

The Defence Policy of Giorgia Meloni's Government: A Traditional Posture with a Conservative Tinge

by Alessandro Marrone

From a long-term perspective, Italian policies on defence and international security look pretty stable when looking at their basics along the transatlantic, European and "wider Mediterranean" dimensions. The government led by Giorgia Meloni is set to add a conservative tinge to this traditional posture. Such nuance can be better understood through a closer look at the government's profile and political manifesto, the ruling parties' track record on the Ukraine war and the first declarations of key government members.

A relatively solid coalition and an experienced leadership

On 25 September, the right-wing coalition won the parliamentary elections and obtained a comfortable, absolute majority of seats in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The rassemblement already governs 14 out of 20 Italian regions and has been repeatedly in power at national and local levels. The prime minister's party – *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) – is

the largest in the Parliament, having obtained 26 per cent of the votes.

Giorgia Meloni is 45 years old, but she is already a veteran of Italian politics with almost thirty years of experience. She has become the first-ever female prime minister of the Italian Republic, also thanks to the political career she built by herself and from scratch as a young activist. The two deputy prime ministers, as well as key ministers such as the Treasury, Foreign and Defence ones, are experienced politicians too. All these elements suggest the likely scenario of a stable government for the next few years. Such relative stability enables the Meloni government to devise its defence policy and work with allies and partners beyond the short-term urgencies and in light of its broader conservative posture.

The Western geopolitical orientation of the conservative coalition

Defence policy takes place within a comprehensive geopolitical orientation of the Italian executive along the three

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traditional dimensions of Italy's foreign policy: the European, the transatlantic and the wider Mediterranean ones.

When it comes to Europe, for sure, the current executive has a different approach than Mario Draghi's – but it is not anti-EU altogether. It rather represents a form of nationalist, constructive criticism of the Union, although with some nuances within the ruling coalition. Indeed, Forza Italia has been a full member of the European People's Party (EPP) since the 2000s and holds more moderate, pro-EU views, while Lega is at the hard right of the European political spectrum when it comes to the Union.

Meloni herself chairs the European Conservative and Reformists rassemblement in the European Parliament, which sits at the right of EPP but does not hold a hard-core sovereigntist posture. From this perspective, a key point is the subsidiarity principle that places policy competencies at the most effective level of governance that is closest to citizens: the EU level should therefore focus on the greatest challenges that cannot be addressed by member states. A sensitive issue in this regard is illegal migration, which already saw tensions between the Meloni government and the French leadership.

Interestingly, for the first time in decades, Rome's position in the international arena is the first point of the ruling coalition's political manifesto, which clearly states that Italy is "fully part of Europe, the Atlantic Alliance and the West. More Italy in Europe, more

Europe in the world."¹ Meloni's first Parliament speech as appointed prime minister is crystal-clear concerning the EU and international security, stating that her government will strongly act to move European integration "towards more efficient responses to crises and external threats".² The fact that the prime minister's first official meeting abroad has been with the EU institutions' heads in Brussels symbolises the government's prioritisation of constructive relations with the Union, including on European defence.³

When it comes to NATO and bilateral partnership with the US, the Meloni administration is clearly Atlanticist. This is not a novelty for the ruling coalition as a whole and particularly for Forza Italia, as further confirmed by a recent meeting between Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.⁴ Meloni's Parliament speech recalled and confirmed such commitment, by stating on NATO that "it is Italy's duty to fully contribute, because [...] freedom has a cost and that cost, for a nation, is

¹ Centre-right coalition political manifesto, https://www.ansa.it/documents/1660243246870_CENTRODESTRA.pdf.

² 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>.

³ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Tajani: "We Need to Count as Much as Germany and France in Brussels"*, 30 October 2022, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=90362>.

⁴ US Department of State, *Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani before Their Meeting*, Münster, 4 November 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-italian-foreign-minister-antonio-tajani-before-their-meeting>.

its ability to defend itself and prove it is a reliable partner within the framework of alliances to which it belongs.”⁵ Her subsequent meetings with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Rome and US President Joe Biden in Bali further confirmed this position.⁶

Overall, Meloni's Parliament address leaves no doubts in this regard: “Italy is rightfully part of the West and its system of alliances”. Such geopolitical collocation is linked to a nationalist identity narrative on the West, with Meloni proudly recalling in her speech that Italy is “the cradle, together with Greece, of Western civilisation and its system of values based on freedom, equality and democracy”.⁷ As such, this orientation would not change regardless of whether there will be a Republican or Democratic administration in Washington.

Clear support for Ukraine

A closer look at the track record of conservative parties in 2022 shows that words and deeds are rather aligned when it comes to the Russia–Ukraine war. In the previous Parliament, all of them supported Italy's decisions to donate lethal military equipment to Kyiv

taken from March to September.⁸ Last July, they also supported the annual law to authorise and finance Italian military operations abroad, including the NATO enhanced forward presence of land, sea and air assets from the Baltic to the Black Sea.⁹ Among other things, Italy is going to lead the NATO multinational battalion in Bulgaria and commands the allied missions in Kosovo and Iraq. Last but not least, in August, all moderate and nationalist parties voted in favour of NATO enlargement to Sweden and Finland.¹⁰

Without a doubt, the costs and consequences of the Russia–Ukraine war are high for the Italian economy and society, in terms of spiking inflation, decreasing trade and risks to energy supplies. Still, the ruling coalition is likely to stay the course of Western support to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia in both the short- and the mid-term. Once again, Meloni's Parliament speech is clear in this regard, stating that Italy will continue to “support [...] the brave Ukrainian people who are opposing the invasion by the Russian Federation, not only because we cannot accept a war of aggression [...] but also because

⁵ Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address...*, cit.

⁶ Italian Government, *President Meloni Meets with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg*, 10 November 2022, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/20971>; *President Meloni Meets with President Biden of the United States at the G20 Summit*, 15 November 2022, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21003>.

⁷ Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address...*, cit.

⁸ On the latest Parliamentary hearing, see Marco Battaglia, “Armi a Kiev. Ok del Copasir, che prepara la relazione sulla difesa europea”, in *Formiche*, 28 July 2022, <https://formiche.net/?p=1489875>.

⁹ Italian Chamber of Deputies, *Authorisation and Extension of International Missions in 2022. Infographics*, 8 August 2022, https://temi.camera.it/leg18/temi/infographics/autorizzazione-e-proroga-missioni-internazionali-ultimo-trimestre-2019_d_d_d.

¹⁰ Italian Senate, *Ratifica adesione Finlandia e Svezia al Trattato del Nord Atlantico - Voto finale*, 3 August 2022, https://www.senato.it/leg/18/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/aula/55169_aula.htm.

this is the best way to defend our national interest".¹¹ Despite sporadic, unfortunate comments by Silvio Berlusconi, the conservative political leadership as a whole – and Meloni in particular – has understood that this is a watershed moment for international relations. In practical terms, on 4 November, the new Defence Minister Guido Crosetto has anticipated that Italy is going to consult with allies on a sixth tranche of arms donations to Ukraine, because "it is the right thing to do".¹²

Notably, the notion of national interest is now widely and openly used by the new government, which adds a nationalist tinge to Italy's traditional posture. This reflects the predominant orientation of Italian right-wing voters,¹³ as well as a post-Cold War trend whereby the Italian public debate has become increasingly explicit in linking national interests to foreign and defence policy. The conservative coalition makes national interests a hallmark of its posture within the EU, NATO and the wider Mediterranean region.

A stable outlook for military operations abroad

When it comes to the core of defence policy, continuity elements are very strong, also in terms of key political

figures such as Crosetto. He was deputy defence minister a decade ago, and then acted in the policy community as president of the Italian association of aerospace and defence companies – a pretty rare example of "revolving doors" between the Italian private and public sectors. As such, Crosetto is familiar with many of the relevant dossiers and interlocutors in Italy and beyond. Moreover, he is personally close to Meloni, having the two of them co-founded *Fratelli d'Italia* in 2012, which is likely to increase the prime minister's awareness of defence issues. Finally, the two undersecretaries of Defence are no newcomers either, since they both served in the Chamber of Deputies Defence Committee over the last four years.

Against this backdrop, no revolution should be expected in Italy's upcoming defence policy. The focus of military deployments abroad will probably remain two-fold: on the one hand, on Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean for NATO deterrence and defence purposes against Russia;¹⁴ on the other, on the wider Mediterranean region for a variety of peace-keeping, stability and counter-terrorism operations, within UN, EU and NATO frameworks as well as through ad-hoc coalitions or bilateral agreements. As of November 2022, Italy deploys about 8,500 troops abroad,¹⁵ mainly in Europe, the Middle

¹¹ Italian Government, *President of the Council of Ministers Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Address...*, cit.

¹² Arturo Celletti, "Intervista al Ministro della Difesa", in *Avvenire*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/parla-il-ministro>.

¹³ Alessandro Marrone, "Italians and Defence at the Time of the Ukraine War: Winds of Change", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|54 (November 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16225>.

¹⁴ On the new military deployments in Eastern Europe see Michelangelo Freyrie, "Le missioni militari all'estero oltre il 'focus europeo'", in *AffarInternazionali*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=99496>.

¹⁵ Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Military Operations*, <https://www.difesa.it/EN/Operations/Pagine/MilitaryOperations.aspx>.

East and Africa, and they are there to stay for the foreseeable future. In 2022, former Minister of Defence Lorenzo Guerini adopted a strategy for the wider Mediterranean region,¹⁶ which is unlikely to be radically changed by Crosetto. This is a positive element of continuity for Italy, in both operational and strategic terms, as a reliable regional security actor.

More high-end capabilities, same budget, prioritised defence industrial policy

Concerning force planning, capability development, procurement and defence industrial policy, the trajectory of the Italian military shifted as a consequence of the outbreak of the war on Ukraine, and this shift is set to continue under Meloni and Crosetto's political leadership. The whole policy community is now focusing on scenarios of high-end, near-peer conflicts, which entails a shift of investment in war-fighting capabilities across the land, naval and air domains, as well as advancements in cyberwarfare and defence in space.¹⁷ The Meloni government, including

Crosetto, is well familiar with the language of realpolitik and hard power. A positive convergence between military and political views on the trajectory of Italy's military posture is therefore likely to materialise.

Such convergence will bring limited results if not backed by adequate funding, and this remains a critical issue for Italy. Over the last three years, Minister Guerini managed to ensure a gradual increase of the defence budget despite the pandemic and its economic fallout. But in 2022, the Draghi government missed the opportunity of a budgetary leap forward despite the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war.¹⁸ Minister Crosetto confirmed the commitment to reach the NATO threshold of 2 per cent GDP spending on defence by 2027,¹⁹ openly stating that “peace does not come for free”;²⁰ nonetheless, this will largely depend on the broader fiscal outlook that has been fiercely put under pressure by the war's impact.

Defence industrial policy is an important part of the equation when it comes to capability development, which is likely to be prioritised by Crosetto. Here, again, Guerini adopted an important ministerial directive in

¹⁶ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Guerini: “The International Security Context Assigns Renewed Centrality to the Mediterranean”*, 7 June 2022, https://www.difesa.it/EN/Primo_Piano/Pagine/Guerini-The-international-security-context-assigns-renewed-centrality-to-the-Mediterranean.aspx.

¹⁷ On Italy and cyber defence see Alessandro Marrone, Ester Sabatino and Ottavia Credi, “Italy and Cyber Defence”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 21|12en (September 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/14125>. On Italy, space and defence see Alessandro Marrone and Michele Nones (eds), “The Expanding Nexus Between Space and Defence”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 22|01 (February 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/14669>.

¹⁸ Ottavia Credi, “Dove investe la difesa italiana”, in *AffarInternazionali*, 27 July 2022, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=99572>.

¹⁹ Monica Guerzoni, “Crosetto: ‘Di fronte al governo un orizzonte di 10 anni. Il Parlamento è unito sulle armi a Kiev’”, in *Corriere della Sera*, 26 October 2022, https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_ottobre_26/crosetto-armi-ucraina-4a4b93fa-54a2-11ed-a58a-ad027d5a5146.shtml.

²⁰ Arturo Celletti, “Intervista al Ministro della Difesa”, cit.

2021,²¹ and Crosetto is unlikely to undo what was at that time welcomed by Italy's defence industry. In September 2022, all conservative parties voted in favour of the budgetary allocation to the six major procurement programmes presented by the government to the Parliament.²² After his installation, Crosetto clearly affirmed that one of the duties of the Ministry of Defence is to "promote Italian companies abroad".²³ Under Meloni too, Italy will in all likelihood continue to prioritise projects under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) umbrella, European Defence Fund calls, as well as procurement cooperation beyond the EU – as in the case of F-35 and Tempest fighter aircraft. The latter reflect Italy's traditional, deep-rooted defence cooperation with both Washington²⁴ and London, which Rome will have to manage in relation to the growing EU defence initiatives and the Franco-German role in this regard.²⁵ In light of the aforementioned

shift towards high-end, peer-to-peer scenarios, Italy will probably focus on war-fighting capabilities and will likely adopt a pragmatic approach to transatlantic and/or European partnerships to procure them. In that context, Rome is likely to choose different partners among NATO members on ad-hoc basis to develop together different capabilities, such as the European Patrol Corvette to be produced with France, Spain and Greece within PESCO.²⁶

In conclusion, the Meloni government relies on a rather solid coalition for the next few years, presents a strong Western orientation and fully supports Ukraine against Russia. Italy will remain a solid NATO ally and will actively promote its national interests within the EU. Italian commitment to military operations abroad will be stable, a modest increase of the defence budget is likely but its extent uncertain, a shift towards high-end capabilities is on the cards, and defence industrial policy will be prioritised in a pragmatic way. Overall, national interests will add a conservative tinge to a rather traditional posture.

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²¹ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Direttiva per la politica industriale della Difesa* [Directive on the Defence Industrial Policy], 2021, https://www.difesa.it/Documents/Direttiva_Ministro_Guerini2907.pdf.

²² Italian Senate Defence Committee, *Resoconto sommario n. 156*, 13 September 2022, <https://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/18/SommComm/0/1360550>.

²³ Monica Guerzoni, "Crosetto: 'Di fronte al governo un orizzonte di 10 anni'", cit.

²⁴ For an in-depth analysis of Italy's role within the F-35 project see Vincenzo Camporini et al., *The Role of Italian Fighter Aircraft in Crisis Management Operations: Trends and Needs*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, 2014, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/2155>.

²⁵ See in this regard, among others, Elio Calcagno, "Gli aerei di sesta generazione frammentano la difesa europea", in *AffarInternazionali*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=100508>.

²⁶ PESCO website: *European Patrol Corvette (EPC)*, <https://www.pesco.europa.eu/project/european-patrol-corvette-epc>.

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