

COUNTRY CHAPTER ON ITALY

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ITALY DEBATES THE FUTURE OF NATO

Matthias Dembinski

Italy is a staunch NATO ally and a close security partner of the United States (Ratti 2021). Italy is a participant in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement, hosts the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples and several US bases and is currently the second largest contributor to NATO operations after the United States. The Italian debate combines a strong transatlantic orientation with support for the construction of the EU as a more capable provider of security and defence. This consensus is shared by the centre-right and centre-left in the Second Republic.¹ It emerged after the end of the Cold War when the centre-left parties, whose security approach had hitherto been based on support for European frameworks in the form of the OSCE or a strengthened EU, began to embrace transatlantic perspectives and NATO.²

THREAT PERCEPTION: AMERICAN RETRENCHMENT AND MOUNTING CHALLENGES

The Italian think tanks and research centres that dominate the discourse on the future of NATO – most notably the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), the Centro Studi Internazionali (CeSI) and the Aspen Institute Italia – lean more or less towards transversal positions (although IAI is rather centre-left) and are part of this consensus. The debate among think tank scholars starts from a generally shared assessment that Italian security is threatened by the combination of two worrying strategic trends: US retrenchment from the crucial MENA region (Marrone/Muti 2020: 14) and an accumulation of threats stemming from this region. Even if Joe Biden's election offers an opportunity to renew the transatlantic partnership, the structural forces pulling American attention and resources away from Europe will remain.

- 1 The Five Star Movement (M5S) and the PD reframed their positions towards NATO recently, and the Conte II and the current Draghi governments are even more NATO-friendly than the Conte I government.
- 2 Italian scholars debate whether foreign policy in the Second Republic is characterized by continuity (Croci 2008) or swings like a pendulum with the changes in government between centre-right and centre-left coalitions. Adherents of the »pendulum school« argue that the foreign policy of the centre-right coalitions usually follows a »conservative/nationalist paradigm« and are more pro-Atlantic, while the foreign policy of the centre-left follows an »international/progressivist« paradigm and is more pro-European (Brighi 2007).

The most important factor in this respect is the rise of an increasingly assertive China and the corresponding American pivot to East Asia.

According to many scholars, the combination of the two trends creates a security environment marked by »aggressive multipolarity«. The security void created by the partial American withdrawal from the MENA region has been filled by the incursions of regional actors such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt and the Gulf States, as well as Russia and to some extent China, who have been able to exploit the prevalent fragility of states resulting from local conflicts and underdevelopment. Although these actors refrain from challenging the still existing American military hegemony directly through open warfare, they have engaged in a variety of proxy wars, hybrid threats and cyber-attacks, resulting in what Stefano Silvestri recently termed »guerra in tempo di pace« [war during peace-time] (Silvestri 2020: 3). Even if Italy's territorial security is not threatened directly, Italian scholars worry about the spillover effects from instability in adjacent regions, and from Libya in particular. Looking further into the future, some Italian think tankers, most of them affiliated with the IAI, hope that this situation is transitional and will be replaced by a bipolar confrontation between the United States and China: »In short, we are facing a multipolar scenario while seeing on the horizon the contours of a mostly bilateral setting« (Credi/Marrone/Menotti 2020: 3).

Against this backdrop, most Italian think tankers are convinced that the Alliance »remains a crucial multilateral tool for the management of Euro-Atlantic security« (Carati 2019: 51f), but that on the road to 2030 NATO must adapt.

RESPONDING TO THE RISE OF CHINA AND THE EMERGING AMERICAN-CHINESE CONFLICT

One area in which adaptation seems both inevitable and difficult is China. Many Italian scholars acknowledge that NATO will have to play a more active role not only to counter a perceived Chinese assertiveness in the European region, but also because the United States will remain committed to Europe »while pushing Europeans to both take greater responsibility for their Continent's security and to stand together with the US against China« (Marrone/Muti

»Independently of who is in government, Washington has always been the main point of reference for Italian foreign policy.«

Foradori 2014: 37

2020: 3). Implementing such a quid pro quo, however, might be difficult for Italy. Following a surge of Chinese investment in Italy since 2014, China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have increasingly come to be perceived by the public and by some scholars primarily as an opportunity. At the behest of the Five Star Movement (M5S), Italy signed a memorandum to join the Belt and Road Initiative on 23 March 2019. This positive view of China was shared by some think tankers. For example, Paolo Magri, ISPI's executive vice president, wrote in 2017 that in contrast to Trump's unilateralism and transactional approach, »China has taken a clear position to defend globalization and boost new multilateralism (...). The BRI is an open proposal from China to Europe (...) to forge a platform for diversified cooperation (...) and ultimately to reduce the risk of the »Thucydides Trap«« (Magri 2017: 8).³

In recent years, however, the mood has changed.⁴ While ISPI researcher Flavia Lucenti still argues that »the U.S.-led West misconceives China's behaviour and intentions« (Lucenti 2020), others propose a more robust response. Recent IAI policy papers criticize the unilateral policies towards China of Italy's populist government, headed until August 2019 by M5S and Lega, as undermining Euro-Atlantic solidarity (Casarini 2019a) and call for an approach that combines elements of engagement and containment that protects European values and interests (Casarini 2019b). However, the debate is just beginning on whether Italy should use NATO as a vehicle for coordinating policy on China or should develop a European response and coordinate policy with Washington on a bilateral EU-US level. A recent IAI/Aspen Institute Italia paper describes China as the West's main global competitor in technological terms and in the future possibly as NATO's main military concern. The Alliance should take a balanced approach towards China that includes strengthening the security of supply chains and NATO's technological edge with a policy of engaging China in areas of common interest (Credi/Marrone/Menotti 2020: 5). IAI's Nathalie Tocci takes a slightly different stance.⁵ According to her, the United States regards China as a geopolitical rival and prefers a strategy of containment and (partial) decoupling, whereas Europeans perceive authoritarian China as a threat to their values and

open regulatory standards and prefer a strategy of guarded engagement that protects the resilience and attractiveness of the liberal model. Thus, EU member states should seek transatlantic coordination on China in a bilateral EU-US format rather than within NATO.

RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

A second area in which Italian scholars have called for adjustment concerns NATO's policy towards Russia. Although Russia is perceived as a threat to NATO's Eastern flank and is also extending its aggressive policies in the MENA region, scholars have advised NATO to recalibrate its policy and pursue the dual-track approach of deterrence and dialogue »with a premium of dialogue over deterrence« (Marrone/Muti 2020: 14). Allies should engage Russia in a dialogue on crisis prevention, arms control and issues of common interest (Credi/Marrone/Menotti 2020: 4). Such a dialogue would also be important as it might lessen Russia's interest in forging closer ties with China. A recent MONDODEM paper strikes a slightly more critical tone by advocating a double track of targeted pressure and resilience-building (de Stefano and Freyrie 2020:4). This position reflects Italy's traditionally close relations with Russia (Ratti 2021) and the traditional conviction of centre-left actors in Italian politics that European security eventually will have to include Russia in common institutional structures.

In line with this dual track approach towards Russia, most Italian scholars support **NATO's open door policy** with regard to South-East Europe (to project stability and counter the influence of extra-regional powers), but view the possibility of offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia very critically (Marrone/Muti 2020: 7).

THE FUTURE OF ARMS CONTROL

So far, the Italian case for dialogue with Russia in the realm of arms control has not been translated into concrete proposals (Trezza 2019). On the coming into effect of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the Foreign Ministry signalled Italy's support for a nuclear-weapons free world, but maintains that this goal »can only be achieved realistically by a difficult procedure that takes not only humanitarian considerations into account, but also national security and international stability needs«.⁶ In fact, Italy remains firmly committed to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and is procuring F-35 jets as the next generation of dual-capable aircraft (DCA). This ambivalence is also

3 This is a reference to Graham Allison's widely circulated 2017 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap*.

4 The partners of the populist government – the Five Star Movement and Matteo Salvini's Lega – have always been at odds with each other over Italy's participation in the BRI. American criticism of Italy's signing of the memorandum led to a split in the coalition, culminating in Salvini's characterization of the Chinese engagement as »colonialism«. Available at: <https://www.recnews.it/2019/03/11/salvini-no-alla-colonizzazione-cinese/> (last accessed 11 May 2021). The Defence Minister of the current government has characterized China's rise as a »challenge« (Marrone/Muti 2020: 13).

5 Interview with World Policy Review, 12.01.21. Available at: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/29346/how-china-eu-relations-will-affect-eu-us-relations> (last accessed 11 May 2021).

6 Available at: https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/entrata-in-vigore-del-trattato-per-la-proibizione-delle-armi-nucleari-tpnw.html (last accessed 11 May 2021).

reflected in debates among think tanks. Scholars are generally in favour of non-proliferation and negotiated arms control and they deplored the breakdown of the INF (Alcaro 2019a) and the Open Skies treaties (Castelli 2020). However, the TPNW and NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are not debated much and pundits do not propose unilateral steps. Italy's participation in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements has been criticized by NGOs such as *ICAN Italia* and grassroots movements such as *Rete Italiana Pace et Disarmo*.⁷ However, their ideas have not gained traction in political debates and debates among think tanks.

ASYMMETRIC THREATS AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

Italian scholars emphasize the importance of asymmetric and hybrid threats. Given Lega's sympathies with authoritarianism in Russia, the alleged covert Russian financial support of Lega and the influence of Russian media outlets such as Sputnik, think tankers worry about disinformation campaigns and foreign meddling in Italy's political system. Strengthening the resilience of political and societal structures is a major issue in the think tank debate. In addition to cyber and hybrid threats many scholars emphasize the military threats that might result from new technologies. In their view NATO should be aware of emerging disruptive technologies and invest in maintaining its technological edge. In line with their scenario assessment (see below), Italian scholars have identified shortcomings of Italian and other European armed forces in the area of strategic enablers such as Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, strategic air lift, logistical support, missile defence and force protection broadly (Marrone 2020a).

CRISIS PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Italian scholars support NATO's 360-degree approach and Italy's participation in strengthening NATO's military presence on the Eastern flank and in the Baltic region.⁸ Some studies argue that the stereotype according to which Southern members focus only on non-conventional threats emanating from the South, while Eastern members focus on military threats emanating from Russia is misleading (Celac/Dibenedetto/Purcăruş 2019). Yet, most think tankers maintain that the Southern neighbourhood remains crucial. Echoing Italy's 2015 White Paper, IAI scholar Alessandro Marrone has advanced the concept of an »Enlarged Mediterranean«, a regional security complex encompassing not only the countries located at the Southern rim of the Mediterranean, but also the Maghreb and Sahel regions, as well as the Middle East (Marrone 2020a). Projecting stability into this region should remain one of NATO's pivotal tasks. In accordance with their threat assessment, accord-

ing to which the aggressive incursion of regional actors has been furthered by situations of state failure and local conflicts, Italian scholars argue that NATO should go beyond a strict state-centric approach. As a state-based organization, NATO has partnered with MENA states and their security forces, focusing on programmes such as capacity-building. However, those »security services are often culpable in the deterioration of the country's political situation« (Marrone/Muti 2019: 71). NATO should supplement its military might with civilian instruments, build relations with non-state partners in crucial regions and contribute to stability by »supporting more than intervening directly« (Marrone/Muti 2020: 18). In this context, Italian scholars endorse the establishment of NATO's Strategic Direction South Hub in Naples as a crucial initiative that underlines NATO's commitment to projecting stability. This hub is an analytical body composed of civilian and seconded military experts. Using the hub, NATO should focus on »constant dialogue, capacity building and support to the local communities« (Dibenedetto 2019a: 11). However, some scholars question NATO's utility as a military organization. To compensate for this structural weakness, NATO should cooperate closely with the EU and try to benefit from the EU's experience in stabilization and crisis prevention (Marrone/Muti 2020: 18).

Despite the importance of civilian crisis prevention, Italian scholars anticipate that the advent of »aggressive multipolarity« will most likely necessitate future military stabilization missions as well. Despite changing governments the Italian policy of sending troops abroad either on a bilateral basis (for example, in Libya) or in a multilateral context has been fairly stable, and public opinion has got used to them (Muti/Marrone 2019). Most scholars take the principled stance that interventions require legitimization from the UN or the host country.

NATO AS A COMMUNITY OF VALUES

Not surprisingly, the Italian debate on the future of NATO addresses not only external challenges, but also internal disagreements and deficiencies. Most scholars perceive NATO as a community of values and argue that NATO's continued existence and ability to adapt to changing circumstances results from its value-oriented character as an organization of democratic states. Yet, scholars also maintain that pragmatism and respect for member states' interests should remain hallmarks of NATO. This approach is reflected in, for example, Natalie Tocci's (2020) recommendation that NATO, despite Erdoğan's autocratic turn, should seek opportunities to work with Turkey.

EUROPEANIZATION AND INTERNAL ADAPTATION

According to Italian think tankers, a reformed NATO will remain a fundamental reference point for Italian security (Marrone/Muti 2020: 14). One element of reform consists of the growing Italian interest in developing European security and

⁷ See: <https://retepacedisarmo.org/> (last accessed 11 May 2021).

⁸ Italy contributes troops not only to Mission Resolute Support in Afghanistan but also the NATO missions eFP Latvia and Baltic Air Policing.

defence structures. In future crises, Italy and other European countries should look for American support in terms of force enablers such as space and air assets but not for boots on the ground (Marrone 2020b). Italian scholars even envision scenarios in which Europeans would be asked to defend NATO's eastern flank with limited support from America, while the United States would focus on a simultaneous crisis in the Pacific (Credi/Marrone/Menotti 2020: 6).⁹ To shoulder this burden, the European NATO allies would have to cooperate more closely. Italian scholars note that »European countries have so far struggled to engage collectively when it comes to the security and stability of their neighbourhood« (Tocci 2020). Nevertheless, given the uncertainties of the American leadership, Europe's recently stated ambition to pursue strategic autonomy is becoming a matter of necessity (Alcaro 2019b). Scholars see Europe's potential primarily in the field of armament cooperation. This should not come at the expense of NATO, however. European defence initiatives such as PESCO or the EDF should remain synergic with NATO and be developed in consultations with Washington. EU defence cooperation should not lead to a duplication of capabilities or the exclusion of NATO partners such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Italian defence companies are present on the American market and the government in Rome should insist that the European armaments market remains open. Likewise, European institution-building should not occur at the expense of NATO's unity and cohesion.

Although Italy fails NATO's 2 per cent target, **burden-sharing** is not debated much in public and is not even an issue among think tanks. The low salience of this issue may be because American scorn has not been directed against Italy and because Italy sees itself as an exemplary performer with regard to output criteria.

Italian scholars tend to support the reflection group's proposal to **broaden NATO's agenda**. Scholars support, for example, NATO's initiatives regarding the gender balance and argue that women and gender perspectives will enrich NATO with new perspectives both at the conceptual and mission level (Marrone/Muti 2020: 5). More generally, scholars entertain the idea of a fourth core task that includes issues of societal resilience.

⁹ For a similar assessment see: Aspen Institute Italia webinar: The future of NATO, 8 October 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/en/programs/future-nato> (last accessed 11 May 2021).

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