

Avanti Tutta: Rebooting Italian Defence

by Paul Taylor

Given the host of security challenges in Europe's southern neighbourhood, Italy is bound to be on the front line and will need the full support of its NATO allies and EU partners to weather storms gathering on the horizon. That requires revived strategic relationships with key European powers and a relaunch of stalled defence reforms to streamline and modernise the Italian armed forces.

The wider Mediterranean region stretching from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf, and from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa is a theatre of instability marked by the return of great power competition, fragmented or fragile states, uncontrolled migration flows, struggles over land, resources and the borders inherited from colonialism, resurgent ethnic and sectarian conflicts, Islamist radicalisation and terrorism.

Climate change, desertification and water scarcity, combined with demographic growth in Africa and the Middle East while the population shrinks or stagnates in much of Europe, are bound to fuel future conflicts and drive mass migration. A short-term clampdown on the arrival of migrants is no substitute for longer-term policies to manage population flows through a comprehensive approach including trade, diplomacy, development, educational opportunities, institutional and security capacity building and a joint European system of legal labour migration channels.

Any number of national or cross-border upheavals could trigger the next crisis. Civil war in Libya, social conflict in post-Bouteflika Algeria, instability in Egypt, Turkish-Kurdish fighting in northern Syria, another round of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, conflicts in

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countries of origin of migrants in east or sub-Saharan Africa, a jihadist attack on Mediterranean shipping or a naval incident off the coast of Cyprus are just some of the plausible scenarios.

Italy needs to take bolder steps to implement the defence reforms initiated by former Defence Minister Giampaolo Di Paola in 2012 and developed in the 2015 White Paper¹ to adapt its force structure to meet 21st century threats. Such reforms should build on its internationally valued strengths in peacekeeping, stabilisation and civilian-military engagement – where Italy has much to teach other western powers – and maintain and improve high-end military components developed over recent decades, while eliminating waste and perverse incentives.

One key reform element is a real centralisation of the armed forces' activities at joint level, including national procurement programmes, to reduce duplication and inter-service rivalry for military spending. This goes hand in hand with a rationalisation of military bases and an ambitious programme to sell off or rent surplus real estate and equipment, with at least two-thirds of the proceeds accruing to the defence budget.

Expenditure must be shifted significantly from personnel, which currently swallows 70 per cent of the Defence Ministry budget, to maintenance, training and exercising.

¹ Italian Ministry of Defence, *White Paper for International Security and Defence*, April 2015, https://www.difesa.it/Content/Pagine/Libro_Bianco.aspx.

While Rome meets the NATO target of 20 per cent of military spending on equipment, it also needs to devote at least 20 per cent to operational costs – double the current 10 per cent.

This implies substantially younger and smaller armed forces, especially the army, with a once-off civilian retraining and early retirement programme for officers to lower the age profile and free up resources for running costs. The average age of Italian soldiers today is 37.9 years old, compared with 31 in the UK and 33.1 in France.

A consolidated and transparent defence budget that incorporates external operations and all procurement funding, including programmes currently funded by the Ministry of Economic Development, would enable a more effective and efficient use of resources – and would improve democratic accountability.

A successful defence policy also requires strategic political guidance. The foundations of Italy's strategy for national and international security, codified in the 2015 White Paper, are still valid today. Yet they have to be implemented consistently, taking into account the sea of troubles besetting the country as well as perception gaps with key allies.

Within NATO, Italy needs to offer practical solutions and adequate resources to enable the Alliance to make a valuable contribution to Mediterranean stability. It also needs to be realistic in recognising the limits of what NATO can do to address non-military threats in the South, and

thus promote NATO-EU synergies, mobilising the Union's broader toolbox.

Within the EU, while remaining an active player in shaping Permanent Structured Cooperation and the embryonic European Defence Fund, Rome should be more consistent in making the necessary investments – another good reason to pursue budget rationalisation and gradually raise defence spending towards the 2 per cent NATO commitment.

This requires a better alignment of military, industrial and political thinking in each strategic choice Italy makes on defence cooperation in Europe. A number of bilateral and multi-lateral projects are in the pipeline, from sixth generation fighters to main battle tanks and drones, and Rome should be ready to step up with cash, capabilities and contributions.

European defence and security cooperation is not just about capabilities. Italian interests are better served if Rome contributes to a common European position on issues like the Iran nuclear deal, relations with Russia and an overall approach towards China – without forgetting the need to preserve transatlantic and cross-Channel political and military cooperation. All these issues are interlinked with Mediterranean stability, which is Italy's priority but should not be the only item on the agenda of Italian foreign and defence policy.

As one of the biggest contributors to peacekeeping and crisis management operations, it would make sense for

Italy to join the European Intervention Initiative established by France, in which willing and capable countries including post-Brexit Britain can share strategic cultures, horizon-scanning and coordinate resources for possible actions by coalitions of the willing.

The challenge in the Mediterranean goes well beyond the defence domain and calls for civil-military cooperation with a stronger political lead from the prime minister and the president. Strategic issues such as striking a grand bargain with France and addressing instability in Libya require long-term vision and political consistency.

Yet Italy risks marginalisation in Europe and NATO by picking fights with key EU partners and pursuing an incoherent foreign and defence policy. While EU members are debating strategic priorities for the next five years and looking for a new leadership in Brussels, Rome is distracted by the struggle to avoid punishment for its fiscal indiscipline.

As other allies increase defence spending, Italy is pointing in the opposite direction. Now that the European Parliament elections are over, Rome should give top priority to mending fences in Europe and winning allies to address the next storms in the South.

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