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‘Armiamoci e Partite’: Italy’s Paradoxical Approach to European Union Rearmament Policy

Roberto Di Quirico
UNIVERSITY OF CAGLIARI

Abstract

This article examines Italy’s apparently paradoxical approach to European rearmament under the Meloni government: enthusiastic support for the €800 billion ReArmEU initiative while rejecting military deployment. Utilizing Putnam’s two-level game and Moravcsik’s liberal theory, it demonstrates how this contradiction dissolves under systematic analysis of domestic constraints. While supporting military preparedness without operational commitment is not uncommon among states facing severe constraints, Italy’s position is distinctive in combining this stance with full NATO membership and burden-sharing expectations befitting the EU’s third-largest economy. With PNRR funds expiring in 2026, Italy confronts a fiscal cliff precisely as ReArmEU launches. Facing fiscal crisis, coalition fragility, constitutional antimilitarism, and European pressure for solidarity, the government has identified ReArmEU as a rare convergence: access to resources without politically untenable military commitments. Drawing on EU documents, budget plans, and defence-industry data, the analysis shows how rearmament has been reframed as European alignment, industrial policy and coalition maintenance. Government preferences and public opinion point in the same direction: fiscal imperatives, electoral calculations, and antimilitarist culture mutually reinforce industrial mobilization without operational deployment. This equilibrium depends on Europe’s tolerance for asymmetric burden-sharing, the materializing of fiscal returns, and the absence of crises forcing a choice between economic benefits and military engagement. Should these conditions deteriorate, Italy’s ‘careful ambiguity’ risks collapsing into involuntary defection, undermining both its credibility and European security architecture.

1. Introduction

‘Armiamoci e partite’ (let’s arm ourselves, and off you go) is a phrase often attributed to Mussolini and deeply embedded in Italian popular culture. It encapsulates the enthusiastic adoption of military rhetoric alongside a consistent avoidance of actual military commitment. In the present context, as the Meloni government advocates for the €800 billion European rearmament plan while firmly rejecting Italian military deployment to Ukraine, this historical pattern is manifest in contemporary policy. Yet what appears paradoxical from a conventional security perspective – arming without willingness to fight – dissolves under closer examination of Italy’s specific constraints. This article demonstrates that Italy’s position reflects not strategic incoherence but constrained optimization: a pragmatic response to multiple binding pressures that happen to converge on industrial mobilization without operational commitment.

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Contact Author: Roberto Di Quirico, University of Cagliari.
E-mail address: diquirico@unica.it

The empirical puzzle is notable: Italy is among the most vocal supporters of ReArmEU, positioning itself to receive €14.9 billion in SAFE loans and potentially secure €70-85 billion in defence investments by 2030.[1] However, Italy provides among the lowest levels of military aid to Ukraine relative to GDP among major European powers (Bomprezzi et al. 2025: 1, 8; MEF 2025b). Concurrently, the Italian government has categorically rejected all proposals for military deployment in support of Ukrainian security. This apparent contradiction warrants systematic explanation.

To explain this apparent contradiction, the article draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. Putnam's (1988) two-level game analysis illuminates how the Italian government navigates between international expectations for burden-sharing (Level I) and domestic constraints against military deployment (Level II). The key insight is that complex policy packages can be decomposed into separable elements with different domestic politics: industrial investment falls within Italy's domestic win-set while operational deployment lies outside it. Moravcsik's (1997) liberal theory enriches this analysis by emphasizing how domestic societal groups – defence industries, regional governments, trade unions, anti-war movements – shape state preferences in international negotiations. Together, these frameworks reveal Italy's position as emerging from genuine domestic political economy rather than strategic manipulation: the government responds to real constraints that then determine what it can and cannot accept internationally. This article contends that Italy's approach reflects constrained optimization under severe fiscal and political pressure, rather than strategic sophistication or genuine paradox. The Meloni government faces multiple binding constraints simultaneously, including fiscal crisis following the expiration of the PNRR (Italy's Recovery and Resilience Plan), coalition fragility, constitutional antimilitarism, and European expectations for burden-sharing. ReArmEU represents a rare convergence of interests under these conditions. Recent scholarship on Italian policy towards the Ukrainian crisis highlights a similar tension between multilateral role expectations and domestic political cultures, emphasizing how Italy's historical pacifism and anti-Americanism complicate alignment with Western positions (Brighi & Giusti 2023: 194-196). The initiative provides substantial resources without necessitating politically untenable military commitments, coinciding with Italy's acute need for external financing. Analyses of Italian foreign policy underscore the Meloni government's pragmatic navigation of these contradictory pressures, maintaining continuity with the Draghi government's strategic orientation while adapting to coalition politics and domestic constraints (Fasola & Lucarelli 2024: 198, 208).

Italy's position shares elements with other states facing analogous tensions. Neutral countries – Finland before NATO accession, Austria, Switzerland – have long maintained robust military preparedness without alliance commitments or expeditionary postures. Several EU members combine industrial participation in defence programmes with reluctance towards operational deployment. Germany's early Zeitenwende phase

[1] SAFE (Security Action for Europe) is an EU financing mechanism established in 2025, providing long-term, low-interest loans through the European Investment Bank for defence investments, with repayment periods of up to 45 years. Eighteen member states joined in July 2025, requesting €127 billion collectively; Italy requested €14.9 billion for programmes planned for 2026-2030. Funds must be employed within five years for industrial capacity, equipment procurement, or infrastructure development (Il Foglio 2025; European Parliament 2025a; Il Sole 24 Ore 2025).

displayed similar hesitations between financial commitments and military engagement. What distinguishes the Italian case is the specific combination of factors: full NATO membership creating burden-sharing expectations; the third-largest EU economy generating proportional contribution demands; a governing coalition containing both Atlanticist and pro-Russian elements; constitutional antimilitarism rooted in Article 11; and a fiscal cliff following PNRR expiration that makes European defence funding uniquely attractive.[2] No single element is unique to Italy, but their convergence at this particular juncture creates a distinctive configuration requiring analysis on its own terms.

The timing is crucial and reveals the opportunity structure shaping Italian choices. Italy received €191.5 billion in PNRR funding from 2021-2026, funds that sustained public investment and economic growth when fiscal space was effectively zero (MEF 2025a). By 2026, these flows will terminate completely. The Italian government projects a +3.6 percentage-point impact on GDP attributable to the PNRR by 2026 (MEF 2025a), an artificial stimulus that will evaporate precisely as European fiscal rules tighten. Italy must reduce its deficit below 3% of GDP by 2026 while managing debt levels approaching 138% of GDP (MEF 2025a; Euronews 2024). The government faces severe constraints on expenditure growth – limited to 1.6% annually under new European rules – leaving virtually no room for discretionary spending increases (MEF 2024a).

Onto this fiscal cliff lands ReArmEU, announced in March 2025 by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The initiative promises €650 billion in defence spending enabled by exemptions from Stability and Growth Pact limits, €150 billion in SAFE loans to member states, plus various EU-funded programmes (European Commission 2025a). For Italy, this translates to potential access to €29 billion in fiscal space that will not count against deficit limits if directed toward defence capabilities, plus €14.9 billion in favourable loans (European Parliament 2025a; CGIL 2025). ReArmEU thus offers not merely security policy but fiscal salvation: a mechanism to maintain public investment levels after PNRR expires without triggering European sanctions.

Building on Putnam's two-level game framework, we contend that the Meloni government has pragmatically navigated this opportunity by reinterpreting rearmament through three complementary lenses. First, defence spending aligns with European integration, which is essential for maintaining Italy's place at the European table despite Fratelli d'Italia's Eurosceptic roots. Second, it functions as an industrial policy, promising employment, regional development, and technological advancement precisely at a time when traditional sectors are facing a crisis. Third, it enables coalition maintenance by distributing resources to key constituencies, particularly in regions where defence production facilities are concentrated, without requiring politically divisive operational commitments that would fracture public support.

The structure of this article is as follows. Section 2 examines how ReArmEU addresses Italy's fiscal challenges following the expiration of the PNRR, emphasizing the explanatory significance of timing. Section 3 analyses the political economy of defence

[2] The term fiscal cliff is borrowed from U.S. economic discourse and refers to a sudden contraction in public spending due to the expiration of temporary programmes. In Italy's case, it marks the abrupt termination of the PNRR inflows in 2026, removing a fiscal stimulus equivalent to nearly 3.5% of GDP annually.

industrialization as an economic recovery strategy. Section 4 explores how defence spending maps onto coalition electoral geography and sustains cross-party support. Section 5 offers a theoretical interpretation grounded in Putnam's two-level games and Moravcsik's liberal theory, illustrating how Italy navigates contradictions between domestic constraints and international expectations. Section 6 explores the limits and potential fragility of this equilibrium, including European frustration, questions of industrial sustainability, and crisis scenarios that could compel a shift in Italian policy. The conclusion assesses the implications for Italian foreign policy and the broader European security architecture.

2. Italy's Fiscal Cliff and the ReArmEU Opportunity

Italy's enthusiasm for European rearmament becomes comprehensible only when situated within the country's specific fiscal predicament and the context of long-term economic decline. From 2021 to 2026, the PNRR provided Italy with €191.5 billion – €68.9 billion in grants and €122.6 billion in loans at favourable rates – plus an additional €30.6 billion from a complementary national fund (MEF 2025a; Italia Domani 2025). These resources sustained public investment at levels that would have been impossible under normal European fiscal constraints. The government's own projections indicated that PNRR implementation would boost GDP by 3.6 percentage points by 2026 relative to a baseline without the programme (MEF 2025a).

This represents an extraordinary fiscal stimulus for a country that entered the pandemic with debt at 134.8% of GDP and virtually no room for deficit spending within European rules (Euronews 2024). PNRR funds financed everything from digital infrastructure to green transition projects, from judicial reform to public administration modernization. More importantly for our analysis, they provided steady flows of resources that maintained public investment rates and supported economic activity precisely when Italy's own fiscal capacity was exhausted. The Italian government has grown dependent on this external financing to sustain expenditure levels without triggering European sanctions.

On 31 December 2026, this flow terminates completely. The final PNRR disbursements occur, and Italy must thereafter finance all public investment solely from national resources. This creates what analysts have termed a 'fiscal cliff'. The government must simultaneously manage three binding constraints. First, Italy must reduce its deficit below 3% of GDP by 2026 to exit from the Excessive Deficit Procedure, with current projections targeting 2.8-2.9% (MEF 2024a; PMI.it 2024). Second, debt levels are projected to rise to 137-138% of GDP before stabilizing, requiring careful management to maintain market confidence (MEF 2024a; Euronews 2024). Third, new European fiscal rules limit expenditure growth to approximately 1.6% annually, calculated as growth in 'net expenditure' that excludes certain categories but constrains discretionary spending severely (MEF 2024a).

For the Italian government facing this fiscal cliff, a European initiative offering billions in additional resources, substantial portions of which are exempted from normal deficit calculations, and favourable loan terms represents not merely an opportunity but a necessity. Whether Italian policymakers consciously sought such an initiative or simply recognized and seized an unexpected opportunity, the fiscal logic compelling

Italian enthusiasm is clear. ReArmEU offers what Italy desperately needs: a mechanism to sustain public investment after 2026 without violating European rules or exhausting domestic political capital.

Following the new strategy of pursuing 'peace through strength' introduced by President Ursula von der Leyen,[3] the European Commission's March 2025 White Paper on European Defence, introducing the ReArmEU initiative (later renamed 'Readiness 2030'), transformed defence spending from a budgetary constraint into a fiscal opportunity (European Commission 2025c). The initiative mobilizes potentially €800 billion through multiple complementary mechanisms, each offering distinct advantages to member states facing fiscal pressure. For Italy, three elements prove particularly attractive: the defence expenditure exemption from Stability and Growth Pact limits, SAFE loans structured to remain off-balance sheet, and EU-funded programmes requiring minimal national co-financing, including the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP)[4] with €1.5 billion, and the European Defence Fund (EDF)[5] with €7.95 billion for 2021-2027 (European Defence Fund 2023).

The defence exemption is a revolutionary precedent in European fiscal governance. Since the Maastricht Treaty established the 3% deficit and 60% debt criteria, European rules permitted exceptions only for natural disasters, severe recessions, or extraordinary circumstances requiring Council approval. The ReArmEU framework institutionalizes defence spending as a permanent category for special treatment. Member states can exceed normal expenditure limits if resources flow towards defence capabilities, with the Commission promising 'maximum flexibility' in deficit calculations (European Commission 2025b). For Italy, this translates into potential access to approximately €29 billion in additional fiscal space that would not count against deficit limits if directed appropriately (CGIL 2025).

The SAFE (Securing Arms for Europe) loan facility adds another dimension. Unlike traditional EU structural funds, which require complex co-financing arrangements and lengthy bureaucratic procedures, SAFE offers direct loans at favourable rates specifically for defence projects. The facility operates on a 45-year repayment schedule with grace periods, effectively transforming immediate defence needs into long-term fiscal obligations spread across decades (Il Sole 24 Ore 2025a; Il Foglio 2025). Italy's allocation of

[3] The expression 'peace through strength' derives directly from the rhetoric used by von der Leyen to articulate the rationale for the ReArm Europe initiative. In her address to the European Parliament on 11 March 2025, von der Leyen declared: 'This is the moment for peace through strength'. (European Commission 2025d).

[4] The European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP), proposed in March 2024 and finalized in June 2025, strengthens European defence industrial capacity and collaborative procurement. It continues temporary measures adopted in 2022-2023 (EDIRPA and ASAP). The programme allocates €1.5 billion in EU grants for 2025-2027: €1.2 billion for the main programme and €300 million for a Ukraine Support Instrument integrating Ukrainian defence industry into the European ecosystem. (Council of the European Union 2025; European Commission 2024; European Parliament 2024, 8-11; European Parliament 2025b; Senato della Repubblica 2025).

[5] The European Defence Fund (EDF), established in 2021, provides €7.95 billion for 2021-2027 to support cross-border collaborative defence R&D, positioning the EU among Europe's top three defence R&D investors. The Fund fosters competitiveness and innovation capacity in the European defence industrial base, supporting both research for future military capabilities and collaborative development to achieve economies of scale and reduce duplication. (Vroege 2024, 67-68; European Commission 2021-2024; European Defence Agency 2022-2023).

€14.9 billion – the third largest after Germany and Poland – can finance everything from ammunition production to cyber capabilities to naval modernization (European Parliament 2025a). Critically, these loans receive special accounting treatment that minimizes their impact on current deficit calculations, allowing Italy to 'borrow now, pay later' while meeting near-term fiscal targets (Il Sole 24 Ore 2025b).

The creative accounting involved deserves emphasis. Italy can claim progress towards NATO's 2% GDP defence spending target by including military pensions, carabinieri salaries, and other items traditionally excluded from pure defence budgets (Defense News 2025a). When combined with SAFE loans and EU-funded programmes, this allows Italy to present itself as meeting European expectations while carefully managing what actually counts against fiscal limits.

The September 2024 Draghi Report on European competitiveness proved essential in providing intellectual legitimacy for rearmament-as-industrial-policy (Draghi 2024).[6] Former Prime Minister and European Central Bank President Mario Draghi commanded unique authority across the political spectrum. His framing of defence spending, not primarily as security investment but as an economic necessity for European competitiveness, offered the Meloni government precisely the narrative framework needed to justify massive spending increases to coalition partners and a sceptical public.

Draghi's central argument presented European defence industrial fragmentation as an economic inefficiency requiring correction. He noted that European defence budgets already exceed €290 billion annually but generate limited economic benefit due to fragmentation across 27 national markets and procurement systems that favour imports over European production (SIPRI 2025, cited in Draghi 2024). This fragmentation costs Europe technological leadership, industrial capacity, and strategic autonomy. Consolidation through coordinated procurement and industrial policy could transform inefficiency into opportunity, creating European champions capable of competing globally while generating high-skilled employment in regions suffering deindustrialization. Defence spending is no longer a cost but an investment with substantial economic multipliers.

Draghi provided language that avoided military terminology while justifying spending increases. Terms like 'defence industrial base', 'dual-use technologies', and 'strategic autonomy' carefully sidestep associations with militarization or war preparation. This linguistic strategy matters because, as Moravcsik notes, issue framing shapes which domestic groups mobilize and how interests are perceived (Moravcsik 1997, 518, 524-528). Presenting rearmament as industrial policy rather than military build-up expands the domestic win-set, attracting support from economic interests while contrasting opposition from anti-military constituencies.

The Italian government's rhetoric quickly adopted this framing. Defence Minister Guido Crosetto consistently presented rearmament in economic terms, emphasizing job creation, regional development, and technological advancement rather than military

[6] Commissioned by the European Commission, the Draghi Report laid the groundwork for a new doctrine of *strategic competitiveness*, later invoked to justify large-scale public investment in defence industries. It reframed rearmament not as militarization but as a structural pillar of Europe's economic resilience and technological sovereignty.

capability (Landor & Fitch 2025; Analisi Difesa 2025). In parliamentary hearings and public addresses, he portrayed Leonardo and Fincantieri not as arms manufacturers but as 'national champions' driving innovation and export growth.[7] In a March 2025 address at the Festival of Economics in Trento, Crosetto praised the 'total osmosis between the military and civilian sectors', explaining that investment in defence necessarily produces growth in civilian applications (Analisi Difesa 2025). This economic framing found receptive audiences across the political spectrum, making possible support from constituencies that would never endorse purely military arguments.

3. The Political Economy of Opportunity

Understanding why Italy embraced ReArmEU with such enthusiasm requires an examination not merely of fiscal arithmetic but the specific political economy of defence industrialization. Why defence spending rather than investment in other sectors for post-PNRR investment? The answer lies in the defence industry's unique characteristics: it simultaneously addresses economic recovery needs, maps advantageously onto coalition electoral geography, commands fragile but functional cross-party support, and offers fiscal engineering possibilities unavailable through conventional spending.

The economic case for defence industrialization rests on projections suggesting substantial returns precisely when Italy most needs them. Leonardo projected revenue growth from €17.8 billion in 2024 to €28-30 billion by 2029 – an increase of 58-67% that would make it one of Europe's largest industrial enterprises (Leonardo S.p.A. 2025b; Defense News 2025b). Fincantieri anticipated similar expansion through the European Patrol Corvette programme, next-generation submarines, and unmanned naval systems. The combined order backlog of Italian defence companies reached €42 billion by early 2025, providing a multi-year revenue visibility that is rare in other sectors (Leonardo S.p.A. 2025c). These projections assume that substantial ReArmEU procurement materializes, but even partial realization would represent transformative growth.

Employment multipliers amplify the direct economic impact. A Bank of Italy analysis indicates that defence investments generate 1.5-2x multipliers through supply chain effects – higher than those of traditional infrastructure spending due to technological intensity and skilled labour requirements (Banca d'Italia 2024). This matters, particularly given Italy's employment structure: defence manufacturing creates both blue-collar production jobs and white-collar engineering positions, building broader coalition support than sectors appealing to narrow constituencies. Regional development models showed benefits concentrated in areas suffering industrial decline. Aerospace facilities in Campania and Puglia, naval production in Liguria and Friuli Venezia Giulia, and electronics systems across the industrial North could anchor ecosystems that sustain

[7] Leonardo S.p.A. is Italy's largest defence company and ranks as the world's 13th largest arms manufacturer employing 62,000 people. The company operates across aerospace, defence electronics, helicopters, and cybersecurity. Fincantieri S.p.A. is Italy's naval shipbuilding champion, recording €8.1 billion in revenues. It employs 22,588 people, half in Italy, and specializes in military vessels, including frigates, destroyers, submarines, and patrol ships. Both companies are state-controlled, Leonardo directly by the Treasury, Fincantieri through Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, the state investment vehicle, ensuring strategic autonomy whilst allowing commercial operations and international partnerships. (Leonardo S.p.A. 2025; Fincantieri S.p.A. 2025; SIPRI 2024, SIPRI 2025; Defense News 2025; MEF 2024b).

smaller suppliers. Employment projections suggested 30,000-50,000 direct positions plus 100,000-150,000 indirect jobs across supply chains (Leonardo 2025a).

Why defence rather than alternative sectors? Defence offers a distinctive combination of advantages: high-value manufacturing in domains where Italy maintains competitive capabilities; multi-year contract stability providing predictability absent in commercial markets; substantial export potential generating fiscal returns; and dual-use technology spillovers, though these remain uncertain as discussed below. This combination proves uniquely attractive for a government seeking to maintain industrial capacity and employment after PNRR expires while accessing European resources unavailable through other channels.

The timing reinforces the defence's attractions. Italy needs immediate employment creation and industrial activity to smooth the post-PNRR transition. Infrastructure projects require lengthy planning, permitting, and construction cycles. Traditional industrial policy faces state aid restrictions and an uncertain private sector response. Defence procurement, by contrast, can move relatively quickly. The compressed timeline between political decisions and economic activity makes defence particularly well-suited to addressing near-term fiscal and employment pressures.

These economic attractions explain why Italian policymakers, regardless of their broader ideological orientation towards military spending, might pragmatically embrace defence industrialization. The sector offers employment in politically important regions, technological advancement in competitive domains, improved export revenues to strengthen fiscal balances, and multi-year stability to bridge the post-PNRR period. Whether economic returns materialize as projected remains uncertain – defence firms historically overestimate growth, technological spillovers prove elusive, and export markets face competition. But the promise proves sufficient to build political coalitions supporting massive spending increases that would face resistance if framed purely as a military necessity.

4. Defence Spending and Electoral Support

Defence industrial geography maps remarkably well onto the governing coalition's electoral strongholds, creating structural advantages that transcend any particular government's strategic choices. Leonardo's helicopter production facilities are concentrated in Varese (Lombardy), a traditional Lega stronghold where the party commands local government and parliamentary representation. The company's aerospace division spans Torino (Piemonte) and facilities across the industrial Northwest, regions where centre-right parties dominate. Fincantieri's naval shipyards stretch across the Northeast from Trieste to Monfalcone in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, where Fratelli d'Italia and Lega compete but both command significant support.

Southern facilities add geographic breadth to this political base. Leonardo operates aerospace plants in Pomigliano d'Arco (Campania) and Grottaglie (Puglia), regions governed by centre-left but that respond to employment promises. Fincantieri maintains shipyards in Castellammare di Stabia (Campania) and plans expansion in Southern regions traditionally dependent on state investment. The geographic distribution creates interest groups across Italy's political landscape, though they are particularly concentrated in areas where the governing coalition draws electoral strength.

This geographic alignment is an inherited advantage rather than a deliberate design by the current government. Italy's defence industrial structure developed over decades, shaped by Christian Democratic-era decisions about state enterprise location, Cold War strategic considerations, and regional development policies predating current political configurations. That these facilities are now concentrated in regions supporting the centre-right coalition creates an opportunity for the Meloni government to leverage existing assets rather than build new political relationships. The government did not create this favourable geography, but it is now moving to exploit it through procurement decisions, facility modernization, and workforce expansion programmes.

Historical echoes resonate without determining current patterns. Christian Democratic governance in Southern Italy created systems based on state enterprise control and employment distribution serving dual functions: economic development and political consensus-building (Ginsborg 1990; LaPalombara 1987). State-owned enterprises established industrial facilities in the Mezzogiorno not primarily for economic efficiency but for employment creation and patronage distribution. These enterprises generated jobs, distributed resources to local political networks, and built constituencies dependent on government investment flows. The Christian Democratic formula combined state resource control with clientelistic distribution, ensuring electoral loyalty through material benefits rather than ideological alignment.

Contemporary defence industrialization follows distinct mechanisms operating in different political contexts, yet it shares functional similarities. State procurement drives private-sector expansion in politically important regions. Employment creation strengthens local economies and builds constituency support. Multi-year contracts provide stability, encouraging long-term political relationships. Export licensing decisions concentrate power in the government's hands, creating dependencies. The contemporary right adapts rather than invents patronage politics, using defence procurement where Christian Democrats deployed broader state enterprises, operating through defence exemptions and European funds rather than deficit-financed domestic programmes, but pursuing similar logics of building support through resource distribution.

The critical difference lies in constraint rather than choice. Christian Democrats commanded fiscal resources through deficit spending and direct control of state enterprises. Contemporary governments face European fiscal rules, declining state ownership, and market constraints. Defence spending under ReArmEU offers a rare mechanism to distribute resources despite these constraints, while European security anxiety creates space for spending that domestic economic arguments alone cannot justify. Political opportunity emerges not from superior strategic vision but from the alignment of existing industrial geography with current electoral coalitions at a time when European priorities permit fiscal expansion that would otherwise be foreclosed.

Defence spending commands fragile but functional cross-party support, unusual in Italy's polarized political landscape. This consensus proves conditional and potentially temporary rather than deeply rooted, sustained by each party finding distinct reasons to support or tolerate policies they might otherwise oppose (Vignoli and Coticchia 2024, 9-18). The coalition supporting ReArmEU resembles 'minimum winning coalitions' in

legislative politics: sufficient support exists to proceed, but only because to each constituency the alternatives appear worse.

The Lega (League) presents the most striking reversal. Historically sympathetic toward Russia and sceptical of NATO commitments, the party has traditionally opposed increases in defence spending as wasteful militarism. Matteo Salvini maintained close relations with Russian officials and criticized sanctions following Crimea's annexation (Capati 2024, 224; Vignoli and Coticchia 2024, 6-7; Carlotti 2023; Morini 2023: 175-176). Yet the Lega voted to support substantial increases in defence spending once leadership recognized that major production facilities were concentrated in the party's electoral heartland. Economic self-interest overcame ideological hesitation. Lega representatives began framing defence investment as industrial policy and employment protection rather than militarism, allowing support without explicitly repudiating previous positions. This support remains conditional: should facilities close, employment disappoint, or coalition dynamics shift, Lega could revert to a sceptical position.

Fratelli d'Italia presents a distinctive pattern requiring separate examination as the coalition's dominant party. Unlike Lega's visible tensions between base and government, or Forza Italia's straightforward Atlanticism, FdI displays remarkable alignment between Meloni's governmental pragmatism and party discipline on defence matters. This alignment did not emerge from governmental responsibility alone. The party's transition from hard Euroscepticism toward what scholars term 'Euro-realism' began before Meloni's 2022 electoral victory, traceable to the 2017 Trieste congress and the 2018 decision to join the European Conservatives and Reformists rather than more radical Eurosceptic groupings (Salvati 2025). By the 2022 campaign, FdI had abandoned anti-euro rhetoric in favour of a 'Europe of homelands' framing that accepted EU membership while emphasizing national interests.

On defence specifically, FdI occupies the intermediate ground within the coalition. The party supported the March 2025 European Parliament resolution on ReArmEU – unlike Lega, which voted against it – while proposing to rebrand the initiative as 'Defend Europe' rather than 'ReArm Europe', signalling discomfort with overtly militarist framing. FdI backs increased defence spending and NATO commitments but opposes a European army, distinguishing itself from Forza Italia's more ambitious European defence integration proposals. This positioning allows Meloni to present Italy as a reliable partner on European defence cooperation while maintaining distance from supranational military structures that would alarm sovereigntist constituencies.

Crucially, the absence of visible party-government divergence on defence policy reflects Meloni's concentrated authority rather than genuine ideological consensus. As both Prime Minister and party leader, Meloni shapes FdI positions to match governmental requirements, a pattern scholars identify as characteristic of the party's historical flexibility on doctrine. Defence Minister Guido Crosetto embodies this convergence: a FdI co-founder who previously presided over AIAD (the Italian aerospace and defence industry association), his appointment bridges partisan loyalty, industrial interests, and governmental pragmatism. The revolving door between defence industry leadership and ministerial responsibility – rare in Italian politics – ensures that FdI's defence positions align with both coalition management needs and industrial constituency demands. Whereas Lega's support for defence spending required the overcoming of ideological

resistance through economic incentives, FdI's support required only the repositioning of a doctrinally flexible party behind a leader whose governmental interests now favour European defence cooperation.

Forza Italia's support follows a different logic. The party maintains Atlanticist foreign policy traditions and generally favours defence cooperation, providing an ideological foundation for supporting European rearmament. However, Forza Italia's fiscal conservatism creates tension: the party historically opposes high levels of taxation, also to finance industrial policies. ReArmEU resolves this tension by offering European financing rather than national deficit spending or further taxation. The combination of EU funds, SAFE loans, and budget exemptions allows Forza Italia to support substantial spending increases without contradicting fiscal orthodoxy positions. As long as European mechanisms finance expansion, Forza Italia maintains support; if Italy has to self-finance using domestic resources, party positions might shift.

This cross-party configuration creates a functional majority supporting ReArmEU, but hardly represents a durable consensus. Each party supports the other for contingent reasons rather than for shared conviction about military necessity. Should these conditions change, the coalition could fragment rapidly. The Meloni government, therefore, operates on a narrow foundation requiring continued management to maintain a minimum winning coalition supporting defence spending.

5. Navigating Contradictions: Two-Level Games and Preference Decomposition

Italy's ability to simultaneously champion European rearmament and refuse military deployment appears paradoxical until analysed through the lens of two-level games. This section employs Putnam's framework to show how the Italian government navigates between international pressures for burden-sharing and domestic constraints against military involvement, using decomposition strategies that allow the pursuit of apparently contradictory policies. The case demonstrates how governments facing severe domestic constraints can maintain international cooperation by carefully managing which aspects of complex issues reach negotiation tables and which remain off-limits.

As outlined in the introduction, Putnam's two-level game framework illuminates how governments navigate between international and domestic constraints. Applied to Italian defence policy, Level I involves European negotiations where partners expect contributions commensurate with Italy's status as the EU's third-largest economy: not merely financial commitments but operational deployments and genuine military risk-taking.

Level II, however, presents severe constraints. Italian public opinion decisively opposes military involvement. Support for Ukraine collapsed from 57% in March 2022 to 32% in 2025, with the majority refusing to take sides (IPSOS 2025). Only 28% favour ReArmEU, while 39% oppose (IPSOS 2025). Earlier surveys found that 27% of Italians blamed Ukraine, the EU, or the US for the war – the highest proportion among polled European countries – while 35% identified these actors as the biggest obstacle to peace, reflecting what scholars term Italy's 'divergent public opinion' compared to other major European states (Brighi and Giusti 2023: 198-199). Constitutional antimilitarism, rooted in Article 11's renunciation of war as an instrument of policy, creates legal and

cultural barriers to military deployment. Coalition politics add complexity: while Fratelli d'Italia might tolerate limited operational commitments, Lega's base remains sceptical (Vignoli and Coticchia 2024, 16-17). In the meantime, opposition could mobilize broader anti-war sentiment. Any government proposing substantial troop deployments risks both electoral backlash and coalition fracture.

Yet framing this purely as constraint misses a crucial dimension. The standard two-level game posits tension between governmental preferences and domestic constraints – negotiators want outcomes that domestic constituencies block. In the Italian case, however, governmental preferences and domestic constraints point in the same direction, creating what might be termed a 'convenient convergence'. The Meloni government faces no internal pressure to pursue operational commitments that public opinion forecloses. Military deployment would impose severe fiscal costs on an already strained budget, risk casualties that would destabilize coalition support, and generate uncertain political returns even if successful. The government's revealed preferences – industrial mobilization without operational commitment – align with, rather than strain against antimilitarist public opinion.

This convergence has important theoretical implications. Post-functionalist accounts of European integration emphasize how responsiveness to public opinion pulls governments away from functional cooperation pressures (Hooghe and Marks 2009). A pure post-functionalist reading would cast Meloni as constrained by antimilitarist sentiment against her preferred Atlanticist positioning. Alternatively, a cynical free-riding interpretation would see the government strategically exploiting public opinion as cover for the burden-shifting it would pursue regardless. The evidence suggests a third possibility: genuine preference alignment where fiscal imperatives, electoral calculations, and antimilitarist culture mutually reinforce the same policy outcome. The government need not choose between responding to domestic opinion and pursuing its interests because both point towards industrial participation without operational deployment. This alignment makes Italy's position more stable than either pure constraint or pure free-riding would imply – but also more resistant to change, since modification would require shifting both governmental calculations and public attitudes simultaneously.

The standard two-level game would face gridlock: international partners demand operational contributions, but Italy's domestic win-set excludes them. But the Italian case demonstrates how decomposing complex issues into separable components can expand negotiating space. ReArmEU is not a monolithic 'rearmament' but rather a bundle of distinct elements: financial commitments, industrial procurement, capability development, operational deployment, training missions, and strategic planning. These components have different domestic politics. Industrial investment that creates jobs and drives growth is acceptable domestically, while military deployment remains toxic. The Italian government, therefore, navigates by enthusiastically supporting elements within its domestic win-set (industrial investment, financial contributions) while categorically excluding elements outside it (operational deployment).

This decomposition creates an apparent contradiction – championing rearmament while refusing military commitment – that proves sustainable as long as European partners accept the distinction. Whether this represents sophisticated strategy or necessity-driven pragmatism remains ambiguous. Italian negotiators may have consciously

identified decomposition as a solution, or they may have stumbled into it while responding to contradictory pressures. The outcome, however, is clear: Italy maintains participation in European defence cooperation by carefully controlling which aspects reach both negotiating tables.

The Putnam framework illuminates how domestic constraints, rather than merely limiting options, can serve as bargaining advantages. A negotiator who can credibly claim 'my hands are tied domestically' gains leverage: partners must either accommodate constraints or accept that negotiations will fail. Italy's antimilitarist consensus, far from being a weakness to hide, becomes an asset to deploy strategically in Level I negotiations. European partners, aware of Italian public opinion, understand that pushing for troop deployment risks either Italian defection from broader cooperation or government collapse, followed by even less cooperative successors.

This dynamic requires domestic constraints to be both genuine and credible. If partners suspect constraints are feigned negotiating tactics, the strategy fails. But Italian antimilitarism is demonstrably real, with deep historical and constitutional roots. The Italian Constitution creates a high threshold requiring parliamentary approval and public support for military operations. The credibility of these constraints means European partners must choose: accept Italy's limited participation, which focuses on financial and industrial contributions, or risk losing even that by demanding operational commitments that would trigger Italian withdrawal. Most European states prefer partial cooperation to none at all.

Moravcsik's liberal theory enriches this analysis by emphasizing how domestic societal groups shape state preferences in international negotiations (Moravcsik 1997, 517-20). Rather than treating states as unitary rational actors, liberal theory recognizes that preferences emerge from domestic political processes where organized interests compete for influence. In Italy's case, several constituencies shape the defence policy win-set. Defence industry groups favour procurement spending but remain indifferent to operational deployment. Trade unions in defence sectors support employment-generating investment but oppose military adventurism. Regional governments in areas hosting production facilities seek investment flows regardless of ultimate military use. Anti-war movements, Catholic organizations, and parts of the political left mobilize against operational commitments but lack the capacity to block purely industrial spending.

This constellation of domestic interests creates a win-win: industrial rearmament is acceptable, but operational deployment is not. The Italian government, whether consciously or not, positions itself to represent these preferences internationally. The government is not manipulating domestic opinion to pursue preferred policy but rather responding to genuine constraints that then shape international negotiating positions. This represents bottom-up preference formation: societal interests determine what governments can and cannot accept internationally, rather than governments strategically using domestic politics as cover for predetermined choices.

The result is a preference structure that appears contradictory from a realist perspective (why arm if not willing to fight?) but logical from a liberal institutionalist view (domestic political economy permits certain contributions while excluding others). Italy's position reflects not strategic calculation about military effectiveness but domestic political equilibrium, in which multiple constituencies find an acceptable arrangement.

Defence firms get contracts, regions get jobs, fiscal authorities get European financing, and the public avoids the military entanglements it opposes. That this equilibrium simultaneously satisfies domestic constituencies and maintains (barely) acceptable international cooperation makes it sustainable, at least temporarily.

The theoretical insight here concerns how decomposition strategies face time-consistency problems. Arrangements that are acceptable initially as emergency measures become sources of friction when sustained indefinitely. Partners tolerate temporary free-riding during crisis build-up but grow resentful when it becomes permanent policy. The two-level game analysis suggests that Italian negotiators understand this dynamic but calculate that maintaining the current equilibrium, however unstable, is preferable to available alternatives. Pushing towards operational commitments risks the collapse of the domestic coalition. Reducing industrial investment eliminates fiscal benefits, motivating the current policy. The government, therefore, continues along the current path, hoping that either the security situation improves (reducing pressure) or that European tolerance persists (preventing forced choice).

Whether or not this calculation proves correct depends on factors beyond Italian control. Should Russia achieve a breakthrough requiring an urgent European response, or should Article 5 invocation demand operational commitments, Italy's decomposition strategy will collapse. At that point, the government will face a binary choice: deploy forces and risk a domestic political crisis, or refuse and face international isolation. Neither option appears attractive, but the decomposition strategy works only by deferring this choice indefinitely. The Italian case thus illustrates both the utility and fragility of managing contradictory pressures through issue disaggregation – a tactic that works until circumstances force reintegration.

6. The Limits of the Italian Paradox

Italy's equilibrium – industrial mobilization without operational commitment – depends on conditions unlikely to endure indefinitely. This section examines some sources of fragility. The analysis remains descriptive rather than predictive; we cannot know whether or when these pressures will force change. But identifying conditions sustaining current arrangements clarifies what would need to shift for Italy's approach to become untenable.

Data reveal stark disparities in how European states share defence burdens, with Italy consistently appearing in the lower tier of contributors when measured by operational commitments or military aid relative to GDP. The Kiel Institute's comprehensive tracking of support to Ukraine shows Italy providing 0.03-0.04% of GDP in bilateral military assistance – approximately one-tenth the proportional contribution of countries like Poland, which invests over ten times this rate (Bomprezzi et al. 2025: 7). When measured in absolute terms, Germany leads European donors at €17 billion total military aid, followed by the United Kingdom at €15 billion and Denmark at €8 billion, while Italy ranks thirteenth at approximately €700 million to €2.2 billion depending on how secreted contributions are estimated (Analisi Difesa 2025). The Meloni government's support for Ukraine, though limited in operational terms, represents continuity with positions established during the Draghi government and reflects pragmatic balancing of transatlantic alignment requirements against domestic political constraints (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024: 205-206).

These disparities become more pronounced when defence spending is expressed as a share of GDP. Poland increased spending from 2.7% in 2022 to 4.2% in 2024, with projections reaching 4.7% in 2025 (NATO Review 2025). Estonia maintains defence spending at 3.4% of GDP despite being a small nation with limited resources (Economic Insider 2025). The Baltic states collectively demonstrate threat perception, driving genuine prioritization of military capability. Germany, despite its own historical reluctance, reached the 2% NATO target in 2024 and discussions now centre on potentially increasing to 3-3.5% (NATO Review 2025). Italy, by contrast, claimed to meet the 2% target only through creative accounting, including military pensions and carabinieri salaries – a methodology drawing international scepticism (Defense News 2025).

Beyond financial metrics, operational contributions reveal even starker contrasts. Poland provides not merely funding but substantive military equipment: tanks, artillery systems, fighter aircraft, and ammunition from its own stocks despite the degradation this causes to Polish military readiness (Poland News-Pravda 2025). Germany, after overcoming historical reluctance, supplies Leopard tanks, Iris-T air defence systems, PzH-2000 self-propelled howitzers, and substantial ammunition stocks (Analisi Difesa 2024). Even smaller states like Denmark deliver F-16 fighter aircraft and integrate Ukrainian pilots into training programmes. Italy's contributions, while including some significant systems such as SAMP/T air defence units, notably exclude heavy offensive weapons and remain modest relative to its economic capacity.

Explicit public criticism from Eastern European capitals remains muted, reflecting European diplomatic norms favouring quiet pressure over public confrontation. Additionally, Italy's financial contributions and industrial capacity serve collective interests, creating incentives for partners to tolerate limitations rather than risk broader cooperation fracturing. However, anecdotal reports and policy discussions suggest growing frustration in capitals most exposed to the Russian threat.

Studies on European defence burden-sharing reinforce these concerns. Research examining support to Ukraine relative to donor capacity consistently ranks Italy in the bottom third of contributors (Trebesch et al. 2025; CEPR 2024). Academic analyses of NATO burden-sharing note Italy's historical pattern of benefiting from alliance security guarantees while minimizing its own contributions – a pattern that predates the current government but continues under it (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024: 202, 205-206). The language remains diplomatic and analytical, but the cumulative effect documents Italy as a persistent under-contributor relative to capacity.

The sustainability question concerns not whether disparities exist – they clearly do – but whether European tolerance will persist. Several factors might maintain current arrangements. Italy's financial contributions, while modest in operation, provide resources that other states use. Italian industrial capacity, particularly in naval systems and aerospace, contributes to European capability development. Most fundamentally, pushing Italy toward operational commitments it cannot politically sustain risks coalition collapse or Italian withdrawal from broader cooperation. European partners may calculate that partial Italian participation beats none at all.

However, tolerance has limits. Should the security situation deteriorate, pressure on Italy to match operational commitments with financial contributions will intensify. The current arrangement works because the crisis remains manageable and American

guarantees, however uncertain, persist. Change either condition, and Italy's equilibrium will be severely stressed. The decomposition strategy sustaining current policy assumes European partners will indefinitely accept industrial free-riding without operational burden-sharing. This assumption appears increasingly questionable.

Defence firms require operational deployment to sustain industrial development and maintain export competitiveness. Systems never tested in combat face scepticism from potential buyers, and production lines justified by security needs but lacking actual military use become vulnerable when fiscal pressures force choices. Italy's strategy of industrial mobilization without operational commitment thus contains internal contradictions threatening long-term sustainability.

Leonardo and Fincantieri project massive growth based on anticipated ReArmEU procurement, but export success – critical for a market worth €7.6 billion annually – depends substantially on operational credibility. Potential buyers evaluate systems based partly on battlefield performance: Polish, German, and Nordic equipment tested in Ukrainian conditions gains credibility unavailable to untested Italian alternatives. This 'capability without credibility' problem means Italy's refusal to deploy forces operationally may ultimately undermine the industrial strategy motivating defence investment.

Defence firms themselves recognize this tension. While public statements emphasize industrial opportunity and technological advancement, private discussions reportedly include concerns about the long-term sustainability of production justified purely by domestic procurement without operational deployment, creating demonstration effects. The firms cannot publicly pressure the government towards military commitments, but the economic logic of defence exports requires operational credibility that current policy precludes.

Additionally, maintaining production capabilities without operational deployment raises questions about workforce development and skills retention. Defence manufacturing requires highly specialized engineering, production and maintenance capabilities that have been developed over decades. Workers and engineers need confidence that investments in developing specialized skills will pay off in the long term. If Italian systems remain largely undeployed and unexported, sustaining motivation for skills development becomes challenging. The industrial strategy depends on the defence sector offering attractive career paths and long-term employment, but achieving this requires more than domestic procurement alone.

The fiscal logic driving Italian enthusiasm for ReArmEU assumes that defence spending generates economic returns that justify investment – employment creation, technological spillovers, export revenues, and regional development. However, these returns remain projections rather than realities, and multiple factors could prevent them from materializing or reduce them below levels necessary to sustain political support.

The economic literature on defence spillovers presents contested findings that defy simple generalizations. Proponents point to historical examples – semiconductors, GPS, the internet, jet engines – as evidence that military R&D generates transformative civilian applications (Ruttan 2006). A recent cross-country analysis suggests defence R&D can stimulate private sector innovation, with estimates indicating that a 10% increase in defence R&D generates approximately 4% increases in private R&D expenditure (Moretti, Steinwender and Van Reenen 2019). However, other scholars find these effects

contingent rather than automatic, potentially declining since the Cold War era when military technology led civilian development in key sectors (Mowery 2010; Cowan and Foray 1995). The emerging consensus suggests spillovers depend heavily on industrial structure, institutional context, and the specific technologies involved.

Italy's defence industrial base concentrates advanced capabilities in a few large firms – Leonardo, Fincantieri – rather than the diffuse ecosystem of specialized suppliers and technology-intensive SMEs that would maximize spillover potential. The Draghi Report's emphasis on dual-use technologies creating broader innovation ecosystems reflects possibility rather than certainty (Draghi 2024). This structural characteristic suggests that Italian defence investment will generate real but concentrated economic effects: employment and revenue growth in major contractors and their immediate supply chains, with limited broader technological diffusion. These concentrated returns may nonetheless prove politically sufficient during the ReArmEU implementation period (2025-2030), providing tangible benefits to key constituencies precisely when the government most needs to demonstrate results. Whether such effects prove durable beyond the investment phase, or extend beyond established defence champions to transform Italy's broader innovation capacity, remains an open question that current evidence cannot resolve.

SAFE loans, while offering favourable terms, must eventually be repaid. The €14.9 billion Italy accesses through SAFE carries 45-year repayment schedules, deferring but not eliminating fiscal costs (Il Sole 24 Ore 2025; Il Foglio 2025). Future Italian governments inherit these obligations, and whether or not defence investments generate sufficient economic returns to service debt remains uncertain. If growth projections fail to materialize, then Italy faces a situation of having borrowed billions for investments generating inadequate returns. The fiscal arithmetic justifying current policy depends on optimistic assumptions about the defence sector's economic impacts.

Employment creation, while politically valuable, carries costs. Defence sector jobs typically command higher wages than alternative manufacturing, reflecting skill requirements and security clearances. If job creation proves less than projected – firms automate more than anticipated, supply chains locate abroad, or procurement quantities fall short – then cost per job created rises, potentially making defence investment less fiscally attractive than alternatives. The political logic depends on defence spending generating substantial employment in politically important regions, but whether jobs materialize at projected levels remains uncertain.

Most fundamentally, political support for continued defence spending depends on the public's perception of economic benefits. If unemployment or underemployment remains high, regional economies stagnate, and the promised industrial renaissance fails to materialize, public support for sustaining defence investment erodes. The Meloni government justifies ReArmEU enthusiasm partly through the economic recovery narrative, but if recovery does not occur or defence spending appears disconnected from broader prosperity, political support will weaken. Opposition parties emphasizing welfare, healthcare, and social spending gain traction if defence investment appears to come at the expense of social protection without delivering promised economic returns.

The decomposition strategy – separating industrial mobilization from operational commitment – works only as long as the crisis remains ambiguous enough that stark

choices can be deferred. Should circumstances force a binary decision between maintaining alliance solidarity through military deployment and accepting isolation, Italy's carefully constructed equilibrium will collapse.

The critical question concerns whether an acute crisis, most plausibly an Article 5 scenario involving Russian aggression against NATO members, would modify the domestic constraints currently foreclosing operational commitment. The literature on 'rally-around-the-flag' effects suggests that direct security threats generate temporary increases in public support for government action and national unity, typically ranging from 3-6 percentage points in European contexts and lasting weeks to months before returning to baseline (Mueller 1973; Hetherington and Nelson 2003). Recent research on European responses to the Ukraine invasion found comparable temporary shifts in EU-positive sentiment across member states (Kizilova and Norris 2023).

Applied to Italy, this literature suggests that an Article 5 invocation might temporarily weaken antimilitarist constraints. However, several factors counsel caution about assuming fundamental change. First, rally effects are characteristically temporary: Italian governments would need to calculate whether short-term opinion shifts justify long-term military commitments whose political costs would persist after rally effects dissipate. Second, the depth of Italian constitutional antimilitarism, accumulated since 1945 and embedded in Article 11, represents more entrenched resistance than the baseline attitudes that rally effects typically modify. Third, an Article 5 scenario would likely require not merely symbolic deployment but sustained combat operations with attendant casualties, costs, and domestic political friction far exceeding the threshold at which rally effects operate. The Meloni government, aware of the Italian military's limited expeditionary capacity and the political risks of combat deployment, would likely calculate that temporary opinion shifts provide insufficient foundation for commitments that could destabilize the coalition and exhaust scarce fiscal resources.

If this assessment is correct, Italy's equilibrium proves resilient even to significant external shocks – but at the cost of predictable alliance tensions should crises materialize. Partners expecting Italian contributions commensurate with economic weight would face a government genuinely unable to deliver, regardless of temporary opinion shifts. The 'convenient convergence' between governmental preferences and public constraints, which stabilizes current policy, would simultaneously prevent adaptation when circumstances demand it.

7. Conclusions

This article has examined an apparent paradox in Italian European Politics: the Meloni government's vigorous championing of European rearmament, coupled with its steadfast refusal to contribute militarily to Ukraine's defence or to contemplate troop deployment. The analysis reveals not a sophisticated strategic design but a pragmatic navigation of multiple binding constraints, a pattern consistent with broader assessments of the Meloni government's foreign policy approach (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024: 198, 208). Italy's approach reflects constrained optimization under conditions that make ReArmEU uniquely attractive: a programme offering resources without requiring politically impossible military commitments.

The constraints converge with uncommon force. Fiscally, Italy faces a post-PNRR cliff in 2026, with substantial EU funding ending precisely when domestic fiscal space remains severely limited. Politically, the coalition's heterogeneous attitude towards Russia, and overwhelming public antimilitarism render military deployment unthinkable for any government seeking survival. Constitutionally, Article 11's renunciation of war embeds pacifism deep in Italian political culture. Internationally, European pressure for solidarity and burden-sharing demands a visible Italian contribution to collective security. ReArmEU offers a rare solution: fiscal resources through SAFE loans, defence exemptions from the Stability Pact, industrial contracts that generate employment in electorally strategic regions, and European credentials through participation in collaborative programmes, all without requiring the operational commitments that would trigger a domestic political crisis.

Putnam's two-level game framework illuminates why this decomposition works, at least temporarily. Industrial mobilization expands the win-set at both Level I (international) and Level II (domestic): European partners gain Italian financial participation and industrial capacity, Italian coalition partners secure economic benefits for their constituents, and the government avoids the deployment debates that would fracture its majority. Military deployment, conversely, contracts the win-set catastrophically at Level II while generating only marginal gains at Level I. The Italian case demonstrates that governments can sustain apparent contradictions when each element serves different constituencies and when these constituencies lack sufficient overlap to force coherence.

The equilibrium proves fragile precisely because it depends on conditions unlikely to endure. European tolerance for asymmetric burden-sharing – industrial participation without operational commitment – has limits that growing threat perceptions will test. The trajectory of American commitment to European security – subject to significant uncertainty given evolving political dynamics – represents a critical variable whose direction cannot be confidently predicted. Whether recent developments signal renewed transatlantic engagement or continued volatility remains contested among analysts. German and Danish intelligence assessments of Article 5 scenarios within 3-5 years and Russian military reconstitution nonetheless suggest that the security environment enabling Italian exceptionalism faces mounting pressure (Open 2025). Italy's equilibrium depends not on any particular American policy outcome but on the persistence of conditions – manageable threat levels, continued alliance cohesion, European tolerance for burden-sharing asymmetries – that multiple trajectories could disrupt.

The fiscal returns justifying defence spending remain uncertain: SAFE loans require repayment; Leonardo and Fincantieri growth projections assume export success increasingly dependent on operational validation that Italy cannot provide; and the political support mobilized through economic promises will evaporate if contracts fail to materialize. Most critically, an actual crisis would force the binary choice that the current policy avoids. A Russian breakthrough, an Article 5 invocation, or the collapse of American guarantees would demand military deployment, not industrial capacity. Italy would face involuntary defection: alliance obligations that its government cannot ratify

domestically.[8] 'Armiamoci e partite' captured fascist-era cynicism about martial enthusiasm without sacrifice. Today, it describes not a sustainable strategy but an unstable present: industrial mobilization coupled with the hope that others will bear operational burdens.

[8] *Involuntary defection*, in Putnam's terminology, denotes a breakdown in international commitments when domestic ratification becomes impossible. It reflects not bad faith but structural misalignment between external obligations and internal political feasibility (Putnam 1988, 438-39).

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