters*, 26 June 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/turkey-backs-natos-5-defence-spending-goal-plans-nationwide-air-shield-source-2025-06-26>.

that enable technology transfer and industrial upgrading.⁷²

As already said in this paper, the origin of the Italy-Turkey collaboration trace back to the 1967 Cyprus crisis and to the embargo on Turkey. In the most recent decades, in the aircraft domain, Italian-designed platforms and maritime patrol aircraft have operated under Turkish markings, in some cases manufactured in Turkey under licensed production arrangements. In the rotary-wing sector, bilateral cooperation delivered one of Turkey's flagship defence systems, the T129 ATAK, when, in October 1996, Turkey launched a request for proposals for 145 attack helicopters under a licensed-production scheme. Although AgustaWestland initially failed to secure the contract – partly due to political tension arising from Italy's refuse to extradite Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), during his brief stay in Italy in 1998-1999 – the bilateral defence relationships later evolved into a cornerstone of bilateral defence cooperation after Turkey became an official EU candidate in 1999, and Italy's new government under Silvio Berlusconi voiced support for its accession in 2001. After the cancellation of the original programme, Turkey relaunched the tender with revised requirements in 2006, placing strong emphasis on technology transfer, local industrial participation and sovereign control over key subsystems. AgustaWestland emerged as the winning bidder not as a standalone supplier, but as the prime foreign partner within a Turkey-centred industrial framework. The selection was therefore followed by negotiations to operationalise the programme through Turkey's defence-industrial ecosystem.

This process culminated in 2007 with the signing of the main production contract not directly with AgustaWestland, but with Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI), designated as the prime contractor. Under this structure, AgustaWestland provided the platform design, technical assistance and critical know-how, while TAI assumed responsibility for final assembly,

⁷² A notable example of the indigenous programme is the MilGem project, with the Ada class anti-submarine warfare corvette. From the other side, the co-development is exemplified by the T129 ATAK attack helicopter, produced in partnership with Italy's AgustaWestland (then Leonardo).



manufacturing integration, testing and lifecycle support, alongside other Turkish firms involved in avionics, mission systems and electronics. The transition from AgustaWestland's bid victory to the contract with Turkish industry thus reflected Turkey's strategic choice to use foreign partnerships as vehicles for domestic capability-building, rather than conventional off-the-shelf procurement.⁷³

The ATAK programme is widely considered a success, not only for its significant technological transfer – enabled by Turkey's robust science and technology base and the close cooperation between Italian and Turkish engineers – but also for the T129's export achievements in markets such as Nigeria and the Philippines. It played a central role in establishing Turkey's helicopter industry, which has since advanced to indigenous design such as the Gökbeş. Other successful collaborations include Fincantieri's support for the construction of four Dost-class patrol ships for the Turkish Coast Guard; Vitrociset, now part of Leonardo, providing a digital data-acquisition system, command and communication solutions and consultancy for the Turkish space programme; and Leonardo's supply of technologies for maritime and airborne traffic management.⁷⁴

In the space sector, Italian technological expertise has been instrumental in supporting Turkey's accession to satellite capabilities, generating durable infrastructure as well as transfer of skills and know-how. More recently, a surge in direct corporate partnerships – from unmanned systems production initiatives to cross-border mergers and acquisitions – demonstrates that this cooperation is not merely legacy-driven but remains dynamic and responsive to emerging technological domains.

Furthermore, these successes have strengthened Italy-Turkey defence cooperation in recent years, fostering growing trade and joint ventures. Italian industrialists and officials regard Turkey as an attractive market due to several factors: strong growth in Turkish defence spending,

substantial investment in defence electronics, a well-developed science and technology sector and Turkey's experience in managing joint ventures and collaborating with foreign partners. The Turkish defence procurement agency, the *Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı* (SSB), is particularly respected among Italian stakeholders with experience working alongside it.

Turkey's defence exports have surged since 2019, initially driven by the sale of armed UASs to markets in Middle East and Africa, and more recently expanding to include platforms such as corvettes as well as guided weapons. These developments have reinforced Turkey's position as a credible supplier for an increasing number of countries, including Eastern European states such as Estonia, Poland and Romania, which are engaging with Ankara to meet their defence-modernisation requirements.

In 2022, Turkey ranked as the primary recipient of Italian defence export authorisations, with a total value of 598.2 million euros, while in 2023 it fell to sixth place, receiving authorisations, worth 231.3 million euros.⁷⁵ These exports have predominantly encompassed four categories of equipment: helicopters, including the ATR72 turboprop, the AW109 and the AB 212/412; naval artillery, such as the Oto Melara's 76mm gun systems; military and dual-use satellites, frequently developed through Franco-Italian joint ventures; and guided weapons for naval vessels, including the A244 lightweight torpedo and the Aspide surface-to-air missile.

Italian industry has also contributed key subsystems to Turkish platforms that are subsequently exported to third countries. A notable example is Leonardo's Osprey 30 radar, integrated into Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicles acquired by Poland.⁷⁶ These transfers have generally followed two principal modalities: either direct sales from Italy's production lines, or licensed production of Turkish variants of Italian

⁷³ Kardas, Saban, "Turkey Initiates Production of National Attack Helicopters", in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 5, No. 123 (27 June 2008), <https://jamestown.org/?p=71392>.

⁷⁴ Cavanna, Giacomo, "Le industrie italiane della Difesa in Turchia", in *Ares Osservatorio Difesa*, 15 October 2019, <https://aresdifesa.it/?p=3502>.

⁷⁵ Italian Government, *Relazione sulle operazioni autorizzate e svolte per il controllo dell'esportazione, importazione e transito dei materiali di armamenti*, 24 March 2023, <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/1411693.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Gosselin-Malo, Elisabeth, "Poland to Break New Ground with Osprey on TB2", in *Shephard News*, 7 December 2021, <https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/digital-battlespace/poland-to-break-new-ground-with-osprey-on-tb2>.



designs.⁷⁷

Nonetheless, these positive aspects are tempered by concerns over Turkey's relatively limited research and development (R&D) budget, which is dispersed across numerous projects, and the substantial requirements it imposes during negotiations regarding intellectual property rights, technology transfer and industrial offsets. Additionally, several experts noted that political connections can sometimes play a decisive role in awarding contracts to private sector companies, creating potential risks for Italian firms if a Turkish partner became disfavoured. Some sources also questioned whether Turkey could sustain its robust defence spending growth amid high inflation and fiscal pressures stemming from socio-economic challenges that may necessitate additional funding. Moreover, Turkey's expanding defence exports and broader engagement with states in Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East could entail risks, depending on how these systems are ultimately employed.

Italy and its EU partners share broadly similar ambitions, goals and interests on several issues, including concerns over Turkish support for Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. In practice, Italy often allows other European states to take the lead on more contentious matters with Ankara, which provides context for its occasional disagreements. Yet certain issues – such as the early stages of the Libyan civil war or energy exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean – are more acute and directly affected Italian security interests. Some divergences, like differences over relations with Israel or Turkish activity in the Horn of Africa, appear to have minimal impact on defence-industrial cooperation.

Specifically concerning Israel and Gaza, in the last years Italy and Turkey adopted increasingly divergent positions, reflecting different strategic cultures, alliance priorities and domestic political dynamics. Italy has maintained a cautious and institutionally aligned stance, broadly consistent with EU and transatlantic positions. While

expressing concern over the humanitarian situation in Gaza and supporting calls for pauses or ceasefires, Rome has continued to frame Israel's actions primarily within the context of its right to self-defence, avoiding confrontational rhetoric and preserving diplomatic channels with Israel. This approach reflects Italy's commitment to EU unity, its close ties with the United States and its preference for de-escalation through multilateral diplomacy rather than unilateral political signalling.

Turkey, by contrast, has taken a far more assertive and openly critical position toward Israel. Ankara has strongly condemned Israeli military operations in Gaza, framing them in moral and legal terms and positioning itself as a vocal defender of Palestinian rights. This posture is consistent with president Erdoğan's broader regional strategy, which combines domestic political mobilisation, leadership claims in the Muslim world and a willingness to challenge Western partners on normative grounds.

Others, however, carry substantial implications. These include Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air-defence system; military operations in Libya and Syria, which disrupted or delayed opportunities such as Turkish acquisition of air and missile defence systems resulted from Italo-French collaborations; concerns over potential Turkish arms exports to third countries; and delays in ratifying Sweden's NATO accession. Such factors have shaped Italy's assessment of Turkey's participation in future NATO and multinational defence initiatives.⁷⁸ At the same time, both countries are seeking influence in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, and in certain areas their interest coincide – for example, Italy views Turkish military presence in Libya as stabilising, while both states share a strong interest in Somalia's territorial integrity.

Italian policymakers and defence industry representatives see considerable potential for expanding defence industrial cooperation with Turkey. They point to Ankara's rapidly growing defence budget, its ambitious capability development goals and the persistent gaps in its

⁷⁷ Gilli, Andrea and Mauro Gilli, "Italy", in Tom Waldwyn (ed.), "Turkiye's Defence-industrial Relationships with Other European States", in *IISS Research Papers*, September 2024, p. 9-11, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/09/turkiyes-defence-industrial-relationships-with-other-european-states>.

⁷⁸ Eurosam, *Turkey, France and Italy Sign an Agreement on Air Defence*, 9 November 2017, <https://eurosam.com/?p=225002>.



defence industrial base that could be addressed through partnerships with experienced foreign actors. Turkey today possesses significant and expanding military capabilities. According to the latest SIPRI data, it ranked 17th among the world's top military spenders in 2024, up from 19th the previous year. Its defence budget reached 25 billion US dollars, marking a 12 per cent increase compared to 2023. Over the past decade, Turkey's military expenditure has more than doubled, rising 110 per cent since 2015, and accounting for 1 per cent of global military spending.⁷⁹

This steady growth has been driven by a combination of external and internal security pressures, including sustained military operations in Syria, clashes with Kurdish groups, maritime disputed in the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader repercussions of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, Ankara remains the largest non-EU troop contributor to Operation ALTHEA, the EU-led mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, underscoring its continuing relevance as a security actor in the broader Euro-Atlantic and Mediterranean spaces.

Potential areas of collaboration with Italy include maritime search and rescue and the protection of underwater critical infrastructure. Italy's leading shipyard industry, combined with the shared Mediterranean strategic context, suggests room for deeper cooperation in this sector. However, some observers note that the close integration between Italian and French naval industries could pose a challenge, given Ankara's more complex relations with Paris. A recent example of bilateral collaboration is the 2024 unveiling of a light tank by Leonardo and Otokar, which paired Leonardo's turret with Otokar's vehicle platform.

Additionally, the Italian Air Force plans to procure Rokestan Cirit laser-guided rockets for use with Leonardo's Astore UAVs, representing a rare instance of a potential Turkish defence export to a major European partner. Regarding competition, Italian industrialists generally see the Turkish defence industry operating in sectors and markets that largely do not overlap with Italian priorities. A possible exception is in

Middle East, where Turkey's greater willingness to transfer technology could provide its companies with a competitive edge.⁸⁰

6. At a crossroad: Ukraine as litmus tests for Italy-Turkey relations

Italy's foreign policy stance remains firmly convinced that both the southern and eastern dimensions of Europe are equally important for ensuring its position within the EU's and NATO's comprehensive security.

Notably, Italy's growing engagement on NATO's eastern flank is demonstrated by its leadership of allied multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, with significant troop deployments (around 1,000-1,300 personnel) and active participation in NATO air policing missions in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. This operational deployment is supported by Italy's defence planning documents, which priorities capabilities aligned with NATO's capability targets, and by its political commitment to meet the new threshold of spending on defence. These actions underscore Italy's shift toward reinforcing NATO's eastern posture while maintaining its traditional focus on the southern flank.⁸¹ This is quite clear when it comes to the analysis of the ongoing war in Ukraine (among the others), thus focusing on the main perceptions and positions of both Italy and Turkey.

The war in Ukraine has indeed revealed again from one side the importance of EU in foreign policy (at least in the first phase of the aggression) and of NATO and transatlantic ties in ensuring European security (after a period of divergences and mistrust opened with Emmanuel Macron's sentence on the brain-death of the Alliance and culminated with the dramatic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021). For Meloni, strengthening bonds with the United States and aligning with NATO strategies are not only measures of security policy but also a reaffirmation of Italy's historical

⁷⁹ Liang, Xiao et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024", in *SIPRI Fact Sheets*, April 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/node/7316>.

⁸⁰ Valpolini, Paolo, "WDS 2024 - Otokar and Leonardo Unveil New Tulpar Light Tank Solution", in *European Defence Review*, 5 February 2024, <https://www.edrmagazine.eu/?p=34931>.

⁸¹ NATO Allied Air Command, *Spain to Handover NATO Air Policing Mission in Romania to the Italian Air Force*, 26 March 2025, <https://ac.nato.int/archive/2025-2/spain-to-handover-nato-air-policing-mission-in-romania-to-the-italian-air-force>.



commitment to a stable and secure Europe through strong transatlantic alliances.

One tangible example of this diplomatic effort is Meloni's engagement with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, reflecting Italy's alignment with Western support for Ukraine. The two leaders have met several times (including in Kyiv on February 2023, Rome on May 2023 and October 2024, and on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2024 and with Trump at the White House, and again in December 2025 in Rome). The two most substantial outcomes of this cooperation are the ten-year bilateral security agreement signed in February 2024. The agreement specifies the concrete financial and military support provided by Italy since February 2022 and reaffirms Italy's commitment to continue delivering such assistance throughout a ten-year period. In addition to military aid, the deal includes provision for military training, intelligence sharing, strategic coordination and support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, thus anchoring Italy's diplomatic support in a long-term strategic framework.⁸²

From its own side, Turkey has repeatedly positioned itself as a diplomatic and strategic intermediary in the Russia-Ukraine war, hosting rounds of talks between Russia and Ukraine in March 2022 at Istanbul and Antalya; regulating access through the Bosphorus by limiting the passage of Russian naval vessels using its strategic position regulated by the Montreux Convention: facilitating the Black Sea grain export arrangements, together with the UN Secretary General; and supplying Ukraine with Baykar-produced drones through Baykar. While operating on a different scale and with a less overtly transactional approach, Italy shows partial similarities: both countries combine NATO membership with pragmatic diplomacy, seek to preserve channels of dialogue with all sides, and leverage their geographic and political positioning to contribute to de-escalation, mediation and the protection of critical economic flows as food security.

⁸² Italian Government, *President Meloni Meets with President Zelensky of Ukraine*, 10 October 2024, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/27795>.

7. Future prospects and conclusions

Italian-Turkish relations are shaped by global and regional developments and stand at a critical crossroads today. The evolving geopolitical landscape, marked by new challenges in the Middle East and the influence of the new Trump administration, has introduced fresh dynamics into this bilateral relationship.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has brought an element of uncertainty to transatlantic relations. His "America first" policy and his often-transactional approach to alliances could prompt a reassessment of NATO's role in European security. For Italy, this means maintaining a balance between commitment to NATO and aspirations for a stronger EU defence framework. Meanwhile, Turkey, which has to navigate complex relations with Washington under the previous Trump administration, might seek to leverage its strategic value within NATO to gain concessions or mitigate US pressure.

At this critical juncture, Italy and Turkey must carefully navigate their bilateral relationship, balancing national interests with broader regional stability. Potential for defence cooperation exists, especially through bilateral agreements and NATO-led missions, but the two countries firstly need to align their strategic priorities. Both countries are demonstrating a proactive and more assertive role in foreign and defence policy; moreover, as Italy advocates for stronger EU defence mechanisms that complement NATO, integrating Turkey into this framework remains a complex challenge, particularly given the EU's cautious stance towards Turkey's membership bid.

Furthermore, whether Italian-Turkish relations tilt towards competition or collaboration will depend on how both countries respond to the evolving geopolitical landscape, manage external influences (such as the policy shift in Washington) and reconcile their strategic differences in key regional theatres.

Like many other European countries, Italy is currently in a phase of redefining its foreign policy and affirming its position in the international community, especially in light of tensions in the transatlantic relationship. Turkey's foreign policy



stance, characterised by strong engagement with the EU and sustained influence across the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia, combined with its strategic geopolitical position in an increasingly multipolar world – where emerging regional powers pose destabilising challenges to traditional alliances – makes Ankara a linchpin for NATO’s southern flank and reinforces its importance in collective security. On the other hand, Turkey’s recent military operations, particularly its unilateral actions in Syria driven by national security concerns and its focus on Kurdish groups along its border, have raised apprehensions among European allies due to their potential to strain NATO cohesion and regional stability. This duality presents a complex challenge for Italy, which must navigate its foreign policy commitments while addressing uncertainties stemming from Turkey’s unpredictable behaviour.

Despite these challenges, the bilateral relationship remains crucial for both countries. Moving forward, maintaining open dialogue and fostering cooperation in areas of mutual interest will be essential to ensuring stable and productive relations between Rome and Ankara. Notably, shifts in Italy’s approach toward Turkey – observed between the Draghi and Meloni governments – reflect an evolution from a more cautious, principle-driven stance to one focused on pragmatic agreements and strategic engagement.

Collaborative defence projects, such as joint development and production of military equipment, represent a tangible avenue for cooperation. Both Italy and Turkey have made significant advancements in defence technology and research, as evidenced by Italy’s strong investment in national, bilateral and EU initiatives, as well as by Turkey’s investments in air and missile defence systems like the “Steel Dome” project, drones and other capabilities. Leveraging these strengths through joint endeavour could not only enhance interoperability, military readiness and production capacities, but also reinforce broader strategic ties between the two NATO allies.

Turkey can serve as a strategic partner for Italy in accessing regions where Rome has limited influence, particularly in parts of Middle East, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Ankara’s extensive regional networks, deep-rooted political ties, and operation reach in countries such as Libya, make it a valuable partner for Italy when seeking to advance its diplomatic, security, or economic interests in areas where direct engagement might be challenging, particularly for the shared goal of regional stability. The “benefits” Italy may offer in this exchange, however, is nuanced: it includes political support in EU forums, cooperation in multilateral initiatives, joint defence and security projects, and economic and technological partnerships. At the same time, Italy may provide Turkey with access to European structures, legitimacy and opportunities for economic and industrial collaboration, as well as a channel to shape EU policies in ways that accommodate Ankara’s regional ambitions. The bilateral relationship is therefore inherently transactional, with each side leveraging its assets to compensate for the other’s limitations, but it requires careful management given Turkey’s often opaque foreign policy and Italy’s commitment to EU norms and multilateral framework.

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