

PEACE AND SECURITY

# SECURITY POLICY IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

A view from Rome

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The enlarged Mediterranean region is Italy's top priority. National interests at stake include the protection of energy supplies and maritime routes, the stabilisation of Libya and the reduction of migrant flows.



Italy usually looks for a politico-diplomatic solution, sustained by a long-term military commitment. Rome always seeks a multilateral format for its actions, particularly within the EU and NATO.



Italo-French relations have been troubled since the 2011 war in Libya. Germany and EU institutions have played an important role in the region to foster stabilisation.



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## Executive Summary

The prevailing geopolitical vision in Italy as regards the regions south and south-east of Europe, centred around the Mediterranean, might be designated the »**enlarged Mediterranean**«. This expression refers not only to the region washed by the historic Mare Nostrum, but also the **Maghreb and Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East** between the Persian Gulf, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

**Italy's national interests** in the enlarged Mediterranean can be summed up as follows:

- stabilising Libya;
- ensuring energy supplies from the Mediterranean;
- protecting maritime trading routes;
- managing and reducing migration flows towards Italy;
- reconstructing a regional order of stability favouring the region's socio-economic development and thus benefiting Italian security and the economy.

Italy regards the enlarged Mediterranean as a foreign and **defence priority** as a result of the national interests at stake there. Broadly speaking, **Italy's strategy** has five main characteristics:

- the search for a politico-diplomatic solution that is, as far as possible, consensual and shared with local and regional players;
- robust, variegated and long-term deployment of the armed forces;
- pursuing an integrated approach that links up the various challenges and locates Italian activities within a regional sustainable-development strategy;
- strict compliance with international law when it comes to deployment of the armed forces;
- a constant search for a multilateral format at the political, diplomatic and military levels.

Especially in the wake of the 2011 revolts, Italy has constantly put issues related to the enlarged Mediterranean on the **NATO and EU agendas**. The relationship with **France** was disrupted by the manner in which Paris pushed for military intervention in **Libya** in 2011.

In this context, **Germany and the EU** institutions could play a determinant role in formulating and implementing a truly European approach to the region, and to Libya in particular, thereby enhancing the chances of building consensus among regional and local players to stabilise the area. The January **2020 Berlin conference** has been viewed as a positive step, and its follow-up by EU institutions has been welcomed by Rome.

## 1 UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINITION

Generally speaking, Italy's foreign and defence policy is traditionally seen as structured around three partially overlapping geopolitical circles.

- (i) The **European circle** relates to the EU integration process and Italy's relations with the main Old Continent partners, connecting up the various policies – trade, migration, neighbourhood and so on – in an increasingly holistic way, together with the intergovernmental and Community levels.
- (ii) The **Transatlantic circle**, on the other hand, looks to the United States and NATO with a clear security and defence emphasis, but also important economic implications.
- (iii) Finally, there is the **Mediterranean circle**. In the absence of regional organisations providing a suitable multilateral pan-Mediterranean framework for Italy's projection

southwards, Rome has traditionally pursued two lines of action: developing bilateral relationships with African and Middle Eastern countries, and working within NATO and the EU to get them to devote more attention and resources to the region's stability and security.

The three circles overlap, not only geographically – many countries on the Mediterranean's north coast are NATO and EU members – but also functionally, because of the intense and variegated network of relationships, such as the US role in the Middle East and France's role in the Sahel and North Africa. From the Italian perspective, these circles clearly place Italy and the protection and/or promotion of its national interests centre-stage.

Against this backdrop, the 2015 International Security and Defence White Paper ushered in an interesting innovation, indicating only two regions of reference for Italy, again partially overlapping. One is the **Euro-Atlantic** area, comprising

Map 1

### Military Operations –

Italy is engaged in 39 missions, 36 out-of-area operations, in 24 countries\*

#### AFRICA

- 400 **Libya** MIASIT (Mission assistance and support)
- 123 **Somalia** (EUTM)
- 92 **Djibouti** (Support base)
- 75 **Egypt** (MFO)
- 290 **Niger** MISIN (Mission assistance and support)
- 12 **Mali** (EUTM)

#### EUROPE AND MEDITERRANEAN

- 754 **Mare Sicuro**
- 520 **EUNAVFOR MED**
- 538 **Kosovo** (KFOR)
- 166 **Latvia** (EFP)
- 259 **Standing Naval Forces NATO** (SNMG2 - SNMCMG2)

#### ASIA AND MIDDLE EAST

- 1216 **Lebanon** (UNIFIL - MIBIL)
- 800 **Afghanistan** (RS)
- 1100 **Irak - Kuwait** (Prima Parthica)
- 126 **UAE** - Al Minhad Task Force Air

#### NATIONAL TERRITORY

7050 **Strade Sicure**

#### OTHER OPERATIONS

about 872

#### ENGAGED PERSONNEL

7,343 **International Operations**  
7,050 **National Operations**

\* <http://www.difesa.it/EN/Operations/Pagine/MilitaryOperations.aspx>

Source: Numbers relating to personnel engaged in mission—both national and international while complying with the authorized force number may change under specific circumstances such as, for example, units rotation.

European and North American countries with NATO and/or EU membership. It presents a high level of security and stability, and well-institutionalised multilateral relations.

The other is the **Euro-Mediterranean** area, comprising five areas ›gravitating‹ around the Mediterranean, albeit with different characteristics: (i) EU nations, (ii) the Western Balkans, (iii) the Black Sea area, (iv) the Mediterranean shores of the Middle East and (v) the Maghreb. In addition, the Mashreq, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf regions are connected to the Euro-Mediterranean area, but distinct from it (Ministry of Defence 2015: 12).

The White Paper notes that, while the Euro-Atlantic area is relatively stable and Italian NATO membership ensures the best possible security and defence framework for Rome, the Euro-Mediterranean region is afflicted by crisis and instability, whose impact on national interests is direct and negative. Thus Italy needs to work for the stabilisation of the Euro-Mediterranean area, for example by being ready to run **crisis management operations or lead international missions** independently (Marrone 2015). The Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Mediterranean areas clearly overlap considerably in Europe, which is thus the focal point of the geopolitical vision expressed by the document.

Five years on from its adoption, the 2015 White Paper certainly remains a reference point for the Italian armed forces, but the wider foreign and defence policy debate has returned to the Mediterranean concept to highlight Europe's southern neighbourhood. This applies to the policy approach presented to parliament on 30 October 2019 by **Defence Minister Lorenzo Guerini**. The minister echoed a concept used in the 2000s by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI 2008), as well as by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (Chief of Defence Staff 2005), and even earlier by the Italian Navy (from the 1990s onwards), namely the ›**enlarged Mediterranean**‹.

This expression refers not only to the region washed by the historic Mare Nostrum but to the Maghreb and the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East between the Persian Gulf, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In this vision, economic, demographic, migratory, energy and political links, as well as crisis and conflicts, make this cross-continental region a single, large geopolitical area despite the great differences within it. It is Italy's geopolitical priority.

As it is an area in which war, crisis and upheaval have been constant since 2011, beginning with Libya and Syria, it is also identified from an Italian and Euro-centric perspective as an ›**arc of instability**‹, stretching from Morocco to Afghanistan, surrounding a relatively stable European continent. As such, it requires constant and a significant Italian military commitment. A glance at map no. 1 of the 34 Italian missions abroad in 2019, involving a total of around 5700 soldiers, clearly shows that the whole of Italy's operational deployment is focused on this arc of instability. In addition, there is an important contribution to NATO deterrence and collective defence measures in the Baltic countries.

Lastly, originating with the debate on NATO's strategic posture, the concept of a ›**southern flank**‹ has entered the Alliance vocabulary, the flip side of the coin to the ›eastern flank‹ which has become a *de facto* priority since 2014 in light of the renewed Russian threat. This concept is obviously Euro- or rather NATO-centric, to an even greater extent than the ›arc of instability‹ concept, and it is frequently linked to the idea of ›projecting stability‹ onto Europe's southern neighbours (NATO 2016).

Of the various concepts used in Italy to identify the region to the south of Europe in geopolitical terms, the ›**enlarged Mediterranean**‹ is less problematic than the other three. Indeed, it is neither Euro- nor NATO-centric in focus and thus implies greater autonomy for a geopolitical area with its own identity and relevance, regardless of whether it is the Atlantic Alliance's ›flank‹. Neither does it limit its geopolitical identification to conflicts and/or instability: however important, these cannot encompass the whole complex set of dynamics that go well beyond the notion of an ›arc of instability‹. Finally, while the idea of a Euro-Mediterranean region has a number of points in its favour, the multiplicity of differences between the EU and the African and Middle Eastern countries mean that the concept is not particularly useful as an analytical tool for understanding the region in geopolitical terms.

Whatever the pros and cons, the term ›enlarged Mediterranean‹ has been used more and more frequently over the past thirty years, partly because of the symbolic and political resonance of the word ›Mediterranean‹. Therefore, it usefully summarises Italy's geopolitical vision of the regions to the south and south-east of Europe,<sup>1</sup> particularly in the absence of a **new White Paper**.

## 2 INTERESTS, PRIORITIES, RISKS AND THREATS

Italian interests in the enlarged Mediterranean are varied, important and structural, whatever the government in power. The main issue is the **maritime trade routes** accessed by Italy's ports, an important avenue for the global import–export trade of Europe's second most important manufacturing economy and a crucial element in Italy's GDP. Furthermore, from Turkey to Egypt via the Gulf, the region is an important Italian **export destination** including in the aerospace, defence and maritime sectors. Considering the ›blue economy‹ as a whole, it accounts for an important share of the nation's economy, from shipbuilding to coastal tourism (Marrone & Nones 2019).

From an energy point of view, a significant portion of national supplies cross the Mediterranean via ship and undersea pipelines linking Italy with Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Albania. Increasingly, significant resources are also being extracted

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is used today by the MAECI, for example in the RomeMED conference co-organised with ISPI.

from the Mediterranean Sea itself, with important offshore gas reservoirs in the eastern part of the basin. It is no accident that the Italian Navy has been at work for years on the Mare Sicuro mission guaranteeing maritime security in the Mediterranean, encompassing trade and **energy activities**. More generally, as already mentioned, the armed forces are involved in many robust crisis management operations in the enlarged Mediterranean. National interests are, in fact, to be protected in a regional context of underlying (in)security and (in)stability for Italy, whereby geographical position and geopolitical interconnections make Rome directly vulnerable to crises and tensions in the area. In other words, Italy is NATO's and the EU's frontline facing threats and risks from Europe's southern neighbours.

In this context, **massive unregulated migratory flows** to Italy are not themselves a threat, but they have proven to be an important source of pressure and destabilisation in socio-political terms. The theme of immigration and the policing of Italy's maritime borders has frequently been central to the political debate and media attention over the past twenty years. Managing the waves of immigrants from the Western Balkans was a foreign policy priority as far back as the 1990s and contributed, among other things, to a series of military missions in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The relative stability of North Africa and the Balkans in the 2000s culminated in important Italian foreign policy successes, such as the 2009 signing of a friendship and cooperation treaty with Libya, and an alleviation of migration pressure on Italy.

This picture changed drastically because of the **2011 Arab revolts**. Above all, because of the **military intervention in Libya pushed by France and the United Kingdom** without proper intra-European coordination or collective stabilisation efforts, either beforehand or afterwards. As a result, the Gaddafi regime was overthrown, but no politico-institutional alternative had been put in place and consequently a state of anarchy ensued. While the number of migrants arriving in Italy via Libya had been around 10,000 in 2010, from 2014 to 2017 approximately 608,000 migrants followed in their wake (Marrone 2019, *Migranti come l'Italia*), an average of over 150,000 per year. Understandably, this further destabilised the situation.

It is no coincidence that immigration has been centre-stage in the Italian political debate in recent years, and it is now a decisive factor in Rome's foreign and defence policy in Libya and beyond. In 2018, the priority accorded to the theme led Italy to repeatedly demand a rotation mechanism for the migrants saved at sea by **EUNAVFORMED Sophia mission**. When its European partners rejected this Italy withdrew from the mission and subsequently its naval component was terminated (Marrone 2019, *Migranti, chi controlla*). Generally speaking, Italy's approach to the southern shores of the Mediterranean has involved agreements with the Sahara and Sahel transit countries and local players in Libya to manage and contain migration, as well as the launch of a military mission in Niger (Gaiani 2018). In the context of crisis and war in the enlarged Mediterranean, unregulated immigration is

increasingly considered in terms of the threat of organised crime and the infiltration and/or growth of **Islam-inspired international terrorism**. This perception of the risks and threats is widely visible in electoral trends, according to various opinion polls, which mention terrorism, energy supply, Libya and migration as national security priorities (eg., *Gli Italiani e la Difesa* 2019).

Summing up, Italian **foreign and defence policy objectives** in the enlarged Mediterranean today and in recent years include the following:

- ensuring energy supplies from the Mediterranean;
- protecting maritime trade routes;
- stabilising Libya;
- managing and reducing migration flows to Italy;
- reconstructing a regional stability order favouring the region's socio-economic development, thus benefiting Italian security and economy.

In terms of national priorities, it should also be underlined that, since the 1990s, Italian foreign and defence policy has focused to a greater extent on the **Balkans and North Africa**, theatres of a great deal of military intervention. This commitment continues today, also within the EU enlargement process towards former Yugoslav countries and Albania, considered by Rome as fundamental to stabilising and developing the region. In recent years, however, attention to the **eastern Mediterranean** has also increased as a result of the discovery and exploitation of important gas reserves (Colantoni & Sartori: 2016), and of the subsequent revival of interest by Moscow in an area that has the potential to provide an alternative to Russian energy supplies for Europe. At the same time, Italy's activities in the **Sahel** have also grown recently, with a strengthened diplomatic and operational presence, mainly aimed at combating the smuggling of migrants. It is not coincidental that Italy currently contributes to G5 Sahel, too, with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

This combination of interests in the enlarged Mediterranean is considered a **top priority** over other risks or threats within the international security environment for two reasons. First, rightly or wrongly, it is believed in Italy that developments in the Asia-Pacific region or the Arctic, for example, have a lesser and more indirect impact on national interests than the challenges from the enlarged Mediterranean. This perception once again is confirmed by opinion surveys. In this context, until 2019 the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative was perceived largely in economic rather than security terms. Second, it is precisely in the enlarged Mediterranean, Italy's **closest neighbours**, that the country feels most able to make an impact and get greater and more direct 'returns on its investments' at the political, military and economic levels. This geographic prioritising was previously sanctioned by the 2015 White Paper concerning the use of the armed forces, defining the Euro-Mediterranean region as the priority ambit for Italian military intervention (Ministry of Defence 2015).

This priority is also **reflected in academia and think tanks**. For instance, IAI has a well-established Mediterra-

nean and Middle East research programme; FIERI focuses on important regional issues such as migration; CESPI has undertaken research projects on Africa; and since 2015, ISPI, together with the MAECI, has organised the prestigious RomeMED conference focused on the Mediterranean. The Ministry of Defence's in-house think tank, CASD, also finances research projects on Mediterranean issues, while Rome hosts the NATO Defence College, including its research division. Moreover, regional politico-security issues are addressed by university research centres, such as Sapienza's Centro di Ricerca e Cooperazione con l'Eurasia, il Mediterraneo e l'Africa Sub-sahariana (CEMAS), and covered by specialised press, such as *Limes*, *Rivista Italiana Difesa*, *Airpress*, *AffarInternazionali* and *Geopolitica.info*.

### 3 STRATEGIES

At government level the most important strategic document on the enlarged Mediterranean was the 2015 White Paper. This was the last to be presented to the **Supreme Defence Council**, the highest constitutional body supervising Italy's defence policy. This body is chaired by the head of state, who is also supreme commander of the armed forces, and includes the prime minister, the ministers of defence, foreign affairs, interior and treasury, as well as the chief of defence staff and the head of the Italian intelligence services. It convenes periodically, as well as in times of crisis, in order to supervise and provide guidelines to the government's defence policy. The policy guidelines presented by defence minister Guerini in 2019 (Ministry of Defence 2019, Linee) show a marked continuity with the White Paper and the policies of the Italian governments of the past decade. Additionally, the 2017 national energy strategy has strong implications for the enlarged Mediterranean in virtue of the importance of the energy resources present there, but it does not focus on foreign and defence policy. The subsequent parliamentary resolutions, as well as the positions tabled by Italy within NATO, the EU and, recently, the OCSE – including the Parliamentary Assembly of the Atlantic Alliance (Mancilli 2016) – all fit fairly well into an overall approach with the following five characteristics.

First, the search for a politico-diplomatic solution shared and agreed as far as possible by local and regional players, possibly within a broad multilateral framework. This, for example, has been the approach adopted by the UN diplomat of Italian origin Staffan De Mistura, who has also been MAECI Deputy Minister, when he served as UN special envoy in Iraq and then Afghanistan. More importantly, precisely in the Libyan case, Rome first supported a national reconciliation process under the UN aegis, which led to the Shikrat agreement and the formation of a government led by Serraj in Tripoli. Later, when faced with an armed offensive against the latter by forces gathered around Haftar's leadership, the Italian government began a dialogue with both for the purpose of blocking a dangerous escalation. It also organised an international conference in Palermo in 2018 at which Serraj and Haftar met (Il Sole 24 Ore 2018).

The second characteristic of the Italian approach in the enlarged Mediterranean is a robust, structured and prolonged use of the armed forces for both foreign- and defence-policy purposes. In contrast to other European countries, such as Germany, Italy has taken part, right from the start, in all the main Western military actions from Lebanon to Libya, Iraq to Afghanistan and the Balkans, frequently taking on a leadership role. The Italian armed forces have engaged in combat in both air- and land-based campaigns, marking itself out, in particular, in stabilisation, defence capacity-building and security force assistance operations. The latter was also enacted by the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (SFA CoE) set up in the Italian army in 2019 (Pioppi 2019). The SFA CoE trains NATO military forces for deployment in crisis areas or partner countries to build up the capacity and institutions of local armed and security forces.

A third constant in Italy's contribution to enlarged Mediterranean security is its pursuit of an integrated approach linking up the various challenges and locating Italian activities within the framework of a regional sustainable development strategy. It is an holistic vision focusing on 'human security', which encompasses political solutions, humanitarian assistance, civil reconstruction, institution-building and economic development (MAECI 2017). Indeed, Italian participation in both NATO and EU missions has frequently featured strong civilian–military cooperation. Moreover, Italy has worked in crisis zones and fragile states in the enlarged Mediterranean with a kind of 'whole of society' approach, including the activities of a vast network of NGOs of various sorts and sizes. Here the MAECI plays an important role by blending together diplomatic action and the development aid portfolio. It has traditionally cooperated well with the Ministry of Defence on the ground, although sometimes the convergence between defence policy and development policy has not been easy. The landscape of Italian NGOs is obviously more variegated, and while many of them have established cooperative relations with the armed forces, others prefer a more neutral and autonomous profile. Interestingly, the Italian army has established a study centre focused on post-conflict operations, carrying out research on these issues and training both military and civilian personnel (Ministry of Defence 2019, Post-Conflict).

Fourthly, Italian military action has closely complied with international law. This is one of the motives behind Italian non-intervention in Syria where the situation is so fluid and controversial as to raise numerous questions about the legitimacy of military action by third-party states, as well as doubts over its effectiveness.

The last, but not least, element in the Italian approach to this region is a constant search for a multilateral format for its actions at the political, diplomatic and military levels. In particular there has been a marked tendency to put it at the centre of the NATO, EU and, to a lesser extent, OCSE agendas, in the hope of coordinating member states' policies and channelling international energies into stabilising the enlarged Mediterranean. Moreover, it should be noted that Italy is a parliamentary democracy featuring a multiparty sys-



tem, coalition governments and prime ministers with limited command over their own ministers, not to mention the law-makers supporting their government. In such a polycentric system, the EU and NATO have frequently been viewed as a reference point in efforts to find a national synthesis of the strategies being pushed by the various political-institutional players.

## 4 INSTITUTIONS AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Italy can be seen, and tends to perceive itself, as a ›middle-ranking power‹ with interests in various parts of the world – especially given its need to import raw materials and energy resources and export the products of its national economy – but lacking in a great power's ability to ensure autonomously that its national interests are protected and promoted. For this reason, Rome has sought ›asymmetrical alliances‹ with more powerful nations since the end of the Second World War, and in some ways since unification in the nineteenth century. This has meant the United States, first and foremost, with bilateral and multilateral alliances committing it to regions and/or dossiers of importance to Italy (Colombo & Bonvicini 2012). This dynamic has been very important in the enlarged Mediterranean until very recently: the United States has generally been considered the ally of reference and a hegemonic power in the Mediterranean Sea. This was the backdrop to the intense bilateral cooperation, in particular, with the second Barack Obama administration over stabilising Libya. Currently, however, Italy is experiencing a difficult process of coming to terms with President Trump's intention of pulling out of US commitments in Africa and the Middle East as rapidly as possible, whatever the costs. Such US retrenchment has seen drastic changes of direction, such as Trump's opening up to Haftar in the midst of the 2019 war in Libya, and his sudden abandonment of temporary partners, such as the Syrian Kurds.

The status of the United States hitherto as a reference point in regional security was one of the main reasons prompting Italy to insist, in the NATO context, that the latter make a greater commitment to its ›southern flank‹, thus channelling US weight in a multilateral framework. A further motive is the aforementioned preference for multilateral dialogue: as NATO is the only security organisation in which all the main European countries, the United States and Turkey are represented, it would be sensible and productive to launch a strategic dialogue among the allies on regional stabilisation.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, by means of various partnerships such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO brings countries on the Mediterranean's two shores into dialogue. These are the deep-rooted reasons for Italian efforts to persuade NATO to adopt a ›360 degree‹

approach to the security challenges of its members, from both south and east (Lucioli 2019). These efforts were to some extent supported by other southern members, such as Spain, Portugal and Greece, and have led, among other things, to the creation at allied Joint Force Command in Naples of a Hub for the South (Pioppi 2018). The Hub's mandate is to establish dialogue with non-governmental entities in Africa and the Middle East and acquire a better understanding of the local situation. This is to be disseminated within NATO to help to frame a suitable approach to the region. A political impetus in the direction of persuading the Atlantic Alliance to pay more attention to the Mediterranean has been constant in all Italian governments over the past decade.<sup>3</sup> There are, however, limits to what NATO can do in the enlarged Mediterranean in the face of mainly non-military challenges (Lucarelli et al. 2017). This is partly because the lion's share of the required action concerns crisis management, stabilisation and partnership, and not the collective defence that has once again been centre-stage in the Alliance's agenda since 2014. Moreover, NATO does not enjoy a favourable perception in North Africa and Middle East, also because of the outcome of Western intervention in Libya in 2011 (Marroni & Muti 2019). Given currently foreseeable short- to medium-term conditions, NATO can and must play an important but not a leading role, in close cooperation with the EU (Ibid.).

The European Union is viewed positively in Italy as a player capable of using a wide range of tools, from military and civilian missions to the European Neighbourhood Policy, for the stabilisation of the enlarged Mediterranean. It is no accident that Rome contributes to the EU Trust Fund for Stability, which addresses the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa). Overall, in NATO, Rome has traditionally nurtured expectations that American leadership would contain the ambitions of the individual European powers, levelling the playing field and thus mitigating some of Italy's weaknesses. This cannot take place within the EU framework in the absence of an hegemonic power accepted as such by all member states. However, Rome has frequently looked to EU institutions with similar expectations, while recognising the importance of the Franco-German driving force in European policies and seeking to remain connected to it, promoting further development of European integration. In other words, via negotiations, treaties, sovereignty sharing, and the attribution of competencies, power and budget at the supranational or at least intergovernmental level, Rome works for fruitful convergence and limits unilateral action by individual member states. The appointment of Federica Mogherini as High Representative/Vice President and the whole EU Global Strategy process go well with this overarching Italian approach to the EU. The first unilateralism to be contained is that of France, as Paris has found it easier to exert leadership since the ›Brexit‹

<sup>2</sup> This is not exactly the case for OSCE because the organisation focuses on security in Europe, while the stabilisation effort is directed mainly towards Africa and the Middle East. However, the Western Balkans, for example, is a region in which the EU, NATO and OSCE should play a synergic role for regional stability and development.

<sup>3</sup> Including the first Giuseppe Conte government made up of Lega and Movimento 5 Stelle. See, for example, Ministry of Defence (2018, 26 July), Audizione del Ministro per la Difesa sulle linee programmatiche del Dicastero presso le Commissioni congiunte 4<sup>a</sup> (Difesa) del Senato della Repubblica e IV (Difesa) della Camera dei deputati.

referendum and the absence of the United Kingdom from EU decision-making processes.

In light of America's ever more tangible disengagement from Africa and the Middle East, Italy is currently taking stock of the need to invest greater energies in European defence, including in the perspective of military intervention in the EU's southern neighbourhood. It is no accident that, since 2016, Rome not only has supported important EU initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) (Marrone 2018), but has also played an active part in a series of European missions, both civilian and military, from Mali to Somalia.

Furthermore, in September 2019 Rome joined the French-led European Intervention Initiative with an explicit focus on Mediterranean security. Early Italian doubts about an initiative outside the EU (and NATO) framework, promoted somewhat opaquely by Paris, were superseded for several reasons. One of the main reasons is that Italian interests are better served by prior discussion with European allies on potential military action in the enlarged Mediterranean, also to avoid repeating the negative experience of the 2011 war in Libya with its unilateral French action and well-known epilogue. It is precisely Italy's troubled relationship with France and the still open Libyan wound (Tazloe & Marrone 2019) – Libya has been transformed from an important and constructive partner to a source of instability and insecurity for Italy and the Mediterranean – that have cast a negative shadow over the public debate on the best strategy to adopt in the region. Italian resentment over Macron's 2017–18 initiatives, which legitimised Haftar as a player on a par with Serraj, is one example, to which Italy responded with the previously cited Palermo conference.

The multilateral framework that is important to Italy in the enlarged Mediterranean context goes beyond NATO, the EU and the European Intervention Initiative. Indeed, in 2004 the 5+5 Defence Initiative was set up as a forum for dialogue between western Mediterranean nations, with five from the northern shores (France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) and five from the southern shores (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia). It aims to promote concrete cooperative activities regarding, for example, maritime security and surveillance, air safety, military support for civil protection, education, training and research (Ministry of Defence 2019, Iniziativa). Broadly speaking, its ultimate goal is to share knowledge and strategies regarding common threats, and to promote interoperability and confidence-building among participants. In recent years, Italy has made considerable efforts in this regard: Rome actively managed its 2018 rotating presidency (Carteny 2018) and led 11 of the Initiative's 53 actions in 2019 (Ministry of Defence 2019, Iniziativa). This framework is promising and significant from the Italian point of view as a cross-Mediterranean bridge. Rome would, in fact, prefer a much broader approach, considering that Italy straddles the western and eastern Mediterranean, just like Libya, and that Italian interests in Egypt, and generally east of Malta, are strong and growing because of the energy developments mentioned above. Accordingly, Italy has sup-

ported the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue which began with the Barcelona process and continued in the Union for the Mediterranean, also hosting the permanent secretariat of the related parliamentary assembly (MAECI 2018). However, this Union is currently viewed as low impact, also because it is to some extent blocked by the disagreements among its members on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Lastly, more recently, Italy has highlighted the Mediterranean dimension in the OCSE ambit, too, using its rotating presidency of the Organisation. For example, in October 2019 at the Tirana Mediterranean conference Italian deputy foreign minister Marina Sereni invited participating countries to step up their efforts to create a renewed and deeper partnership with a long-term vision (MAECI 2019). This may be the starting point for further steps, although at the moment their fate remains unclear.

## 5 PROBLEMS, POTENTIAL AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRUSSELS AND BERLIN

In recent years, Italian efforts in the relevant international organisations and multilateral forums, as well as with the main European countries and the United States, have not borne fruit, as Rome had hoped, as regards a collective approach to stabilising the enlarged Mediterranean. The result has been a certain frustration on the part of Italy's political leadership and public opinion, above all as regards management of migration flows, the Libyan situation and, in general, the lack of understanding abroad of Italy's concerns (Taylor 2019).

Three closely interrelated issues underlie the Euro-Atlantic inability to effectively take on the problems of Europe's southern neighbours, and the resulting Italian worries:

- (i) The American disengagement from the enlarged Mediterranean under the Trump administration. While the Obama administration consulted European allies on the US retreat from this region and agreed the way ahead, the Republican president has not done so. This lack of consultation has led to serious local and transatlantic tensions and increased regional instability and has opened up vacuums that have been filled by non-Western powers, such as Russia and China, as well as by Islamic extremists and by increasingly aggressive states from the region.
- (ii) The lack of a collective European response to American disengagement, one taking collective responsibility for crisis and instability within the EU, NATO and OCSE ambits or even in ad hoc formats.
- (iii) Underlying this European failure in the enlarged Mediterranean, together with other significant factors, is the uncooperative relationship between France and Italy, stoked by French unilateralist tendencies and Italian weakness in tackling complex regional security.

These three issues have exacerbated an inherently unstable, conflictual and problematic regional context since 2011, marked by rivalry between states, population increase, political turmoil, growing socio-economic inequalities and considerable interference by external powers.

It is now urgent that Europe addresses the multiple challenges to its security from its southern neighbours, and the potential to do so exists by means of greater European and Euro-Atlantic cooperation. The starting point is to take stock of the fact that little can be asked of local players while European states pursue divergent national agendas (Lucarelli et al 2019). In this sense, the Italian, German and European contributions to the problems of the region begin in Europe, namely from a strategic dialogue culminating in a truly shared approach to specific dossiers and/or regions, starting with Libya. Germany and the EU could do a great deal to encourage France and Italy to make up their differences and make common cause in order to exert a greater impact on local and regional dynamics.

They could take on a leadership role in the search for a political solution to the region's security and stability problems, beginning with Libya, within the framework of a responsible and long-term vision, incentivising constructive behaviour and penalising resistance by local players, whether state or non-state. Libya is a key country in North Africa and the Sahel, in terms of its interest to Italy, France and Europe. It is also a case in which it is unlikely that extra-European powers, including the United States, will play a significant and constructive role. After international conferences on Libya organised first in Paris and then in Palermo did not bring the expected results, the 2020 Berlin conference has been a positive step in the right direction. But its impact will depend on the ability of Berlin, Paris and Rome to forge a truly common European approach to the Libyan crisis. These three countries could act as permanent contact group, borrowing from the positive experience of many years of dialogue with Iran implemented by France, Germany and Great Britain – but this time fully including the EU High Representative in the group. Moving forward firmly and coherently a shared European policy on Libya would probably render strategic dialogue with key regional powers such as Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, as well as Russia and the United States, much more fruitful.

The case of Syria is different, considering the excessive influence of Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, along with Europe's overall absence to date. It is a matter of kick-starting a long and cautious mediation process among the interests and powers involved in order to reach a regional solution to a war that has so far been fought, by proxy or directly, between internal and external powers.

Beyond the Libyan and Syrian conflicts, the EU could and should systematise its policies and better mobilise available resources for a partnership with African states that takes realistic account of reciprocal interests, as well as geopolitical competition from China and Russia. In recent years, downstream from the 2016 EU Global Strategy, various EU sectoral

and regional strategies have been elaborated, from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa, constituting a robust strategic vision of Europe's southern neighbours, shared with member states who helped to adopt them. What remains is to enact this vision with appropriate political will, tools and resources for collective EU action. Making sure that European countries do not split once again along old colonial fractures in an era in which no European country is a global power on a par with China, and rather adopting a long-term multilateral approach together – including the use of armed forces – would be a step forward in the challenging process of stabilising the enlarged Mediterranean. And not only in this region, given that Russian activism is increasingly connecting up Europe's southern and eastern neighbourhoods. Therefore, adopting a 360-degree approach would be in the interests of all member states and the EU institutions.

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# SECURITY POLICY IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

## A view from Rome



The enlarged Mediterranean region is Italy's top priority. National interests at stake include protecting energy supplies and maritime routes, as well as stabilizing Libya and reducing migration flows.



Italy usually looks for politico-diplomatic solutions, sustained by prolonged military intervention. Rome always looks for a multilateral format for its actions, particularly within the EU and NATO.



Italo-French relations have been troubled since the 2011 war in Libya. Germany and EU institutions played an important role in building consensus in Europe and the region for a stabilization process.