

An International Peacekeeper. The Evolution of Italian Foreign and Defence Policy

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ABSTRACT

After the Cold War, Italy started to act as an international peacekeeper, deploying troops in dozens of military operations, mainly within multilateral frameworks. Recently, with the end of the “war on terror” and after the 2015 White Paper, Italy devoted growing interest and resources to the “Enlarged Mediterranean”. Despite Italy’s post-bipolar military dynamism, limited attention has been paid to assessing missions. The withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well as the debate about European Union defence and NATO, particularly after the Russian aggression on Ukraine, have emphasised again the need for a detailed analysis of Italian operations. This paper discusses the effectiveness of international interventions and the features and the trajectory of Italian missions. Three policy recommendations are advanced: the need to 1) create standard and systematic evaluations as events proceed; 2) establish transparent and inclusive assessments when interventions are completed; and 3) plan strategically for long-term proactivity rather than short-term reactivity.

*Italian defence policy | Italian foreign policy | Peacekeeping |
Multilateralism | Military operations | Mediterranean*

keywords

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Introduction

How effective have peace operations been overall? What has Italy's role been in international military missions? What can we learn from the international experience and specifically from Italian involvement? This paper aims to address these questions by focusing on international frameworks and will provide recommendations on best practices for Italian operations. First, findings about the effectiveness and outcomes of international interventions in countries at risk of conflict, engaged in conflict, and in post-conflict situations are summarised. Second, in light of global trends, which tend to be ignored within the national debate, the features and evolution of Italian missions are examined, with particular attention being devoted to current intervention in the "Enlarged Mediterranean". Finally, selected policy recommendations on the future evolution of Italian defence and its operations abroad are advanced: the need to 1) establish standard and systematic evaluations as events proceed; 2) establish transparent and inclusive assessments when interventions are completed; and 3) create a permanent security body that can advise on strategic planning and long-term proactivity rather than short-term reactivity.

1. International context and assessment of operational effectiveness

The effectiveness and outcomes of international interventions in countries that are at risk of conflict, engaged in conflict, and in post-conflict situations have been

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extensively debated.¹ Italy, which is a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and a European Union (EU) founding member, has made a significant military contribution over the last thirty years to its primary ally (the United States) and to regional and international organisations (e.g., the United Nations [UN]), mainly within a preferred multilateral framework, but also in bilateral and multinational operations.

In a recent review of findings about external interventions in international politics, intervention has been defined as actions and policies undertaken by one state with the goal of influencing structures of political authority within another state.² The missions and actions we review here should be understood as a subcategory of these interventions. There is a clear consensus that “humanitarian military intervention entails a cross-border use or threat of force by a state, a coalition of states, or an international organization for the purpose of protecting citizens of the target country from an acute violent emergency”.³ Hence, they can be further broadly divided into unilateral/coalition interventions by individual powers and multilateral interventions coordinated with international institutions, usually the UN and regional organisations.

1.1 Unilateral/coalition interventions

The first category includes powers that remain in a country after actively intervening in a conflict (often themselves being the cause of the conflict), becoming a military occupation force. This situation can develop under the aegis of international law, and possibly shares characteristics with retrospective multilateralism. Examples of this are Afghanistan and Iraq. In Iraq, after the 2003 invasion, the coalition peak was reached in 2005 with 160,000 American troops and approximately 21,000 allied troops, including 2,600 Italian soldiers. In Afghanistan – under the NATO umbrella – the deployment of military forces peaked in 2011, with 100,000 US troops and 42,000 allied troops: Italy, providing 3,770 soldiers, was among the five allies with the most troops. These can be defined as military occupations – the temporary control of a territory by another state that does not claim any rights for sovereign and permanent control over that territory. A critical question is whether stabilisation after a military operation can come from occupation. In 2008, Edelstein pointed out that there have been twenty-four milestone occupations since the Napoleonic Wars (1815), of which only seven can be defined as successes;⁴ six of

¹ For instance, on the UN, see: Barbara F. Walter, Lise Morje Howard and V. Page Fortna, “The Extraordinary Relationship between Peacekeeping and Peace”, in *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (October 2021), p. 1705-1022.

² Matt Malis, Pablo Querubin and Shanker Satyanath, “Persistent Failure? International Interventions since World War II”, in Alberto Bisin and Giovanni Federico (eds), *The Handbook of Historical Economics*, London/San Diego, Academic Press, 2021, p. 653.

³ Thorsten Gromes and Matthias Dembinski, “Practices and Outcomes of Humanitarian Military Interventions: A New Data Set”, in *International Interactions*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (2019), p. 1033.

⁴ David M. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards. Success and Failure in Military Occupation*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2008.

them came in the wake of the Second World War as the Cold War was emerging. The success of an occupation is therefore largely influenced by structural factors that occupying powers cannot easily manipulate. As Edelstein further points out, state-building tends not to be the central focus of occupations, and not all of them include this goal. Rather, the primary objective of a military occupation is to secure the interests of the occupying power and to prevent the occupied territory from becoming unstable. There is clearly a manifest hypocrisy on the part of the great powers: they are often partisans in a conflict, supporting a particular group with money, weapons, and even armed forces.

1.2 Multilateral interventions

The second category organises operations, usually described as peace operations, through a multilateral institution – such as the UN or the EU. There is a military presence but also a significant number of civilian personnel to assist post-war reconstruction, as in the cases of Sudan and East Timor. The UN has implemented seventy peace operations since 1948, expanding from missions to monitor ceasefires to much more ambitious multidimensional peace-building and post-war reconstruction. The UN does not have a standing army, but its deployment of military forces abroad is second only to the US military. More than 80,000 UN peacekeepers from 120 countries are currently deployed in 12 UN missions. More recently, regional organisations such as the EU and African Union, alone or working with the UN, have organised several peace operations. The EU – in part thanks to the Italian contribution – is becoming an increasingly global player in supporting peace and post-conflict reconstruction: it currently (2022) has seven active military missions and eleven civilian missions,⁵ with actions aimed at institution-building and economic development playing a central role.

Overall, there is strong agreement that peace operations are very effective in preventing violence, reducing outbreaks during civil wars and preventing it from recurring once a civil war is over.⁶ This is all the more surprising given that the UN only tends to intervene in the most difficult cases. In Italian public debate, a comparative, comprehensive, and systematic analysis of the effectiveness of peace operations and multilateralism is lacking both in institutional bodies and advisory fora. However, this does not imply that peace operations always work or that they have the success rate we would expect. There are many well-known cases – such as Bosnia and Rwanda – in which UN peacekeeping failed. There are also other contemporary cases such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo where peacekeeping missions are not progressing well. But the successful cases – even in terms of post-war reconstruction – are numerous: Namibia,

⁵ European External Action Service (EEAS), *EU Missions and Operations*, March 2022, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410804>.

⁶ Jessica Di Salvatore and Andrea Ruggeri, "Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations", in William R. Thompson (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 26 September 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.586>.

Mozambique, El Salvador, Guatemala, Sierra Leone, and East Timor, for example.

1.3 Features and trends of peace operations

Over the past thirty years, UN peacekeeping operations have become bigger, more complex, and more diverse.⁷ During the current twelve UN missions, 1,500 peacekeepers have died; since 1948, 4,161 have lost their lives. UN peacekeeping missions have undergone substantive changes since the end of the Cold War, witnessing an increase in the number of peacekeeping troops deployed; an increase in the number of countries supplying peacekeepers; an increase in the average number of troop-contributing countries per mission; and a change in the pool of countries from which the UN can draw troops. As of November 2021, there were 12 active peace operations: the total personnel deployed at that time was 87,572, with 63,889 troops and 7,266 police officers. At the end of 2021, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal remained the top three contributors of peacekeepers, a trend that has been consistent over the last twenty years. Italy is the first European and Western country among providers of UN peacekeepers (overall in twenty-sixth position) with 914 Blue Helmets, most of whom are deployed in Lebanon (904).

UN missions are on average much larger than non-UN missions. These latter are more militarily focused, but this is mostly down to the NATO effect.⁸ The average UN mission deploys around 3,600 people, whereas the average non-UN mission is only a third of the size.⁹ It appears that, among non-UN operations, national contributions are a token gesture – mere signalling – rather than substantive contributions. The number of UN missions has remained fairly stable, while the number of regional and international missions has increased. UN operations increased primarily in the 1990s and early 2000s, with the many missions by the EU since the launch of its European Security and Defence Policy in 1999 making up a large share of this growth. However, non-UN bodies have deployed more missions than the UN every year since the turn of the millennium.

An important distinguishing feature relates to the mandates for peace operations and their different activities. We can distinguish four different categories of peace operations: 1) observer, 2) traditional, 3) peace-building, and 4) peace enforcement. Observer missions, the first category to be deployed by the UN, in 1948, are defined by small contingents that are mandated to observe the behaviour of belligerent parties and determine whether they stick to agreements (e.g., ceasefires or peace treaties). Traditional peace operations usually have the same mandates – to monitor

⁷ Vincenzo Bove, Chiara Ruffa and Andrea Ruggeri, *Composing Peace. Mission Composition in UN Peacekeeping*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁸ Corinne Bara and Lisa Hultman, "Just Different Hats? Comparing UN and Non-UN Peacekeeping", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2020), p. 341-368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2020.1737023>.

⁹ Wukki Kim and Todd Sandler, "Non-UN Peacekeeping Effectiveness: Further Analysis", in *Defence and Peace Economics*, 14 March 2021, DOI 10.1080/10242694.2021.1882280.

and report – but also include lightly armed military personnel who can accomplish tasks such as de-escalating minor tensions, escorting humanitarian aid, and logistically supporting the demobilisation of former combatants. The other two categories – peace-building and peace enforcement – are further developments based on the evolution of field experience; they also relate to the changing nature of security challenges given the increase in the number of civil wars and failure of domestic governance. Both types of missions require larger deployments, substantive military capabilities, larger budgets, and longer-term commitments than the first two categories. Peace-building operations have a portfolio of tasks to keep the peace, and these also include state-building goals such as strengthening the rule of law, reforming and training the security sector, planning and assisting in rebuilding logistical infrastructures, and supporting governance.

The data show that until the end of the Cold War UN missions were mostly in the observer/traditional categories, but in the last ten years most of the new missions that were established related to either peace-building or peace enforcement.¹⁰ Howard and Dayal show that the large majority of newly established missions are deployed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter – hence involving the possible use of force – and several were changed to that mandate from Chapter VI – the use of diplomatic instrument.¹¹

1.4 Effectiveness and evaluations of peace operations

It has been observed consistently that peacekeeping success is more likely when large contingents are deployed under robust mandates.¹² Mission type, size, and composition are able to signal credible commitment and resolve from the international community to local belligerents and empower peacekeepers to halt violence while guaranteeing the implementation of peace agreements.¹³ Over the years, debate on the concept of peacekeeping effectiveness has centred on one crucial dimension: maintaining peace. Notably, peacekeeping literature has focused on the absence of violence, but this focus is limited to conflict-related violence. Social violence (i.e., riots and violent protests), criminal violence, and terrorism are not accounted for when identifying peacekeeping's potential violence-reduction impact. These latter forms of violence may be less political and

¹⁰ Maline Meiske and Andrea Ruggeri, "Peacekeeping as a Tool of Foreign Policy", in William R. Thompson (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 26 September 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.462>.

¹¹ Lise Morjé Howard and Anjali Kaushlesh Dayal, "The Use of Force in UN Peacekeeping", in *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Winter 2018), p. 71-103. Note that they criticise the effectiveness of the use of force by UN missions.

¹² Andrea Ruggeri, Theodora-Ismene Gizelis and Han Dorussen, "Managing Mistrust: An Analysis of Cooperation with UN Peacekeeping in Africa", in *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (June 2013), p. 387-409; Andrea Ruggeri, Han Dorussen and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, "Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict", in *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Winter 2017), p. 163-185.

¹³ Jessica Di Salvatore and Andrea Ruggeri, "Effectiveness of Peacekeeping Operations", cit.

only tangentially related to the main conflict, but they shape perceptions of safety among local populations.

Besides academic assessments and analyses of UN and non-UN peace operations, there have also been internal and organisational assessments to elaborate on lessons learnt and discern best practices. The organisation that has been investigating and developing most of these assessments (and eventually implementing associated reforms) is the UN. This is mostly because the UN has been a major provider of peace operations over a long timeframe and has faced major failures and challenges.¹⁴ Besides evaluating best practices for operations, there have also been independent reviews for specific peace operations. The UN established the practice of independent reviews of peace operations in 2017, and since then there have been nineteen such reviews. A recent report has suggested that the UN needs to consolidate best practices, improve its reporting on independent reviews, and establish a dedicated funding stream for independent reviews.¹⁵

2. Italy: An “international peacekeeper”

The Italian parliamentary debate on military missions that took place in July 2021 highlights some of the most relevant aspects of the country’s defence since the end of the Cold War. With an overwhelming majority, MPs approved more than forty operations across the world, most of them within a multilateral (UN or NATO and UN) framework.¹⁶ The assembly discussion (as well as the attention given to it by the media) was extremely limited, but the tasks undertaken by the interventions are manifold and complex, from peacekeeping to anti-terrorism.

On the whole, bipartisan consensus, scant public debate, and remarkable military commitment (especially in multilateral missions) have been constant features of Italian defence policy over the last thirty years. The stunning transformation of this policy over that period, and the evolution of Italian armed forces and their military engagement abroad, deserves our attention for two main reasons.¹⁷

¹⁴ United Nations, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (Brahimi Report), 21 August 2000, <https://undocs.org/A/55/305>; *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. Principles and Guidelines* (Capstone Doctrine), 18 January 2008, <http://dag.un.org/handle/11176/89481>; and *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People* (HIPPO Report), 17 June 2015, <https://undocs.org/S/2015/446>.

¹⁵ Daniel Forti, *Independent Reviews of UN Peace Operations: A Study of Politics and Practice*, New York, International Peace Institute, October 2021, <https://www.ipinst.org/?p=32284>.

¹⁶ Italian Parliament-Research Department, “Autorizzazione e proroga missioni internazionali 2021”, in *Dossier Servizio Studi*, 5 luglio 2021, <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/BGT/01300858.pdf>.

¹⁷ On the post-Cold War Italian missions see Stefania Forte and Alessandro Marrone (eds), “L’Italia e le missioni internazionali”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 12|05 (September 2012), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/1517>; Giulia Tercovich, “Italy and UN Peacekeeping: Constant Transformation”, in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (2016), p. 681-701; Piero Ignazi, Giampiero Giacomello and Fabrizio Coticchia, *Italian Military Missions Abroad. Just Don’t Call it War*, Basingstoke, Palgrave

First, since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Italy has become one of the most active security providers at regional and global level, sending troops to more than 130 operations. While only dozens of troops were deployed abroad at the end of the 1980s, thousands of Italian soldiers have been engaged in interventions since that time. From the Balkans to the Middle East, from Somalia to Afghanistan, Italian soldiers have participated in air strikes, counter-insurgency interventions, peace-building, and anti-piracy missions, to name only a few of their missions. Officially, their contribution to international security is one of the key roles for the Italian armed forces.¹⁸

Second, despite this considerable commitment, public discussion on defence issues has been modest for many years. The debate on national security and defence policy has been generally relegated to the margins within institutions, media, and even academia. For this reason, it is worth assessing in detail the main features of the most visible example of the transformation of Italian defence policy: military operations abroad.

2.1 Thirty years of interventions: Main turning points

After thirty years of interventions, we can trace the main characteristics of Italian missions. Before doing this, we should answer the following question: what have been the most relevant turning points for Italian participation in military operations abroad? Schematically, we can distinguish three main periods: 1) the 1990s (from Operation Desert Storm, Iraq, 1991, to Operation Allied Force, Kosovo, 1999), 2) the first decade of the new century (with the missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon), and 3) the post-2011 era, after the war in Libya (when Italy started to focus principally on North Africa and the Sahel region).¹⁹

While the end of the Cold War is generally considered the crucial event that allowed development of the Italian military, the legacy of the 1980s helps us to understand changing defence policy.²⁰ Indeed, the peacekeeping intervention in Lebanon in 1982 and other small missions in the Mediterranean region (Malta, Sinai, and the Red Sea), as well as the draft of the 1985 White Paper²¹ (which started to focus on

Macmillan, 2012; Andrea Carati and Andrea Locatelli, "Cui prodest? Italy's Questionable Involvement in Multilateral Military Operations amid Ethical Concerns and National Interest", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2017), p. 86-107.

¹⁸ See Italian Ministry of Defence, *Atto di indirizzo per l'avvio del ciclo integrato di programmazione della performance e di formazione del bilancio di previsione per l'e.f. 2022 e la programmazione pluriennale 2023-2024*, 2021, http://www.difesa.it/Content/Documents/Atto_indirizzo/AI%202022%20Finale%20Firmato.pdf.

¹⁹ Fabrizio Coticchia and Francesco Niccolò Moro, "From Enthusiasm to Retreat. Italy and Military Missions Abroad after the Cold War", in *Italian Political Science*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (May 2020), p. 114-131, <https://italianpoliticalscience.com/index.php/ips/article/view/122>.

²⁰ Nicola Labanca (ed.), *Le armi della Repubblica: dalla Liberazione ad oggi*, Turin, UTET, 2009.

²¹ Italian Ministry of Defence, *La Difesa. Libro bianco 1985*, Rome, 1984.

joint action and others' needs for so-called power projection), paved the way for Italian "deployability".

The most important critical turning point for Italian defence occurred in 1991, when Rome decided to participate in the air strikes against Saddam Hussein within Operation Desert Storm. The first combat mission undertaken by Italy since 1945 was a watershed. Indeed, from that year, Italy started to deploy troops in almost every regional and international crisis, adopting the humanitarian operation narrative; this avoided the declaration of a "state of war" (as required by the Constitution) and thereby eluded strict parliamentary oversight. The concept of war was therefore removed from (limited) public debate, while at the same time the bipartisan plot of these "peace missions" was fully embraced. Alongside this development, the mission in the Gulf highlighted the shortfalls of the Italian armed forces – which were designed for territorial defence in the Cold War era and were now operating in a brand new strategic context. As a consequence, the New Defence Model (1991) set in train an ambitious process of reform for Italian defence. This focused on deployability and active prevention to promote stability abroad, and thus definitively moved away from the static Cold War approach.²²

In the 1990s, Italy started to be involved in manifold complex operations, from the Balkans to Somalia, and it suffered its first casualties in combat operations since the Second World War. In 1997, Italy led the multinational stability operation known as Alba in Albania, while in 1999, Italian armed forces provided a significant contribution to air strikes in Kosovo during Operation Allied Force. Despite combat activities, the peace narrative was not altered, but several relevant reforms (above all, the suspension of conscription) have gradually been implemented.

The new century required Italy to step up its military commitment. Indeed, within the framework of the War on Terror, Italian soldiers have been involved in the most complex (and bloodiest) operations undertaken since the 1940s. Italy provided a very significant contribution (in terms of troops and tasks) both in Iraq (2003–6) and in Afghanistan (2011–21). Such challenging missions had a huge impact on the process of military transformation and adaptation, promoting further joint operations with allies on the ground (especially within the NATO context, which became a crucial reference for Italian defence in terms of approaches and procedures). At the same time, Italy actively participated in the first EU missions – from the Balkans to the Indian Ocean – and deeply enhanced its engagement with UN operations, principally thanks to its considerable involvement in the UN intervention in Lebanon of 2006, in which Italy played a leading diplomatic and military role. In 2001, Italy deployed troops in ten UN missions, which is the number of operations undertaken during the entire Cold War (1945–89).

²² Italian Ministry of Defence, *Modello di difesa. Lineamenti di sviluppo delle FF.AA. negli anni '90*, Rome, October 1991.

The second decade of the century started with the controversial international intervention in Libya (2011), growing instability in the Middle East and North Africa region (known as MENA), and the failure of the War on Terror. All these factors, along with the financial crisis from 2008, conditioned both the evolution of Italian defence and rising prudence – or even scepticism – among political leaders, as well as changing public opinion on the use of force.²³ However, after a decrease in the number of troops deployed abroad, Italy continued to provide a significant military contribution, from NATO air missions in the Baltic states after the Russian invasion of Crimea to anti-Islamic State operations in Iraq. From mid-2022, Italy will take the lead of the NATO Mission in Iraq. Capacity-building and training of local security and police forces represent the main focuses of Italian military involvement. With more than 1,000 troops, the country's contribution will be the largest among NATO members. As affirmed by the Minister of Defence, Lorenzo Guerini, the “fight against terrorism remains a priority”, even after the end of the War on Terror era.²⁴ Above all, as highlighted by the latest White Paper (2015),²⁵ and implemented by all governments (a stunning populist success did not alter Italian defence continuity),²⁶ Italy focused on the Enlarged Mediterranean,²⁷ considered to be the vital area for protecting and promoting national interests, and relocated troops and resources towards the Sahel region and North Africa.²⁸

In summary, over three decades, Italian defence has been marked by deployability, providing a constant and significant contribution within multinational and (especially) multilateral frameworks. Owing to the relevance of such military engagement, it is worth assessing the main features of Italian operations abroad in the post-Cold War era.

²³ Fabrizio Coticchia and Jason W. Davidson, *Italian Foreign Policy during Matteo Renzi's Government. A Domestically-Focused Outsider and the World*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2019. On public opinion see IAI and Laboratorio Analisi Politiche e Sociali (LAPS), *Gli italiani e la politica estera*, Rome, IAI, October 2017, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/8352>.

²⁴ Minister Lorenzo Guerini, quoted in: “Italy to Lead NATO Mission in Iraq”, in *Adnkronos*, 2 July 2021, https://www.adnkronos.com/italy-to-lead-nato-mission-in-iraq_bfOqO9VePtQAPV2gXPddd.

²⁵ Italian Ministry of Defence, *White Paper for International Security and Defence*, Rome, 2015, https://www.difesa.it/Content/Pagine/Libro_Bianco.aspx.

²⁶ Philip Giurlando, “Populist Foreign Policy: The Case of Italy”, in *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2021), p. 251-267; Fabrizio Coticchia, “A ‘Sovereignist Revolution’? Italy's Foreign Policy under the ‘Yellow-Green’ Government”, in *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (December 2021), p. 739-759, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00259-0>.

²⁷ In the White Paper this region covers a broad area, from the Sahel region to MENA. The Minister of Defence, Lorenzo Guerini, has defined the region as: a triangle (whose angles are Libya and Mediterranean Sea, the Gulf of Guinea and the Horn of Africa), with the Sahel region in the centre. Italian Parliament, *Comunicazioni del Governo sulla partecipazione dell'Italia alle missioni internazionali...*, 7 July 2021, p. 16, <https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/365046.pdf>.

²⁸ Michela Ceccorulli and Fabrizio Coticchia, “‘I’ll Take Two’: Migration, Terrorism, and the Italian Military Engagement in Niger and Libya”, in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2020), p. 174-196; Giuseppe Dentice and Federico Donelli, “Reasserting (Middle) Power by Looking Southwards: Italy's Policy towards Africa”, in *Contemporary Italian Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2021), p. 331-351.

2.2 Italian missions abroad: Main features

The events that affected the evolution of Italian military interventions after the end of the Cold War emphasise two overall patterns. In terms of geographical priorities, despite having deployed troops almost everywhere, Italy has mainly focused on two areas: the Balkans (especially in the 1990s) and the Enlarged Mediterranean (mainly after 2011). In addition, several missions have been undertaken in the Middle East (above all in Lebanon and Iraq). While Italian military involvement in Asia has been limited in terms of the overall numbers of missions carried out, Afghanistan represents the most relevant intervention ever conducted by Italian forces in terms of tasks undertaken and costs suffered.

Second, the vast majority of Italian operations have occurred within a multilateral framework (UN, EU, and NATO); however, multinational and bilateral missions represent only a tiny minority of all interventions. It is not clear what the features of “national” interventions abroad should be.²⁹ In order to answer this, we should stress, on one hand, the main traits of the domestic debates during which operations have been planned and approved, and, on the other hand, the recurring patterns of Italian missions. Notwithstanding the evolution of international and domestic contexts over the last thirty years, as well as the very different operational scenarios in which Italian troops have found themselves, we can identify some constant features concerning domestic debate: 1) bipartisan support for operations among the largest parties; 2) a lack of public debate and parliamentary oversight; and 3) a “peace narrative” shared by all governments and leaders.

First, a widespread bipartisan consensus has regularly backed Italian military operations. In line with the literature, and also in the Italian case, a “curvilinear model” of support (i.e., centre-left and centre-right more in favour than the extreme right and – especially – the extreme left) illustrates the ways in which Italian parties have sustained military missions in recent years.³⁰

Second, despite military activism, the national public debate on defence has always been rare, for political and cultural reasons.³¹ More importantly, the scrutiny of military operations in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate has been extremely limited. With minimal parliamentary oversight, the executive has exploited its considerable autonomy on defence issues, avoiding “audience costs”, possible vetoes from players in coalition governments, and public attribution

²⁹ Italian institutions have rarely defined the missions undertaken. Some documents have only generally distinguished between peacekeeping operations, police missions, peacebuilding operations and humanitarian aid. See Italian Ministry of Defence, *2001. Nuove forze per un nuovo secolo*, Rome, 2001, <https://www.difesa.it/Approfondimenti/ArchivioApprofondimenti/Pagine/2001-nuove-forze.aspx>.

³⁰ Fabrizio Coticchia and Valerio Vignoli, “Italian Political Parties and Military Operations”, in *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (July 2020), p. 456-473.

³¹ See, among others, Angelo Panebianco, *Guerrieri democratici. Le democrazie e la politica di potenza*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1997.

of responsibility. Only at the end of 2016 was a comprehensive law (No. 145) on interventions abroad approved,³² finally forcing the government to give details on each operation. For decades, MPs have voted for the refinancing of all missions together (once or at the most twice per year), while sometimes operations were undertaken even without formal votes.

Third and related to that, the narrative for all peace and humanitarian missions – which was adopted no matter individual interventions' features or the risks on the ground – shaped the whole national debate, where any references to “war” were quickly removed. This storyline was instrumental for collecting support from parliament and in the eyes of public opinion, which has always largely opposed combat interventions.³³ More dramatically, the overall narrative has influenced mission structures and assets, which have often suffered the consequences of the gap between humanitarian planning and the level of violence on the ground. The case of Operation Antica Babilonia in Nasiriya well illustrates the dramatic consequences of such a discrepancy.³⁴

Moving from the domestic and procedural context to the operational reality of the interventions, we can identify some of the Italian missions' recurrent traits: 1) the training of local police and security actors; 2) a tendency to keep the military low profile and apply a restrained use of force; 3) the acquiring of significant power projection capabilities; 4) and an enhanced level of joint operations and interoperability with allies.

Official documents have tried to summarise the features of a “national way to peace operations”.³⁵ Based on existing primary and secondary sources, four elements are worth mentioning: training, civil–military cooperation and reconstruction, deployability, and participation in joint operations.

First, training local police and security actors is generally considered to be crucial in contemporary interventions in conflict or post-conflict contexts. Exploiting the vast experience collected across decades and the unique asset represented by the Carabinieri (a mixed police/military force), Italy has developed noted capabilities in this area, and has gradually adapted different training programmes and mentoring activities to different scenarios, from counter-insurgency interventions to UN police operations.

³² Law No. 145 of 21 July 2016: *Disposizioni concernenti la partecipazione dell'Italia alle missioni internazionali*, <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2016;145>.

³³ Fabrizio Battistelli, *Gli italiani e la guerra. Tra senso di insicurezza e terrorismo internazionale*, Roma, Carocci, 2004.

³⁴ The absence of armoured vehicles and helicopters, as well as the protection of bases from external attacks, directly caused casualties among Italian soldiers in Iraq.

³⁵ Italian Ministry of Defence, 2001. *Nuove forze per un nuovo secolo*, cit., point 177.

Second, despite Italian troops having fought harsh battles, from Nasiriya to Western Afghanistan, a military low profile (consistent with the humanitarian narrative adopted by political leaders) and a restrained use of force have generally marked Italian missions. Moreover, Italian troops have been continually focused on civil–military cooperation (CIMIC) to effectively deploy aid and foster reconstruction under a proper security umbrella. Beyond the widespread and superficial stereotype of “good Italians”,³⁶ CIMIC has actually represented a vital tool for Italian missions, from peacekeeping to counter-insurgency. Within the UN framework in particular, from Somalia to Lebanon, Italian CIMIC has promoted cooperation on the ground between military and civilian actors.³⁷

Third, after decades playing a role in interventions that have taken place far from national borders, Italian armed forces have acquired significant power projection capabilities, especially through naval and air assets. While in the 1990s Italy had yet to build proper expeditionary forces, as it moved away from territorial defence, its armed forces have clearly proved to be capable of quick deployment in the new century, illustrated by the missions in Lebanon and Afghanistan. In addition, technological developments have constantly taken place. As has been widely confirmed by empirical research, military operations and the assets employed have been transformed.³⁸ Drones and armed vehicles (which have been continuously modified to better address the menaces posed by improvised explosive devices) exemplify this claim.

Finally, years of multinational and multilateral interventions have deeply enhanced the ability to act jointly with allies. The mission in Afghanistan clearly boosted cooperation on the ground, and also in terms of doctrines and approaches, especially within NATO. In other words, multilateralism is not just an attitude or a political preference of Italian foreign and defence policy; rather, multilateral forums and alliances are the preferred frameworks for Italian armed forces that have been getting used to operating within specific procedures. This explains the pressure on the government that was applied by the Italian Air Force, which sought engagement within the NATO framework in Libya (2011).

2.3 A strategic shift? The enlarged Mediterranean

After the gradual reduction in national military involvement during the War on Terror, from Iraq to Afghanistan, and following the conflict in Libya, Italy started to strategically rethink its missions abroad. The main outcomes of this process

³⁶ Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2005.

³⁷ More recently, new skills and capabilities – such as cultural heritage protection in conflict scenarios – have been emphasised by scholars: Paolo Foradori, Serena Giusti and Alessandro Giovanni Lamonica, “Reshaping Cultural Heritage Protection Policies at a Time of Securitisation: France, Italy, and the United Kingdom”, in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (September 2018), p. 86-101, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9463>.

³⁸ Fabrizio Coticchia and Francesco N. Moro, *The Transformation of Italian Armed Forces in Comparative Perspective. Adapt, Improvise, Overcome?*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015.

were that political leaders applied greater prudence in using force after years of global commitment, and they gave clearer priority to a specific area (the Enlarged Mediterranean). This was driven by the failures of the operations mentioned above, rising regional instability, and the financial crisis. To address the impact of this latter, the Ministerial Directive 2013 that reviewed the defence sector was approved by the Monti government, in order to foster a proper balance between force structure and budget.³⁹ This document still supported the expeditionary capabilities of Italian armed forces, and the latest White Paper (2015), continued to support deployment, identifying the Enlarged Mediterranean as the vital area for Italian interests.⁴⁰ While most of its allies were mainly concerned with what happened in Ukraine in 2014, Italy was primarily focused on the consequences of instability in North Africa and the Sahel region. A remodelling of Italian interventions occurred, with new naval operations in the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Guinea, and, especially, a greater military commitment in Sahel, where the missions aimed to support (mainly through training and mentoring) the capabilities of local states to combat menaces such as terrorism and illegal migration.⁴¹ On the whole, Italy gradually disengaged from missions that employed forces numbered in the thousands for years (e.g., Afghanistan) and increased its commitment towards North Africa and the Sahel region. Also within EU and NATO frameworks, Italy pushed to increase its focus on the “Southern Front”, highlighting the importance of a broader (multilateral) commitment in the region. The Sahel region can be considered to be a new focus for Italian foreign and defence policy, along with the traditional ones (i.e., the Atlantic, Europe, and the Mediterranean). However, the never-ending security problems there and the considerable political troubles suffered by states in that area testify to the problems faced on the ground. In addition, the dramatic shortfalls of the multinational training programmes of local armed forces were revealed by the collapse of the Afghan armed forces in the summer of 2021, questioning the approach to capacity-building missions that has so far been adopted by Italy and its allies.

Despite such obstacles, the reorientation of Italian defence has been strongly supported by all political parties and even by the “Yellow–Green” government (2018–19), the first European executive without mainstream parties. Despite some rhetorical clashes with allies, that populist government guaranteed continuity in defence policy to a very great extent, this applying to missions abroad as well as procurement programmes. Finally, an active military commitment was confirmed during the Covid-19 pandemic era. Alongside the approval of more than forty

³⁹ As a consequence of the Cold War legacy, both the structure of the armed forces and the military budget have been deeply unbalanced, causing problems in terms of efficiency. For instance, the significant expenses devoted to personnel (often even 65–70 per cent of the overall budget) have limited the room for manoeuvre with other items.

⁴⁰ Italian Ministry of Defence, *White Paper for International Security and Defence*, cit.

⁴¹ Italian Chamber of Deputies, *Discussione della relazione delle Commissioni III (Affari esteri e comunitari) e IV (Difesa) sulla deliberazione in merito alla partecipazione dell'Italia a missioni internazionali da avviare nell'anno 2018...*, 17 January 2018, <https://www.camera.it/leg17/410?idSedu ta=0905&tipo=stenografico>.

operations in 2021 and a rising military budget, the Italian government openly supported a greater national and European military commitment, in terms of resources and capabilities. Quite remarkably in the country's political and cultural context, Prime Minister Mario Draghi stated in September 2021 that Italy – and the EU – should “spend more” on defence.⁴²

In this speech, Draghi devoted specific attention to Italy's contribution to the creation of a European defence force. Italy has strongly supported the recent steps made by the EU in the field, from actively participating in manifold projects within Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), to sustaining the European Defence Fund and the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence.⁴³ However, Italy has clearly emphasised its view (which is closer to Berlin than to Paris) on the EU's strategic autonomy. From the Italian perspective, this does not mean independence from the transatlantic partnership but rather “building the capacity to prop up Western security, which is in turn ‘founded on the Atlantic Pact’”.⁴⁴

The next few years will provide additional information that will allow us to assess the overall degree of change in Italian defence policy. The end of the Cold War brought a major evolution, with Italy changing from security consumer to security provider. As we have seen, the role of international peacekeeper has been adopted in the following decades. Relying on an analysis of foreign policy literature,⁴⁵ we can affirm that, while it is reasonable to exclude a reorientation of Italy in world affairs, a more significant level of transformation – relating to means, goals, and purposes – could be conceivable, going beyond small adjustments in the degree of commitment characteristic of recent years.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper provides a general overview of trends around peace operations. It moves on to a more focused analysis of Italy in the international arena and its involvement in peace operations. In the light of what we have noted regarding the effectiveness of missions and also best practices and lessons learned by international organisations and other countries, the following three core recommendations are made:

Establish standard and systematic evaluations – The role of monitoring by the Italian parliament should be enhanced. While Law No. 145 (2016) is an improvement

⁴² “Draghi: C'è fiducia in Italia. Debito si affronta con la crescita...”, in *Repubblica*, 29 September 2021, https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2021/09/29/news/draghi_franco_nadef-319973554.

⁴³ See, for instance, Alessandro Marrone, “PeSCo: The Italian Perspective”, in *ARES Group Policy Papers*, No. 30 (September 2018), <http://www.iris-france.org/notes/pesco-the-italian-perspective>.

⁴⁴ Minister Guerini quoted in Otto Lanzavecchia, “EU Defence Means NATO (and US), Italy's Defence Minister Says”, in *Formiche*, 11 December 2020, <https://formiche.net/?p=1349365>.

⁴⁵ Charles F. Hermann, “Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy”, in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 1990), p. 3-21.

is terms of parliamentary oversight, its implementation and impractical timings have been very problematic in the last few years. Too often, parliament quickly discusses and approves operations in the summer, after months of deployment have taken place. Such discussions should be better informed, examining missions on the basis of proper details and analysis, avoiding a “muddling-through” process that simply gives continuity to previous efforts, without assessing results or the effect on national interests. This broader debate could also contribute towards the development of a national strategy, and a culture in which this is possible, something that has been sought years. Enhanced analytical evaluations and decisions regarding missions should take place before deployment and also during missions.

Assessments should be driven by the following questions: what will Italy’s commitment be (in terms of finance and personnel) in military deployment over the medium and long term? Can possible mission scenarios be simulated and evaluated in order to compare best and worst outcomes? Is this a priority compared with other possible threats and foreseeable challenges? How will our commitment (or the lack thereof) affect our relationship with our allies? Will our commitment reinforce or destabilise international multilateral frameworks?

Establish transparent and inclusive assessments – After thirty years of military engagement, Italy needs to develop a structured, transparent, and inclusive process to assess lessons learnt and establish best practice guidelines. Political institutions (primarily, the Parliament) should begin to assess the results obtained and analyse the approaches of the last three decades. For instance, while many other countries have already developed such processes – especially concerning the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan – Italy has only slowly begun. It is crucial to involve expert actors – armed forces, and also diplomats, academics, and non-governmental organisations – for the evaluation of lessons learnt, providing transparency to the public and also gaining crucial information to avoid future mistakes. As mentioned, purely military support for states that are not perceived as legitimate by the people is not effective in fostering capacity-building, as many operations have revealed.

Assessments should be driven by questions about alternative paths and interventions, and how more effective assistance and higher integration between political and military instruments could be developed. Only rigorous assessments – based on hard evidence, systematic research design, and counterfactual analyses – can provide useful answers.

Plan strategically and for long-term proactivity rather than short-term reactivity – The “national interest” has rarely, if ever, been cited in official speeches and documents (see, for instance, the White Paper of 2015); for cultural and political reasons, owing to the tragic legacy of fascism and the Second World War, the concept has not been part of public debate. But if Italy should commit its armed forces in the Enlarged Mediterranean to defend and promote national vital interests, it would be useful to know what those interests are. Adding a National Security Strategy to the White Paper, as well as creating an institutional body similar

to the US National Security Council, could be a first step to develop the debate around national interests. This institutional and permanent body – composed by elected officials, military and independent experts – would facilitate systematic and rigorous long-term strategic planning, situating Italy in a proactive strategic position rather than in reactive position that is reliant on short-term responses to requests from allies or international organisations.

These policy recommendations should be taken into account by Italian policymakers to systematically and carefully assess the opportunities and risks that are connected to decisions to deploy troops abroad. For instance, procedures that assess the conditions that enhance the effectiveness of training of local forces, and the factors that promote greater coordination and cooperation between civilian and military components, as well as among international actors and allies, should become routinised good practices. Detailed evaluation of results and lessons learned from previous operations will give a more comprehensive and coherent picture of mistakes that can be avoided and problems that it will be necessary to overcome on the ground, at the same time promoting a broader and better-informed public debate on a very crucial issue for Italian politics.

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