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Italy's Defence Policy: What to Expect from the 2018 Elections?

Italy's foreign and defence policy is traditionally characterised by a strong involvement in the transatlantic alliance and the support of a joint European Foreign and Security policy. Italy provides an important number of troops in European-led and NATO-led missions around the globe, establishing itself as one of the largest troop-provider worldwide. Furthermore, Italy sees itself as a bridge between Europe and the other Mediterranean countries.

With the elections of the new Italian parliament being only five weeks away, an analysis of the direction that Italian foreign and defence policy is headed can be useful. This paper will thus present an overview of the recent Italian defence policies and depict the post-electoral scenario on this matter. Indeed, it will help understand whether Italy's European and international partners can count on further engagement of this important Southern European state or a change in strategy is on the horizon.

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Italians will head to the polls on 4 March 2018 to elect both houses of parliament, the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Uncertainty surrounding the results is significant. Yet, a strong line of continuity is expected in Italian (foreign) and defence policy with regards to key issues such as European defence cooperation and integration, commitments to NATO, military operations in Africa and the greater Middle East – including on migration control – and defence spending.

Recent polls predict that 35 to 40 percent of votes will flow to the conservative centre-right coalition formed by Forza Italia (FI), Lega and Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI)¹ together with a smaller gathering of Christian-democrats which have supported the latest Italian centre-left governments. According to pollsters, the populist Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) ranks second, securing between 25 and 30 percent of the vote. Ita-

¹ See for example: "Sondaggi, il Pd ancora più giù: è al 22% (ma gli alleati crescono). Il M5s fermo al 28, centrodestra davanti di 10 punti", in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 10 January 2018, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/?p=4085266>.



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ly's centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) and its smaller allies, in power since 2013, are together polled at 25-30 percent. Finally, the leftist grouping, Free and Equal (*Liberi e Uguale*, LeU), is predicted to receive around 5-8 percent of the vote, and has already ruled out any coalition alliance with the PD.

Italy's electoral law stipulates that two-thirds of seats in both chambers are allocated proportionally to party lists that have secured over 3 percent of the popular vote. Another third is won through a first-pass-the-post system involving more than 300 constituencies across Italy. Such a mixed system puts a premium on larger coalitions – i.e. the conservative camp – by under-representing smaller parties such as LeU which has no chance of winning any constituency.²

As a result, two scenarios are likely: either the conservatives get an absolute majority in both chambers, thereby forming a government, or they win the elections while falling short of such a majority. In the second scenario, the option of a "grand coalition" government between the PD and Italy's mainstream forces in the conservative camp – Forza Italia, the Christian-democrats and, perhaps, FdI – will probably be pursued. In both cases, the populist M5S will remain in the opposition.

Against this backdrop, it is worthwhile to analyse the recent defence policies supported by conservative forces and the PD as a means to predict the direction Italian defence policy may take following the elections. Analysing policies is preferable compared to a focus on the often contradictory statements made by political leaders during a heated electoral campaign. Such an approach highlights a broad consensus on Italian (foreign) and defence policy over the last decade under successive executives: Paolo Gentiloni, Matteo Renzi, Enrico Letta, Mario Monti and Silvio Berlusconi.

First, and despite the recent growth of euro-scepticism in Italy, European defence cooperation and integration enjoys substantial support from the political establishment and mainstream public opinion, on both normative and practical grounds.³ It is not by chance that the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) has been perceived in Italy as a positive breakthrough towards more effective forms of European defence.⁴ Such a consensus reflects the active support by the Italian military, diplomatic corps, civil servants, defence industry and expert community, which promote this issue at a working level and within various Italian institutions, thus influencing politicians and the executive.

Alongside this pro-European stance, a favourable "Atlanticist" attitude towards the US and NATO represents another traditional pillar of Italy's (foreign) and defence policy. Between 2014 and 2017, Italy grew to become the second largest contributor in terms of troops to the US-led coalition to counter the self-proclaimed Islamic State, with a military commitment of about 1,500 soldiers – including special forces and trainers –, around 420 land vehicles and an air task force of 17 assets including fighter aircraft, UAVs, helicopters and re-

² See for example this simulation of seats allocation: Istituto Ixè, *Simulazione dei collegi alla Camera e al Senato*, 30 December 2017, <http://www.istitutoixe.it/?p=3402>.

³ Alessandro Marrone, "Italy, A Steady Supporter of European Defence", in *EU Forum*, 6 November 2017, <https://www.clingendael.org/node/8631>.

⁴ Marco Bresolin, "Nasce la Difesa europea, che cosa prevede e come funziona", in *La Stampa*, 13 November 2017, <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/11/13/esteri/nasce-la-difesa-europea-che-cosa-prevede-e-come-funziona-UeaKn5TWqNTJGdRME6oqyK/pagina.html>; Beda Romano "Nasce 'PeSCO', nuova cooperazione militare UE per la difesa europea", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 12 November 2017, <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2017-11-12/nasce-pesco-nuova-cooperazione-militare-ue-la-difesa-europea-105722.shtml>.

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fuelling tankers.⁵ Concerning NATO, Italy has strongly supported the reassurance, deterrence and defence measures decided in 2014 in light of Russia's aggressive posture. Rome volunteered to take the lead of the Very Rapid Joint Task Force in 2018, has repeatedly ensured air policing of the Baltic republics and contributed 200 troops to the allied Enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia. At the same time, Italy has insisted that the Alliance contribute more to the stabilization of the southern neighbourhood, and obtained the establishment of a "hub for the South" at NATO's Joint Force Command in Naples.⁶ These policies have not been criticized neither by the PD nor the conservative camp.

Finally in Afghanistan, which has been the most demanding operational theatre for the US and NATO over the last fifteen years, Italy continues to be the largest European contributor to the Resolute Support mission with above 1,000 troops – twice the size of the UK's contingent.⁷ In both the Iraqi and Afghan theatres, Italy is set to decrease its military commitment in accordance with agreements with allies, a course of action accepted by both the PD and mainstream conservative parties.

Together with the long standing military operations in Europe, Afghanistan, Lebanon and the Horn of Africa, the last parliament approved three missions aimed at countering, in different ways, people smugglers and illegal migration.

These missions include EUNAVFOR MED Sophia, an anti-smuggling operation launched by the EU in 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea to replace the previous Italian-only operation Mare Nostrum. Commanded by Admiral Enrico Credendino, the operational headquarters mission is located in Rome.

The second mission is a national one, active since July 2017, and aimed at strengthening the Libyan coastguard via capacity building, training, intelligence and logistics assistance. On December 2017, the mission was merged with another Italian land mission in Libya, Operation Ippocrate, ongoing since 2016, with the aim to provide comprehensive assistance to the UN-backed Libyan government in Tripoli.⁸

The third mission, approved in December 2017, sees the deployment of more than 470 troops and 200 vehicles to Niger, alongside France, Germany and the US in the framework of G5 Sahel. The main goal is to enhance local counter-terrorism and border control capabilities, efforts that fit into Italy's willingness to enhance cooperation with France and Germany on European defence, as well as with Rome's energy interests in the region.⁹

These missions are meant to answer domestic demands to reduce and control the extraordinary migratory flows experienced by Italy since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. With more than 700,000 people arriving on Italian shores over the last five years, efforts to limit migration to Italy and Europe enjoy broad support among the Italian electorate and political establishment. Indeed, the military mission to Niger has been approved with

⁵ Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Prima Parthica: Contributo nazionale*, https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Prima_Parthica/Pagine/contributo_nazionale.aspx

⁶ Carolina Polito and Paola Sartori, "Italy, the North Atlantic Alliance and the 2018 NATO Summit", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 17|33 (21 December 2017), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/8643>.

⁷ NATO, *Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan*, 10 November 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm.

⁸ Pietro Batacchi, "Più incisivo l'impegno italiano in Libia", in *RID Portale Difesa*, 8 January 2018, http://www.portaledifesa.it/index~phppag,3_id,2099.html.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Darnis, "Niger: la missione militare italiana, un nuovo corso", in *AffarInternazionali*, 21 December 2017, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=67675>.

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the support not only of the PD but also of conservative parties such as Forza Italia and FdI, while Lega abstained.¹⁰

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Broad support for migration control is also reflected by the fact that Italy's current Minister of the Interior, Marco Minniti – from the PD – benefits from bipartisan support for his approach to the migration issue.¹¹ Through a multifaceted policy combining a mixture of restrictive measures with longer-term development efforts targeting origin and transit countries in Africa, Minniti's policies, while criticized by many, have resulted in diminished arrivals.¹² The former approach is likely to dominate over the latter in the event that elections result in a new government with the conservatives in the driving seat.

The last example of continuity between the conservatives and PD regards the quantity and quality of military spending. Over the last decade, the Italian defence budget has stagnated regardless of the parties in power.¹³ In the meantime, some reforms of the military have been undertaken thanks to the strategic outlook provided by the 2015 *White Paper on International Security and Defence*.¹⁴ However, much of the reforms have not been implemented due to a lack of political will.

This situation is likely to continue after the next elections, independently from the makeup of the government. The need for reforms remain and both the conservatives and the PD are not opposed to them, but neither consider these a priority compared to other dossiers. As a result, while defence budgets are likely to remain stable and stagnate, the quality and the extent of further reforms to the Italian armed forces will largely depend upon the commitment of the new Minister of Defence and his/her staff – as happened with the praiseworthy, albeit still incomplete, initiatives contained in the 2015 White Paper initiated by Minister of Defence Roberta Pinotti, the first comprehensive review of Italian defence policy in thirty years.

Ultimately, the next general elections are unlikely to bring revolutions to Italian defence policy. Against the backdrop of an increasingly conflictual and uncertain international system, such continuity will positively characterize Italy's approach towards European defence and NATO, with the possibility of an enhanced focus on Africa and the Mediterranean. While it will also likely result in few advancements on key reforms to the Italian armed forces, on the whole the 2018 Italian elections appear set to produce a glass half-full scenario characterized by continuity in Italy's defence commitments and responsibilities.

¹⁰ Angelo Amante, "Via libera alla missione in Niger, il sì di Forza Italia a Gentiloni", in *Il Giornale*, 29 December 2017, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/node/1478374>.

¹¹ As an example of the broad consensus towards the Minister of Interior, for example the participation of Minniti to the events organized by the newspaper *Il Foglio*, politically close to Forza Italia: "Minniti lancia il suo manifesto: 'L'Italia prima di tutto'", in *Il Foglio*, 22 October 2017, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2017/10/22/news/minniti-lancia-il-suo-manifesto-l-italia-prima-di-tutto-159160>.

¹² Costanza Hermanin, "Immigration Policy in Italy: Problems and Perspectives", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 17|35 (December 2017), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/8554>.

¹³ Paola Sartori and Giovanni Finarelli Baldassarre, *Defence budgets and industry*, Rome, IAI, July 2017, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/702>.

¹⁴ Alessandro Marrone, "The White Paper, A Strategy for Italy's Defence Policy", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 15|09e (May 2015), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/4239>.

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