

## Italy's Lukewarm Approach to Arms Control

by Carlo Trezza

Arms control does not seem to be a priority for the present Italian government led by Giuseppe Conte. The issue is not addressed in the "government contract",<sup>1</sup> the compromise text considered a "bible" by the two coalition parties – the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) and the right-wing League party – governing Italy.

Yet, the M5S should in principle not be indifferent to the cause of arms control.

Indeed, "disarmament as a premise for peace" was the heading of one of the chapters of the electoral platform of the M5S. Here, the Movement claimed to be "multilateralist", intentioned to remove the threat of weapons of mass destruction and to establish

a nuclear weapons free zone in the Mediterranean area.<sup>2</sup> These principles have not permeated the "government contract", likely because the other coalition partner, the League party, does not share similar priorities.

In fact, the League advocates an "aggressive strategy" to promote Italy's arms exports, the reintroduction of the military draft and a privileged partnership with Russia and the nationalist European governments belonging to the Visegrad Group (despite the fact that the most of them are anti-Russian).

Due to these fundamental differences the only common denominator in the government contract is a shared nationalist attitude, an accommodating approach towards – and even the

<sup>1</sup> M5S and League, *Contract for the Government of Change*, 18 May 2018, <http://m5s.international/contract-government-change>.

<sup>2</sup> M5S, *Programma Esteri*, 2018, <https://www.movimento5stelle.it/programma/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Esteri.pdf>.

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search for an improbable alignment with – Putin's Russia, a focus on the Mediterranean and a general neglect of the role of Europe in security matters and arms control.<sup>3</sup>

Arms control, however, is a primary tool to prevent the deepening arms race we have witnessed over the past few years, one that has, inter alia, induced NATO to renew its call on members to increase military budgets to 2 per cent of GDP (President Trump advocates an even higher percentage). Due to its present financial difficulties, Italy will have difficulties in reaching that target and align itself with NATO's enhanced efforts to counter Russia's ongoing military build-up.

The Italian government is not the only Western country that has displayed a lukewarm approach to arms control and disarmament. In 2017, along with all its NATO allies, Rome refused to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)<sup>4</sup> or to participate in its negotiation despite the obligation it undertook, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament".<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See "Foreign affairs" in M5S and League, *Contract for the Government of Change*, cit., <http://m5s.international/contract-government-change#foreign>.

<sup>4</sup> On TPNW see Carlo Trezza, "The UN Nuclear Ban Treaty and the NPT: Challenges for Nuclear Disarmament", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 17|15 (September 2017), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/8248>.

<sup>5</sup> Article VI of the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, 1 July 1968. Available in the website of the United Nations

Italy has traditionally been a key US ally. The problem is that the current US administration is at the forefront of this trend pointing to an erosion of arms control regimes. Its recent announcement that it would withdraw from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty is a major blow to global arms control and may lead to a new arms race in Europe. Recently, Italy joined its allies in endorsing the US claim that Russia had violated the INF; it also approved a NATO declaration backing President Trump's decision to withdraw from the treaty.<sup>6</sup>

Ever since the early days of the Cold War, Italy has hosted US nuclear forces on its territory. Due to Russia's renewed military assertiveness, its interventions in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the violation of its commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the prospect of a withdrawal of US nuclear forces from Italy had already receded. The demise of the INF could now open the way to a re-deployment of such missiles in Europe. Should such an option be considered, Italy may once again become a potential candidate to host new missiles: a highly controversial prospect.

While the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy is not mentioned in the "government contract" the Union's security and defence dimension will remain a fundamental framework for Italy's diplomatic action on arms

Office for Disarmament Affairs: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>.

<sup>6</sup> North Atlantic Council, *Statement on Russia's Failure to Comply with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty*, 1 February 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_162996.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_162996.htm).

control. However, European countries are very divided on central nuclear issues as witnessed by their deep divergences on the TPNW. It has proved much easier for the Europeans to reach consensus on how to address non-proliferation issues.

In 2003, Italy actively participated in drafting an EU Strategy on Non Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, which still remains in force. Based on this normative framework the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, played a major role in negotiations leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which consensually settled the international dispute over the Iranian nuclear programme.

Italy was not part of the EU negotiating team but, as a major trade partner with Iran, strongly supported the nuclear deal, which would have allowed Italian companies to develop projects in Iran estimated to be worth some 30 billion euros.<sup>7</sup>

Such prospects have been frustrated by the US's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, which has called into question the very survival of the deal. Italy, together with key European allies, now strongly supports the establishment of an EU mechanism aimed at facilitating trade in non-sanctionable goods with Iran.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Cavestri, "La rottura di Trump con l'Iran mette a rischio 30 miliardi per l'Italia", in *Il Sole 24Ore*, 10 May 2018, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2018-05-09/la-rottura-trump-l-iran-mette-rischio-30-miliardi-l-italia-180215.shtml>.

The JCPOA was one of the few recent success stories in the field of nuclear arms control and non-proliferation. The uncertainties about its future and the consequent rift between the US and its European allies do not augur well for the NPT Review Conference in 2020.

This gloomy picture on the future of arms control world-wide is in great part due to a disturbing lack of attention to and awareness of the threat posed by the growing global arms race. Much more must be done. In particular, the EU should intensify its efforts aimed at identifying new ways and means to respond to the worrying trends in arms control.

In this respect, an important asset for the Union is the European Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium (EUNPD) established by the EU Council in 2010 with the task of promoting a strategic debate on the Union's arms control policies by engaging not only experts from research centres and practitioners but also representatives of civil society organisations.<sup>8</sup> In 2018, the Italian think tank Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) joined the six-member consortium.<sup>9</sup>

This step, which implicitly recognises the important role played by the arms control expert community in Italy, will hopefully lead the Conte government to devote greater attention to emerging security dynamics that can undermine European security, spurring Italy to make a more active and consistent

<sup>8</sup> See EUNPD Consortium website: *About us*, <https://www.nonproliferation.eu/?p=1590>.

<sup>9</sup> See IAI website: *EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium*, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9448>.

contribution to the definition of the EU's arms control positions and initiatives.

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