

From enthusiasm to retreat: Italy and military missions abroad after the Cold War

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Abstract

Italy represents an important case of defense policy change after the Cold War. While during the bipolar era the country rarely intervened abroad and was deeply constrained in its defense policy by domestic as well as international factors, in the post-Cold War era, Italy has constantly intervened in major conflicts in the Balkans, the Middle East and Afghanistan. Yet, in the past decade, and especially after the 2011 Libyan intervention, Italian activism has consistently diminished. The purpose of this article is to describe this trend and to review theories that have been put forward to explain Italian activism (and retrenchment). While several insights can emerge from multiple studies dedicated to the topic, we argue that some elements such as legacies and institutional constraints have been somewhat overlooked and actually open promising avenues for research.

1. Introduction

In 2019, Italy deployed around 6,300 soldiers in military missions abroad. In 2005 there were almost 11,000. In 1990, before the end of the Cold War and national involvement in the operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm (Iraq, 1990-91), just fewer than 100 Italian troops were involved in (United Nations) military interventions around the world. In the 1945-1989 time frame, Italy participated in seven UN missions with military personnel. In 2001 Italy deployed its soldiers in ten UN operations *at the same time* (Coticchia 2014). These numbers summarily describe the trend in Italian interventionism after the end of the Cold War. Starting in the 1990s, overall commitment grew fast, then further expanded in geographical scope and intensity of commitment, and has finally been declining steadily since 2009-2010, maintaining in the most recent years the same average (around 6,000) of personnel deployed abroad. Furthermore, Italian troops were mostly (re)located to the most vital area for Italian interests – the so-called ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’ (White Paper 2015).

What explains this pattern? The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, the article reviews three decades of Italian military operations abroad, dissecting the major trends. We do not look at all defense policy changes or their relationship with foreign policy, as

this has already been well dissected elsewhere (Carati and Locatelli 2017; Isernia and Longo 2017; Cladi and Locatelli 2019; Colombo and Magri 2019). We do not, either, look in detail at interventions on the ground (Coticchia and Moro 2015, 2016; Ruffa 2018). While most analyses focus on post-2001, we believe a detailed analysis of the 1990s is in order as it is essential to understand subsequent developments. As we briefly argue below, looking at this not-so-distant past allows us to consider factors that play a considerable role over time. The 1990s constitute, in fact, a decade of upheaval in Italian defense policy, featuring important military commitments abroad – which started with participation in the Gulf War and proceeded with large deployments in Somalia and (especially) in the Balkans – and with key reforms that have re-shaped the institutional landscape of Italian defense.

Second, the article reviews the most compelling explanations for how interventions unfolded and for variations across time. We reconstruct the debate and the different approaches, singling out what different contributions have said to explain each phase. We also argue that factors such as domestic political context, and especially institutional constraints and legacies, have been somewhat overlooked and actually open promising avenues for research. We mention three types of factors particularly for understanding Italian military missions abroad. First, one element of remarkable continuity across these three decades is the relative bipartisan consensus by major parties on foreign interventions. Second, Italian institutional context provided favorable conditions for military interventions to occur: parliamentary veto powers were never really a hurdle for governments willing to intervene. In the last decade, we show that endogenous changes interacted with external ones to reduce the margin of action of executives. Finally, change in Italian defense policy has been deeply shaped by experience on the ground. In other words, by being extremely active, Italian armed forces have undergone a process of thorough change that has been elsewhere defined as ‘transformation in contact’ (Foley et al. 2011). The article – part of a research agenda that has involved the authors for more than a decade now – preliminarily shows how these elements contribute to explaining *why* interventions occurred, but also *how* the Italian armed forces effectively acted on the ground and implemented change ‘at home’. The focus of the analysis is on force deployment over time, although inevitably defense reforms will be touched upon as they both reflected the lessons of interventions and subsequently shaped them (Coticchia and Moro 2014).

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 looks at interventions in the nineties. Rather than providing a complete overview of such interventions (Ignazi et al. 2012), the section aims to present the ‘key decisions’ that were made and that are needed to understand subsequent choices. Section 3 looks into the post-9/11 phase, delving into Afghanistan and Iraq (but also Lebanon). Section 4 discusses the intervention in Libya and Italian retrenchment in the last decade. The key question here is related to how the political parties that are emerging as leading the restructuring of the political system view military operations abroad. The conclusion summarizes findings and suggests four themes to advance the current research agenda.

2. Searching for a new role: interventions in the 1990s

The military intervention in the 1991 Gulf War signaled a clear watershed in Italian defense policy. Italian armed forces had participated in some relevant UN-mandated

missions during the Cold War, such as ONUC in Congo (1960-1964) and UNIFIL in Lebanon (1978), but the Gulf War represented a clear scaling up in terms of size and intensity of commitment. For the first time since the end of World War II, Italian warplanes were involved in air strikes against a sovereign country. The decision to intervene was made with the Andreotti government, invoking article 11 of the Constitution, interpreted as mandating participation to UN-led missions that consisted of ‘international police’ functions (Coticchia and Moro 2020). The mission clearly proved the operational limits of armed forces that were designed for territorial defense in the Cold War scenario, were based on conscription and had a fairly limited number of troops deployable in complex military operations.

Yet, the Iraqi endeavor was just the first of a long series of undertakings. Italian armed forces participated in the UN missions in Somalia and then in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as in the NATO airstrikes against Serbia in 1999. In 1997 Italy also led a (successful) multinational mission in Albania. Somalia showed another key feature of the post-Cold War environment and the role of Western armed forces in it. Originally designed as a non-combat mission within the UNITAF umbrella (*Unified Task Force*), whose primary objective was to guarantee the possibility of aid and immediate relief action to go through in a large-scale humanitarian crisis, the situation on the ground for intervening forces rapidly deteriorated (Loi 2004). The following UN-mandated UNOSOM II recognized the need for more combat-ready troops, and Italy sent armored vehicles, attack helicopters, *Carabinieri* and army paratroopers. Somalia was important for two major reasons. First, it was an early (and, by future standards, quite limited) attempt to deploy troops in high-intensity environments. Second, it showed the type of activities Italian armed forces would engage in while deployed: a focus on social and economic development and reconstruction, especially through civil-military cooperation (later known as CIMIC), as well as on the training of local police and military forces. At the same time, the operation ‘Ibis’ in Somalia revealed a problem that would (dramatically) also affect other Italian missions abroad in the post-Cold War era: a dangerous gap between the war-like reality on the ground and the peacekeeping/peacebuilding setting of the operation, with limited availability of appropriate military assets and inadequate rules of engagement (Ignazi et al 2012), a gap that in Mogadishu, as later in Iraq (and, especially, Nasiriyah), led to dramatic consequences.

The interventions in the Balkans, from Albania to Bosnia, from Macedonia to Kosovo, reveal the transformation of Italian armed forces and their growing capabilities in carrying out multiple operations with very different tasks, such as peacekeeping, peacebuilding, naval blockade, humanitarian intervention, and even air strikes. National military engagement in the Balkans, from 1991 onwards, was constant and remarkable, with thousands of troops deployed – and employed – on the ground (as well as at sea and in the air). Italy provided its significant contribution to allies as well as to regional and international organizations (NATO or UN), thus transforming its foreign policy role from ‘security consumer’ – as it was in the post WWII era – to ‘security provider’ after the end of the bipolar era (Walston 2011). Italy became an ‘international peacekeeper’ (Giacomello and Veerbek 2011), adopting the armed forces as the main tool of its foreign policy. Such a stunning evolution is well described, supported, and justified by official documents such as ‘*Nuovo Modello di Difesa*’ (1991) and the 2002 ‘White Book’ (2002).

What are the major drivers of such an important commitment? On the whole, by adopting concepts and terminology provided by Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature (Hermann 1990), we can affirm that the transformation of Italian foreign and defense policy in the 1990s represented something between a ‘goal change’ and even an ‘international orientation change’, which modified Italy’s global role and activities. Notwithstanding such a striking evolution, the overall debate on the topic has been relatively limited, also due to cultural constraints in discussing defense matters in public (Panebianco 1997; Rosa 2014, 2016; Coticchia 2019). However, reviewing the scholarly debate, we can distinguish several potential explaining factors, connected to different IR paradigms and approaches. In this context, four main variables that the literature has emphasized to explain the specific directions of Italian defense policy in the 1990s can be identified: systemic changes and national interests, prestige, multilateral institutions, and norms.

First, some authors looked at the broader levels of analysis as a vital premise to understand the transformation that has occurred: the end of the bipolar era *and* the collapse of the Italian party system, along with their Cold War constraints (Andreatta 2001; Cotta and Verzichelli 2008; Brighi 2013), were identified as clear watersheds. Andreatta (2001) argues that the end of the Cold War opened an unprecedented space of action for Italian foreign and defense policy. In a similar vein, Carati and Locatelli describe the passage as a change in terms of ‘permissive cause’ of Italian military engagement in multinational operations (2017). Second, in line with a traditional structural realist approach, some authors focused on the strategic adjustment (Coralluzzo 2012) required by the evolution of the international system, which posed new threats (such as regional instability, affected by the spread of civil conflicts at the beginning of the 1990s) that Italy had to address for protecting ‘vital national interests’ (Bonvicini and Silvestri 2015), also with military tools (Croci and Valigi 2013). Second, rooted in the neo-classical realist approach, other scholars argued that the military dynamism of a ‘middle power’ like Italy (Santoro 1991) was mainly aimed at improving its ‘prestige’ (which is conceived as the social recognition of their power) abroad (Davidson 2008, 2011, Cladi and Webber 2011, Coticchia 2019). Third, in line with neoliberalism, the desire to maintain strong involvement in multilateral institutions (Attinà 2009; Bonvicini et al 2011) is another crucial explaining variable in Italian military activism, from Somalia to the Balkans, where the Italian contribution to the UN mission has been most relevant. This explanation is sometimes linked to alliance politics, which is a crucial variable from a realist perspective. ‘Realists also expect states to act in ways that may be costly – even in domestic political terms – in order to preserve valued alliances’ (Coticchia and Davidson 2019, Ratti 2011).¹ In other words, Italy was ‘a multilateral actor’ (Ratti 2011). Finally, authors emphasized the influence played by humanitarian norms and strategic culture in shaping foreign and defense policy decisions since the beginning of the 1990s (Ignazi et. al. 2012, Rosa 2014). According to this viewpoint, Italy modified its national role conception (Holsti 1970), adopting the function of ‘international peacekeeper’.

¹ The literature on Italy and coalition building through the use of “allied payments” is still limited, if not absent. On state-to-state payments (i.e. “deployment subsidies” or “political side deals”) as practices to convince allies to take part in multinational operations see Henke (2019).

These (non-mutually exclusive) explanations certainly contribute to our understanding of the motives that have pushed Italian governments to intervene abroad since the collapse of the Berlin wall. Three types of factors have been somewhat overlooked by the afore-mentioned analyses. First, starting in 1992, political support for troop deployment has been very broad, including all major parties on both sides of the political spectrum. Recent empirical analyses (Coticchia and Vignoli 2019) confirm the existence of a long-standing bipartisan consensus on military operations. Especially the UN multilateral frameworks and non-combat operations are correlated with a high level of parliamentary support. On the contrary, the ‘politically contested missions’ (e.g., Iraq in 2003), which rarely eroded the bipartisan consensus, had a strong combat component without a clear multilateral framework (Coticchia and Vignoli 2019). This consensus is also forged on the basis of a shared narrative that takes hold: military interventions are always labelled as ‘peace missions’, no matter their differences in terms of context (more or less violent) and type of activities that are undertaken (more or less combat-prone) (Battistelli et al 2012, Ignazi et al. 2012, Coticchia 2014, IAI-LASP 2017). The narrative of ‘peace missions’ is an enduring feature of all subsequent interventions, despite the evolution of Italian missions on the ground.

The second factor that should be looked at more closely is the level of parliamentary scrutiny. Literature on parliamentary war powers (Peters and Wagner 2011, Mello 2014, Dieterich et al. 2015) has shown how different arrangements in terms of legislative-executive relations can affect the propensity to intervene: cabinets that deal with parliaments that have fewer formal and informal powers of authorization and oversight of the missions face a favorable opportunity structure that allows them to act more freely. This is the story that unfolds in Italy after the Cold War. The Italian parliament rarely intervenes *ex ante*, that is before the mission, and generally is presented with a *fait accompli* and the ensuing pressure to approve the deployment of troops once these are already operating on the ground (Coticchia and Moro 2020). Mandates and rules of engagement are debated here, but rarely, if ever, has this meant that parliament was able to affect how missions operated on the ground. Besides, debates in parliament also raise minimal attention in public opinion: street protests against interventions occurred in the nineties – especially before the interventions in Iraq and Kosovo (Bellucci and Isernia 1996; Battistelli 2004) – but they were rarely translated into meaningful parliamentary debates as minorities could do little to affect the legislative outcomes (Ronzitti 2016; Coticchia and Vignoli 2019; Coticchia and Moro 2020).

A third, and often overlooked, element is linked to how the first military interventions contributed to shaping future ones. This happened indirectly and also directly, as armed forces operating in new environments started identifying a series of practices, operational procedures, and doctrines that were passed on to units that were intervening in the same and subsequent missions. This ‘transformation in contact’ was at first relatively informal, embedded in the practices of the deployed units (Coticchia and Moro 2016). But effects on future interventions were not limited to such outcomes of transmission. The experience of the early interventions, in fact, also shaped major defense reforms in the 1990s. For sure, the overall change in the security environment mattered a lot: the end of the Soviet threat meant in Italy, as elsewhere, a reduction in the overall defense budgets and a shift from territorial defense. Yet, experience on the ground contributed to shaping

the direction taken by Italian armed forces. In 1991, the so-called ‘New Defense Model’ represented a clear move toward power projection capabilities, paving the way for the suspension of conscription, and also focusing on the need for digitalization of the armed forces. The lessons of the 1991 Gulf War were clearly a strong push in that sense (Briani 2012). In 1997, a major overhaul of the defense establishment (the so-called Andreatta law of 1997, after the minister of defense that promoted it) led to an increase in jointness and interoperability, with increased coordination between the armed forces seen as essential to operating in the new threat environment (as proven by the missions undertaken until then, from Somalia to the Balkans). At the beginning of the new century, conscription was suspended. An all-professional force, again, was the only one deemed capable of deploying rapidly and effectively (Coticchia and Moro 2016a).

3. Interventions in the age of the global war on terror (2001-2011): threats, followership, ideas and the role of domestic factors

Enthusiasm towards the so-called liberal interventionism of the 1990s soon gave way to a different context in which military interventions took place. 9/11 and the US Administration’s response to it, in fact, drastically changed the overall rationale for interventions, with the global war on terror substituting for the humanitarian paradigm (Weiss 2004). The literature has illustrated the gradual convergence between the goals of the defense policy adopted by Western countries in the bipolar era: from territorial defense towards expeditionary crisis-management missions (Dyson 2008). Such a process was marked by a fast transformation in the new century, when countries like Italy started to be constantly engaged also in complex and dramatic missions within the framework of the ‘war on terror’ (Farrell et al 2013). The Italian contribution to international operations in the post-2001 era was remarkable: in the first decade of the century Italy had an average of 8,000 units employed abroad (Carati and Locatelli 2017). Moreover, contrary to European countries like Germany, France and even the UK, Italian troops were deployed in *all* the relevant crises that occurred: Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and, on the eve of the following decade, Libya.

Italy contributed to both NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, becoming the leading nation of the Western area in 2006, and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, 2001-2006), participating in the mission Nibbio (2003) at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. ISAF is the most important mission that Italy has undertaken since the end of WWII, as well illustrated by its length and dramatic (economic and human) costs. The Italian government deployed troops also in the controversial operation ‘Antica Babilonia’ (2003-2006) in Iraq. Italy provided its contribution to the US some months after the beginning of the operation, which was the most contested at the domestic level (Battistelli et al 2012). Only when the Iraqi regime collapsed did the Italian troops arrive on the ground in southern Iraq. Peace rhetoric, here, has been deemed as severely affecting operational requirements (Coticchia 2018, 118), with dramatic consequences in terms of adequate equipment, caveat, and rules of engagement. Indeed, on November 12th, 2013, Italy suffered the bloodiest attack in its post-WWII defense: 17 soldiers and 2 civilians were killed by a suicide truck (Petrilli and Sinapi 2007).

The military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan laid emphasis on the role of counter-insurgency as a crucial approach to addressing the crisis on the ground (Kilcullen 2011),

revealing how the post 2001 interventions were qualitatively different from those of the nineties. The mission in Lebanon was, in this sense, an exception (Cladi and Locatelli 2019). This is both because of its traditional peacekeeping nature and also for the substantial support from Italian public opinion which, on the contrary, has generally provided limited backing to post-2001 Italian interventions (Battistelli et al 2012). Finally, at the beginning of the next decade, Italy participated in the operation 'Unified Protector', NATO's intervention against the Gaddafi regime in 2011, exactly one century after the Italian war in Libya with the first air strike against civilians in history. Despite its initial reluctance, due to the close economic and political relationship with the regime, the Italian government provided its relevant military contribution to the mission.

How can we explain the significant military activism that marked the Italian defense policy in the new century? Different possible explanations exist. First, the terrorist threat posed to national security, along with the never-ending instability at the borders, have been interpreted as vital reasons behind national military dynamism, from Afghanistan to Libya (Coralluzzo 2012). However, analyses of the parliamentary and public debates, as well other empirical assessments of the decision-making process, have revealed how the threat posed by transnational terrorism in the post-2001 period did not play a significant role (Ignazi et al 2012; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2017). Nonetheless, the existence of crucial economic and strategic interests has often been viewed as fundamental in the case of Libya (Croci and Valigi 2013).

Second, despite recognizing the relevance of new multidimensional threats to international instability (Pirani 2010), several scholars have focused on values and global norms. For instance, the so-called 'Responsibility to Protect', R2P, shaped UNSC resolution 1973, paving the way to the military intervention in Libya (Bellamy 2015). From a constructivism point of view, the cultural interpretation of global norms shaped Italian defense policy, fostering an active humanitarian role in regional and humanitarian crises. The case of the Italian mission in Haiti, after the earthquake of 2010, could be adopted as another clear example (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2016).

Third, the interplay of prestige and alliance politics can be considered the mainstream variable adopted within the scholarly debate to explain the Italian military involvement in dangerous combat operations. According to this perspective, Italy has deployed troops from Afghanistan to Libya in order to acquire prestige in terms of social acknowledgment, increasing its relative power (Davidson 2011). It must be noticed how in this period, and especially in the case of Iraq, the prevailing view in going for troop deployment was linked to increasing the country's place within the alliance, by being a loyal and reliable ally to the major power (at least more loyal and reliable than, for instance, France and Germany).

Finally, from a broader viewpoint, the search for status has been identified as a driver of Italian military activism. Status-seeking has been defined as an attribute that is 'granted or accorded by others' (Dafoe et al. 2014). Unable to have recognition due to its institutionalized role, as happens to comparable countries in terms of GDP such as France and the UK that have a UN permanent seat, Italy has increasingly viewed contribution to multinational and multilateral military operations as a means to acquiring the reputation and prestige that would give Italy the 'right place' among nations. In this vein, Carati and Locatelli (2017) developed the concept of 'followership': Italian military commitment as a tool

for seeking status and recognition in the international community. For the authors, followership “is more than just a quest for status” but rather a “deliberate policy that finds its ultimate goal in ‘being part’ of the international community” (2017, 10). Such an interpretation offers an explanation for the relevance of multilateralism for Italy, despite its potential costs (as indeed illustrated by the expensive and dramatic missions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya).

Academic debate was (temporarily) lively on the specific theme of the supposed discontinuity of the Italian defense policy under the Berlusconi government with reference to multilateralism (Ignazi 2004; Brighi 2008; Croci 2008; Walston 2011). The Berlusconi government’s decision to intervene in Iraq after the US unilateral mission, along with the manifold bilateral relationship personally developed by the then Italian Prime Minister, were the main disputed issues. As noticed, Iraq represented a turning point in foreign policymaking as it created an unprecedented need to balance between solidarity with America and with key European allies such as Germany and France (Parsi 2006). This discussion paved the way for further reflections on the role of new drivers behind Italian post-bipolar defense. On the one hand, mainly thanks to Berlusconi’s personal activism abroad, several scholars started to pay attention to the role of leaders in Italian defense policy (Ignazi 2004, Diodato and Niglia 2018). On the other hand, the assumed discontinuity in foreign and defense policy was interpreted by looking at the role of ‘foreign policy paradigms’ that for Brighi (2013) represent mediating factors between domestic and international levels.

All the above-mentioned analyses help in providing a comprehensive picture of the (not mutually exclusive) mechanisms that led to Italian military activism in the new century. Nonetheless, factors such as domestic political context, and especially institutional constraints, have been generally overlooked also in explaining national involvement in the most important Italian operations since WWII. Some authors have occasionally focused on the links between the contingencies of domestic political debate and foreign and defense issues (Carbone 2007, Calossi and Coticchia 2009, Coticchia and Davidson 2018), or on the relevance of electoral politics to explain the (timing of) decisions, such as to intervene in Iraq in 2003 (Davidson 2008). Yet, the recent so-called ‘domestic turn’ in IR and FPA (Kaarbo 2015), featuring growing attention towards the role of domestic factors such as parties and parliaments, has not been dominant within the Italian scholarly debate on defense policy (an exception is D’Amore 2001). Relatedly, three elements should be emphasized concerning the Italian military missions in 2001-2011.

First, as stressed by Coticchia and Vignoli (2019), an analysis of the votes by Italian parties on military operations in the new century confirms – despite the controversial debates which occurred in the case of Iraq – the permanence of the above-mentioned bipartisan consensus on operations, revealing also how the Italian case corroborates the curvilinear model of the relationship between partisanship and foreign policy (Wagner et al 2017; Osterman et al 2019), increasing from the left to the center-right and then declining again towards the radical right. Second, the dynamics of government–opposition are extremely relevant in explaining the support of parties towards specific operations (Coticchia and Vignoli 2019), revealing a considerable ‘instrumentality of the votes’, that mainly change according to the current position of parties. Third, despite the approval of the ‘Ruffino Resolution’ (2001), which introduced the practice of voting on the (re)financing of missions, Italian parliamentary oversight remained limited in practice. Through

legal decrees, the government informed parliament of all the missions abroad but presented them all together (every six months or annually), without providing details on the overall financing, RoE, and nature of the operation. For instance, as reported by Coticchia and Moro (2020), Italian MPs complained regarding the lack of information relating to the significant changes in the structure, aims, and caveats of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan over almost 13 years of intervention. In that sense, the executive autonomy was remarkable, without incurring audience costs (Fearon 1994).

A final driver that merits further attention in explaining the evolution of Italian missions at the beginning of the new century is the way through which the experience on the ground in complex military interventions such as ISAF has contributed to shaping Italian defense policy, fostering organizational learning. For instance, Italian defense was able to learn and adapt regarding the protection of forces after the massive efforts made in the IED's counter-warfare across Afghanistan, Iraq and also Lebanon (Coticchia and Moro 2016b). In this regard, the emulation of allies on the ground was vital, while the influence exerted by the NATO framework – after been involved for years in a combat scenario like Afghanistan – was crucial in shaping the direction of Italian military transformation in Italy, also in terms of doctrinal review. The perception of how precious operations on the ground were in terms of bringing about innovation by allowing the improvement of interoperability and cross-country learning was widely viewed by the leadership of Italian Armed Forces. For example, the Italian Air Force pushed strongly in 2011 to have a NATO framework in the Libyan intervention (Coticchia and Moro 2016b). Multilateralism was not just a guideline for Italian defense but also a required framework for members of the Italian armed forces who had 'got used' to specific common (NATO) procedures and rules after years of engagement. More junior officers seemed to share the belief that participation in international missions was a major driver of military transformation (Moro et al. 2018).

4. The age of restraint: domestic crisis, deployment fatigue and the return of national interests?

The new decade opens with renewed commitment in Afghanistan, strictly linked to the stepping up of the American effort in the region. While Afghanistan, as said, was clearly the most important mission undertaken by the Italian armed forces in the post-WWII era, it was possibly the Libyan War of 2011 that had more visible consequences for the development of Italian defense. On the whole, the 'failures' of most of the post-2001 missions – among which, the negative effects of the Libyan interventions on Italian interests being more easily perceived by political leaders and public opinion (e.g., instability, rising security threats from terrorism to smuggling, collapse of previous economic ties, etc.) – may represent one of the key variables in explaining the considerable shrinkage of Italian military commitment abroad after 2001.

Indeed, two main puzzles emerge by observing the evolution of Italian defense in 2011-2020. First, as stated, following decades of rising military engagement in operations, the numbers of troops deployed in international missions decreased. The overall number of Italian military personnel deployed abroad varied from 9,000 in 2001 to less than 5,000 in 2013 (Coticchia and Moro 2015). Second, Italy started to relocate troops towards a strategic area for vital national interests, defined as the 'Enlarged

Mediterranean’ (Brighi and Musso 2017; Grandi and Strazzari 2019). Such a strategic shift, which has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention (exceptions are Marrone and Nones 2016, Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020), has been stressed by both official documents (such as the White Paper 2015) and (bipartisan) political decisions to send troops in new missions in Niger, Tunisia, and Libya.

Therefore, two questions need to be addressed: What are the causes of the reduction in Italian military commitment? What were the drivers of the Italian strategic relocation towards the ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’? With reference to the first question: we group together four major hypotheses: ‘war fatigue’, change in the external environments, the impact of the financial crisis, and a changing domestic political landscape. As stressed above, scholars have noticed how ‘war fatigue’ and disappointment over the outcomes of major missions abroad – starting with the inability to achieve a satisfactory end state in Afghanistan and Iraq – led public opinion and policy-makers in the West to increasingly doubt that large scale projects of political transformation, supported by considerable troop commitment to guarantee security, were viable at all (Belloni and Moro 2019).

At the same time, changes in the external environment have been seen as deeply affecting the Italian posture. First, US retreat – rhetorically magnified under the Trump administration but started earlier under Obama – signaled shifting US priorities. While overall troop decline in the US, linked to the reduction in deployed personnel in Afghanistan (with Iraq-related reductions starting much earlier) has not been linear, (for instance the end of 2014 saw an increase in deployed troops linked with the anti-ISIL fight), it is clear that the US has adopted a much less interventionist approach in the last decade. The impact on Italian military operations has been seen through realist lenses: the overall shift of the US posture has required Italy to focus more directly on direct management of its immediate threat environment (see also *infra*). In theoretical terms, realist lenses – and especially neo-classical realist ones – can be a good starting point to observe the current wave of change (for a review see Coticchia 2019).

Domestic factors have played an important part as well. First, Italy had to absorb the heavy effects of the financial crisis which started in 2008, which deeply impacted Italian public expenditures, especially since 2011 (with the advent of the caretaker government led by Mario Monti). Budget shrinkage was a crucial determinant of this decline: starting from 2012, the defense budget was reoriented in order to reduce expenditures as a whole while maintaining a relatively high level of operational efficiency. Defense minister Di Paola, previously Chief of the Italian Defense General staff, supervised one of the most radical reforms of defense since the 1990s, entailing a restructuring of the organizational setup that affected overall numbers of personnel as well as careers, offices and structures. The key logic underpinning this reform was that the Italian military could maintain ‘deployability’ in different missions as a key asset, notwithstanding some cuts: effectiveness was guaranteed by the ability to learn from a now large body of operations. Where operating, in other words, Italian forces would be able to exploit the advantages of their experience and ensuing transformation.

The question of ‘where operating’, though, became more and more pressing. The financial crisis, in fact, affected the sustainability of large-scale military commitments in operations abroad. Besides political reasons, willingness to limit the extension of national commitments was behind the non-involvement of Italy in operations in Mali and

in Syria. This is clearly connected also with the shift in public opinion. Amid a context of a severe financial crisis, surveys revealed how Italians favored a reduction in global military engagement (IAI-CIRCaP, 2014). In sum, Italian governments have become more reluctant to commit the country to costly and unpopular (Battistelli et al. 2012) military operations abroad. Finally, rising criticism towards the Italian military operations from new and electorally successful (populist) parties such as the M5S (Tronconi 2015) has perhaps shaped the debate and may have contributed to revising Italian military dynamism all around the globe (Coticchia and Vignoli 2020). Despite their ‘pacifist’ rhetoric, however, the M5S when in government, voted for all the missions supported by the previous Italian government, sharing the new strategic focus on the ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’ (see Coticchia forthcoming).

Two factors seem particularly appropriate in explaining the Italian strategic relocation in the Enlarged Mediterranean, where Italy acted – as it did in Niger – without the traditional multilateral framework that almost always featured in national military engagement in the post-Cold War era. First, the role of new and rising threats to national interests appears fundamental. As well illustrated by official documents (White Paper 2015, Gilli et al. 2015), public and parliamentary debates (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020), and surveys on threat perceptions in the armed forces (Moro et al. 2018), the interlinked challenges posed by regional instability, terrorism and illegal human trafficking have apparently been a crucial element in shaping political decisions regarding Italian involvement in the region. Ceccorulli and Coticchia (2020) have highlighted how the Italian strategic considerations related to the ‘pivot to Africa’ – with the ‘relocation of troops’ from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Sahel and Northern Africa – were strongly connected to the perceived need to support the capabilities of local states, such as Niger, in fighting against terrorism and, especially, migrant smuggling/trafficking. Second, domestic factors matter in explaining the evolution of Italian defense policy and military engagement abroad. The political preferences of Italian parties clearly converged (as illustrated by the bipartisan votes in parliament in 2018 and 2019) around the goal of re-focusing military interventions in the Enlarged Mediterranean, where national interests are perceived to be at risk. Moreover, this consensus seems to be in line with the rising attention and concern of Italian public opinion towards the challenges posed by terrorism and, above all, by illegal immigration (Eurobarometer 2016; 2017; 2018; IAI-Laps 2018). In sum, the salience devoted by domestic actors (parties, leaders, and public opinion) towards the threats caused by instability in the Enlarged Mediterranean contributes to explaining the evolution of Italian defense policy in recent years.

A last change is worth mentioning, as it refers to institutional constraints. In 2016, a comprehensive law on missions (Law 145/2016) was introduced. While in the previous decades voting on missions had been, in substance, reduced to a choice over whether to finance all ongoing missions (with troops already operating on the ground), the new law allowed opposition parties to finally discriminate between the various (groups of) operations (Ronzitti 2017). This would permit parliament to take back some of its ‘war powers’, ending a long period in which executives were largely free of constraint. It is yet too early to assess the impact of the reform. At the time of writing, only four votes have occurred with the new law. Delays in parliamentary discussion have remained dramatically unaltered: in the case of

the mission in Niger deployment was again precedent to parliamentary vote. Thus, de facto, parliamentary oversight of the executive seems to be still quite limited.

5. Conclusions

Italian defense policy has undergone major transformation in the three decades since the end of the Cold War, with frequent participation in military interventions abroad that lasted from the 1991 Gulf War to the 2011 Libyan War, to then somewhat diminish in the past decade. The objective of this piece is to review this evolution and to assess the arguments brought to the fore to explain it.

Table 1 provides a map of the major explanations of Italian military operations in different phases and across different interventions. We do not argue that some theories ‘do better than others’, but simply state that theories under the chosen labels have been used to shed light on Italian interventions. There is no pretense of exhaustivity, and we have selected articles and authors that make somehow *explicit* reference to the different drivers of military interventions mentioned here. Perhaps in the future further studies will close gaps and address the phenomenon under new lenses or re-adapt existing ones.

As revealed also by Table. 1, the nature of the specific subset of foreign and defense policy represented by military missions lends itself to multiple interpretations. A starting point is the changing systemic incentives to which Italy has to respond. Several authors have indeed focused on the strategic adjustment imposed by the end of the bipolar confrontation to Italian defense, which acted in a different scenario mainly to protect its vital national interests.

Other scholars insist that power, in this context, should not just be intended in strictly material terms. In fact, the search for prestige and status has been identified as a powerful driver of Italian military policy. Within the same perspective, the concept of followership allows for the illustration of the Italian need for recognition among allies in the international community.

From a different viewpoint, international organizations are crucial, especially in spreading global norms (such as the ‘responsibility to protect’) that have been received (and then socialized) at domestic level. Multilateralism – as a value as well as an international framework within which to act abroad – has a fundamental function in explaining Italian involvement in missions abroad. Relatedly, a specific strategic culture has been gradually affirmed, transforming the Italian role into ‘an international peacekeeper’. In this sense, ideas and discourses represent a mediating factor between the two levels of analysis.

With reference to domestic variables, other authors argue that looking at the domestic institutional and political landscape provides answers to describe both the macro-trend as well specific decisions to intervene. Recently, specific attention has been devoted to (limited) parliamentary oversight in affecting the calculation made by executives before sending troops abroad as well as to the participation in government as main explaining variable in the parties’ decisions whether or not to support military operations. Further studies will better examine the influence played by successful populist parties in shaping the Italian decision-making process regarding military operations abroad, contributing to the rising, but still limited, scholarly debate on populist parties and foreign policy (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020).

Table 1. Explaining Italian Military Missions. A Review.

Phase	Mission	Type of mission	Strategic adjustment & vital national interest	Prestige, Status & Follow-ership	International norms, ideas & strategic culture	Institutional constraints, electoral & party politics	Economic interests of domestic actors
1	Iraq 1990/1991	Air strikes	Cucchi 1993; Diodato 2015	Santoro 1991	Ignazi et al 2012	Aliboni 1991; Coticchia & Moro 2020	
	Somalia 1992/1994	Stabilization			Ignazi et al 2012	Coticchia & Moro 2020	
	Bosnia 1995	Peace-keeping			Foradori 2007; Pirani 2010		
	Albania 1997	Stabilization		Cladi and Webber 2011	Coticchia 2013; Foradori 2018	Greco 1998	
	Kosovo 1999	Air strikes	Andreatta 2001	Cladi and Webber 2011; Davidson 2011; Carati & Locatelli 2017	Ignazi et al 2012; Foradori 2018	Greco 2000; Coticchia and Moro 2020	Paolicelli and Vignarca 2009
2	Afghanistan (2001-)	Stabilization	Bonvicini and Silvestri 2015; Coralluzzo 2012	Davidson 2011; Ratti 2011	Brighi 2013	Coticchia and Moro 2020; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020	Mini 2003; Paolicelli and Vignarca 2009
	Iraq 2003/2006	Stabilization	Coralluzzo 2012; Bonvicini and Silvestri 2015	Cladi and Webber 2011; Davidson 2011	Brighi 2013; Ignazi et al 2012	Andreatta 2008; Davidson 2008	Mini 2003; Paolicelli and Vignarca 2009; Caruso 2018
	Lebanon 2006-	Peace-keeping		Cladi and Locatelli 2018	Attinà 2009; Ignazi et al 2012; Cladi and Locatelli 2018	Andreatta 2008; Cladi and Locatelli 2018	
	Libya 2011	Air strikes	Lombardi 2011; Croci and Valigi 2013	Carati & Locatelli 2017	Miranda 2011; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2015	Coticchia and Moro 2020; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020	Lombardi 2011; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2015
3	Iraq (2014-)	Stabilization		Coticchia 2018		Olmastroni 2014; Coticchia and Davidson 2019	

Authors' notes: we have provided general definitions to the types of missions waged by Italian forces according to their mandate and tasks. It is worth noticing that general definitions of complex operations are just attempts to connect each mission to broad labels for the sake of a (parsimonious) categorization. While 'air-strikes' (raids carried out by Italian aircrafts) and 'peacekeeping' (neutral interposition by 'blue helmets' after wars) do not require further clarification, we are aware that the selected category 'stabilisation' is vast. Despite referring to the shared aim of providing stability in different civil war/post war contexts, this category encompasses – to a different extent – combat activities (Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq 2003-2006), military assistance and training of local forces employed on the ground (Iraq 2014-) and peacebuilding and capacity building measures (Albania 1997).

Finally, despite still playing a marginal role in the scholarly debate, also the economic interests of relevant domestic actors (from the military-industrial complex to oil and gas companies) have been identified as important drivers of renewed Italian activism.

In sum, Table 1 provides a (concise) picture that collects different views and interpretations concerning the drivers behind Italian military operations in the post-Cold War era.

Beyond reconstructing the debate, this paper has also illustrated the factors that merit additional interest in order to explain or understand Italian defense policy. For instance, we stressed that factors internal to the armed forces – starting from learning while deployed – has been shaping *how* subsequent operations have been undertaken and, to an extent, defense policy reforms. This last set of factors is just sketched in the present manuscript and constitutes what we believe to be a promising research agenda. Another two agendas could deserve further attention. The first one revolves around how external factors will reshape Italian military interventionism in the near future. Increasing American de-commitment in the Mediterranean and the Middle East has created a power vacuum where European countries, and Italy to begin with, have not yet played the role of substitute. How this will occur, and how the European Union will enter this scenario, remains pretty uncertain and clearly constitutes a relevant research avenue. The second theme is related to how interventions are changing. If the last decade saw an overall decrease in the number of troops deployed, it nonetheless saw armed forces acting in (increasingly) diverse domains, from now traditional peacekeeping missions to counterterrorism, from maritime security to fighting against human trafficking. Technological changes, with increasing remote surveillance and strike capabilities, are also affecting the toolbox that armed forces and policymakers have to intervene. Investigating this heterogeneity of missions and the new available toolbox is one of the key challenges for scholarship addressing ‘military’ interventions, in Italy and elsewhere.

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