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LOOKING SOUTHWARD. ITALY AND MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY (1980-88)

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Abstract

This essay examines Italian military activism in the 1980s, that stood in stark discontinuity with the military posture adopted by the country since the defeat in World War II. From 1980 to 1988, Italy deployed its Armed Forces in several strategic theatres in the "enlarged Mediterranean", rediscovering the use of military force as a foreign policy tool. The matter has been largely overlooked by historians (primarily due to the inaccessibility of archival sources), but the international role of Italy in the 1980s cannot be correctly understood without taking into account the military variable. The issue will be analysed from three interpretative angles: bipolarity, agency and consistency – which recall the three level of historiographical analysis: international, regional and local. The main goal is to unveil the reasons behind such an unprecedented turn, which radically changed Italian approach towards security issues in the following decades.

Keywords: Italy, security, Mediterranean, bipolarity, agency, consistency

Introduction

Article 11 of the Italian Republican Constitution of 1948 declares that "Italy repudiates war […] as a means to resolve international disputes." The country adhered to this

principle consistently for over thirty years after the end of WWII, largely renouncing a proactive military policy—except for fulfilling its role within the NATO collective defence framework and participating in occasional peacekeeping missions under UN aegis. However, in the final decade of the Cold War, Italy's abstention from the use of force as a foreign policy tool abruptly ended. Throughout the 1980s, Italy entered a phase of unprecedented military activism, radically altering its national approach to security. After three decades of focusing almost exclusively on its north-eastern border – defended in anticipation of a potential Soviet invasion of Western Europe – Italy shifted its strategic focus southwards, towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Recently, Italy's international role during the 1980s has attracted growing interest from historians.[1] Despite this renewed focus, issues such as defence, national security, and military policy remain underexplored in historiographical debates. Nevertheless, this assessment is not entirely accurate: Italy's role in the Atlantic Alliance has been the subject of relatively extensive literature, with particular emphasis on its acceptance of Euromissiles (1979–83).[2] In recent years, Italian involvement in Beirut within the framework of the Multinational Force (MNF) has also been thoroughly examined.[3] However, Italian military policy in the 1980s encompassed far more than Euromissiles and Lebanon. From guaranteeing Maltese neutrality (1980) to handling tensions between Libya and the United States in the Central Mediterranean (1981–86), from joining the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai (1981–82) to conducting naval missions in the Red Sea (1984) and the Persian Gulf (1987–88), Italy deployed its armed forces across several strategic theatres in the "enlarged Mediterranean".[4] In hindsight, this was the most intense period of military projection abroad during the entire bipolar era. Nonetheless, minimal – if any – academic literature has dealt with these missions. There is, therefore, an evident historiographical lacuna that warrants attention.

The main reason of such a gap is the struggle to access valid primary sources, which has brought historians to – perhaps too hastily – leave in the background the military dimension of Italy's international policy of the 1980s. This paper – which summaries the findings of my PhD dissertation – will overcome such hindrances by drawing on a diverse and extensive range of civil documents from various Italian archives (both public and private) and foreign collections, including the Archives Diplomatiques in

1. For instance, see the recent issue of *Rivista Italiana di Storia Internazionale* [6, no. 1 (Bologna, 2024)], entirely focused on the topic.

2. Leopoldo Nuti, "Italy Italy and the Battle of the Euromissiles: The Deployment of the US BGM-109 G 'Gryphon', 1979-83," in *The last decade of the Cold War. From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation*, ed. Olav Njølstad (London: Frank Cass, 2007), 277-300

3. Silvio Labbate, L'Italia e la missione di pace in Libano, 1982-1984. Alla ricerca di una nuova centralità nel Mediterraneo (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2022); Luca Gorgolini, In missione per la pace. Le Forze Armate italiane in Libano (1982-1984) (Bologna: Clueb, 2023)

4. Fabio De Ninno and Federica Cavo, eds., Il Mediterraneo allargato e l'Italia. Dalla Guerra fredda al mondo post-bipolare (Roma: Viella, 2024)

Nantes, the National Archives in Richmond, and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. However, since addressing in detail the several missions undertaken in the decade would require excessive space, the paper will cut through the conclusions and try to unfold the overall rationale behind such military activism. Methodologically, the essay follows the "strategic history" approach developed by historian Colin Gray, which examines the use of military power as a means to accomplish political goals. Differently said, rather than compose a history of national military institutions *per se*, the dissertation provides an analysis of the Italian Armed Forces as a foreign policy tool.[5] Indeed, past scholars have primarily examined Italy's military policy as a mere variable of national foreign policy, focusing on how existing diplomatic courses determined national security decisions, and not *vice versa*. Seldom have the operative aspects – i.e., the actual employment in peace-, crisis-time and warfare of military power – been analysed, and how the unfolding of military missions abroad affected instead national foreign policy.

From the historiographical debate, three keywords have emerged as the most promising to understand the reason why Italy started such an unprecedented phase of military activism: "agency", "consistency" and "bipolarity". By investigating the agency, the paper assesses whether internal or external factors played a greater role in ceasing Italy's self-imposed abstention from using military power abroad. Specifically, it will weigh the respective impact of internal developments (such as the appearance new political leaders or the end of 1970s social turmoil) and external factors (like U.S. influence over Italian politics or the 1980s "crisis of multilateralism"). The second analytical perspective tests the consistency of Italy's military activism, questioning whether it followed a coherent and proactive rationale or was merely a reaction to external events beyond its control. In simpler terms, whether Italian security policy during the 1980s has been a consistent or erratic phenomenon. Finally, the third keyword explores the relationship between Italy's national security and Cold War dynamics. Scholars have argued that Italy (and the Mediterranean as a whole) were already transitioning towards a post-bipolar world as early as 1979. Nonetheless, the Reagan Administration kept the Cold War somehow artificially alive in the Mediterranean and the Middle East throughout the 1980s, as a means to protect and advance U.S. national interests. The essay therefore examines the impact of this capital incongruity on Italian security decision-makers, and how they adapted national military policy to handle such divergent forces.

Bipolarity

The most concerning consequence – from Italy's standpoint – of the "long crisis of 1979–1980"[6] was the U.S. strategic reorientation towards the Persian Gulf: a process

5. Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations. An Introduction to Strategic History* (Routledge: London, 2007)

6. Martin Beck "Security Threats from the Southern Mediterranean as Viewed by Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the "Long Year" of 1979 and the 2010s," in *Transnational Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean*, ed. Robert Mason (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 19-39

initiated in response to the Iranian Revolution, accelerated by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and sealed by the release of the "Carter Doctrine" in January 1980. Indeed, the bulk of U.S. military forces destined for the new strategic theatre (soon to be bureaucratically reified into the U.S. Central Command) came from the VI Fleet stationed in the Mediterranean basin. In the early 1980s, therefore, the American military presence in NATO's Southern Flank turned out significantly minimised, heightening Italy's perception of vulnerability in its southern quadrant. Despite these concerns, Italian fears of an enhanced Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean – exploiting the vacuum left by the departing VI Fleet – never materialised in subsequent years. Consequently, although initially a primary factor driving Italy towards reinforcing its military presence southwards, the "Soviet threat" was gradually removed from Italy's defence model throughout the decade, as more emphasis was placed on "non-bipolar risks"[7] to national security.[8]

Italy's parallel strategic reorientation, initiated and boldly pursued by Defence Minister Lagorio as early as 1980, involved a shift in military priorities from the northeastern border – the defence of the so-called "Gorizia Threshold" – to the Central Mediterranean, eventually encompassing the entire basin. In the face of burgeoning regional tensions, the security of trade and energy routes, upon which Italy's national economy depended, was increasingly called into question. Nevertheless, the USSR's role in fomenting Mediterranean instability was seen as secondary. In fact, no military mission in which Italy participated during the decade was aimed at "containing" Soviet expansionism. Similarly, references to the bipolar conflict were notably rare in the government's justifications for deploying military power abroad. More than in the global bipolar conflict, Italy prioritised interventions in local fault lines – such as Qadhafi's expansionism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Iranian revisionist offensives – insofar as regarded as the main sources of regional instability[9].

This interpretation of the Middle East and Mediterranean regions as a wholly post-bipolar space by 1979 is widely accepted by international historiography. However, the advent of the Reagan Administration—which led to a "militarisation" of foreign policy and an "ideologisation" of defence policy—contradicted these structural dynamics. The administration's approach forced both allies and rivals to contend with the emergence of the so-called "Second Cold War." Reagan's global anti-Soviet offensive extended to

7. Alessandro Colombo, "La percezione italiana dei 'rischi da Sud' tra l'ultima fase della Guerra fredda e il mondo post-bipolare," in *Il Mediterraneo nella politica estera italiana del secondo dopoguerra*, ed. Massimo De Leonardis (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), 107-134

8. The geostrategic shift of the threat from the "East/West meridian" to the "North/South parallel" has been detailly reconstructed by former Defence Minister Lelio Lagorio in his memoirs. The magnitude of U.S. strategic reorientation over Italian defence policy was noted also by foreign observes: cfr. Defence Reports from the British Embassy in Rome, 1980-83 (National Archives, Richmond, FCO 33/4924, 33/5769, 33/6698)

9. Ministero della Difesa, *Giovanni Spadolini – Indirizzi di politica militare* (Roma, 1983); Archivio Storico della Presidenza della Repubblica, Roma, Fondo Consiglio Supremo di Difesa, fasc. 41 (24 November 1983), fasc. 42 (16 November 1984)

the "enlarged Mediterranean," including Libya, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. In these regions, the U.S. Administration launched military interventions to reassert American supremacy, often justified by the supposed threat of a Soviet takeover in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Reagan's interventionism, thus, put Italy afore both risks and opportunities: on the one hand, Italy saw these missions as opportunities to address regional instability that threatened Mediterranean security. On the other hand, the unilateralism, indiscriminate globalism, and often excessive use of force of the Reagan Administration exacerbated – rather than thawing – regional tensions. Consequently, Rome was often compelled to distance itself from Washington's policies, which led to accusations of insufficient solidarity. In this context, it seems correct the recent argument by Mario Del Pero and Federico Romero – which posits that, by the final decade of the Cold War, the bipolar conflict had already ceased to drive Italian foreign and domestic policies.[10] However, the notion that U.S. influence in Italy was waning is untenable when dealing with security matters. American military policy in the Mediterranean remained a decisive factor shaping Italian defence strategy in the 1980s. The United States created the circumstances, but it also imposed the rules and, when necessary, added caveats. Rome might join the game as a participant, but Washington remained the arbiter.

Agency

All considered, the renewed strategic approach of the United States towards the "enlarged Mediterranean" (both Carter's reorientation and Reagan's interventionism) was a crucial factor in triggering the "new" military policy of Italy in the 1980s. On top of these indirect factors, there were also direct pressures coming from the allies, demanding Italy to deploy its troops overseas. Reagan's unilateralism was a byproduct – not an aim – of his anti-Soviet offensive in the Mediterranean. The Americans needed direct strategic contributions from the European allies to the various military interventions undertaken in the region. In Lebanon, Libya, and the Persian Gulf, U.S. officials obstinately courted (at times, threatened) Italian leaders to obtain their compliance and participation, finding, from time to time, more or less eager interlocutors.[11] Yet, the view that Rome was just

10. Mario Del Pero and Federico Romero, "The United States, Italy and the Cold War: interpreting and periodising a contradictory and complicated relationship," in *Italy in the International System from Détente to the End of the Cold War. The Underrated Ally*, eds. Benedetto Zaccaria and Antonio Varsori (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 15-34

11. Besides the vast correspondence concerning the MNF in Lebanon (available at Archivio Giulio Andreotti, Roma, bb. 1292, 1293 and 1298), it has been possible to assess American influences over Italy's decision-making process about the MFO (National Archives, Richmond, PREM 19/532; Archivio Giulio Andreotti, Roma, b. 485), the guarantee of Maltese neutrality (Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Roma, Fondo Gabinetto del Ministro (1975-1985), b. 252) and the naval mission in the Persian Gulf (Archivio della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, Roma, Fondo Valerio Zanone, bb. 39, 42), in addition to declassified docuemnts from the CIA-FOIA Reading Room and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

a stooge, merely executing orders coming from Washington, is rather outdated and oversimplifying (despite still being upheld by some authors).[12]

Moreover, despite its undeniable preponderance, the United States was not the sole external actor influencing Italy's strategic decisions. Rather, it was a cluster of external influences that moved Italy towards a bolder use of its military power, wherein the unexpected role of Mitterrand's France clearly emerges from the research. As a matter of fact, Rome joined both the MFO and the MNF only after Paris assured it would participate in the missions. Later, the relaunch of WEU (which Italy enthusiastically supported) was a French initiative. Finally, the XVIII Naval Group in the Persian Gulf chose to establish closer liaison with the French fleet rather than with USCENTCOM. Strategic relationships out-of-area between Rome and Paris were regarded as a useful counterweight to balance the absolute preponderance of the United States. Indeed, contemporaries noted how the "French connection" was a meaningful factor in driving Italian security policy:[13] an interesting dynamic which has been overlooked by scholars and is worth further examination.[14]

Another significant factor was the "crisis of multilateralism" that characterised the 1980s: that is, the growing inability of multilateral organisations to play an effective security role. This (eminently systemic) trend, in turn, prompted nation-states to react and autonomously intervene in local and regional crises: the repeated (yet unheard) Italian calls in 1980 for a multilateral guarantee of Maltese neutrality are indeed a case in point. As correctly observed by Luciano Tosi, this dynamic had been amongst the primary triggers of Italy's assertive military policy in the decade[15]. However, upon closer inspection, Italy seems part of the problem rather than a passive bystander. In line with the rest of the European members, Italy consistently refused to extend NATO competence beyond the areas stated in the Atlantic Treaty.[16] Then, despite initial enthusiasm, it never seriously considered enhancing WEU responsibilities, as it became

12. Quite recently, Nicola Labanca has termed Rome as "the most loyal, and *subordinate*, ally of Washington", both within NATO framework and during OOA military missions in the 1980s." Cfr. Nicola Labanca, "Un paese fra pace e guerra," *Guerre ed eserciti nell'età contemporanea*, ed. Nicola Labanca (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022), e-book, ch. I. Italics added

13. The National Archives, Richmond, FCO 33/6657, 27 July 1983

14. It is striking that neither the recent issue of *Revue Défense National* [4, no. 869 (Paris: 2024)], dedicated to French military policy in the 1980s, ever mentions Italy.

15. Luciano Tosi, "La riscoperta della forza. L'Italia tra missioni di pace, interventi umanitari e ricerca di un nuovo ruolo internazionale," in *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, Vol. I of *Fine della Guerra fredda e globalizzazione*, eds. Silvio Pons *et al.* (Roma: Carocci, 2014), 243-260

16. Lagorio – in adherence to the line traced by former Socialist leader Pietro Nenni in the 1960s – construed NATO as a "strictly defensive and geographically limited alliance" (cfr. Ministero della Difesa, *Lelio Lagorio – Indirizzi di politica militare* (Roma: 1980), 19). Such a stance – keen to exclude any military automatism beyond the area as designed in the founding treaty of the Atlantic Alliance – was repeatedly reasserted in the Atlantic Councils of the 1980s; see for instance: "NATO NAC – Final communiqué, Chairman: Lord Carrington, Bruxelles, 11-12 December 1986", NATO On-line Library, available online at: https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c861212a.htm.

evident before and during the naval mission in the Persian Gulf[17]. Similarly, despite its professed "Europeanism", Spadolini (and, even more, François Mitterrand) crippled at the outset the best (perhaps the last) chance to transform the EC into a security actor during the European-American talks over the MFO in 1981[18]. Finally, the United Nations was the most blatant victim of the "crisis of multilateralism": the more the UN tried to make its voice heard in the international arena, the more the Security Council fell prey of the bipolar competition, which paralysed the organisation. Italy remained consistently attached (almost sentimentally) to the UN as the best-suited forum to resolve international disputes[19]. Nonetheless, it soon acknowledged that it lacked any leverage to reverse the organisation's crisis. Appeals to the United Nations thus became a formality, rather than a real policy option.

That said, the apparent relevance of structural changes should not overshadow the importance of human agency. The described systemic developments appear to have functioned more as enablers of Italy's military activism rather than genuine triggers. Nor does the instability characterising the enlarged Mediterranean in the 1980s appear sufficiently pronounced – compared to the past – to justify such a radical shift in Italy's strategic approach to regional dynamics. In accordance with this view, it seems more correct to suggest that external developments served as the backdrop of the "new" Italian security policy, creating the conditions for a bolder use of military power. However, short of changes in the domestic political landscape, little would perhaps have changed from the past attitude towards security matters.

Indeed, at the turn of the 1980s, a new cohort of leaders arrived at the helm of the country: leaders who did not deem national security a secondary matter. On the contrary, they regarded defence policy as a top priority, as well as a powerful tool in their hands to advance and protect national interest. At different times and places, all Italian political leaders of the decade (either Prime, Foreign, or Defence Ministers) faced local and regional crises that eventually required a military response. Either enthusiastically or reluctantly, none of them dodged such responsibilities. Here lies the most striking discontinuity in the domestic political landscape: past Italian leaders were content to meet the minimum NATO standards in the Gorizia Threshold and preferred to delegate to more powerful allies the military management of Mediterranean crises. Leaders in

17. Andreotti's comments on WEU – termed as "a foetus with no head nor limbs" – in the summer of 1987 are indicative of the real Italian sentiments about the organization, cfr. Vittorio Feltri, "Andreotti insiste: Onu, Onu", *Corriere della Sera,* 22 August 22, 1987

18. British Foreign Secretary Carrington's discontent for the pro-MFO (thus, pro-Israeli) turn of Italy and France in 1981 is apparent in the British documentation, cfr. The National Archives, Richmond, FCO 33/4900, folio 22

19. Both in the months preceding the MNF deployment in Beirut (Archivi Centrali dello Stato, Roma, Fondo Ufficio del Consigliere Diplomatico, b. 63) and during Italian-Egyptian talks before the multinational minehunting in the Red Sea (Archivio Storico della Presidenza della Repubblica, Roma, Fondo Ufficio del Consigliere Diplomatico, b. 129), Italy attempted to constitute a multilateral forced under UN aegis, to no avail.

the 1980s realised that this approach to international and regional politics was not feasible anymore.

Ultimately, the Italian governments chose to use military power as a means to resolve Mediterranean instabilities: circumstances might have facilitated the decision, but it was always a deliberation rather than a reaction. The behaviour of the Craxi government during the Libyan crisis in 1986 is perhaps the best – despite indirect – confirmation of this interpretation. Even if attacked on national soil, and even if capable of striking back at Qadhafi, the Cabinet chose to not use military force in retaliation. Using national military power was thus a policy option in the hands of the decision-makers, who selected it amongst a range of responses. Despite being recalcitrant at times (as during the final phase of the MNF or before Golfo-1), the country willingly used its military capabilities as a crisis-resolution tool, calibrating the effort to the expected threat. To conclude, amid the momentous systemic transformations the Mediterranean experienced in the 1980s, the domestic political landscape proved surprisingly receptive and, eventually, turned out unexpectedly proactive.

Consistency

The issue of consistency of Italy's military policy in the 1980s has been addressed with a twofold interpretative approach. Firstly, it has been verified whether allegations of "schizophrenia"[20] towards national decision-makers had any substance. Secondly, it has been determined the extent of "continuity" in the strategic decisions made throughout the decade. The allegation of "schizophrenia" arose from the discrepancy between diplomatic initiatives and military missions, aimed at clearly diverging targets. As a consequence, decision-makers and officers did not always display unity of actions when dealing with regional crises, either at agency level (between different Ministries) or amongst political parties. For instance, negotiations between Malta and Italy were swiftly monopolised by the PSI, which intentionally outflanked the diplomatic personnel in charge of the dossier. Participation in the MFO – firmly sought by Prime Minister Spadolini – belittled the significance of the Venice Declaration, a remarkable personal achievement of Foreign Minister Colombo. Andreotti's invitation of Arafat in September 1982 almost caused an internecine political strife (within the majority) and a diplomatic crisis (with the United States). The President of the Republic, Sandro Pertini, explicitly called for the withdrawal of the MNF-assigned Italian contingent in December 1983, against the opinion of Defence Minister Spadolini. Finally, the most blatant interagency strife took place between Andreotti and Zanone in the summer of 1987. The dispute between the two Ministers was so bitter that the government turned out paralysed and unable to convincingly follow a clear line of action[21].

20. Maurizio Cremasco and Giacomo Luciani, "The Mediterranean dimension of Italy's foreign and security policy", *The International Spectator*, 20, no. 1 (1985): 27-33

21. Lorenzo Bernardini, "Golfo-1: il dibattito politico e la missione militare. Nuove prospettive di ricerca dalle carte

However, dynamics of such a kind are somewhat inevitable in a democratic polity, whose decision-making process falls prey to the influence of various and competing political actors[22]. Italy was not an exception, yet the political debate on military matters does not seem to have had a significant impact on the operational aspects of national security strategy. At the parliamentary level, the political parties argued for the most part on issues of principles such as the legitimacy of the use of force beyond national boundaries, while avoiding discussing the operational details of the military commitments. Within the executive branches, the expediency of the use of military power as a foreign policy tool was never seriously questioned. Ministers displayed different degrees of enthusiasm for military solutions – depending on their personal political sensibility – but, as a general rule, the involved agencies respected the institutional boundaries. In accordance, once a political and military line was adopted by the Cabinet, the involved Ministers complied with the decision and worked together towards a shared goal. Such unity granted a clear chain of command, which in turn shielded local military commanders from receiving contradictory orders from the political authorities.

Rather, looking at the Italian case, the military institutions showed an impressive degree of divergence regarding the national security priorities, and the correct strategies to implement. The Army never accepted the primacy of the Gorizia Threshold to be questioned, refusing to equate the "risks from the South" to the "threat from the East." The Air Force forcefully upheld the case for strengthening the control over national airspace, rejecting the idea of "forward defence" or "force projection" in the Mediterranean region as a waste of resources. For its part, the Navy failed to leverage its growing importance in the national security context, remaining the least funded branch of the Armed Forces for the rest of the decade. Interforce rivalry was, indeed, an age-old dysfunction of the national military apparatus, which remained unresolved in the 1980s[23].

The blatant incapacity of the three Forces to cooperate towards the achievement of a more efficient, up-to-date and effective military framework depended, to a large extent, on their diverging conceptions of national defence. Yet, differently from the political divides, these disagreements directly impacted the operational execution of the military missions abroad: Malta was regarded as substantially undefendable, and little was done to intervene on the matter; the MCM squadron attached to the MFO was the byproduct of an astonishing intraservice dysfunction: ITALCON was the only MNF contingent lacking air cover; such critical shortcoming remained unresolved also during *Golfo-1* mission, when the XVIII Naval Group in the Persian Gulf relied on the belligerents' goodwill for its safety; finally, the southern quadrant was dramatically vulnerable to offensive incursions, due to the lack of SAMs (Army), radar stations (Air Force) and

del Fondo Valerio Zanone", *Quaderni di Scienze Politiche*, XIII, no. 25 (2024): 79-116

22. Angelo Panebianco, *Guerrieri democratici. Le democrazie e la politica di potenza* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997)

23. Luigi Caligaris and Carlo Maria Santoro, *Obiettivo difesa: strategia, direzione politica, comando operativo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986)

aircraft carriers (Navy). Regardless of the theatre of operations, the deficiencies were invariably attributable to intraservice malfunctioning (at best) or interforce rivalries (at worst). Their diverging strategic priorities established different foci for national defence (Army: north-eastern border; Air Force: homeland protection; Navy: far-ranged projection)[24]. As a consequence, the internecine strife impeded a forthright and focused approach to national security. Thus, if the definition of "schizophrenia" must be adopted, it should be attributed to the militaries, more than the civilians.

Ultimately, the political decision-makers seemed to have had much clearer ideas on how to uphold national security, chiefly aiming at a stabilisation of the Mediterranean basin. With inevitable ebbs and flows, this strategy was pursued with remarkable continuity by adhering to the formula "security through stability," originally devised by Lelio Lagorio in response to the mounting regional tensions[25]. The meaning (and thus the implementation) of this policy principle, however, evolved over time. Under Lagorio's leadership (1980-83), "security through stability" was enforced proactively, aiming at revolutionising the Mediterranean geopolitical framework**.** The Maltese Neutrality Agreement was intended to pave the way for a comprehensive mechanism of mutual security guarantees amongst the littoral states: a sort of CSCE-like framework applied to the Mediterranean (sought as early as 1972 by Italian foreign policy-makers).[26] Participation in the MFO was construed by PM Spadolini as the demise of a dead-end row (the "Venice principles"), in favour of a more effective solution (the "Camp David framework") for the Middle Eastern never-ending crisis. By joining the MNF-1, Foreign Minister Colombo hoped to leverage the rescue of the PLO as a means to transform the guerilla movement into a political organisation. Lastly, the second Multinational Force in Beirut was meant to shield the seemingly renewed (yet still fragile) peace process from external perturbations.

Amid these great expectations, the MNF-2 debacle turned out as a watershed: the formula "security through stability" was not discarded, but the means to enforce it significantly changed. Whereas in this first phase Italy sought to resolve the causes of regional tensions with its Armed Forces, the ticket Craxi-Andreotti-Spadolini that took office in 1983 opted instead to use military power to manage the consequences. As a result, Italy – after having escorted (for the second time) Arafat and the "moderate" PLO cadres from Lebanon – swiftly removed ITALCON from Beirut and launched a purely diplomatic peace initiative between 1984 and 1985. Later in the year, the country participated in the multinational minehunting mission in the Red Sea but refused to join the international chorus of condemnation towards Libya – nor did it retaliate after the Libyan missile launch against Lampedusa. The same approach was reiterated in the

24. "Appendix: Comments by the Italian Chiefs of Staff," in *NATO and the Mediterranean*, eds. Lawrence S. Kaplan *et al.* (Wilmington (DE): Scholarly Resources, 1985), 239-247

25. Antonio Tajani, *Il Granduca. Lagorio, un socialista al Ministero della Difesa* (Roma: Consult, undated but 1982)

26. Roma, Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati: 22 October 1980; 10 March 1981

Persian Gulf in 1987-88, when the Ministry of Defence clearly stated that protecting freedom of navigation in the area implied adopting a strictly defensive military posture (on the opposite pole of the U.S. confrontational approach).

Up to the collapse of the MNF security in mid-1983, therefore, "security through stability" was devised as an empowering policy of large military commitments, in order to accomplish far-reaching diplomatic goals. Afterwards, the principle was largely demoted to surgical interventions (limited in time and scope) to address evident and circumscribed threats to national security. By setting overly ambitious aims, however, the first phase turned out a failure across the board: a cooperative security framework for the Mediterranean never materialised; Camp David remained an Egyptian-Israeli peace that no other Arab state ever joined; finally, the MNF missed all the political targets stated at its inception. On the contrary, in the 1983-1988 period, the Italian Armed Forces achieved the foremost goal for which they had been called into action: ensuring freedom of navigation through waterways crucial to the national economy[27]. Ultimately, by reducing its ambitions, Italian military policy turned out to be more effective.

Conclusions

The essay has thus far explored the international (the politics of bipolarism and the global military policy of the United States), regional (systemic developments in the Mediterranean), and local (the coherence and continuity of Italy's military policy) factors potentially influencing Italy's approach to security issues in the 1980s. Building on these findings, a hypothesis can now be advanced to explain why Italy ultimately abandoned its strict policy of abstention from military interventions beyond national borders—a hallmark of its security approach since 1945. In this regard, Thucydides' timeless insight into the three fundamental reasons that drive humans to employ (or threaten to employ) force – interest, honour, and fear – remains particularly appropriate. When applied to contemporary politics, these primal motives can be reinterpreted as subordination, prestige, and security.

To varying degrees, each of these concepts provides a partial explanation for the central question of this study. The idea of subordination is the traditional approach adopted by earlier historiography, and indeed subordination was a driving factor – albeit one whose impact has occasionally been overstated by biased analysts. Italian policymakers often sought to "please" the United States in order to secure some form of reward from the bloc leader. In a political landscape where domestic leadership was partly contingent upon alignment with the current U.S. administration, acceding to American requests

27 . In the most significant strategic document produced by the Ministry of Defence in the 1980s, the control over the Mediterranean sea routes was deemed of the utmost importance. Moreover, as controlling the SLOCs was essential both for national security considerations and for the Atlantic Alliance capacity to sustain a large-scale conflict with the Eastern bloc, Italy finally achieved the ever-sought "welding" between national and NATO interests: cfr. Ministero della Difesa, *Libro Bianco delle Forze Armate* (Roma, 1985), 27-31

for direct military support abroad became a means of consolidating authority at home. However, this attitude towards the bloc leader varied both horizontally – among the parties composing the parliamentary majority – and vertically – within individual political forces. The imperative to maintain cordial relations with the United States cut across ideological lines, and even the least enthusiast officers about the use of military power abroad ought to carefully manage strategic relations with Washington.

More recently, scholars have highlighted the concept of prestige as a crucial factor shaping Italy's military decisions. During the 1980s, the quest for prestige played a significant role in steering national defence policy. Italy's determination to assert itself as a key Mediterranean power stemmed from a renewed sense of confidence in its capabilities. The decline of domestic terrorism and the waning of social unrest coincided with encouraging economic indicators, including a gradual return of inflation to single-digit levels. Amid this favourable backdrop, the political elites eventually realised that Italy's international status depended also on its military performances. A minimalist defence posture might suffice for minor powers, more concerned with welfare rather than warfare. However, to be accepted into the informal "Western directorate" – composed by the United States, France, Great Britain, and West Germany – Italy had to fully embrace its military responsibilities also beyond its Atlantic Alliance commitments. Defence Minister Lelio Lagorio had already acknowledged in 1980 that NATO could not remain the sole framework of Italy's defence policy. Adopting a more assertive military stance was seen as pivotal to achieving the regional primacy that Italy had long sought.

In addition to subordination and prestige, security must also be recognised as a decisive factor – perhaps even more so than the other two – despite its relatively limited attention in historiography. Throughout the archival documentation of the decade, a clear sense of insecurity among Italian decision-makers has emerged. The heightened global tensions brought about by renewed superpower competition created an environment conducive to a less constrained use of military force, even by middle powers like Italy. At the same time, a series of regional crises fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of the "enlarged Mediterranean." Maritime insecurity, in particular, emerged as a novel and unwelcome development. From 1945 onwards, Western control over key maritime chokepoints such as the Sicilian Channel, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz had remained largely uncontested (with the notable exception of Suez in 1956). These waterways, critical for energy and trade routes, were pillars of transatlantic economic prosperity and strategic stability. However, the rise of regional powers hostile to the Western bloc – such as Libya, Ethiopia, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and Iran – threatened the security of these vital sea lines of communication.

The pivotal role of maritime security in Italy's security policy is underscored by its military interventions during the decade. These included Italy's de facto control over Maltese waters through the Neutrality Agreement (1980-81); Italian-American-Libyan

clashes in the central Mediterranean (1981–86); the deployment of a minehunting squadron within the MFO framework in the Tiran Straits (1982); mine-clearing operations in Suez and Aden (1984); and naval deployments in the Persian Gulf (1987–88). Ultimately, the securitisation of the southern frontier initiated by Lagorio implied a massive reorientation of the national defence apparatus southwards, which sealed the demise of a thirty-years-old defence posture revolved around the Gorizia Threshold. Such an impressive turn southwards can hardly be explained by taking into account just elusive concepts such as prestige or subordination. Thus, security (with particular emphasis on its maritime dimension) was the most compelling factor in driving Italy towards an enhanced use of military force abroad.

That said, it would be an overstatement to argue that the 1980s were uniquely volatile. North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia have been perennial hotspots, and no period during the Cold War can be characterised as "stable" for these regions. Therefore, the most plausible explanation lies not in external factors but in changes within Italy's domestic landscape, either among its civilian leadership or its military institutions. As previously noted, the military authorities failed to resolve their internal disputes over the appropriate strategic posture, often quarrelling over secondary issues such as budget allocations. Indeed, two of the armed services actively resisted the southward shift in defence priorities. The real transformation occurred within the political sphere. The transition of foreign policy leadership from the Christian Democratic old guard – imbued with Catholic "irenism" and ecumenical internationalism – to a younger generation of leaders and political forces marked a turning point. The Pentapartito coalition effectively excluded the Communist Party from government, significantly diminishing its ability to veto national foreign and defence policies. Despite Prime Ministers changing at rather swift rate, the other governmental top echelons remained in charge for considerable long tenures – at least, for Italian standards: three years for the Lagorio-Colombo ticket (1980-83) and almost five years for Spadolini-Andreotti (1983-1987). The resulting continuity was indeed an empowering feature for the international policy of Italy. The Presidency of the Republic also played a crucial role in reshaping public perceptions of the military, leveraging its popularity to restore the prestige of the armed forces. Although public indifference to security matters persisted, the 1980s witnessed a gradual shift in attitudes, with patriotic sentiment and the concept of "homeland" undergoing a significant reevaluation. This cultural shift, coupled with the removal of ideological constraints on military policy across the political spectrum, marked a decisive departure from past practices.[28]

In conclusion, Italy's unprecedented military activism during the 1980s was driven by a confluence of factors: a desire to maintain loyalty to the United States, a quest for

28 . Antonio Varsori, *Dalla rinascita al declino. Storia internazionale dell'Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021), 426-427

regional leadership, and, above all, a heightened awareness of regional instability as a pressing security concern. In sum: *subordination*, *prestige* and, chiefly, *security*.

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