

NATO's Future: Euro-Atlantic Alliance in a Peacetime War

by Alessandro Marrone and Karolina Muti

ABSTRACT

Looking at 2030, NATO evolution will depend on two main variables. First, whether the international security environment will lean towards a scenario of "aggressive multipolarity". In this scenario, global and regional powers are engaged in various forms of proxy wars, cyber-attacks, information warfare, and use to put societies of its competitors under pressure by targeting critical infrastructure, energy security, political decision-making, public opinion, etc., without escalating to military conflict – a sort of "peacetime war". Second, NATO's future will depend on domestic politics of the Alliance's major members. US future approach to multilateral alliances will be a determining factor. The two variables are intertwined, and in Europe they further interact with the EU integration process and the path towards greater strategic autonomy in the defence domain. In this context, Italy has to move forward its traditional priorities regarding relations with the US, dialogue and deterrence towards Russia, NATO–EU strategic partnership, and the stabilisation of the "Enlarged Mediterranean" region.

NATO | European defence | Transatlantic relations | Italy's military policy

keywords

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by Alessandro Marrone and Karolina Muti*

Introduction

Looking at NATO's future, the road leading to 2030 presents at least two crossroads. The first is due to the evolution of the international security environment, and the second depends on domestic politics of the Alliance's major members and ultimately on the resilience of the transatlantic bond. The two levels are obviously intertwined, and in Europe they further interact with the EU integration process.

1. Aggressive multipolarity and peacetime war

The international system is likely to witness over the next decade a continuation of the current trend towards aggressive multipolarity. At the global level, the rising influence of China presents a challenge to US leadership, which puts an end to the post-Cold War situation of benign world hegemony. Washington will increasingly focus on the containment of and/or confrontation with Beijing, as there is a bipartisan, deep-rooted consensus on the Chinese challenge to US interests. At the same time, it will probably strive to retrench as much as possible from the Greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA), albeit differently in terms of path and pace according to the future US president. Such retrenchment from the Middle East has proven difficult, as support for anti-Iranian partners like Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States implies a strong military presence, as well as diplomatic moves like the 2020 "Abraham Accords".¹ In a similar vein, a complete withdrawal from Iraq

¹ Ian O. Lesser, "The United States and the Mediterranean in an Age of Shocks", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2020*, forthcoming, <https://www.iemed.org/actualitat-en/noticies/estats-units-i-el-mediterrani-en-una-era-de-xocs>.

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would open the door to a level of Iranian influence probably not acceptable for the US. Moreover, the control of global sea lines of communication implies the security of choke-points like Suez and the Red Sea. In contrast, the US has managed to avoid any entanglement in the Libyan quagmire, and will continue to do so. Despite such difficulties, the overarching goal remains to diminish the American military footprint and provide offshore balancing against opponents as well as support to allies. Meanwhile, Washington will maintain a robust commitment in Europe while pushing Europeans to both take greater responsibility for their Continent's security and to stand together with the US against China. In this context, the pressure to increase European military spending may include modest reduction in US troops and/or their movement across Europe as already happened in 2020. At the same time, Russia is likely to move forward its aggressive foreign and defence policy, not only in the former Soviet space but across MENA too. Russian (and Chinese) influence in that region may make a US retrenchment even more difficult.

At regional level, powers like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and the Gulf Emirates will further exploit the room of manoeuvre left by the partial US retrenchment, as well as by Europeans' difficulties in forging a common position towards their neighbourhood. In East Asia, growing Chinese influence will induce countries either to bandwagon with Beijing or to seek bilateral/multilateral ways to counterbalance the negative implications of its rise for their national interests. Several states would like to maintain an equilibrium based on the US as security provider and China as economic partner.

In comparison with previous expectations on the rise of BRICS countries,² China will likely be the only major power, alongside the US, able to exert a global influence across multiple domains, including economic, technological, military and political. Whether the international system will see the emergence of a new bipolarity between Washington and Beijing is still unclear. Surely, the current status of aggressive multipolarity will be marked by substantial differences in terms of relative weight among various poles. Dynamic competition, confrontation and/or cooperation will be therefore possible simultaneously and on the basis of a variable geometry, with different constellations of partnerships on various dossiers and/or in specific regions. For example, the EU and China may well cooperate in the fight against climate change, but they will continue to present alternative politico-cultural models. In this context, the pressure and challenges towards institutions that emerged in the 20th century international liberal order are likely to grow.³ European states, Japan, Canada, Australia and other like-minded countries will strive to preserve, reform and possibly relaunch this order born under the Western aegis, in the current and future multipolar reality. Another element augmenting complexity on the global political landscape is the growing relevance of non-state

² The acronym stands for "Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa".

³ See in this regard Riccardo Alcaro (ed.), *The Liberal Order and Its Contestations. Great Powers and Regions Transiting in a Multipolar Era*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018.

actors in shaping the international agenda. From tech giants (i.e., GAFAM⁴), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society, to terroristic or transnational organised crime groups, both old and new stakeholders are, to an unprecedented extent, now influencing economic and political trends and decision-making across the globe. These emerging actors have different interests from those of traditional nation-states, and do not follow the same rules.

This aggressive multipolarity will witness what Stefano Silvestri recently defined as "*guerra in tempo di pace*", or peacetime war.⁵ The absence of major military conflicts between world and/or regional powers constitutes a status of relative peace, whereby the same powers are daily engaged in various forms of proxy wars, cyber-attacks or information warfare, and use a variety of tools to put civil societies under pressure by targeting critical infrastructures, energy security, political decision-making, public opinion or economic well-being. War is not officially declared nor explained to the domestic public opinion, and this peacetime narrative contributes to weakening the mobilisation of political, human and economic resources within Western societies, making them more vulnerable. Moreover, if compared with a traditional form of conflict, the absence of a clearly agreed, recognised opponent reduces the pressure to coalesce, and favours political divergences both across the Atlantic and within Europe. At the same time, economic, energy and technological interdependencies among various actors further complicate the strategic calculus. The situation of peacetime war is likely to continue in the mid-long term. On the one hand, the enduring American supremacy in the military field strongly discourages escalation – although it comes with a price in economic and political terms, first for Washington and then for allies in Europe and East Asia increasingly called to share the burden of the security umbrella. On the other hand, both China and Russia prefer this strategy to a direct confrontation with the US/NATO, very much in line with Sun Tzu's indirect approach to war and the hybrid warfare doctrine, respectively. The same goes for regional powers in the MENA region keen to cooperate in various ways with terrorist organisations or local militias, and/or to exploit religious extremism, leveraging asymmetric tactics and non-state actors.

In this context, the Atlantic Alliance will have to acknowledge that maintaining a completely state-centric structure and focus will make it increasingly difficult to effectively address problems in which non-state actors play a significant role.⁶ This can be already observed in NATO policies in the MENA region.⁷ The Alliance will have to rapidly adapt its tools, for instance by starting a new type of partnership

⁴ The acronym stands for "Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple".

⁵ Stefano Silvestri, "Guerre nella globalizzazione: il futuro della sicurezza europea", in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|12 (April 2020), p. 3-5, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11674>.

⁶ See, among others: Alessandro Marrone and Karolina Muti, "Policies and Tools for Dealing with Nonstate Actors", in Tomáš Valášek (ed.), *New Perspectives on Shared Security: NATO's Next 70 Years*, Brussels, Carnegie Europe, 2019, p. 69-73, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/?fa=80441>.

⁷ See in this regard: Sonia Lucarelli, Alessandro Marrone and Francesco Moro (eds), "Approaches to Regional Stability and the Outlook for NATO", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 19|13 (July 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10625>.

with selected non-state actors such as NGOs and civil society groups, in order to deal with a complex reality in a comprehensive way. Indeed, this would serve the Alliance to gather new knowledge and awareness of local and regional realities, as well as to benefit from the growing presence of such actors, and help improve the Alliance's image in the region.

The role of non-state actors, globalisation – although perhaps in new forms – the rapid technological innovation, the emergence of climate/environmental issues, and the interplay among all these factors and national statecraft make the scenario of aggressive multipolarity deeply different from a kind of return to a 19th-century balance of power. Complexity, uncertainty, spill-over effects and unintended consequences are and will be the hallmark of the international security environment. Accordingly, particular attention should be dedicated within the Alliance to encouraging conceptual innovation, and free dissemination of new perspectives, in order to face the ever-changing security environment. A specific dimension regards gender balance. Indeed, the embarrassingly high gender gap in Allies' Armed Force and, to a lesser extent, NATO structures, blocks an unknown intellectual potential of new ideas that women and gender perspectives would bring to NATO in terms of inclusive security, at both conceptual (strategies, doctrines) and operational levels. This is particularly the case for conflict prevention, mediation, peace-keeping and peace-making, as well as counter-terrorism and radicalisation.⁸ Despite significant improvements within the Alliance such as the introduction of gender advisors for NATO missions and special representatives of the Alliance for women's peace and security,⁹ inequality is still largely considered as a secondary, background issue, and not as one of the main sources of unexplored human capital available to the Alliance, able to foster positive change in decision- and policy-making regarding conflict management, security and stability.

2. The crossroads for NATO

An aggressive multipolarity marked by peacetime war challenges NATO and EU cohesion in an unprecedented, structural way. Indeed, both have grown up for about seven decades, in terms of membership and institutions, under three favourable conditions: the US security umbrella over (Western) Europe and the Mediterranean region; the building up and enlargement of a rule-based, multilateral, international liberal order; and the ideological, cultural and political glue represented by Western, liberal-democratic values vis-à-vis Eastern, communist ones.

⁸ See the comprehensive study: Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, "How Women's Participation in Conflict Prevention and Resolution Advances U.S. Interests", in *CFR Discussion Papers*, October 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/node/34193>.

⁹ For an analysis of NATO's progress in this regard, including the creation in 2016 of the Civil Society Advisory Panel, see: Estonian Atlantic Treaty Association, "Expanding and Integrating the Agenda on Women, Peace, and Security", in Tomáš Valášek (ed.), *New Perspectives on Shared Security: NATO's Next 70 Years*, Brussels, Carnegie Europe, 2019, p. 79-81, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/?fa=80443>.

Here comes the first crossroads for NATO.¹⁰ In a first scenario, major powers such as the US, China and Russia will increasingly abandon/defy this order and rely on greater freedom of manoeuvre to confront each other across military, technological and economic domains. Accordingly, peacetime war will intensify, increase and reach new stages. In this context, conflicts may be limited in geographic and/or sectorial terms, for instance confined to the cyber domain or to local hotspots, but they can easily escalate both horizontally and vertically towards fully fledged wars. Western countries will have to primarily protect their societies, economies and vital interests from threats linked to multipolar confrontation, also through NATO and – for Europeans – the EU. Globalisation will suffer setbacks and ruptures, particularly regarding technological breakthroughs such as 5G and strategic supply chains which represent a choice of sides, a “*scelta di campo*”, in terms of geopolitical and governance alignment with either the US or China.¹¹

In this scenario, NATO may be called to extend the application of article 5 beyond conventional and nuclear attack across air, sea, land, space and cyber operational domains. Indeed, the boundaries between internal and external security will be further blurred – for instance, regarding the protection of critical infrastructures, energy supplies, the implications of disruptive technologies, the strategic use of foreign direct investment as a tool for technological penetration, interference with domestic decision-making, the exploitation of health crises, and so on. It should be noted that the formulation of article 5 is rather flexible,¹² and the Allies’ political will remains crucial to determine its appropriate scope, enforcement and credibility in light of the international security environment and the Allies’ threat assessment.

In this context, NATO–EU cooperation will become ever more important to address the internal–external security nexus, and to guarantee an adequate level of resilience of European societies against threats, pressures and shocks. To this end, the Atlantic Alliance will have to rely on article 3 and its civil component in synergy with article 5,¹³ and prepare, both conceptually and operationally, for the possibility of acting in response to an emergency like a natural disaster or a

¹⁰ The focus of this paper is on NATO, therefore the EU will be considered only in relation to this focus.

¹¹ Stefano Silvestri, “Guerre nella globalizzazione: il futuro della sicurezza europea”, cit., p. 10.

¹² Article 5 of the Washington Treaty – or North Atlantic Treaty – states: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.” See NATO website: *The North Atlantic Treaty*, Washington, 4 April 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

¹³ See NATO website: *Resilience and Article 3*, last updated 31 March 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm.

failure of critical infrastructure, in one or more allied countries in the future. It should be noted that NATO is a political and military alliance, and cannot in any way substitute for civilian agencies responsible for internal security and crisis management tasks without risking an operational overstretch of its functions – a further reason to cooperate with the EU and its Civil Protection Mechanism. Having said that, a minimum level of support towards the civil preparedness of its members should be granted, as has been the case in the pandemic. When Europe faced the dramatic COVID-19 situation,¹⁴ it was expected from NATO to activate its tools, even if the Alliance's contribution was considered modest. Therefore, the necessity of future actions with a similar purpose should be considered in NATO planning, in order to properly support a nation's and the EU's response to crisis and alleviate both citizens' suffering and societal stress. On top of that, NATO's support in this kind of contingency would contribute to counter Chinese and Russian propaganda, which in the COVID-19 case was very effective in amplifying their help to European countries vis-à-vis a transatlantic and European response perceived as slow and modest.

In this scenario, long-standing multilateral formats for cooperation like the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative will suffer greatly under the power politics competition in the MENA region, while bilateral partnerships with certain countries are likely to be scaled up (*in primis* Sweden and Finland). NATO may well be called by the US to enhance its partnership with like-minded countries in the Pacific region, such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, in the context of a containment strategy against China. Such a strategy might well include India as a major continental power in Asia. This NATO outlook towards the Pacific Region would not imply an enlarged membership nor a change in the Washington Treaty.¹⁵ It would rather be a matter of intelligence sharing, for instance through the use of allied assets, politico-military consultation, and definition of common military and technological standards with important implications for critical infrastructures and the civilian sector aimed to contain Chinese penetration. The Alliance's open-door policy regards only the Western Balkans, where further progress is necessary also to counter Chinese and Russian influence in the region. Enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia would be off the table considering the inherent risk of military escalation with Russia. Last but not least, politico-strategic consultation through article 4 can and should become much more frequent and wide considering the diverse threat perception – and the different vulnerabilities – across Allies in facing such a challenging global context. This is crucial as NATO should become a framework for strategic dialogue also in issues where Alliance institutions or military commands will not take action. If properly managed, such a dialogue would definitively help prevent mistrust among Allies,

¹⁴ NATO, "NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic", in *NATO Factsheets*, May 2020, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/5/pdf/200525-factsheet-COVID-19_en.pdf.

¹⁵ *Mutatis mutandis*, in the 1990s NATO undertook crisis management operations and launched partnerships by recognising these activities in subsequent Strategic Concepts without touching the Treaty.

it would benefit from the NATO approach based on inclusiveness and balance, and in turn it would enhance the strength and value of the Transatlantic Alliance as *the* forum where its members deal together with their respective security concerns.

The international security environment may however lean towards a second scenario, whereby the aggressive multipolarity will somehow coexist with selective support for international law and institutions. For instance, the compelling need to fight climate change, protect the environment and increase the use of renewable energy sources may well trigger a global cooperation in this field. Similarly, nuclear non-proliferation may witness a convergence and cooperation among major poles, interested in preventing other states from acquiring these technologies and becoming more autonomous and assertive. Competition will continue and accelerate, particularly in the economic, trade and technology fields, by using overt and covert means including cyber-attacks, industrial espionage, disinformation campaigns and propaganda. However, major powers will refrain from escalation leading to military conflicts, while maintaining and enhancing strong deterrence capabilities and a high-readiness defence apparatus. In other words, peacetime war will be limited by the recognition of a certain degree or form of interdependence, openness and cooperation, as necessary for the economic wellbeing of all parties.

In this scenario, NATO will still have to step up its deterrence and defence posture in all five operational domains. The focus, as in the previous scenario, would be on Europe. NATO will also likely support member states and the EU in increasing resilience when it comes to disruptive technologies, critical infrastructures, information warfare and energy security. Yet, the Allies' threat assessment will be less worrying, and there will be more room for cooperative security efforts. NATO–EU cooperation will be essential not only to deal with the internal–external security nexus, but also to contribute to stabilisation, as well as an acceptable balance of power, in Europe and its neighbourhood, particularly along the Southern flank. In this context, dialogue with Russia may be relaunched, also with a view to avoid its possible alignment with China in the mid-long term. NATO may well re-invest in both bilateral and multilateral partnerships, by differentiating partners within a broad strategy of sustainable engagement. Given the persistent confrontation between the US and China, NATO may be called to play a dual role: first, to help Allies to define military standards with relevant technological/industrial implications, in order to counter China's rise in this field and reduce Western dependencies on Chinese suppliers in terms of raw materials, technologies, components and products. The second role, as in the other scenario, would be to enhance politico-military partnerships with Japan, Australia and other like-minded countries in the Pacific area with a view to building an alternative to Beijing's regional influence. The open-door policy will regard the Western Balkans in this scenario, too, once again also to counter Chinese (and Russian) influence in loco. The issue of Ukraine's and Georgia's membership will be addressed in light of the aforementioned effort to relaunch a dialogue with Russia. Partnerships in the MENA region may mark some progress on a case-by-case basis, in both military and/or political terms. Last but not least, politico-strategic consultations under the aegis of article 4 will be needed to share analysis, find compromises among different priorities and build a

common position on a variety of issues relevant for the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area.

In both cases, NATO will face a second crossroads related to the domestic politics of its major members. Indeed, different political visions may emerge on both sides of the Atlantic, leading to different strategic choices.

3. Domestic strategic choices on both sides of the Atlantic

3.1 The US

In the US, two different approaches to foreign and defence policy will remain on the table in the mid-long term. On one hand, there is the idea that Washington should have more room of manoeuvre in confronting and containing China, managing a gradual military retrench from MENA, and tailoring bilateral partnerships and alliances in a transactional way. The advantages of such freedom of manoeuvre are worth abandoning the liberal international order which has contributed so far to a Western consensus on US leadership. The underlying assumption is that *realpolitik* basically frames foreign and defence policies. In this context, the use of US military power mainly aims to deter from further escalation – as was the case with the 2017 missile strike in Syria after the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. This approach is currently championed by President Donald Trump and is supported by a significant portion of American public opinion – mainly Republican – that perceives international engagement more as a domestic economic cost than an opportunity, as delocalisation abroad and a buoyant trade deficit, which did cost jobs, are considered the price paid to maintain this role in the world. On the other hand, there is the idea that international norms and institutions, as well as multilateral alliances, serve US strategic interests better than a purely *realpolitik* approach. In this perspective, “soft” and “hard” power have to come together in a “smart” way, and the costs in terms of trade deficits or military presence are a price worth paying in order to have a stable net of alliances against a few main opponents. Accordingly, the confrontation/containment of China and the retrenchment from MENA can and should be managed through greater cooperation and coordination with European and regional partners. This approach is traditionally supported by the Democratic Party, and by a portion of the Republican one.

These different approaches have significantly diverging implications for transatlantic relations. In the first case, European countries would be considered also as economic competitors, particularly Germany, while the EU as such would be largely disregarded and/or viewed in negative terms. In the second case, the importance of European allies would be valued more than trade imbalances, and the EU would be viewed in a more positive way as a relevant interlocutor able to play a complementary role in containing Russia and/or China while stabilising the Old Continent and possibly its neighbourhood. The UK may play a significant role in both scenarios, but Brexit's implications for the country's international posture

are still unclear, as well as its relations with the EU and its members.

In both cases, in political terms, the American position towards Russia will remain ambivalent. As we have seen under different administrations since the 1990s,¹⁶ efforts to reset tensions and relaunch dialogue may be undertaken, frustrated and abandoned in favour of a more confrontational relationship. Some, particularly in the Republican Party, have supported a sort of recognition of the Russian sphere of influence over Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova¹⁷ in order to put an end to confrontations in Europe and distance Moscow from Beijing – the real peer adversary to deal with. Others, particularly within the Democratic Party, hold a more negative view of Russia.

In any case, in military terms, the US operational deployment abroad experienced in the 1990s and 2000s will not be replicated even in cases of dramatic civil wars or humanitarian crises. Local conflicts and tensions will instead be dealt with “remotely”, offshore, through indirect support to partners and proxies, for instance in terms of intelligence or equipment, or at maximum via stand-off weapons able to strike without a local military footprint. The US military focus will be on technological superiority over China and Russia across all operational domains,¹⁸ and on the ability to both deter/defend from attacks and perform in-depth precision strikes. This will imply, among other things, greater investments and advancements in relation to air, naval and space platforms and technologies, in comparison with land systems. Despite the scope of the US defence budget, equipment costs will continue to increase and choices will have to be made on the prioritisation of finite resources.

Obviously, the global and domestic politics levels will remain closely intertwined. For example, the more the international security environment leans towards confrontation and conflict, the more worrying the threat perception in the US will be, thus increasing the support for room of manoeuvre unconstrained by multilateral institutions. At the same time, the argument that multilateral alliances and institutions can better contain China – as was the case with the Soviet Union during the Cold War – may still gain ground in the US, particularly in case of Democratic electoral success, thus influencing their international posture and that of allies and rivals.

¹⁶ Gabriele Natalizia and Marco Valigi, “From Reset to Restart: The US-Russia Cyclical Relationship in the Post-Cold War Era”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (September 2020), p. 65-81.

¹⁷ Robert D. Blackwill, “U.S. Foreign Policy in the Trump Administration”, in *CFR Conference Calls*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/node/222226>.

¹⁸ In this regard see, among others: Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage”, in *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Winter 2018/19), p. 141-189, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00337.

3.2 Europe

In Europe, the domestic political level will continue to be further complicated by fragmentation along national polities, despite the progress made in the European integration process including in the defence domain. Different paths may be undertaken by single major European countries, as well as by EU institutions, with an ensemble of effects on Europeans' position towards the Alliance. Generally speaking, three pathways are possible: national, European and Euro-Atlantic.

In the first scenario, several major countries in Europe will turn increasingly nationalistic, sceptical towards both the EU and NATO. Sovereigntist and populist parties have constantly and significantly gained ground across Europe in recent years. In 2020, the dramatic COVID-19 experience and the slow, uncoordinated response at European and Euro-Atlantic levels fuelled mistrust and resentment towards EU partners, and to a lesser extent the US, in countries like Italy. It may well be that some large and/or mid-size countries in Europe will have governments not keen on EU or NATO solidarity and cooperation, and open to transactional deals with Russia and China. The heavy Chinese penetration in the economy and politics of some EU members, particularly in South Eastern Europe, may well fuel and leverage this nationalistic shift to make further progress. In this scenario, the European contribution to common security would diminish, NATO (and EU) cohesion would be weakened and Europe would turn into a battleground for the peacetime war waged by other powers, or "poles".

In the second scenario, a core of EU members would try to build a fully independent European pole in competition with the US. The idea of strategic autonomy would be pushed and implemented at its maximum extent on the assumption that Washington is unreliable, and some sort of European "equidistance" could and should be achieved with respect to the US, China and Russia. Such a pathway entails three negative implications for Europe. The first one is to generate further tensions and division within Europe, regarding both the most pro-Atlanticist EU members like Poland and important partners like the UK. The second risk, given the simple impossibility for the EU to achieve any meaningful nuclear or conventional deterrence towards Russia, is to be blackmailed by Moscow over a number of dossiers and – in the worst-case scenario – to be unable to defend its members against a Russian attack on the Eastern flank if the US is alienated from Europe. The third risk, without a transatlantic bond to contain China, is to allow Chinese influence to penetrate through the backdoor of technological and trade agreement up to the point of losing control of those critical infrastructures needed to maintain autonomy in terms of security and defence, as well as foreign and industrial policy. While several European countries are already penetrated by China, particularly in South Eastern Europe, without the US pressure to contain Beijing this trend would be more difficult to reverse despite the EU's current and future efforts towards strategic autonomy. In any case, the output would be to a certain extent similar to the previous scenario: a weak and divided Europe, which cannot act as a European pole nor contribute to the Transatlantic Alliance, probably condemned to become

a battleground for other aggressive multipolar confrontations.

In the third scenario, the bulk of EU countries will move forward the integration process, achieving a greater degree of autonomy but in the framework of a strategic alliance with the US. In this framework, a deepening and widening of the politico-military integration within the EU in terms of operations, capability development and defence industrial policy would generate less tensions with the most Atlanticist European countries. At the same time, a stronger European pillar would make the Transatlantic Alliance more balanced and effective, both within and outside NATO. In this scenario, Europeans would be less naive regarding the geopolitical challenge brought by China, and would better protect their strategic autonomy firstly from Chinese and Russian interference. Transatlantic tensions and disagreements would obviously continue, particularly should the approach championed by the Trump administration guide US foreign and defence policy. Yet a strong European commitment on both EU integration and NATO cohesion would enable Europe to have a more strategic and productive dialogue with Washington. And the Union itself would be better prepared to use all its leverage – political, economic, etc. – to convince the US administration to take its concerns seriously and converge on key policy choices. Also, a stronger Europe in a stronger Transatlantic Alliance would be better able to engage with countries like Japan, Australia, South Korea and India that are already important, and often like-minded, partners on a number of dossiers.

This third scenario would represent the more positive way ahead for both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, European countries cannot strategically and politically afford to alienate the US, and compete simultaneously with China and Russia. At the same time, only a solid Transatlantic Alliance would enable Washington to contain China's rise over the long term in a sustainable way.

3.3 The Turkey question mark

Last but not least, domestic strategic choices are likely to be made also in Turkey. The last two decades, in which Erdogan's leadership has taken the country on an authoritarian path and away from its transatlantic partners, have witnessed a growing rift between Turkey and both the US – e.g., on S400 and F-35 – and European allies – including on the East Mediterranean energy sources and the conflict in Libya. Such a rift is part of a broader autonomy and assertiveness of Ankara foreign and defence policy, particularly towards MENA and Western Balkans, which is likely to continue. So far, NATO as a whole has demonstrated a sort of "strategic patience" vis-à-vis Ankara, on the assumption that escalating divergences may lead to dramatic, game-changing consequences such as the Turkish exit from the Alliance. Such assumption will remain valid in a 2030 perception. However, whether and how divergences will be managed in each of the aforementioned scenarios remains a question mark, whose answer will depend on domestic choices in the US, Europe and – above all – Turkey itself.

4. Implications for Italy and Italian priorities

Diverse scenarios have different implications for Italy. In any case, Rome will have to define its interests and position with reference to the major issues on the transatlantic agenda.

Two types of pressure will affect Italy's foreign and defence policy in this regard. The first is external and will depend on two elements. In its immediate neighbourhood is the security situation in both North Africa, especially Libya and Tunisia, and – to a lesser extent – the Western Balkans. Conflicts and instability in the MENA region will still be a primary concern for Italy, even if it risks becoming more of an observer of the political and military shifts than an active player. NATO's enlargement to the states of the Western Balkans would have a positive impact on Italy's security, contributing to the stability of the whole region. Yet, interference from Russia and China would continue, as already occurs for other allies in South Eastern Europe. At the global level, Italy will be called by Washington to align against Beijing, and eventually against Moscow. The forms and intensity of the American pressure will depend on the evolution of both the international security environment and US politics, according to the aforementioned crossroads. Requests made by Washington to European allies will be largely the same, but the political substance and quality of the transatlantic relations could vary depending on the next US administration. In Italy the widespread perception of both Russia and China is rather ambiguous, and largely positive, yet reflection on the various aspects of China's rise has moved forward, including in 2019 through the Ministry of Defence's assessment of this rise as a "challenge".¹⁹ In a 2030 perspective, striking a sustainable balance between external pressures and internal orientations will be difficult for any Italian government.

These governments will continue to be pressured from within Italy as well. The institutional system of checks and balances does not favour stable governments, and its reform is unlikely. A frequent turnover of ruling majorities is a challenge per se for the continuity, effectiveness and credibility of Rome's defence and foreign policies. While the fundamentals of Italy's position within NATO will not be questioned, domestic politics may have a varying influence on some aspects, and appearance, of the country's international posture.

In this context, in a 2030 perspective, the traditional Italian agenda for NATO and, broadly speaking, for its national security is likely to continue along four priorities: (1) an enduring transatlantic bond; (2) dialogue and deterrence towards Russia; (3) NATO–EU strategic partnership; and (4) stabilisation of the "Enlarged Mediterranean".

¹⁹ Italian Senate, *Audizione del Ministro della difesa, Lorenzo Guerini, sulle linee programmatiche del suo dicastero*, Rome, 30 October 2019, p. 4, <http://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/file/repository/commissioni/stenografici/18/Congiunte/4a-IV-20191030-AU-CAMERA.pdf>.

Within these priorities, the stabilisation of Italy's Mediterranean neighbourhood enjoys the greatest political and public opinion attention, yet it is going to be increasingly influenced by the other three issues.

4.1 An enduring transatlantic bond

For a variety of reasons, Italy constantly attributes great importance to bilateral relations with the US, and will continue to do so despite the changes and difficulties brought by the Trump administration.²⁰ Accordingly, NATO is important because it is one of the main frameworks to consult Washington on security and defence issues, to cooperate at the military and political levels, and to build trust and cultivate networks with a variety of American interlocutors. Therefore, the ongoing US retrenchment from MENA has first surprised and then concerned Italy. Nowadays Rome has to deal with a Mediterranean region where the geopolitical vacuum left by Washington is being filled by Russia, Turkey and others in a rapid and dramatic way.

Also in light of the likely continuation of the US effort to disengage from MENA, the perception of the US role and that of NATO is likely to evolve in Italy, towards a greater reliance on European defence and a more autonomous national policy towards the neighbourhood. Yet Washington and the Atlantic Alliance will remain fundamental reference points for Italian defence policy in the Mediterranean region. In other words, Italy looks at 2030 with a kind of Lord Ismay lens: NATO will remain a cornerstone of Europe's security, defence and stability, because it helps to keep the Americans in. And the Americans have to remain engaged in Europe for the sake of Italy's national security and interests in the evolving regional balance of power.

4.2 Dialogue and deterrence towards Russia

Italy has traditionally maintained a dialogue with Moscow during and after the Cold War, culminating in the 2002 establishment of the NATO–Russia Council at the Pratica di Mare Summit. After the 2014 war in Crimea, Rome supported the Western dual-track approach towards Russia, but with a premium on dialogue over deterrence. In the Italian perspective, deterrence is necessary but is not the end-state: it serves to prevent conflict and lays the ground to find a diplomatic solution on Ukraine and pan-European security. Accordingly, Rome is likely to continue providing a robust contribution to NATO military activities in the Eastern flank, from the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) to Air Policing over the Baltics or the North Atlantic. But at the same time Italy will insist on a meaningful dialogue in the NATO–Russia Council and through other possible venues.

²⁰ See, among many others, the very recent statement by the Italian Minister of Defence: Lorenzo Guerini, "L'importanza del patto Nato contro le sfide emergenti", in *Il Messaggero*, 29 September 2020, https://www.difesa.it/Il_Ministro/Articoli/Pagine/Limportanza-del-patto-nato-contro-le-sfide-emergenti.aspx.

This Italian approach does not mean an acceptance of Russia actions, from Eastern Ukraine to the repression of internal opposition. It means these actions have to be assessed and countered within an overarching approach which balances values and interests, and prioritises the peace and stability of the whole European continent.

NATO is deemed essential in this regard for two reasons. First, it ensures a collective defence and deterrence which the EU is and will be unable to provide, in both conventional and nuclear terms. Second, the Alliance is also the only framework where Europeans, North Americans and Turks can discuss collectively *with* Russia, as well as among them *on* Russia. While enhancing current NATO deterrence works for avoiding conventional and nuclear confrontation, it clearly has a very limited impact when confronting hybrid threats such as cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, election meddling or the spread of fake news through mass and social media. These threats can have an extremely negative impact on the stability and resilience of European liberal democracies and their civil societies, and they have not stopped despite the massive NATO effort undertaken on the Eastern flank. Therefore, Italy would welcome a future American and NATO effort to re-engage Russia and lower the level of "peacetime war" to the minimum possible. Italy is very keen on this transatlantic multilateral framework as it really believes it can work in the long term. Moreover, as a middle power, Italy feels better able to influence allies and the international agenda through multilateral cooperation, rather than via a series of bilateral relations whereby Rome would be in a weaker position vis-à-vis strong interlocutors.

A renewed dialogue with Moscow would be even more important, considering the fact that European allies could be sooner than later called by the US to take position against China; and if they do so, the possible reaction coming from Beijing – if coupled with the already aggressive behaviour of Russia – would catch Italy and Europe between a rock and a hard place. Without finding a viable way ahead for de-conflicting the relation with at least one of the two – and for the sake of European security and territorial integrity it should be Russia – this situation would not be sustainable in the long run, either for Italy or for Europe.

In conclusion, Italy will continue to somehow adjust Lord Ismay's words on NATO and Moscow: it is not really about keeping Russia out of Europe, but rather keeping Russians away from the use of force (or its threat) in their relations with the rest of the Old Continent.

4.3 NATO–EU strategic partnership

For Italy, NATO and the EU not only have to cooperate, they have to become strategic partners sooner rather than later. Their membership largely overlaps; their toolboxes are complementary or provide resilient redundancies; they both fit well with the Italian preference for multilateral fora in which to put forward national

priorities. Italy, like many European countries, is a member of both and has a single set of military forces. Therefore, a divergence of military requirements between the well-established NATO ones and the new EU ones is simply not affordable – particularly for a country whose defence budget will not move towards 2 per cent of GDP in the next years.

Rome will therefore continue to push for NATO–EU cooperation on a variety of dossiers: from hybrid threats to the Southern neighbourhood, to cyber and maritime domains, technological innovation, etc. This implies an enduring Italian effort on three fronts: first, within NATO and towards the US, to make the case that European defence initiatives like the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) are synergic with the Alliance. Indeed, these initiatives will bring more European defence investments and more military capabilities for Europeans – something long requested by Washington. In this sense, Rome would definitively welcome the prevalence in Washington of a more favourable view of the Union as a partner rather than a competitor, as well as the preservation of the international liberal order which has allowed the European integration process to flourish. Second, within the EU, Italy works to build European defence cooperation and integration not in opposition to NATO.²¹ In fact, the concept of EU strategic autonomy is embraced by Rome with a number of caveats. A pragmatic approach to EU capacity- and institutions-building is preferred, in order to avoid unnecessary tensions with the US. The third front for Italy is the post-Brexit relationship with London. Rome will likely support the widest and deepest possible EU–UK relations. Not just for economic reasons or the industrial and military cooperation between Italy and the UK, but also because good relations across the Channel contribute to good relations across the Atlantic, support NATO, benefit European security by keeping the UK close as an essential security and defence player, and enhance NATO–EU cooperation towards a real strategic partnership.

To again use the Ismay saying on the Alliance, it is not about keeping the Germans down. For Italy, it is about building European defence alongside NATO rather than against NATO.

4.4 Stabilisation of the “Enlarged Mediterranean”

Last but not least, Rome is likely to bring the Southern neighbourhood on the NATO (and EU) agenda. In this context, it is worth introducing the main geopolitical concept used in Italy to look at the Mediterranean region: the “Enlarged Mediterranean”. This concept encompasses not only the coastal states of the Mediterranean Sea, but also the whole Maghreb and Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East up to the Caucasus. It is a regional security complex where

²¹ This effort is evident for example in the joint letter on European defence signed on 29 May 2020 by the Defence Ministers of France, Germany, Spain and Italy: “*At the Heart of our European Union*”, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/at-the-heart-of-our-european-union>.

demographic, economic, security, political and religious dynamics link together very different countries.²² Geography, history and economics make it a top priority for Italian interests and national security.

Italy will continue to build a network of bilateral relations with countries in the region, also in light of the vacuum left by the US's ongoing attempt to retrench from MENA. At the same time, Rome will still seek to get the EU and NATO to deal with security challenges in this region. In the Alliance, Rome has been a key supporter of the 360° approach and the projecting stability goal. Concretely, Italy worked hard to establish the NATO Strategic Direction South Hub in Naples.

There are two main reasons for this enduring effort on NATO and the South. On the one hand, Italy genuinely believes NATO can provide an added value when it comes to security and stability in the Enlarged Mediterranean. Indeed, as mentioned before regarding the Eastern flank, NATO is the only organisation bringing together Europeans, including the UK, North Americans and Turkey; this is an asset per se in terms of strategic dialogue. Moreover, the Alliance has an unparalleled integrated military command to manage operations, and has invested in regional partnerships since the establishment of the Mediterranean Dialogue (1994) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (2004). Finally, the Alliance can (and should) cooperate with the Union in this region, bringing complementary and synergic added value. Building on that basis, from the Italian perspective NATO can and should do more in the South. But the Alliance has also to change its approach to MENA, including through a more comprehensive outlook beyond government representatives.

On the other hand, there is an enduring domestic politics rationale behind Italian efforts towards a greater NATO role in its Southern neighbourhood. Public opinion focuses on the Enlarged Mediterranean because of illegal migration, illicit traffic, energy supplies, security of maritime routes and commerce, stability of Libya and trade with countries in the region. These are all important issues that clearly matter for Italians.²³ Italy considers NATO a politico-military organisation which deals with the different security interests of its members. Since Italian interests largely lie in the Enlarged Mediterranean, the Alliance has to deal with that region in order to maintain the support of its public opinion²⁴ and the political leadership itself. It is a legitimate argument, with a very clear logic, widely shared across the Italian establishment, which touches upon the democratic accountability of the international organisations to which Italy belongs.

²² Alessandro Marrone, *Security Policy in the Southern Neighbourhood. A View from Rome*, Rome, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, March 2020, <http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/gbv.cgi?id=16768&ty=pdf>.

²³ See for example the 2019 IAI-LAPS survey on Italians' perception of threats to national security: Davide Angelucci et al., "Italians and Defence", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 19|08e (April 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10228>.

²⁴ In 2018 NATO membership was supported by about 70 per cent of Italians. See: 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>.

But this argument entails two structural problems. First, most of the security challenges in this region are not military, and NATO is not well equipped to deal with political instability within Arab countries, migration flows, arms trafficking, smuggling, etc.²⁵ Therefore, it is inherently difficult to turn the overarching goal of letting NATO do something for the South into actionable proposals which bring tangible results. The Alliance's added value in the Enlarged Mediterranean might be premised on adopting a non-traditional approach for NATO, with a focus on the civilian alongside the military dimension, by supporting more than intervening directly, and by establishing partnerships with well-rooted local non-state actors: NGOs, UN and EU agencies, delegations and missions. The second problem with the Alliance's role in the Enlarged Mediterranean lies in the divergences among the Allies. They are used to somehow overcoming their differences when it comes to collective defence, deterrence and dialogue towards Russia, because they recognise that their national security is better served through NATO, and there are no alternatives in the foreseeable future. The same NATO members traditionally consider MENA an arena for autonomous policies with little or no constraints coming from NATO. The Alliance is eventually called to operate after a decision or a military action is taken by some members, for instance to provide training to Iraqi forces after a war waged by a "coalition of the willing". Only when tensions over MENA reach exceptionally worrying peaks is NATO called upon by capitals to act as a forum to manage these tensions, as happened in 2011 with the military intervention in Libya. It is precisely on Libya that disagreements among Allies have continued over the last decade, creating an additional obstacle to a meaningful NATO role in the Enlarged Mediterranean region. Moreover, the US disengagement from MENA leaves the Alliance without the leadership exerted by default on other dossiers. Here the paradox is that Allies have first to do their homework within NATO to deconflict respective agendas and find common ground, in order to make the Alliance play a positive and meaningful role in its Southern neighbourhood.

In conclusion, the reasons for a strong NATO commitment are and will remain valid in a 2030 perspective, but the internal and external obstacles to such commitment are significant. A possible solution to this conundrum could be a NATO–EU strategic partnership towards the South, where the Union takes a leading role and the Alliance strongly supports it. Such an approach would bring several advantages: (i) it contributes to having, through NATO, a strategic dialogue from Vancouver to Ankara; (ii) it helps to channel UK support through the Alliance, as well as exploiting the limited effort the US is willing to provide; (iii) it leverages NATO's niche capabilities; and (iv) it benefits from the fact that MENA societies have a (slightly) better perception of the EU than of NATO. At the same time, it would reduce expectations on what NATO can deliver while implementing the principle according whereby the Alliance should also deal with its Allies' concerns over the security and stability of the Mediterranean region.

²⁵ On NATO's difficulties in projecting stability in that region see, among others: Ian Hope (ed.), "Projecting Stability: Elixir or Snake Oil?", in *NDC Research Papers*, No. 1 (December 2018), <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1242>.

Conclusions

The road leading to 2030 will likely be characterised by an international chessboard more crowded than ever. Two global powers – the US and, to a lesser extent, China – will probably have the largest influence on the global scene, but they will have to deal with regional powers, as well as with emerging non-state actors. Different approaches, from dynamic competition to confrontation to cooperation, will co-exist on a variable geometry, depending on dossiers and areas. Domestic politics of major NATO members will have a crucial impact on the future of the Alliance, interacting with the international security environment and – for its European members – with the European integration process under a question mark. A mutable, aggressive multipolarity and a peacetime war condition will force NATO to adapt very rapidly and maintain a higher than ever level of flexibility. Not only article 5, but also article 3 and article 4 could serve as a basis for action, disclosing the full and multidimensional potential of the Alliance. EU members will have to choose among nationalist isolationism, full European independence and a renewed strategy solidly anchored to the transatlantic bond. Each alternative does not completely exclude the other, also considering that different countries may turn towards different directions, but all of them will have an impact on the future of the international liberal order and its institutions. For sure, greater European integration coupled with a persistent transatlantic bond would be the best way to achieve a renovated Euro-Atlantic Alliance able to face the challenges foreseeable in a 2030 perspective. And, Italy has to work towards this direction while pursuing its national priorities within the transatlantic agenda.

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