

# Italian Military Operations: Coping with Rising Threats and Declining US Leadership

by Alessandro Marrone

The Italian armed forces need to adjust to a changing operational environment, whereby threat levels are on the rise and the United States is more reluctant to lead military operations than in the past.

As of March 2020, Rome deploys more than 7,300 troops abroad.<sup>1</sup> Italy is the second largest contributor to NATO's out-of-area operations after the US, and the first European nation for deployments in UN peacekeeping missions.<sup>2</sup> Major Italian contingents operate in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Libya, Niger and Somalia. As a whole, Italian armed forces are active in 24 countries across Europe, the greater Middle East and Africa, and Italy currently holds command roles in

the international missions in Lebanon, Kosovo and Somalia.

The Italian commitment to both crisis management and stability operations, as well as to NATO deterrence activities, has proven extremely stable over the last 30 years, despite frequent government changes. Military deployments abroad are indeed considered by policy-makers a primary tool to pursue national interests in the international arena.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, they help to have an impact in concerned countries, from the Balkans to Libya, which in many cases are of strategic importance to Italy. On the other, military contributions enhance relations with important allies such as the United States, as

<sup>1</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Military Operations*, updated 27 February 2020, <https://www.difesa.it/EN/Operations/Pagine/MilitaryOperations.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping, *Summary of Troops Contributing Countries by Ranking...*, January 2020, [https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/2\\_country\\_ranking\\_13.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/2_country_ranking_13.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Alessandro Marrone and Michele Nones, "Le forze italiane in missione all'estero: trend e rischi", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 20|03 (March 2020), p. 3, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11378>.

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well as Italy's role within multilateral organisations like NATO, the EU and UN. Public opinion has slowly gotten used to such deployments, with absolute or relative majorities in favour of recent interventions.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, Italian military commitments abroad have indeed been robust. They have included active combat duties in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and have shown remarkable aptitude to defence capacity building, civil-military cooperation and long-term stability operations.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the general stability of Italy's approach to missions abroad, the situation in major operational theatres has not remained stable. Indeed, Italian armed forces have had to face sudden and dramatic escalations on the ground. In Libya, since April 2019, General Khalifa Haftar's offensive against the UN-recognised government in Tripoli, coupled with the increasing military involvement of third countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia and Turkey, have increased threats to unprecedented levels, particularly following the air bombing of infrastructures in Misrata where Italian troops operate.

In Iraq, the escalation between Iran and United States led in January 2020 to a

<sup>4</sup> Karolina Muti and Alessandro Marrone, "How Italians View Their Defence? Active, Security-oriented, Cooperative and Cheap", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|39 (June 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10557>.

<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Braw, "Europe's Military Maestros: Italy", in *Politico*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-military-maestros-italy-troops-mediterranean-migrants-libya-refugees>.

missile attack against military bases hosting hundreds of Italian troops – not only US ones. In Afghanistan, the manner in which Washington has negotiated with the Taliban has weakened Afghan institutions and enhanced the momentum of the insurgency, by making the situation on the ground increasingly unstable and dangerous.

In all these theatres, as well as in Somalia, hostile actors frequently carry out terrorist attacks and ambushes against convoys and patrols, using improvised explosive devices, mortars, rockets and drones in an increasingly effective way. Such a challenging operational environment is predicted to persist in the near future and, according to Italian army doctrine, to worsen in growingly urbanised areas.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, since the Barack Obama administration and even more so under President Donald Trump, Italian armed forces are witnessing a decline in US politico-military leadership and coordination with traditional allies. Indeed, in Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Niger and Mali there is no US lead or substantial support for ongoing operations. This is happening while Italy's military effort increasingly focuses on North Africa, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Such declining US resolve puts new and demanding burdens on the shoulders of

<sup>6</sup> Italian General Staff of the Army, *Future Operating Environment Post 2035. Implications for Land Forces*, 2019, <http://www.esercito.difesa.it/comunicazione/Le-5-Sfide/Documents/FOE-INGLESE191205.pdf>.

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the Italian military in terms of mission planning and conduct capabilities, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets, strategic and tactical airlift, logistic support, air and missile defence and force protection broadly defined. Moreover, it implies that potential escalations, as those that occurred in Libya, have to be managed without relying on the United States for reinforcements and/or deterrence, and this at a time when third states regularly and heavily interfere in conflict areas. In turn, this increases Italy's burden in terms of force generation, high-end assets, as well as equipment Maintenance, Repair, Overhaul and Upgrade (MROU).

Even in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the US still lead international military efforts, Washington increasingly requests European allies to take on greater responsibilities, while seeking to disengage as much as possible. In other words, the US strategic retrenchment from the crises and conflicts in North Africa, the Middle East and central Asia is a structural trend that Italy (and others) must deal with.

The security and power vacuum left by Washington has been rapidly filled by Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, China, Qatar, the UAE and others, depending on the context. In contrast, European countries have so far struggled to engage collectively when it comes to the security and stability of their neighbourhood.

Such a changed international security environment has deep implications for Italy's military operations abroad.

First, Rome has been used to look to Washington for leadership in crisis areas, but this approach does not work anymore in North Africa and parts of the Middle East. Therefore, Italy has to primarily engage with European and regional partners to build consensus on a possible politico-military approach to deal with crises and conflicts, beginning with Libya, East Med and the Sahel.

Second, concerning missions abroad, NATO remains for Italy a valuable format in terms of political consultation and military cooperation among allies and particularly with the United States, the UK, Canada and Turkey. The Atlantic Alliance also provides unique assets such as the integrated military command, ISR capabilities, agencies and centres of excellence.

Such potential – however – should be exploited through greater Italian and European leadership, looking for support rather than guidance from Washington. This support should be compatible with the ongoing US retrenchment, which means intelligence, space and air assets including drones, strategic airlift, logistics – but not boots on the ground.

When it comes to European leadership, the EU is of course the first place to build it. The European Union has slowly but steadily created military planning and conduct capacities under the EU Military Committee supervision, and it has increasingly engaged in capability development through the European Defence Agency, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PeSCo) and the European Defence Fund.

Such a toolbox is useful but not decisive for crisis management and stability operations. What is missing is the political will to engage together in the security and stability of Europe's neighbourhood.

The French-led European Intervention Initiative could be of added value in this regard. Rome should propose actions within this format to have an early, timely and strategic conversation with major European allies. Options and solutions should then be implemented via the EU and/or NATO on a case-by-case basis. It goes without saying that the more NATO-EU cooperation, the better.<sup>7</sup>

Last but not least, Italy has to do urgent and important homework to adjust its defence policy to the new reality of operations abroad. A more explicit strategy clarifying the national interests and priorities in crisis areas, as well as spelling out the rationale for each mission and the related threat assessment, is badly needed.

This strategy should lead to updated rules of engagement, a larger and more combat-oriented training, greater availability and readiness of high-end, heavy assets and an increased importance given to logistical support and MROU within procurement programmes. Moreover, as envisaged by the Chief of Defence Staff's 2020 Strategic Concept, all military operations should by design be planned

<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Andrea Aversano Stabile, Guillaume Lasconjarias and Paola Sartori, "NATO-EU Cooperation to Project Stability", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 18|18 (July 2018), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9366>.

as joint ones.<sup>8</sup>

The 2015 White Paper for International Security and Defence<sup>9</sup> constitutes a solid, overarching starting point for such a strategy. Given the changing international security environment, and particularly the challenges from Europe's neighbourhood, time has come for Italy to think, plan and manage its military interventions abroad in a more strategic way.

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<sup>8</sup> Italian Chief of Defence Staff, *Il Concetto Strategico del Capo di Stato Maggiore della Difesa*, January 2020, [https://www.difesa.it/SMD\\_/CaSMD/concetto\\_strategico\\_casmd](https://www.difesa.it/SMD_/CaSMD/concetto_strategico_casmd).

<sup>9</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence, *White Paper for International Security and Defence*, July 2015, [https://www.difesa.it/Primo\\_Piano/Documents/2015/07\\_Luglio/White%20book.pdf](https://www.difesa.it/Primo_Piano/Documents/2015/07_Luglio/White%20book.pdf).

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