

## Goals and Shortcomings of Italy's Peace Operations

by Vincenzo Camporini

A substantial number of Italy's military personnel – 5,950 soldiers, sailors and airmen – are presently deployed beyond national borders in 34 international missions in 23 different countries.<sup>1</sup> However, since 1 January there has been no legal and financial cover for their activities since the government has yet to submit to Parliament the legislation required to ensure funding for these missions.

This delay is not a novelty, but in January 2019 Italy's Minister of Defence announced, apparently without prior consultation with the Foreign Minister, her intention to explore the feasibility of an Italian withdrawal from NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, giving a political flavour to this procrastination.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Military Operations*, <https://www.difesa.it/EN/Operations/Pagine/MilitaryOperations.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Crispian Balmer, "Italy Considering Afghan Pullout Within a Year - Defence Source", in *Reuters*, 28 January 2019, <https://reut.rs/2WyzYGK>; Italian

These two episodes highlight the persistent structural deficiencies in the decision-making and financing procedures regulating Italy's participation in peace-support operations.

Participation in international peace operations has been a constant in Italy's foreign policy since the early eighties. The first deployment of armed units after World War II came in 1982, in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and devastating siege of Beirut. The Italian government responded to a request for assistance by Lebanese authorities and deployed troops to Beirut in the framework of the Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF), which also included French, UK and US contingents. The initial deployment was followed, in the wake of a further worsening of the security environment, by a more demanding and long-lasting mission in

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Italian Military Contingent in Afghanistan*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.esteri.it/mae/tiny/27821>.

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Lebanon, stretching until March 1984, when the MNF formally withdrew.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, Italian Armed Forces have engaged in a number of international efforts to restore peace and security worldwide, in Kuwait (1990–91), in Somalia (1992–95), in all Western Balkans conflict zones and in East Timor (1999–2000), just to mention a few. Today, Italy is the largest Western contributor to UN missions<sup>4</sup> and the second (after US) largest contributor to NATO missions.<sup>5</sup>

The legal framework of Italy's participation in peace-support missions is provided by Article 11 of the Italian Constitution which states that "Italy shall agree [...] to such limitations of sovereignty as may be necessary to ensure peace and justice among Nations. Italy shall promote and encourage international organisations pursuing such goals."<sup>6</sup>

This constitutional provision broadly explains why Italian troops have been deployed so widely, even when a direct link with the national interest was

not that obvious. It seems that Italy's engagements in international missions are inspired mainly by a sense of duty and by a compelling loyalty to the international organisations to which the country belongs, the UN, NATO and the European Union, that is, the three main pillars of Italian foreign policy.

While Italy's participation in Afghan operations, first as a member of the US-led coalition and later within the NATO framework, has been in line with this well-established tradition of international solidarity, other missions respond to more direct national interests. This is the case with Italy's prominent role in the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) which aims to lower tensions in an area whose stability is seen as a national security priority. Similarly, there was clear evidence that conflicts in the Western Balkans had an immediate impact on Italy's security.

This explains Italy's insistence in the 1990s to be part of the Contact Group for the Balkans in charge of efforts aimed at pacifying and stabilizing the region. The other members of the Group were however reluctant to accept Italy's request to join; only by threatening to close its air bases to the coalition's air operations did Italy manage to overcome such resistance.

Today, the Italian armed forces remain fully engaged in the Western Balkans; they are, in particular, the backbone of Kosovo Force (KFOR), the NATO mission in Kosovo, which is still far from achieving the desirable level of stability.

<sup>3</sup> Italian Army website: "Lebanon 2" Mission, <http://www.esercito.difesa.it/en/Operations/international-operations/Pagine/Lebanon-2-Mission.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping, *Troop and Police Contributors Monthly Strength Report: Contributions by Country and Post*, January 2019, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabetta Trenta, "Italy's Defense Minister: Let's Redefine Burden-sharing", in *Defense News*, 9 December 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/outlook/2018/12/10/italys-defense-minister-lets-define-burden-sharing>.

<sup>6</sup> An official English translation of the Italian Constitution is available at <https://www.senato.it/1024>.

A closer look at the modalities of Italian military interventions shows a substantial reluctance to use force. In Afghanistan, for instance, Italian Air Force fighters were not allowed to carry weapons and, in case an Italian ground patrol needed air support, it was necessary to ask other members of the coalition to provide it. Similarly, Italy has participated in air operations against ISIS in Iraq, but only in aerial reconnaissance role and refuelling operations.<sup>7</sup>

This attitude has cultural roots that date back to the Cold War, when the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was by far the largest in the western world and the main party in power was the Christian Democracy Party (DC), which included a very influential left wing (the term "cattocomunista" was used, to indicate the convergence between the two political views).

In those times strong ultra-pacifist currents flourished and have since influenced a large part of the public opinion. Political leaders have been inclined to embrace such feelings, with paradoxical consequences. One is that the Italian juridical system has two different military codes, one for peacetime and the other for wartime; for purely ideological reasons, when Italian troops are involved in peacekeeping operations, the peacetime code is applied, instead of the wartime code, which would be by far more appropriate. As a result, in case of casualties a legal inquiry is opened

<sup>7</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Operazione Prima Parthica/Missione*, [https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op\\_intern\\_corso/Prima\\_Parthica/Pagine/Missione.aspx](https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Prima_Parthica/Pagine/Missione.aspx).

with the related judicial procedures.

For similar ideological reasons the political process to debate and decide the participation in military missions abroad has tended to be long and cumbersome. A case in point is the decision to join the US-led coalition against Iraq in 1990: it took such a long time that, when the green light was given, all the available logistic facilities and infrastructures were already earmarked and the Italian multi-role fighter jets Tornado had to be based in an airbase in Al Dhafra in the United Arab Emirates, some 1,000 miles from their potential targets.

The institutional framework also suffers from long-lasting shortcomings. Only in July 2016 was a law approved to regulate the decision-making procedure for Italy's participation in peacekeeping interventions.<sup>8</sup> The law defines inter alia the different roles of the government and parliament, as well as the related financing procedures. These foresee that the costs of the missions are not included in the ordinary defence budget, but provided by the Treasury as extra resources.

Before the new law was passed the process was performed in a rather unregulated, albeit pragmatic, way. The government issued periodic decrees with varying timeframes – annual, semi-annual or even shorter – which considerably complicated the job of military planners. Now the process is clear, although the financing process

<sup>8</sup> Natalino Ronzitti, "Missioni all'estero, arriva la legge", in *Affari Internazionali*, 10 January 2017, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=64843>.

remains subject to periodic renewal.

Another very delicate institutional question has remained unresolved since the birth of the Republic. Italy has a parliamentary system: the prime minister – and the ministers upon a proposal by the prime minister – are appointed by the President of the Republic. The government takes office following a confidence vote in both chambers of Parliament. In this framework, the prime minister is only a “primus inter pares” as he has only a limited hierarchical authority over ministers (he may not, for instance, dismiss them).

This complicates the chain of command in military forces. The supreme commander is the President of the Republic, who does not have any strategic or operational role. The operational commander is the Chief of Defence General Staff, who answers to the minister of defence, but the latter does not answer to the prime minister.

What is missing is a legal mechanism giving the Cabinet as a whole the authority to direct the employment of the military instrument. There is wide agreement about the need to clarify this chain-of-command issue as a key precondition for a more effective use of the armed forces for peace support operations as well as for other contingencies.

*14 February 2019*

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