

Italian Peacekeeping Missions: Vast, Praised and Underused

by Gabriele Abbondanza

ABSTRACT

Italian peace support operations (PSOs) under UN, EU, NATO and Italian aegis are well-known and respected by the peacekeeping community. Italy's current contribution is the largest among all developed states, as it employs around 7,500 soldiers in 24 host countries, mainly in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), the Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Horn of Africa. Italian PSOs stem from a combination of national interest and humanitarian, multilateral and internationalist attitudes, although a number of recent developments threaten their future effectiveness. These include increasing tensions and conflicts in the MENA region and the Horn of Africa, the growing Chinese influence in the Mediterranean, a European and Italian decline in influence in the Balkans, the risks of the current US retrenchment, Italy's political and economic instability, the multiple impending risks of the Libyan crisis and the many repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rome needs to face these issues rapidly and effectively, if it wishes to maintain and optimise the role of its PSOs in supporting its foreign policy.

Italy's foreign policy | Italy's military policy | Military missions | Crisis management | Peacebuilding

keywords

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by Gabriele Abbondanza*

1. The debate on peacekeeping and the Italian case

Since their formal inception in the late 1940s, peacekeeping activities have been under constant scrutiny by participating and host countries, scholars, non-governmental organisations and the international community at large. Over the years, three main schools of thought have developed, respectively reflecting utilitarian, positive and hybrid connotations. The first one provides by far the most critical view of peacekeeping operations (PKOs), since it argues that the latter take place only to pursue participating states' national interests. Among the many, Chandler equates the great powers' responsibility to protect (R2P) with an "imposition of the liberal peace",¹ and Pugh considers such operations as a neorealist defence of the current status quo.² The second school of thought emerges from entirely different beliefs, as it argues that PKOs defend democratic values and human rights. In particular, Lidén correlates the main elements of peacekeeping with "a comprehensive human rights agenda",³ and Paris underlines the importance they have for the support of liberal-democratic systems of governance and market economies.⁴ The third school of thought stands on more neutral grounds and takes into account both states' national interests and their concurrent humanitarian, multilateralist and internationalist drivers. In her seminal book, Fortna attested that peacekeeping works in the majority of cases⁵ – despite the presence of clear

¹ David Chandler, "The Responsibility to Protect? Imposing the 'Liberal Peace'", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2004), p. 74.

² Michael Pugh, "Peacekeeping and Critical Theory", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2004), p. 39-58.

³ Kristoffer Lidén, "Building Peace between Global and Local Politics: The Cosmopolitical Ethics of Liberal Peacebuilding", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2009), p. 617.

⁴ Roland Paris, "Saving Liberal Peacebuilding", in *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 2010), p. 337-365.

⁵ Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War*, Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 172-180.

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interests in the implementation of such missions – and Gilligan and Sergenti reached a similar conclusion in their quantitative research.⁶

Italy is no exception and its peacekeeping efforts have also been scrutinised in this threefold manner, under a utilitarian, positive and hybrid logic. Critical views on Italian missions abroad tend to focus solely on the country's national interests at the detriment of other factors. Among this group of authors, Carati and Locatelli stress the importance of Italy's perceived interests when planning and implementing PKOs,⁷ and Ignazi, Giacomello and Coticchia point out an apparent dichotomy between the pacifist rhetoric and the military nature of PKOs.⁸ A second, larger group of authors provides a more positive interpretation of Italian peace efforts, focusing on a number of tangible elements. These include a respectful behaviour that wins both "hearts and minds" of the local populations, a broader sense of legitimacy compared to countries (such as the US) that are more contested among the people living in war zones) and more effective contributions in niche areas. The latter comprise religion-related frictions, cultural protection, human rights defence, civil-military cooperation and military, security and police training. Within these niche fields, and especially with reference to training and cultural protection, the role of the Carabinieri, Italy's gendarmerie, is invariably praised by non-Italian policymakers and officials.⁹ A middle ground is promoted by a further group of peacekeeping experts, who take into concurrent consideration both viewpoints, thus arguing that national interests can be defended while pursuing humanitarian, multilateralist and internationalist causes.¹⁰

As the above introduction has showed, the very idea of peacekeeping is remarkably nuanced and, while its meaning is not essentially contested, its rationale sometimes is. To complete this conceptual image, it is useful to remind that the United Nations outlines five phases: conflict prevention and mediation, peacemaking, peace enforcement, peacebuilding and peacekeeping,¹¹ which in essence frame the wider concept of peace support. It follows that peace support and peace support operation (PSOs) also include peacekeeping and PKOs, although the two terms are

⁶ Michael J. Gilligan and Ernest J. Sergenti, "Do UN Interventions Cause Peace? Using Matching to Improve Causal Inference", in *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2008), p. 89-122.

⁷ Andrea Carati and Andrea Locatelli, "Cui prodest? Italy's Questionable Involvement in Multilateral Military Operations Amid Ethical Concerns and National Interest", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2017), p. 86-107.

⁸ Giampiero Giacomello, Fabrizio Coticchia and Piero Ignazi, *Italian Military Operations Abroad. Just Don't Call It War*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

⁹ Gabriele Abbondanza, "The West's Policeman? Assessing Italy's Status in Global Peacekeeping", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (June 2020), p. 127-141.

¹⁰ See Giulia Tercovich, "Italy and UN Peacekeeping: Constant Transformation", in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (2016), p. 681-701; Manon Derriennic, "Italy's and China's Commitment to Africa's Peace and Security Architecture", in Andrea de Guttry, Emanuele Sommario and Lijiang Zhu (eds), *China's and Italy's Participation in Peacekeeping Operations. Existing Models, Emerging Challenges*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2014, p. 157-170; and Gabriele Abbondanza, "The West's Policeman?", cit.

¹¹ United Nations Peacekeeping website: *Terminology*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/node/7931>.

used interchangeably in this analysis.

2. Italy's international interests and the potential role of its missions

Due to its long and complex history, as well as to its unique geographical position, Italy's national interests are multifaceted and diversified. There are, however, a few constants that can be detected since the beginning of the post-World War II period, which directed Italian foreign policy ever since. By the end of the Cold War these were clearly visible: the strategic relationship with the US (*Atlanticism*); the fundamental role of European communitarianism, which eventually led to creation of the European Union with Italy as a co-founding country (*Europeanism*); the substantial role of Italy's extended area of influence, with a special focus on its former African colonies, the Mediterranean and the Near East (*regionalism*);¹² to which one might add the country's post-war role of mediator between the Western Bloc and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (*mediation*).

These drivers of Italian national interests have not changed in the following years, rather they have adapted to the newly-formed EU, the increasing multipolarity created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the relative (but not absolute) decline of US power and the fragmentation of power balances that existed in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region prior to the Arab Spring. While the significance of Italy's Atlanticism, Europeanism and regionalism remained intact for the country's foreign policy,¹³ its "bridge-builder" role took new paths, which can be seen in the complicated dealings of the "West" and the Middle East, as well as between Middle Eastern countries and Israel. The combination of these factors allows Italy to maintain a solid security network with allies and partners, foster its export-driven economy and continue to exert a multifaceted, smart power-based influence in the regions where the country's interest lie.

In consideration of all of the above, what is the role of Italian peace support operations? At first glance, they are instrumental in pursuing the country's national interests. As a number of authors have argued, the effectiveness and the extent of its PSOs place Italy in a category of its own in Europe, which led Braw to label the Italians "Europe's military maestros".¹⁴ More to the point, a specific research on Italian international missions under UN, EU and NATO aegis has shown that Italy is the leading peacekeeping contributor among all developed countries, thus including Europe, North and South America, Northeast Asia and Oceania.

¹² Carlo M. Santoro, *La politica estera di una media potenza. L'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1991, p. 309-313.

¹³ Sonphil Lee, "Europeanism and Atlantism in the Italian Foreign Policy: Focused on Continuity and Change", in *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 2007), p. 175-191.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Braw, "Europe's Military Maestros: Italy", in *Politico*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-military-maestros-italy-troops-mediterranean-migrants-libya-refugees>.

As of August 2020, Italy is engaged in 36 international missions – including operations that are not sanctioned by international organisations – with 7,488 soldiers deployed in 24 host countries (see table 1). Such a vast engagement stands out both on a quantitative (number of troops a country deploys) and a qualitative (number of missions a country leads) viewpoint, and it is mostly focused on areas where Italian interests are more prominent: the MENA region, the Balkans, the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa (see table 2). Indeed, as it has been shown elsewhere, Italy’s global operations bolster its regional security, support its large military-industrial complex, represent a source of international prestige, help to uphold the rules-based international order and the respect of human rights and allow the employment of the country’s soft and hard capabilities, if needed.¹⁵ In short, the potential that Italian PSOs have in advancing the country’s interests and promoting its foreign policy is extremely significant. Yet, despite all of this, they are only partially successful in doing so, as a few considerable cases can attest. This is due to a number of limitations concerning the country’s domestic and foreign policy, which are explored in the section below.

Table 1 | Italian international deployment of troops by sanctioning authority

Italian national government	3,392
EU	663
NATO	2,217
UN	1,216
Total	7,488

Source: Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Operazioni internazionali in corso*, https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Pagine/Operazioni_int.aspx.

Table 2 | Italian international deployment of troops by region

Africa	1,513
Europe	882
Mediterranean Sea	1,293
Middle East and Asia	3,272
Other	528
Total	7,488

Source: Italian Ministry of Defence website: *Operazioni internazionali in corso*, cit.

3. How and why Italian international missions are underused

The majority of Italian peace support operations take place in areas where the country’s interests are perceived to lie, therefore including the Mediterranean,

¹⁵ Gabriele Abbondanza, “The West’s Policeman?”, cit.

the Balkans, the MENA region and the Horn of Africa. The role played by Italy is often that of main contributor at the head of the operation. However, this does not always pay dividends to the country's foreign policy and its actual influence in host countries.

A prominent case is that of the Central Mediterranean Route, the most active maritime migration route in the world, accounting for around 800,000 seaborne asylum seekers since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. These migration flows originate in Sub-Saharan Africa, reach Libya, and then head for the Italian peninsula.¹⁶ Italy has been impacted more than any other European nation in terms of total numbers of maritime asylum seekers – with Greece and Spain following at a distance – yet the European Union started planning a shared system (the “quota system”) only in 2015. In turn, this was immediately contested by the “Visegrád Group” (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and as a result it has been largely ineffectual. Despite its forefront position in rescuing the vast majority of seaborne migrants directed towards Europe, and notwithstanding the fact that Italy was also in command of EUNAVFOR Med (“Operation Sophia”, now replaced by EUNAVFOR Med IRINI, also commanded by Italy) and Joint Operation Themis, the country was not able to reconcile the conspicuous internal divisions within the EU. This, combined with an erratic approach taken by populist parties in government during the 2018-2019 Conte I Cabinet,¹⁷ meant that Italy was not able to exploit its comparably more influential position in the Mediterranean to advance a stable and shared solution.

A second case in point concerns the Italian role in the Middle East under the aegis of both NATO and the Global Coalition against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and the lack of a place in the Iran nuclear deal. Italy's contribution to the stability of the Middle East is significant, since it heads the Western command of Resolute Support (NATO) in Afghanistan – a position it also held in the previous NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – and it leads the Global Coalition's training mission in Iraq, while also holding joint command of the coalition's Counter-ISIS Finance Group (CIFG), alongside the US and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ This considerable engagement is invariably praised by allies and host nations, but it hasn't proved sufficient in granting a place for Italy in the development and implementation of the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Adopted in 2015, when the Italian peace support contribution in the region was well-established, the JCPOA involved Iran on the one side and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, China, Russia, France and the UK) with the addition of Germany and the EU (the P5+1 or E3/EU+3) on the other. The exclusion of Italy occurred despite the fact that the latter had been

¹⁶ UNHCR, *Central Mediterranean Route Situation. Supplementary Appeal January-December 2018*, March 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/65290>.

¹⁷ Sergio Fabbrini and Tiziano Zgaga, “Italy and the European Union: The Discontinuity of the Conte Government”, in *Contemporary Italian Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2019), p. 280-293.

¹⁸ See the website of the Global Coalition Against Daesh: *Italy*, <https://theglobalcoalition.org/?p=550>.

"Iran's first trade partner among European Union states for several years and the time [had] come to assume the position again", and notwithstanding the explicit position of Iran, which regarded "Italy as the most important countr[y] for trade and economic cooperation", to quote President Rouhani's words.¹⁹ In essence, although its peacekeeping contribution in the Middle East was one the most prominent ones at the time the JCPOA was being drafted, and notwithstanding the historically constructive relationship with Iran, Italy was not able to leverage its assets in order to ensure a place in the Iran nuclear deal.

A third, more general consideration can be drawn when assessing Italy's role within the UN and the EU. With reference to the former, it provides the seventh-largest financial contribution to the organisation's general budget, as well as the largest peacekeeping contribution among all developed nations. Such commitments are the most important parameters the UN ought to take into account when electing the non-permanent members of its Security Council (UNSC), according to para 1, Article 23 of the UN Charter,²⁰ and should therefore result in a comparably more frequent Italian membership to the UNSC. However, Italy was elected seven times to the UNSC, on par with Colombia, India and Pakistan, and less often than Argentina (nine) and Brazil (ten),²¹ despite having constantly provided the largest financial contribution among all of them, as well as a larger peacekeeping contribution compared to Colombia, Argentina and Brazil. A similar consideration could be made when examining Italy's specific weight inside the EU, to which it provides the third-largest financial contribution²² and the largest in terms of peace support activities.²³ Here, too, the country's underuse of its resources and contributions has progressively led to an Italian political vacuum in EU politics, which in turn has paved the way to the so-called "Franco-German condominium", whose role in shaping European politics at the detriment of other actors has been the frequent object of research since the early Cold War years.²⁴ All of the above cases represent a significant impairment to the effectiveness of Italian foreign policy, which occurs in spite of its comparably-superior efforts in global peace support operations, and as such deserves to be acknowledged and investigated by policy-makers, academics and analysts.

¹⁹ "President: Tehran Welcomes Expansion of Ties with Italy", in *IRNA*, 13 November 2015, <https://en.irna.ir/news/81836930>.

²⁰ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, 26 June 1945, <https://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations>.

²¹ UNSC website: *Countries Elected Members*, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/node/64961>.

²² European Commission, *EU Budget 2018. Financial Report*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019, p. 39, <https://doi.org/10.2761/027405>.

²³ For comprehensive information on EU operations, see European External Action Service (EEAS) website: *Military and Civilian Missions and Operations*, <https://europa.eu/!pv39QD>.

²⁴ Gisela Hendriks and Annette Morgan, *The Franco-German Axis in European Integration*, Cheltenham/Northampton, Elgar, 2001, p. 3-17.

3.1 The reasons

In essence, while Italian PSOs have frequently served the country's national interests, as well as its internationalist, multilateral and humanitarian attitudes, at times they have failed to secure the objectives that Rome was pursuing through such missions. Why did that happen? Arguably, the reasons are rooted in Italy's domestic politics, which affect its foreign policy as a result. The literature outlines some key weaknesses, which include: (1) political, (2) economic and (3) identitarian motivations which subsequently have a negative impact on Italian foreign policy.

The first group of reasons highlights the role of Italy's notorious internal instability, with 66 governments in 72 years of parliamentary democracy, often resorting to coalitions in order to reach a constitutionally-required majority in the parliament. Such instability has brought several contrasting policies over the years, including in areas of high relevance for the country's foreign policy, such as immigration.²⁵ The second weakness relates to the country's stagnant economic growth and remarkably-high public debt, which amounted to 135 per cent of the GDP in 2019 and is set to rise further due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶ Despite the very large economy – the eighth-largest in nominal terms – these numbers are bound to affect Italy's capabilities in the future, especially after the global crisis caused by the pandemic. The third set of motivations, lastly, refers to the decades-long reluctance of the Italian governments to publicise the country's missions abroad, which has led to a widespread unawareness of the Italians in this sense. In turn, such lack of knowledge cannot but hamper the support of the public opinion for these foreign policy tools, a condition that is closely-related to what Brighi aptly defined as the country's "indomitable self- and misperception of weakness",²⁷ despite Italy's great power material capabilities. These political, economic and social elements, once combined and protracted for decades, ultimately curb the effectiveness of Italian foreign policy. At least to a certain extent, they also hamper the potential of the country's peace support operations in supporting it, in terms of political leverage on both the host countries and Italy's coalition partners.

4. The risks of inaction: a vast potential threatened by new concerns

When discussing the potential role of Italy's peace support operations in advancing the country's foreign policy, it is fundamental to acknowledge how they are perceived internationally. As mentioned earlier, Italian PSOs have a positive and

²⁵ Gabriele Abbondanza, "Italy's Migration Policies Combating Irregular Immigration: from the Early Days to the Present Times", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (December 2017), p. 76-92.

²⁶ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020*, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>.

²⁷ Elisabetta Brighi, *Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and International Relations: The Case of Italy*, London/New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 153.

solid reputation across the peacekeeping, political and military community. US Ambassador to Italy, John Phillips, stated that “Italy is a leader and contributor to peacekeeping missions worldwide [...]. Italy works hard with us [...]”.²⁸ Another specific recognition coming from the US was that of former CIA Director David Petraeus, who praised Italy’s military training quite openly: “The Carabinieri are for training what Michael Jordan is for basketball”.²⁹ More on the Carabinieri’s role, this time with reference to their leading role in cultural protection and counter-crime activities, Rush and Benedettini Millington spoke of an “Italian model”, arguing for the need of other countries to follow it,³⁰ an idea that Braw also shares.³¹ Moreover, in his position of UK Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson openly acknowledged Italy as Europe’s main peacekeeping contributor.³² The Global Coalition against ISIS, further, attests that “Italy is among the top contributors of the Global Coalition against Daesh [ISIS], actively supporting Coalition’s efforts in all lines of action: military, stabilisation, counter-financing, foreign terrorist fighters and counter narrative”.³³ Italy’s network of PSOs is thus solidly praised and recognised as one of the most significant contributions to global peacekeeping. As discussed previously, such an engagement is not exploited in full as it does not always translate into tangible benefits for Italian foreign policy. In addition to this, however, there are eight recent developments that have the potential of further undermining Italian efforts in this field, if dismissed by Rome.

1) *Italian political instability* has often been identified as a major constrain for a full implementation of the country’s foreign policy, although the Italian political system did at least provide bipartisan support for PSOs throughout the years. This may not be the case in the future, however, should populist governments be in charge for long period of times. Italy’s first Conte Cabinet is a good case in point, since it managed to partially marginalise Rome’s foreign policy despite its short duration.³⁴

²⁸ US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Testimony of John R. Phillips*, 30 July 2013, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/2013/07/30/testimony-9>. See also US Embassy in Italy, *Remarks by Ambassador Phillips at the Tenth Anniversary of COESPU*, Vicenza, 1 December 2015; Paolo Foradori, “Cops in Foreign Lands: Italy’s Role in International Policing”, in *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2018), p. 507.

²⁹ Francesca Caferri, “Il generale David Petraeus: ‘Pyongyang minaccia gli Usa, la Cina deve fermarla’”, in *La Repubblica*, 26 April 2017, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2017/04/26/news/il_generale_david_petraeus_pyongyang_minaccia_gli_usa_la_cina_deve_fermarla_-163935802; Paolo Foradori, “Cops in Foreign Lands”, cit., p. 522.

³⁰ Laurie Watson Rush and Luisa Benedettini Millington, *The Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Property. Saving the World’s Heritage*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2015, p. 175-182.

³¹ Elisabeth Braw, “Europe’s Military Maestros: Italy”, cit.

³² “Italy Top Peacekeeping Contributor in EU”, in ANSA, 15 September 2016, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2016/09/15/italy-top-peacekeeping-contributor-in-eu_8429e1f0-e7dc-4175-90d4-c73c10c5ffbb.html.

³³ Global Coalition Against Daesh, *How Italy Supports the Global Coalition against Daesh*, 21 June 2019, <https://theglobalcoalition.org/?p=5452>.

³⁴ Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, “The ‘Yellow-Green’ Government’s Foreign Policy”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 19|10 (April 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10293>.

2) The *Libyan situation* arguably represents the single most important risk for – and failure of – contemporary Italian foreign policy, and as such deserves to be examined in greater detail, also in consideration of the around 400 Italian health and military personnel presently in the country. Rooted in the aftermath of the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, the Libyan crisis and the subsequent civil war involve considerable political, humanitarian, economic, social and strategic issues, many of which have been partially dealt with by Italy over the last few years.³⁵ More recently however, during the first Conte Cabinet, Italy declined a direct request for support voiced by Fayez al-Sarraj, who leads the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli. Eventually, the GNA decided to look for help elsewhere, and Turkey was *formally* brought back into Libyan politics for the first time since the end of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time Khalifa Haftar, head of the UN-unsanctioned Libyan National Army (LNA), asked for and accepted support from Russia. At present, what used to be Italy's most strategic African partner – with a rocky and yet privileged relationship stretching for more than a century – is a failed state whose spoils are being contested by two diverging blocs. On Tripoli's side there is Turkey, whose formal military support has been met by a contested agreement allowing Ankara to extend its exclusive economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean and, at least nominally, the UN. Officially, Italy too backs the UN-sanctioned government of Tripoli, but its input has been inconsequential so far. Tobruk's side, on the other hand, may count on varying degrees of support from Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and, informally, France and the US.³⁶ The implications for Italy are extremely substantial in terms of national security, political influence, trade flows, energy security, diplomatic relations and immigration flows (the majority of which reach the Italian coasts from Libya). In the Libyan case the risks of inactions are vast and multifaceted, and their acknowledgement by strategy experts has led to the proposal of European "boots on the ground".³⁷ Should that happen, the intimate knowledge of the Libyan context and the experience in leading coalition-based missions would likely pave the way for a new operation with Italian command.

3) *Strategic rivalries in the Middle East* are at an all-time high, with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel supporting a US-led vision of the region, and Russia, Syria and Iran opposing it. In addition to purely-strategic rivalries, religious, sectarian, tribal and social tensions more in general not only persist, but are experiencing a growing trend.³⁸ In this scenario, moreover, the role of Turkey is increasingly blurred and may represent a hindrance rather than a helping hand. Such is the context in which well over 3,000 Italian peacekeepers are currently

³⁵ Gabriele Abbondanza, *Italy as a Regional Power. The African Context from National Unification to the Present Day*, Rome, Aracne, 2016, 209-275.

³⁶ Mattia Giampaolo, "General Haftar and the Risks of Authoritarian 'Stability' in Libya", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|04 (February 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11269>.

³⁷ Nathalie Tocci, "Europe Needs Boots on the Ground in Libya", in *Politico*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-libya-strategy-boots-on-the-ground>.

³⁸ Ellie Geranmayeh, "Regional Geopolitical Rivalries in the Middle East: Implications for Europe", in *IAI Papers*, No. 18|18 (October 2018), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9652>.

operating.

4) A similar *situation* is unfolding in Africa – where Italy currently deploys around 1,500 peacekeepers – with emerging powers benefitting from the multipolarity of the 21st century that are rapidly modifying continental politics and power balances. The relevance for Italian foreign policy lies in the volatile and unstable regions of Northern Africa and the Horn of Africa, the latter being increasingly torn between renewed Saudi, Emirati and Chinese influences.³⁹

5) The increasing *influence of China in the Mediterranean*, where around 1,300 members of the Italian armed forces are deployed, is a source of concern. On the one hand, the economic benefits resulting from Chinese policies such as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) need to be carefully assessed against the risks of potential loss of control over crucial infrastructures, as well as looming debt traps for smaller states of the region. On the other, the strategic risks associated with the presence of a non-democratic and revisionist state are self-evident, and as such should be interpreted by the Italian and European political communities.⁴⁰

6) *European influence in the Balkans* (and Italian influence too, despite its almost 900 peacekeepers in the region) is *in relative decline*, due to the fact that the many EU predicaments in economic, political and social terms have reduced the Union's attractiveness, which in turn has allowed Russia and Saudi Arabia to start exploiting this influence vacuum. Concurrently, this is proving to be a fertile ground for Russian propaganda and Islamic extremism and potentially terrorism,⁴¹ thus outlining a series of political, economic and strategic risks for the next years.

7) Much of this this is happening when *the United States is renouncing its long-held role assertive defender of the global order* it had shaped following the end of the Cold War. Italy is therefore not only more alone that it has been in the past when pursuing its direct interests, but it is also unprecedentedly isolated in defending interests that were previously shared with the US, primarily in the MENA region.⁴² A reassessment of the country's priorities is therefore urgent, in order not to overstretch where it is less necessary and under-deliver where it matters the most.

8) All of which brings us to the eighth and last consideration on new concerns and subsequent risks for Italian PSOs and foreign policy more in general: the *spread of COVID-19*. While the international ramifications are too complex to be depicted in their entirety at present, early consequences already outline exacerbated

³⁹ Francesco Donelli and Giuseppe Dentice, "Fluctuating Saudi and Emirati Alignment Behaviours in the Horn of Africa", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (March 2020), p. 126-142.

⁴⁰ Ronald H. Linden, "The New Sea People: China in the Mediterranean", in *IAI Papers*, No. 18/14 (July 2018), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9435>.

⁴¹ John Turner, "Manufacturing the Jihad in Europe: The Islamic State's Strategy", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (March 2020), p. 112-125.

⁴² Alessandro Marrone and Michele Nones, "Le forze italiane in missione all'estero: trend e rischi", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 20|03 (March 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11378>.

geopolitical tensions, between allies and trade partners alike.⁴³ With reference to Italy, moreover, the aftermath of the pandemic will undoubtedly bring a temporary but severe economic contraction, which will in turn aggravate Rome's relationship with Brussels due to issues of debt sustainability. More to the point, many forecasts predict a contraction of Italy's GDP of around 10 per cent for 2020, which will be inevitably followed by a spending review. The risks of budget cuts to Italy's peace support operations openly concern both the country's national interests and its humanitarian engagements, and as such have been cautioned against elsewhere.⁴⁴ In this sense, the nature of the government in charge when such cuts will be designed – as well as the warmth (or otherwise) of the relationship with Brussels – will exert a substantial influence on the direction that the forthcoming Italian spending review will take.

5. What lies ahead for Italian peace support operations?

As with any element of a country's foreign policy, there are both strengths and weaknesses in Italian peace support operations, although, as the review of the literature has shown, the assessment of international observers is generally positive. Rome's engagement in this field reflects the duality of such efforts, with the pursuing of national interests coexisting with humanitarian, internationalist and multilateral attitudes. The main rationales behind Italy's national interests are Atlanticism, Europeanism, regionalism and mediation. The country's more specific drivers are national interests and security, economic benefits, the pressure of domestic politics, the maintenance of international prestige, the support for its military-industrial complex, the country's security culture, the protection of culture heritage and strong support for multilateralism. There are, moreover, some niches in which the Italian contribution is comparatively superior to that of other nations, which include policing, training, civil-military cooperation and cultural protection, often thanks to the Carabinieri corps. The above is implemented through a vast and respected network of PSOs, supported by 7,488 soldiers deployed in 24 different host nations, predominantly in the MENA region, the Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Horn of Africa. Such an effort firmly portrays Italy as the main peacekeeping contributor of all developed nations, thus being labelled as "the West's policeman" in recent research.⁴⁵

The other side of the coin, however, reveals that Italian PSOs are underused – as the maritime migration crisis, the Iran nuclear deal and the role within the UN and the EU attest – due to a series of political, economic and identity motivations that concern Italian domestic affairs. While it is evident that Italy's engagement in

⁴³ Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, "The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order", in *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1125706>.

⁴⁴ Gabriele Abbondanza, "L'Italia offre maggior contributo al mondo tra tutti i Paesi sviluppati per le missioni di pace internazionali", in *TPI News*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.tpi.it/?p=574670>.

⁴⁵ Gabriele Abbondanza, "The West's Policeman?", cit.

global peacekeeping cannot uphold the country's foreign policy by itself, these are significant obstacles that Rome should not dismiss. Moreover, Italian PSOs (and Italian foreign policy more in general) is increasingly undermined by new threats, such as: the multiple impending risks of the Libyan crisis, increasing tensions in the Middle East, contested regional power balances in Africa, the increasing influence of China in the Mediterranean Sea, the diminishing European and Italian influence in the Balkans, the progressive US shift from its traditional global role, the potential instability resulting from new populist governments and the many repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which are still unfolding. In conclusion, if Italy is to maintain its remarkable role in global peacekeeping – and bridge the gap between its commitment and the actual outcomes of it in terms of international influence – the country as a whole ought to face these issues, with its political, security, diplomatic, military and academic communities working in concert and without unnecessary delays.

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