

# An Overview of the Current State of US-Italian Political-Security Relations

by Dario Cristiani



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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between the United States and Italy has historically been strong, although there have been moments of misunderstanding and tension. The new phase of European (in)security triggered by Russian imperial and revisionist ambitions has pushed Italy to commit to increasing defence spending. Although Italy was able to satisfy the operational and technological requirements to operate in the transatlantic alliance even under the current spending levels, the allocation of a larger share of the GDP to defence will reinforce its readiness, while also creating deeper connection with the United States. Italy is increasing its contributions to international missions, both on the eastern front as a means to support NATO deterrence against Russia and in the south, especially in Iraq. The latter is part of a broader effort to increase Italy's status as a reliable partner in the logic of a greater transatlantic burden-sharing of tasks in the European neighbourhood.

*US-Italian bilateral relations | US military policy | Italy's military policy | Transatlantic relations | NATO | China*

keywords

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by Dario Cristiani\*

## Introduction

The year 2021 marked the 160th anniversary of the establishment of formal Italian-American diplomatic relations. In April 1861, the United States recognised the newly established Kingdom of Italy.

This was the beginning of a lasting and positive relationship, although there have been difficult moments too. The mass migration of Italians to the United States between the 19th and 20th century provoked occasional backlash, with diplomatic repercussions. Tensions between Rome and Washington grew in the interwar period, especially from the late 1930s on, and culminated in the Italian Fascist regime's decision to follow Nazi Germany's lead and declare war on the United States in December 1941.<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War, Washington did not appreciate the freedom that Italy sometimes took in its relations with the Soviet government, for instance when Italy's carmaker Fiat opened a plant in the Soviet Union in 1970. Another matter of contention was the diverging approaches of Italy and the United States in the Mediterranean in the 1980s, especially over Libya<sup>2</sup> and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Leopoldo Nuti and Daniele Fiorentino, "US-Italian Relations", in Leopoldo Nuti and Daniele Fiorentino (eds), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, Oxford University Press, 31 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Paolo Soave, *Fra Reagan e Gheddafi. La politica estera italiana e l'escalation libico-americana degli anni '80*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Mjriam Abu Samra, "Italian-Palestinian Relations: What Went Wrong?", in *Jadaliyya*, 30 August 2014, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31162>.

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Disagreements also extended to areas far away from Europe and the Mediterranean. Although Rome's recognition of the PRC anticipated the American détente with China that would become a reality a few years later,<sup>4</sup> the US government was wary of Italy's intentions, specifically of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Pietro Nenni, to move ahead in establishing formal diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China in 1970 (as it was considered untimely)<sup>5</sup> or, much more recently, when in March 2019 Rome decided to join the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese President Xi Jinping's plan to fund infrastructure development in countries along trade routes between Asia and Europe.<sup>6</sup>

The last year has seen the relationship regain momentum, particularly after both countries experienced a change of leadership. President Joe Biden began his term on 20 January 2021 amid the global pandemic crisis and in the wake of the assault on Capitol Hill by a mob of supporters of former President Donald Trump. His primary aim was to bring back some sort of normality to Washington after the erratic tenure of his predecessor. Mario Draghi was sworn in as Italy's prime minister, replacing Giuseppe Conte, on 13 February of that same year. Draghi's main tasks were to pull Italy out of the pandemic crisis and complete the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*, PNRR), with the support of a large but extraordinarily diverse and chaotic majority consisting of centre-left and centre-right mainstream parties as well as anti-establishment, nationalistic and populist forces.

Trump's transactional foreign policy<sup>7</sup> and sceptical approach to transatlantic relations<sup>8</sup> inevitably impacted Italy. The ruling coalitions between first (in 2018–19) the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), the nationalist and Eurosceptical League and then (2019–21) between the M5S and the centre-right Democratic Party (PD), both led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, had two problems. The first was that Conte's and the M5S's soft approach to China and Russia created apprehension in Washington, and the second was that Conte was seen by the new Democratic administration as too close to Trump. This was exemplified by Conte's hesitation before congratulating Biden for his electoral victory. Under Draghi, ties between the two governments improved.

<sup>4</sup> Enrico Fardella, "A Significant Periphery of the Cold War: Italy-China Bilateral Relations, 1949–1989", in *Cold War History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2017), p. 181-197.

<sup>5</sup> Ennio Di Nolfo, "Le reazioni americane al riconoscimento italiano della Cina", in *Economia*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2012), p. 11, <https://doi.org/10.1285/i22808949a1n1p9>.

<sup>6</sup> Chico Harlan, "A Defiant Italy Becomes the First G-7 Country to Sign on to China's Belt and Road Initiative", in *The Washington Post*, 23 March 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/defiant-italy-becomes-the-first-g7-country-to-sign-on-to-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/2019/03/22/54a732d4-4bdf-11e9-8cfc-2c5d0999c21e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/defiant-italy-becomes-the-first-g7-country-to-sign-on-to-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/2019/03/22/54a732d4-4bdf-11e9-8cfc-2c5d0999c21e_story.html).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "Trump's Transactional Myopia", in *Project Syndicate*, 4 February 2020, <https://prosyn.org/HBjog6T>.

<sup>8</sup> Kristian L. Nielsen and Anna Dimitrova, "Trump, Trust and the Transatlantic Relationship", in *Policy Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 5-6 (November 2021), p. 699-719.

In April 2021, Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio was the first foreign dignitary to visit Washington after the new administration was sworn in.<sup>9</sup> In the following months, the two countries had several occasions to work together, from the ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to the G20 Summit in Rome. Observing political and diplomatic dynamics over the past months, the two countries have coordinated efforts on a number of issues. The convergence has been particularly significant in multilateral fora, something that likely would not have occurred with the previous leaders, as Trump was generally hostile to multilateral approaches. Rome and Washington worked together in the G20 and the COP26 climate change conference to push for the adoption of ambitious international targets for reduction of carbon emissions. During the G20 Rome Summit, the United States also announced the lifting of American steel and aluminium tariffs on Europe, and the European Union reciprocated by lifting its own counter-tariffs. The overall relationship is thus set to remain strong and stable in the foreseeable future. The convergence of views on the Russian military aggression in Ukraine is proof of this stability.

### 1. Strategic interests, security cooperation, defence procurement

Italy is a middle diplomatic power,<sup>10</sup> whose security is primarily affected by strategic and military developments in the European continent and the wider Mediterranean, including its appendixes – the Sahel, the Persian Gulf, the South Caucasus. However, from an economic perspective, Italy can be considered a global power: a member of the G7 since the 1970s; the second European manufacturing economy after Germany; and the third European Union member by GDP size, with commercial and trade interests that span across the globe.<sup>11</sup> Italy also has a relevant global position thanks to its soft power projection,<sup>12</sup> from being a major destination for global tourism to the attraction that Italy maintains in a number of cultural and economic domains, from food to art, fashion and lifestyle. This unique positioning leads Italy to be diplomatically active in areas of the world that do not represent an immediate geopolitical and security concern. Moreover, it contributes to explaining why Italy has such a deep connection with the United States, which has been historically resilient irrespective of the parties and personalities in power in Rome.

<sup>9</sup> "Italian Foreign Minister the First to Visit Biden's Washington", in *France 24*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210412-italian-foreign-minister-the-first-to-visit-biden-s-washington>.

<sup>10</sup> Carlo M. Santoro, *La politica estera di una media potenza. L'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Valerio Castronovo, *Storia economica d'Italia. Dall'Ottocento al 2020*, New ed., Torino, Einaudi, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> David Ellwood, "Italy: Soft Power Superpower? The New Official Projection of Italian Creativity", in *CDP Blog*, 16 February 2022, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/node/91967>.



The United States remains, by all material means, the main global superpower. Despite all the fuss about American *declinism*,<sup>13</sup> the rise of China,<sup>14</sup> the return of Russia<sup>15</sup> and the emergence of a multipolar order, the United States has not lost primacy on a number of domains, the military one being the most relevant.<sup>16</sup> Washington still has an unmatched capacity for projecting power, as paradoxically demonstrated even by the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan:<sup>17</sup> although the actual dynamics of the withdrawal did not bode well for the image of the Americans in the eyes of allies and global public opinion, the United States was the only country that had the capacities to do something as logistically complicated as extricating over a hundred thousand people from a faraway theatre. Italy's twenty-year presence in Afghanistan was a function of its relationship with the United States: Afghanistan was never a priority in Italian foreign policy, but Italy decided to participate in the multinational coalition (from 2003 led by NATO) that went there after the ousting of the Taliban in late 2001 because of its commitment to Washington's campaign against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and those who harboured them, namely al-Qaeda and the Taliban. As such, the end of the international mission in Afghanistan has been a quite relevant development for Italian-American relations. Italy, one of the European countries most involved in Afghanistan, inevitably suffered from the uncoordinated fashion in which the Biden Administration ordered the withdrawal. Rome was a major contributor to the evacuation efforts. It was the EU country that extracted the largest number of Afghans from the country and one of the most active across the entire spectrum of logistical activities needed to complete these operations. Italian diplomats also played an important role, for instance NATO's Senior Civilian Representative Stefano Pontecorvo.<sup>18</sup> Italy, in its capacity as holder of the G20 presidency for 2021, arranged an extraordinary meeting on Afghanistan,<sup>19</sup> which resulted in the EU pledging one billion euros in aid to Afghanistan and neighbouring countries,<sup>20</sup> a move that was seen as positive by the United States as it meant greater burden-sharing with European allies, one of America's historical obsessions.

<sup>13</sup> Tom McTague, "The Decline of the American World", in *The Atlantic*, 24 June 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Zhen Han and T.V. Paul, "China's Rise and Balance of Power Politics", in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2020), p. 1-26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz018>.

<sup>15</sup> Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected. Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> 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](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00337).

<sup>17</sup> David Rohde, "Biden's Chaotic Withdrawal from Afghanistan Is Complete", in *The New Yorker*, 30 August 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/bidens-chaotic-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-is-complete>.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Braw, "NATO's Man in Kabul", in *Foreign Policy*, 16 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/16/natos-man-in-kabul>.

<sup>19</sup> Italian Government, *G20 Extraordinary Leaders' Meeting on Afghanistan, Prime Minister Draghi's Closing Remarks*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/18220>.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission, *Afghanistan: Commission Announces €1 Billion Afghan Support*, 12 October 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_5208](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5208).

Despite the problems experienced over Afghanistan, the alliance with the United States remains a crucial element in the security arrangements of Italy, and the Ukraine crisis has reinforced the relevance of NATO membership for Rome's security. Being a major exporting country, whose economy depends on the import of a number of raw materials (primarily energy-related) and on integration in a number of global supply chains, Italy is particularly sensitive to any shock that might affect global logistics and maritime security. From this point of view, the structural alliance with the United States, whose dominance over global shipping lanes makes it the cornerstone of the international architecture of maritime security, is fundamental for Italy to guarantee the security of its logistical chains.

At the same time, Italy's geographical position in the centre of the Mediterranean is a significant asset for the United States. It was crucial back in the days of the Cold War, when the strategic relevance of Italy was not only due to the presence on its territory of the biggest Communist party in Western Europe, but also to its position in the Mediterranean basin, which was a particularly sensitive area of confrontation with the Soviet bloc. The strategic value of Italy's position did not disappear with the end of the Cold War. On the contrary, it continued to be central to US and NATO operations in the Balkans and the Middle East. Italy still hosts the second-largest number of American troops in Europe (after Germany), around 15,000 military and civilian staff, according to the latest data from the US Department of Defense.<sup>21</sup> American analysts increasingly perceive Italy as the centre of US military activities in the Mediterranean. Naples is home to the American Sixth Fleet,<sup>22</sup> and there are a number of military bases that are particularly relevant for the American projection in the wider Mediterranean, such as Sigonella in Sicily and Aviano in Friuli (northeast Italy).

Besides geostrategic considerations, there has also been a significant American political and industrial attention in Italy's defence sector, particularly concerning aeronautics. In the post-Cold War period, defence industrial relations between Rome and Washington included two important elements: first, procurement programmes,<sup>23</sup> and second, the penetration of the US defence markets by Finmeccanica (now Leonardo), AgustaWestland and Fincantieri.<sup>24</sup> In this period, the procurement programme for the multi-role F35 aircraft was particularly relevant, given its military, industrial and political importance.<sup>25</sup> In Italy, the programme was mired in controversy as it soon became the target of widespread

<sup>21</sup> US Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) website: *DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications: Military Personnel*, <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

<sup>22</sup> See official website: <https://www.c6f.navy.mil>.

<sup>23</sup> C130J and C27J Spartan transport aircraft, the KC-767 tanker, the Medium Extended Air Defense System (MEADS) and, above all, the F-35 fighter aircraft.

<sup>24</sup> Alessandro Marrone and Alessandro R. Ungaro, "Relations between the United States of America and Italy in the Post-Cold War Period: A Defense-Industrial Perspective", in *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, No. 88 (June 2014), p. 157-181 at p. 160, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cdlm.7542>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

criticisms, particularly from anti-establishment and left-wing parties. There was a public opinion movement demanding that the programme be cancelled, in line with the historical pacifist approach shared by catholic and left-wing forces.<sup>26</sup> The M5S was the most vocal critic. In October 2019, when it was in power as the senior coalition partner, the party was still calling for a renegotiation of the agreement.<sup>27</sup> In the past, even the PD went vocal against the F35. Former PD secretary general Nicola Zingaretti said that the F35 choice was “unacceptable”, and he posted on his Twitter account a picture of himself holding a poster stating “Stop F35”.<sup>28</sup> In the previous legislative term, the PD voted a motion to halve the programme.<sup>29</sup> However, once Lorenzo Guerini became Minister of Defence in September 2019, he put an end to the debate on Italy’s participation in the F35 programme almost immediately.<sup>30</sup>

The issue of defence expenditure has long remained a complicated issue in the relations between the United States and Italy. Since former US Secretary of Defense Bob Gates warned European allies about the risk of “collective military irrelevance” should the imbalanced burden-sharing within NATO remain,<sup>31</sup> the United States has made spending 2 per cent of the GDP on defence a standing request to NATO allies. Italy, for years, has stressed the need to look at military contributions within NATO in a different way. During his visit to Washington in October 2019, President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella highlighted how “Italy has always contributed intensely and effectively, to NATO missions and operations, significantly supporting the activities of the Alliance. Moreover, Italy is not only the second contributor of military personnel in NATO missions, but also the fifth NATO contributor.”<sup>32</sup> At the end of January 2020, meeting Italian Defence Minister Guerini, former US Secretary of Defence Mark T. Esper praised “the expansive role that Italy did as a member of NATO”,<sup>33</sup> making an explicit reference to the Italian role

<sup>26</sup> Carmine Saviano, “‘Stop agli F35’. Da Saviano a Zanotelli, da Servillo a Rorhwacher l’appello ai parlamentari”, in *Repubblica*, 10 September 2014, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2014/09/10/news/f35\\_-95439105](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2014/09/10/news/f35_-95439105).

<sup>27</sup> “F35, Cinquestelle: ‘Ridimensionare il programma di acquisti’. Conte: ‘D’accordo con la rinegoziazione’”, in *Repubblica*, 6 October 2019, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/10/06/news/f35\\_rinegoziazione\\_m5s\\_giuseppe\\_conte\\_usa-237855408](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/10/06/news/f35_rinegoziazione_m5s_giuseppe_conte_usa-237855408).

<sup>28</sup> Nicola Zingaretti, “Rivedere la spesa su F35 è un impegno importante”, Twitter @nzingaretti, 23 January 2013, <https://twitter.com/nzingaretti/status/293784016430178304>.

<sup>29</sup> Enrico Piovesana, “F35, sì a mozione Pd: Camera dimezza i fondi per i caccia: da 13 a 6,5 miliardi”, in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 24 September 2014, <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/09/24/f35-la-camera-dimezza-i-fondi-per-i-cacciabombardieri-da-13-a-65-miliardi/1131605>.

<sup>30</sup> “F35, Guerini: dato avvio a fase 2 del programma”, in *Reuters*, 28 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/f35-guerini-idITL8N28824Q>.

<sup>31</sup> “Gates Parting Shot Warns NATO Risks Irrelevance”, in *Reuters*, 11 June 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-idUSTRE7591JK20110611>.

<sup>32</sup> Italian Presidency, *Statements to the press by the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella at the End of the Talks with the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump*, 16 October 2019, <https://www.quirinale.it/elementi/40197>.

<sup>33</sup> US Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper and Minister of Defense Lorenzo Guerini of Italy*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2072124/secretary-of-defense-dr-mark-t-esper-and-minister-of-defense-lorenzo-guerini-of>.

in multinational missions, adding that “whether it’s burden sharing [...] in Iraq or Afghanistan, or even Africa, Italy leads with a very robust presence [...] of its forces”. However, Esper did point out that bringing defence expenditure to the 2 per cent threshold remained a fundamental objective. Guerini expressed his commitment to increase military spending, although he had been very clear that reaching the 2 per cent threshold in defence spending by 2024, as NATO members had committed to in the Alliance’s Wales summit in 2014, was “realistically unachievable”.<sup>34</sup> The idea was to bring Italy closer to the average of European countries and give it more credibility with a greater spending commitment – similarly to what Central and Eastern European countries have done in recent years.<sup>35</sup>

The current war in Ukraine is likely to have a ground-breaking effect on European approaches to defence. Minister Guerini said that, in line with the decisions taken by the new government in Germany to massively increase the military budget, Italy must increase its military spending from 25 to 38 billion euros (over the course of several years). Against this backdrop, the Italian armed forces have two major challenges. First, Italy needs to cope with weapons systems and logistics platforms that risk becoming obsolete due to rapid technological shifts and the pace of the cyber evolution. Second, Italy must reinforce its capacity to project military power abroad.<sup>36</sup> This should also increase Italy’s military integration within NATO and EU structures. Italy has been able to ensure a significant degree of coherence and interoperability with its allies even with its defence spending below the 2 per cent threshold. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has opened a new phase, and a rethinking of national priorities and expenditure on defence has suddenly ceased being taboo.

## 2. Italy’s Transatlantic engagement: The Eastern and Southern Flank

After months of military build-up, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The strategic goals of this conflict were ostensibly to install a pro-Russian regime in Kyiv and force the country into recognising the Russian annexation of Crimea and the independence of the two self-proclaimed republics of Lugansk and Donetsk. However, according to what Russian President Vladimir Putin allegedly said in a phone conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron during the early days of the conflict, it seems that the actual, ultimate goal was to annex most of the country.<sup>37</sup> This military aggression has entirely changed

<sup>34</sup> “Guerini: l’Italia ‘non rispetterà l’impegno di investire il 2% del pil in spese militari’”, in *Il Messaggero*, 27 November 2019, [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/economia/news/difesa\\_spesa\\_militare\\_italia-4889827.html](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/economia/news/difesa_spesa_militare_italia-4889827.html).

<sup>35</sup> Emma Beswick, “EU Countries Increase Military Spend Due to ‘Perceived Russia Threat’: Report”, in *Euronews*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/04/29/eu-countries-increase-military-spending-due-to-growing-perceptions-of-russia-threat-report>.

<sup>36</sup> Niccolò Carratelli, “Guerini: ‘L’Italia aumenti le spese militari, arrogante la lettera dei russi’”, in *La Stampa*, 3 March 2022.

<sup>37</sup> “Emmanuel Macron pense que ‘le pire est à venir’ et que le but de Vladimir Poutine est de ‘prendre



the strategic reality of Europe. Moreover, it has shown how the concerns of NATO eastern members, which pushed the Alliance to take a tougher approach towards Moscow after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, were not groundless.

At the NATO Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO launched the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) initiative, a forward-deployed defence and deterrence military force in Central and Northern Europe, precisely in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Through the EFP initiative, the Alliance deployed combat forces of around 1,000 troops in each of the four countries east of the former East-West German border for the first time, although it did so on a rotational rather than permanent basis so as to remain in compliance with a specific proviso of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act.<sup>38</sup> This presence reversed a trend of gradual American military disengagement from Europe. The goal was to strengthen the deterrence posture of the Alliance on the eastern flank and reassure its easternmost members who were increasingly concerned about Russia's readiness to resort to force to achieve its foreign policy goals.

Italy decided to contribute, although stressing that it did so "not [as] part of a policy of aggression towards Russia, but one of reassurance and defense of our borders as an Atlantic alliance", as the then Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni remarked.<sup>39</sup> At the Warsaw Summit, Rome was clear about the need to strike a balance between deterrence against Russia and contributing to Mediterranean security.<sup>40</sup> The Italian contingent was deployed to Latvia, at the Adazi military base,<sup>41</sup> 23 kilometres east of Riga and 300 km from the Russian border, leading an ultra-rapid action task force capable of intervening within five days in an emergency. Overall, the Italian deployment initially consisted of 160 units, later grown to 240. The contingent's tasks were to provide logistical support, administrative and health care in local outreach activities, while the bulk of the Italian Alpines carried out training activities jointly with the NATO forces, aimed at consolidating integration and interoperability.

Italy's participation in the Enhanced Air Policing (EAP) mission must be seen in the same light. Italy deployed high-tech Eurofighters and F35 fighter jets (plus 150 soldiers), which – along with aircraft of the German and Romanian air forces – are involved in air patrolling missions. In December 2021 Italy assumed command of

le contrôle de toute l'Ukraine", in *Franceinfo*, 3 March 2022, [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/russie/vladimir-poutine/emmanuel-macron-pense-que-le-pire-est-a-venir-et-que-le-but-de-vladimir-poutine-est-de-prendre-le-controle-de-toute-l-ukraine\\_4990720.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/russie/vladimir-poutine/emmanuel-macron-pense-que-le-pire-est-a-venir-et-que-le-but-de-vladimir-poutine-est-de-prendre-le-controle-de-toute-l-ukraine_4990720.html).

<sup>38</sup> John R. Deni, "NATO's Presence in the East: Necessary But Still Not Sufficient", in *War on the Rocks*, 27 June 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=17723>.

<sup>39</sup> "Italy to Send 140 Troops to NATO Mission in Latvia", in *Reuters*, 14 October 2016, <http://reut.rs/2e3qZcW>.

<sup>40</sup> Stefano Stefanini, "NATO Warsaw Summit Special Series: Italy", in *NATOSource*, 20 June 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=97089>.

<sup>41</sup> The other contingents present at the base are Albania, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain.

the mission, before handing it to the British Royal Air Forces in April 2022. Italy's fighters were supposed to return to Italy, but they have remained.<sup>42</sup> Rome has been among the top contributors to NATO's Air Policing mission across Europe, not only for the EAP, but also for other NATO Air Policing missions, supporting air patrolling activities in Iceland, Bulgaria, Slovenia, North Macedonia and Montenegro.<sup>43</sup>

Italy started these missions in 2017–18. In June 2018, following the results of the Italian parliamentary elections of March that year and after months of intense negotiations, Italy experienced its first "openly populist" government as two Eurosceptical parties, the M5S and the League, joined forces in the so-called "yellow-green" government.<sup>44</sup> Foreign policy was one of the domains in which discontinuity was expected. When in the opposition, both parties had expressed foreign policy positions often in contradiction with Italy's traditional commitment to the EU and NATO, especially as regards their much more conciliatory approach to Russia. In the so-called "coalition contract" signed by the two parties, it was openly written that Italy wanted to lift sanctions against Russia.<sup>45</sup>

However, the yellow-green government did not reverse Italy's military commitments in eastern Europe, showing that discontinuity was more rhetorical than actual.<sup>46</sup> Italy's alignment with its Euro-Atlantic partners was only re-affirmed under the "yellow-red" M5S-PD coalition that ruled between 2019 and 2021 and the multi-partisan coalition (comprising M5S, the PD and the League along with other smaller parties) that has supported Draghi as prime minister since early 2021. As the tension in eastern Europe rose following Russian military build-up in late 2021 and early 2022, Italy announced its readiness to provide an additional one thousand troops for patrolling the eastern borders of the Alliance.<sup>47</sup> At the end of February, Minister Guerini confirmed the doubling of Italy's aerial presence in Romania, bringing to eight the number of fighters operating in the "Black Storm" Air Task Force that operates from the Mihail Kogălniceanu base in Constanta.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Marco Battaglia, "Nato, la Raf subentra all'AM in Romania. Ma i caccia italiani restano", in *Formiche*, 8 April 2022, <https://formiche.net/?p=1465996>.

<sup>43</sup> Elisabeth Braw, "Italy Is a Quiet Pillar of NATO's Aerial Policing", in *Defense One*, 20 February 2022, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/02/italy-quiet-pillar-natos-aerial-policing/362230>.

<sup>44</sup> Monica Rubino, "Conte, il discorso della fiducia: 'Basta business dei migranti, Daspo per corrotti e corruttori'. E apre alla Russia", in *Repubblica*, 5 June 2018, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/06/05/news/cont\\_e\\_discorso\\_fiducia\\_senato-198193413](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/06/05/news/cont_e_discorso_fiducia_senato-198193413).

<sup>45</sup> Marco Cremonesi, Dino Martirano e Lorenzo Salvia, "Contratto di governo, ecco l'ultima bozza: ricalcolo del debito e stop alle sanzioni contro la Russia", in *Corriere della Sera*, 16 May 2018, [https://www.corriere.it/politica/18\\_maggio\\_16/contratto-governo-lega-m5s-cosa-prevede-7f9b0aee-5930-11e8-a92f-c55317f6ffa7.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/politica/18_maggio_16/contratto-governo-lega-m5s-cosa-prevede-7f9b0aee-5930-11e8-a92f-c55317f6ffa7.shtml).

<sup>46</sup> Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, "La politica estera del Governo giallo-verde", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 19|04 (March 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10127>.

<sup>47</sup> Tommaso Ciriaco, "Ucraina, l'Italia pronta a inviare mille uomini per rafforzare il fianco Sud-Est dell'Europa", in *Repubblica*, 12 February 2022, [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/02/12/news/ucraina\\_italia\\_mille\\_uomini\\_nato-337540039](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/02/12/news/ucraina_italia_mille_uomini_nato-337540039).

<sup>48</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence, *Ucraina, Guerini: "da domani l'Italia potenzierà la propria presenza in Romania raddoppiando il numero dei mezzi aerei già operanti nell'attività di airpolicing"*, 26 February 2022, [https://www.difesa.it/Il\\_Ministro/Comunicati/Pagine/Guerini-da-domani-l-Italia-](https://www.difesa.it/Il_Ministro/Comunicati/Pagine/Guerini-da-domani-l-Italia-)

Italy is also taking on a number of military responsibilities in NATO's southern flank. It is becoming more and more involved in the Sahel, while it also maintains a non-combat military presence in Libya. In February 2021, NATO announced that Italy would take over the control of the NATO Mission Iraq from Denmark in 2022. As the US presence in Iraq is diminishing, Italy is to lead European efforts to fill the operational gaps that the reduced American presence creates, an effort that is crucial to preserve the sustainability of NATO's mission in Iraq.<sup>49</sup> Italy was already the second biggest contributor to this mission after the United States, but with the size of the NATO mission set to grow from 400 to 5,000 units, Italy has not only the command of the mission but also deploys the bulk of its military staff. This increased responsibility in Iraq is Italy's response to the American need for European allies to take more responsibility for their extended neighbourhood.

### 3. Italy and the US–China systemic confrontation

Russia's aggression towards Ukraine has forced the Biden Administration to recalibrate its approach towards Europe. Its swift and steady response to the invasion and the president's commitment to supporting European allies (including through an unprecedented degree of intelligence sharing) show that the United States remains committed, despite all the fuss about the Asian pivot, to intervening in the European security system when the need arises. Moreover, this approach has been a crucial factor in strengthening the EU's response to the invasion and pushing Europeans to work together in addressing the mounting threat. The war created some initial frictions between the United States and Italy, primarily due to an apparent lack of focus on the part of Rome when the crisis was escalating, although saying that Italy was missing in action is a bit of an exaggeration.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Prime Minister Draghi, Foreign Affairs Minister Luigi Di Maio and Defence Minister Guerini reiterated the position that Italy would support all the efforts of the allies in facing this challenge.<sup>51</sup> Still, Italy was hesitant to take a tough stance on Russia prior to the invasion, for reasons that range from the structural to the contingent.

As for the former, because of its geographical location and absence of massive historical interactions with Russia, Italy is less diplomatically involved in Eastern Europe than other continental countries, such as Germany, France and Poland. Moreover, Italy is one of the European countries most dependent on Russian gas.

potenzierà-la-propria-presenza-in-Romania.aspx.

<sup>49</sup> Paolo Napolitano, "What to Expect When You're Expecting NATO in Iraq", in *War on the Rocks*, 29 March 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=24627>.

<sup>50</sup> Giovanna De Maio, "Draghi and Italy Have Been Missing in Action on the Russia-Ukraine Crisis", in *World Politics Review*, 2 February 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30291>.

<sup>51</sup> Tommaso Ciriaco, "Crisi ucraina: l'Italia invierà alpini e bersaglieri", in *Repubblica*, 13 February 2022, [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/02/13/news/crisi\\_ucraina\\_russia\\_italia\\_invia\\_soldati\\_alpini\\_bersaglieri\\_nato\\_est\\_europa-337650494](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/02/13/news/crisi_ucraina_russia_italia_invia_soldati_alpini_bersaglieri_nato_est_europa-337650494).

As for the contingent, at the end of January 2022 Italian politics was paralysed by the election of the new President of the Republic. In the days in which the tensions at the border of Ukraine were rising sharply, Draghi, who is usually not very active on media, kept an even lower profile. Moreover, because of concerns about the potential adverse effects of the crisis, particularly on energy prices, and the extremely diversified composition of the ruling coalition, the government's response to the unfolding crisis was relatively muted. However, once Russia invaded Ukraine, Italy aligned consistently with the United States, the rest of the EU and Ukraine as well. As Russia escalated its military operations in Ukraine and the United States and the EU were looking for effective ways to undermine the Kremlin's war machine, Draghi had a central role in defining the sanctions regime on Russia. He and US Treasury Secretary Jennet Yellen worked out a plan to freeze roughly half of Moscow's 643 billion dollars of foreign currency reserves.<sup>52</sup>

The Russian aggression in Ukraine confirmed the deep convergence existing between the two administrations in power in Rome and Washington. As Draghi visited Washington on 10 and 11 May 2022, he reiterated Italy's position that peace terms could not be forced upon Ukraine and that it would be helpful if the US president showed a willingness to talk to Putin when (and if) Russia agrees to downscale massively its presence in Ukraine.

However, in the United States there is still some apprehension. Public figures, including from parties of the current majority, as well as a significant part of the Italian public opinion, have embraced positions that are somehow in line with the narratives, the visions and the preferences that Moscow has expressed over the past weeks. Since the risk of a protracted conflict is becoming more and more real, the concern is that next year's general election will result in a government that is less committed to working alongside Italy's transatlantic and European partners in undermining the Russian imperial project in Ukraine than the current one.

The war bears significant costs in terms of high energy prices, logistical issues and reduced exports for a number of Italian sectors. These problems are likely to affect the outcome of the electoral campaign. While the past suggests that also openly populist and anti-establishment forces, once in power, avoid pushing for radical changes,<sup>53</sup> in a situation like the Ukraine war even small differences can have impact on the cohesion of the transatlantic front.

Looking at the Russian war in Ukraine from the perspective of Washington, the United States was somehow forced to take a leadership position in handling this conflict despite its actual preferences and priorities. While the Ukraine war

<sup>52</sup> Valentina Pop, Sam Fleming and James Politi, "Weaponisation of Finance: How the West Unleashed 'Shock and Awe' on Russia", in *Financial Times*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/5b397d6b-bde4-4a8c-b9a4-080485d6c64a>.

<sup>53</sup> Giulio Pugliese, Francesca Ghiretti and Aurelio Insisa, "Italy's Embrace of the Belt and Road Initiative: Populist Foreign Policy and Political Marketing", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (May 2022), p. 1033-1051, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac039>.



has put relations with Russia into a sharper focus, for President Biden, China – and not Russia – remains America’s greatest strategic competitor and rival. The Democratic administration has adopted an arguably tougher stance on China than the previous one, which inaugurated a rather confrontational course vis-à-vis Beijing.<sup>54</sup> However, Trump’s approach to China was erratic, as shown on many occasions where he praised China and its leadership when contingencies fit his agenda.<sup>55</sup> Most importantly, Trump’s China policy was eminently unilateral, pursued in isolation from US allies in both Europe and Asia. Moreover, there was a structural divide between the White House and the American foreign policy institutional apparatus, which undermined consistency and clarity in outlining policy priorities.

As noted above, Italy’s relations with China became a contentious issue in US-Italian relations, especially after Italy became the first G7 country to formally join the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in support of it.<sup>56</sup> In the United States this decision created alarm particularly among those institutions – State Department, the Pentagon and Congress – that generally give continuity to the American foreign policy system. Although Italy never thought of the BRI as anything other than a commercial and investment opportunity, the optics of a leading US ally endorsing President Xi’s flagship foreign policy initiative were not good for Rome. China’s propaganda machine magnified the impression of an Italy veering away from its traditional alliances in Europe and across the Atlantic.<sup>57</sup> Despite all reassurances, Italy remained in the spotlight, and concerns reignited as Italy became the first country in Europe to be hit by the Covid-19 pandemic in late February 2020. The United States feared that China would make inroads into Italy.<sup>58</sup> As it was becoming clear that Beijing was using the health crisis in Italy to push its Covid-19 diplomacy, Trump ordered an assistance package for Italy.<sup>59</sup>

After Biden won the election, it became clear that the United States would adopt a more multilateral approach to China, and Italy had to work to defuse any ambiguity about where its foreign policy allegiance lay. From the Italian standpoint,

<sup>54</sup> Patricia Zengerle, “Biden Talks Tough on China in First Speech to Congress”, in *Reuters*, 29 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-talks-tough-china-first-speech-congress-2021-04-29>.

<sup>55</sup> Myah Ward, “15 Times Trump Praised China as Coronavirus Was Spreading across the Globe”, in *Politico*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/15/trump-china-coronavirus-188736>.

<sup>56</sup> Italy and China, *Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative*, 22 March 2019, [http://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Memorandum\\_Italia-Cina\\_EN.pdf](http://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Memorandum_Italia-Cina_EN.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Philippe Le Corre, “Italy, a Target Destination for China’s Propaganda”, in *Note de la FRS*, No. 23/2020 (April 2020), <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/node/3037>.

<sup>58</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, “COVID-19 Exposes Italy’s Vulnerability to US-China Antagonism”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|33 (May 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11617>.

<sup>59</sup> J. Edward Moreno, “Trump Orders ‘Robust Assistance Package’ for Italy”, in *The Hill*, 11 April 2020, <https://thehill.com/?p=492339>.

something already started changing by late 2019, when Italy saw the end of the yellow-green populist government and the arrival of the new government centred on the M5S and the PD. This new government was considerably more balanced and traditional in its foreign policy approach. Although Di Maio, an advocate of the Italy's BRI membership, became minister of foreign affairs, he gradually shifted his approach, embracing Europeanism and Atlanticism.<sup>60</sup> Other members of the cabinet, first and foremost Minister of Defence Guerini and Minister of European Affairs Enzo Amendola (both PD members), were also considered staunchly Euro-Atlanticist and worked to give a starker Euro-Atlanticist imprint to the foreign policy approach of the new government. For instance, almost immediately after the new government was sworn in, Italy adopted new measures strengthening the government's scrutiny of foreign investment, a main preoccupation in Washington, especially as regards the possibility of European countries buying Chinese 5G technologies.<sup>61</sup>

Under Draghi, this approach became even more evident. Draghi used the government's scrutiny powers more extensively than his predecessor had done. He also openly said that he would be ready to reassess Italy's participation in the BRI.<sup>62</sup> While a withdrawal of Italy from the MoU in support of the BRI is unlikely, the prospects for Chinese companies acquiring controlling stakes in key sectors of Italy's economy, especially in the maritime sector, look pretty grim. In addition to this, the historical agreement on the EU Next Generation fund, the 800-billion-euro facility meant to revive the EU economy shattered by the Covid-19 pandemic, overshadowed whatever was promised under the BRI. Most of the BRI-related funds were still being negotiated and, in many cases, were merely theoretical, while the funds that Italy received from the EU to implement its PNRR (the recovery and resilience plan) were immediately available.

## Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened a new phase in global and European security and, inevitably, in US-Italian relations. The new phase of European (in) security triggered by Russian imperial and revisionist ambitions has pushed Italy to commit to increasing defence spending, like many other countries in Europe. Although Italy was able to satisfy the operational and technological requirements to operate in the transatlantic alliance even under the current spending levels, the allocation of a larger share of the GDP to defence should reinforce its readiness,

<sup>60</sup> Francesco Bechis and Valeria Covato, "From Coronavirus to Mediterranean Tensions, Italy Has Stepped Up Its Diplomatic Game during Dramatic Year, Foreign Minister Says", in *New Atlanticist*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=295367>.

<sup>61</sup> "Italy Pledges to Strengthen National Security in 5G Networks", in *Reuters*, 24 September 2020, <https://reut.rs/3611ZxP>.

<sup>62</sup> "Italy to Assess Involvement in China's Belt and Road - Draghi", in *Ansa*, 14 June 2021, [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2021/06/14/italy-to-asses-involvement-in-chinas-belt-and-road-draghi\\_ddf3f456-7e0a-40ab-9f19-57b8fe30ae8a.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2021/06/14/italy-to-asses-involvement-in-chinas-belt-and-road-draghi_ddf3f456-7e0a-40ab-9f19-57b8fe30ae8a.html).

while also creating deeper connection with European and transatlantic allies. Italy is increasing its troops and resources contributions to international missions, both on the eastern front as a means to support NATO deterrence against Russia, for instance in Latvia and Romania, and in the south, for instance in Iraq. The latter is part of a broader effort to increase Italy's status as a reliable partner in the logic of a greater transatlantic burden-sharing of tasks in the European neighbourhood.

Although the Russian aggression in Ukraine has pushed the United States to "return to Europe" (it never actually left, but its leading role has been re-affirmed by the current war), for Washington the main systemic rival remains China. From this point of view, how Italy engages China remains a crucial element affecting its ties with Washington. The MoU in support of the BRI created problems and misunderstandings, but the past three years have shown that Italy did very little to substantiate US concerns.

The European post-pandemic response, resulting in the launch of the Next Generation EU fund, and the US leadership in countering the Russian threat have both strengthened the Italian commitment to its historical foreign policy pillars, a commitment that has clearly represented one of the crucial, characterising elements of the foreign policy approach of the government led by Mario Draghi since February 2021.

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