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Special Issue: Italy in the 21st Century's International Politics

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SISP SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI SCIENZA POLITICA

Introduction to the Special Issue: Italy in Twenty-First Century International Politics

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At the time of writing, international politics seems almost frozen, and the whole world is focused on how to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. However, contemporary international politics shows many signs of transformation that predate – and go well beyond – the pandemic. The international system is more turbulent, multifaceted and unpredictable than it was during the whole of the twentieth century, and even though the two World Wars represent two unmatched peaks in terms of total deaths and destruction, it seems difficult to claim that wars and armed conflicts are disappearing (Braumoeller 2019).

If we scratch below the pandemic surface and consider the conditions and actions of the great powers that play a central role in shaping the overall international system, we can see that these countries show a remarkable degree of activism. The United States is redefining its role in the world and reconsidering its strategy in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, albeit through an ambiguous trajectory that is mainly the result of strong domestic tensions and high political polarization. China has launched a global initiative that could allow it to complete its transformation from economic giant to real hegemon. This long-term foreign policy plan stretches from intensifying military competition with the United States in the Asian Pacific to the gigantic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Asia toward Europe (Shambaugh 2018). However, the final outcome of these policies is still uncertain and it is producing contrasting reactions in many partner states (De Oliveira et al. 2020). Russia is increasingly active in its neighbourhood and in the Middle East, vigorously reclaiming the role of great power, and using external interventions and armed force in a fashion that recalls nineteenth century European politics (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018).

In this unstable situation, long-standing international organizations seem to have lost their grip and even the European Union is going through a long and deep crisis. An important debate is open about the fall of the liberal order and several authors advance interpretations that stress links between the current features of international politics and the domestic politics of many Western countries (on this debate see e.g. Ikenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Lucarelli 2020).

Turbulent times and the activism of great powers are not new phenomena in international politics, but the present international system is also marked by the growing importance of non-state actors, transnational flows and unprecedented technologies,

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which make calculations more difficult and policy-making increasingly complex. For instance, it has now become common knowledge that most contemporary armed conflicts involve non-state actors fighting states locally in civil wars or transnationally through terrorist attacks. Moreover, huge private companies and economic flows heavily influence international politics and the domestic politics of many countries, causing tensions in various parts of the world. Even individuals are increasingly at the centre of international politics, mainly due to the massive flows of refugees and migrants, which have been growing for years (UNHCR 2019).

In other words, policy makers who want to navigate the turbulent waters of contemporary world politics have to take into account a high number of variables in different dimensions. This situation is especially cogent for the governments of middle powers, which are not at the mercy of international phenomena as small states are, but at the same time are more bound by external conditions than great powers. Italy has long been defined as a typical example of a middle power (Santoro 1991) and – considering the tough challenges the country is facing nowadays – it seems appropriate to make a point about these challenges.

This special issue has, therefore, been conceived to address the role of Italy in twenty-first century international politics, presenting a series of essays that could possibly be interesting for an audience that goes beyond the academic community, including policy makers and commentators. The main aim of these essays is not to advance a theoretical interpretation of Italian foreign policy, a task that has already been successfully achieved by more purely academic initiatives (e.g. Isernia and Longo 2017). The main goal of this collection is rather to try to clarify the current challenges, identifying the available options for Italy's foreign policy, while considering major risks and opportunities. Italy is directly involved in many of the global dynamics mentioned above, primarily for geopolitical reasons. It seems, therefore, crucial to identify its current position in the stormy seas of contemporary international politics and to understand its possible contribution.

In the first article of this special issue, Stefano Costalli and Andrea Ruggeri seek to show the position of Italy on a broad set of key issues for contemporary international politics, from military power to international trade and refugee flows. Relying on a large amount of data, the authors show empirical trends and compare Italy with its neighbours or with the great powers of the international system. It turns out that Italy and the main European countries have converged on many dimensions and, according to the data, Italy seems to have the capacity to have a say in many instances. However, it is crucial to be aware of strongpoints, as well as limits and ties, to identify the opportunities and the most appropriate partners. In the second article, Lorenzo Cladi and Andrea Locatelli study the role of Italy in Europe, vis-à-vis France and Germany, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. The authors show that, in addition to difficulties in detecting external ties and opportunities, Italy's ambivalent foreign policy in Europe has been strongly influenced by the composition of its governments. When coalition partners' ideologies converged, the leading party did not need to concede much to its partners. Conversely, when coalition partners' ideologies differed, a compromise had to be found and this has been true for pro-EU as well as Euro-sceptic parties.

Two articles in the special issue directly deal with the relationships between Italy and the great powers. Gabriele Natalizia and Mara Morini explore the relationship between

Italy and Russia, challenging conventional wisdom according to which the two countries enjoy constant cooperative relations. On the contrary, the authors show that even in this case Italian foreign policy has been far from constant. Here, the main reason for the variations is the degree of stability in the international order. Italy is more prone to a cooperative stance towards Russia when the international order is fundamentally stable, but Italian and Russian interests tend to diverge in periods of instability. Simone Dossi's contribution looks at the relations between Italy and China at the time of the BRI. The BRI is one of the most notable foreign policy initiatives in contemporary international politics and the author seeks to explain why Italy and China, apparently so distant from both a political and an economic point of view, opted for cooperation under the BRI and signed the ad hoc Memorandum in 2019. In tune with the message of other articles in the special issue, Dossi argues that while the BRI is expected to be adjusted with a stronger emphasis on China's own priorities, Italy is missing a long-term vision for the future of the country's relations with the Asian rising power.

Two additional articles deal with the Italian position on global issues that feature prominently in contemporary international politics: climate change and mass migrations. Federica Genovese investigates Italy's position in global climate change politics and seeks to understand why this country, like similar middle powers, has adopted ambiguous positions on such a global public policy issue. Relying on data for the pollution costs of Italian industrial sectors and on public opinion surveys, Genovese argues that Italy gives importance to climate change, but mixed domestic incentives counterbalance each other and push the government to take mild and ambiguous positions. Antonio Zotti and Enrico Fassi look at Italy's position in the European debate about international migrations focusing on the peculiar feature of this issue, which is partly a matter that falls within the country's foreign policy and partly a domestic issue, partly a national affair and partly a European concern. Even in this case, Italy's stance has been somewhat ambiguous, depending, the authors claim, on the government coalitions and on the attitudes of these coalitions towards the EU.

Finally, two articles deal with international security issues, even though they tackle this subject from different perspectives. Fabrizio Coticchia and Francesco N. Moro study Italian participation in military interventions abroad since the end of the Cold War, following their increase between 1991 and 2011 and their subsequent decrease after the Libyan War. The authors review this evolution and assess the arguments proposed to explain it. Both international conditions and domestic factors contribute to explaining changing Italian policy over time, but Coticchia and Moro also suggest that currently understudied factors such as the stance of armed forces and technological change play important roles. Finally, Ruth Hanau Santini looks at the Italian role in the Mediterranean, and especially in Libya. The author analyses Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean, arguing that Italy acts in this area while reading the situation through the lenses of US policies and intra-EU dynamics. According to Hanau Santini, a fear of abandonment by the US and a fear of marginalization by European allies have strongly affected Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean, eventually leading the country to carry out some ineffective and self-defeating initiatives. In Libya this sort of syndrome has reduced Italy to an invisible player in a heavily populated theatre.

While considering different aspects of Italian foreign policy and evaluating Italy's position in different dimensions of contemporary international politics, the articles of this special issue share a clear and important point. They explicitly or implicitly show that Italy's position is often ambiguous, ambivalent and erratic. Adjusting the country's foreign policy to changing circumstances can be a deliberate and rational strategy for a middle power, but the articles of this special issue show that this is not the case for Italy. On the contrary, Italian foreign policy in the twenty-first century seems to result from a lack of long-term vision and a systematic difficulty of Italian political forces to correctly identify the risks and opportunities present in the turbulent contemporary world. A more structured and permanent debate involving academics, policy-makers and a broader audience through efficient media would be essential to this aim. We hope this special issue can contribute to achieving this goal.

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Italy and its international relations. Getting real on relative positions

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Abstract

What is the position of Italy in contemporary international politics? How does Italy compare with its neighbors or with the so-called great powers in terms of power? What are the most influential factors to be considered when evaluating Italian foreign policy? Contemporary international politics is multidimensional and multifaceted and positioning a country in the international system involves looking at various and diverse domains. These domains and trajectories have experienced substantive changes and, in turn, the role and relative position of Italy have dramatically changed. This article aims to provide empirical trends in Italy's positioning in international relations, showing the existence of some unsolved issues and the reasons for specific underlying tensions in Italian foreign policy.

1. Introduction

What is the position of Italy in contemporary international politics? How does Italy compare with its neighbors or with the so-called great powers in terms of power? What are the factors we have to take into account when expecting something from Italian foreign policy or when evaluating Italian foreign policy? Contemporary international politics is multidimensional and multifaceted and positioning a country in the international system involves looking at various and diverse domains. These domains and trajectories have experienced substantive changes and, in turn, the role and relative position of Italy have dramatically changed. However, without a solid and systematic empirical discussion about trends and relative positions over different international realms, academic analysis – but perhaps even most importantly, policy-making – could be anchored to the past and operate on erroneous assumptions. Hence, this piece aims to provide empirical trends in Italy's positioning in international relations, showing the existence of some unsolved issues and the reasons for specific underlying tensions in Italian foreign policy. The reader, therefore, should take this piece as an empirical complement to this special issue where we have selected some data sources and illustrated some trends. Moreover, we have explicitly opted for breadth (hence, several phenomena and indicators) rather than depth when discussing these trends.

Different schools of thought look at international politics from different perspectives and tend to weigh a given sphere of interaction over others. Our purpose in this article is not to support a specific interpretation of contemporary international politics

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over others.[1] Rather, we aim at providing the necessary tools and data to readers who, starting from different theoretical traditions, want to conceive Italy's role in the current international system. We are aware of the limitations that derive from trying to achieve this goal in a single article, but we believe that we can nonetheless provide a useful service for colleagues and policy-makers. Therefore, for the purpose of this special issue, we decided to produce an empirical framework that privileges breadth over depth.

We organize our data presentation[2] by dividing it into three main sections. In the first section, we present the position of Italy in the field of hard power and international security. The Realist school of International Relations primarily focuses on security dynamics, military might and power politics. The current international system is marked by severe security crises, and some of the major powers are actively competing for leadership of the system. Thus, taking stock of the position of Italy in terms of power capabilities seems a necessary starting point to understand the position of the country in the international system. In the second section we consider the position of Italy in the international economy, as power and wealth have always been key goals for human political entities and a system of free international trade has been at the center of Liberal theories of International Relations since their first conception. In the same section we also present Italy's position concerning two crucial non-economic transnational flows: refugees and migrations. These phenomena have become increasingly important in contemporary international politics, and especially for Italy, given the country's geopolitical position. Liberal approaches to international politics have deeply investigated the role of transnational dynamics (Cerny 2010; Rosenau 2018) and migrations and refugee flows embody crucial dimensions of globalization according to Liberal lenses. However, the same phenomena can also be interpreted as security issues through the lenses of Realism and, therefore, it seems doubly useful to look at the position of Italy in these fields. Finally, in the third section, we provide a brief selection of data trends representing the engagement of Italy in international politics via international organizations.

First, we compare the commitment of Italy with other major European countries in European missions. Compared to other international organizations, the EU is still relatively modest in terms of size of military deployments. However, different roles and engagements among the major European states are clear. We then present trends of Italy's behavior compared with world powers within the United Nations, both in terms of providing blue helmets for peace operations and voting in the UN general assembly. The UN is the major non-state actor in organizing and deploying troops globally and Italy is one of the major contributors among European states. Finally, we summarize the findings to suggest some lessons that could be useful for scholars working on Italy but also for policy makers. In an international system where bipolarity belongs to the past and we struggle between unipolarity and multipolarity, a more empirical and data-driven approach is necessary. Theories help us navigate the complexity of international politics, but only a combination of theoretical frameworks with a systematic use of empirics can guide us in this challenging exploration.

[1] For those dissatisfied with this approach, a reference point is the piece by Mearsheimer & Walt (2013).
[2] When providing graphs of values over time we have opted for colored lines to facilitate their reading. However, as always, lines over time — when observations are missing — could provide untrue trends. Though, we do not believe any major trend is wrongly reported due to missing observations.

2. Italy, international security and contemporary power politics

For centuries, international politics has been the realm of power politics and the Realist school of thought has interpreted international relations by emphasizing the security dimension, focusing on the relative power of states and usually stressing the balance of power and alliance politics as the only way to stabilize the system and avoid constant conflict (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). Even though scholars and practitioners can also gain from alternative approaches, such as Liberalism (Keohane and Nye 1977; Russett and Oneal 2001) and Social Constructivism (Wendt 1999), Realism, and its focus on the role of power politics, seems to keep its relevance today. Over the last few years, international organizations have been losing legitimacy and are often questioned by their own member states, Russia has rediscovered armed force as a useful tool of foreign policy and China and the United States of America are openly competing for hegemony. However, if the implications and dynamics of power politics are clear – though not uncontested – in theory, it is often hard to measure power empirically, rank states in terms of power and have a clear picture of power constellations in the international system, especially when it comes to so-called medium powers like Italy. If power is inherently a relational concept (Baldwin 2012; Dahl 1957), the best scholars and policy-makers can do is to assess the relative position of states in power politics trying to calculate their power capabilities. To this aim, a widely used indicator of a state's power is Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which records the value of all goods and services produced within a country in a given year. While, strictly speaking, GDP is an economic indicator, several scholars argue that it captures both economic and military capacity, because states can easily convert economic resources into military force (Beckley 2018). In the literature on civil war, GDP (per capita) has also been considered a measure of a state's capacity to control its territory and population (Fearon and Laitin 2003).

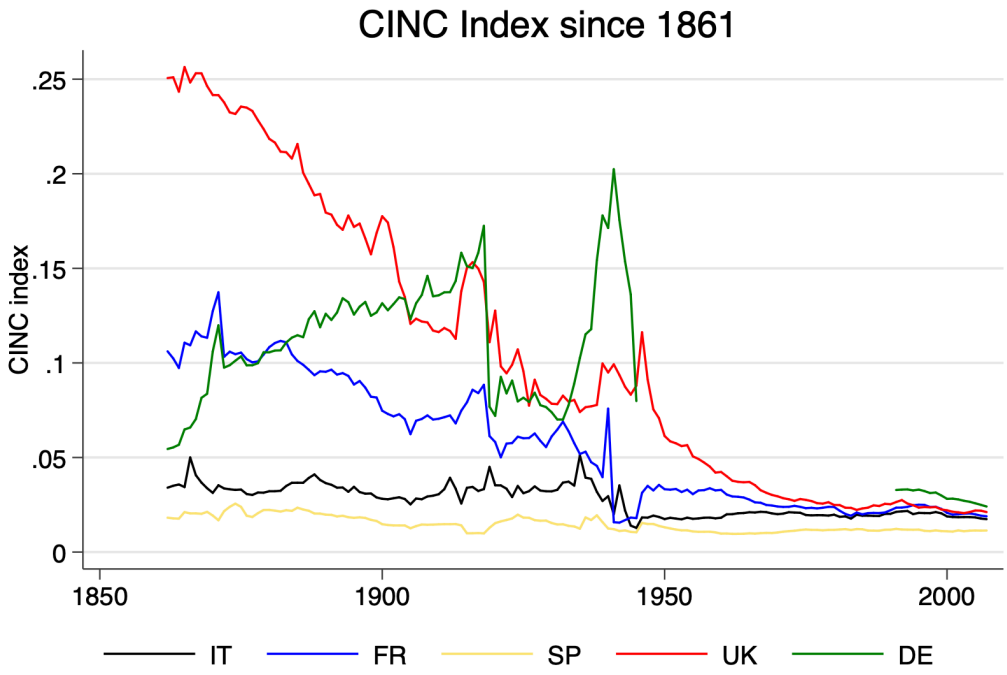
However, if we focus on the International Relations literature, the most commonly used indicator to measure power is probably "war potential", the capabilities useful for waging war, which combines measures of gross economic output and gross military resources. The basic idea behind this approach is that power in international politics is ultimately needed to fight and win major wars, and winning major wars requires a big army backed by a considerable military budget and substantial industrial capacity. The most widely used measure of a country's war potential was elaborated by the Correlates of War Project (COW) (Singer and Small 1994) and is the Composite Indicator of National Capabilities (CINC), which first appeared in the 1960s and is based on annual values for total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel, and military expenditure (Singer et al. 1972).[3]

The CINC score aggregates these six individual measured components of national material capabilities into a single value per state year. The CINC reflects an average of a state's share of the system total of each element of capabilities in each year, weighting each component equally. In doing so, the CINC will always range between 0 and 1. A "0.0" would indicate that a state had 0% of the total capabilities present in the system in that year, while a "1.0" would indicate that the state had 100% of the capabilities in a given year

[3] The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) provides more accurate data on national military expenditures, but the time series are shorter and investigations of long-term trends are therefore impossible. We will use the SIPRI data below as a separate indicator.

(and on the contrary that every other state had exactly 0% capabilities in that year). Below we use CINC to compare the power share of Italy with the power share of other European countries over two different time spans. Figure 1 shows the trends of power share between 1861, the year in which Italy was unified under the same kingdom, and 2007, latest year of available data from the COW project. Figure 2 focuses on the post-Cold War period until 2007. Looking at the long-term trends, we can see that Italy's share of world power shows a moderate but clear and structural fall immediately after the end of World War II, but has remained essentially stable since 1945. On the contrary, France and the United Kingdom have experienced a dramatic loss of power share and have substantially converged to the level of Italy (below 5% of world power) since the mid-1970s. The decolonization process accelerated a trend that – especially for the UK – had been going on since the late nineteenth century, when the relative power of the British Empire began decreasing as a result of the emergence of other great powers such as the US, Japan, and unified Germany. Notable, therefore, is a convergence of European countries towards closer power relations. If the nineteenth century was a clear period of preponderance for countries such as the UK and France, the two World Wars sanctioned a European convergence and shifted the power center toward the USA.

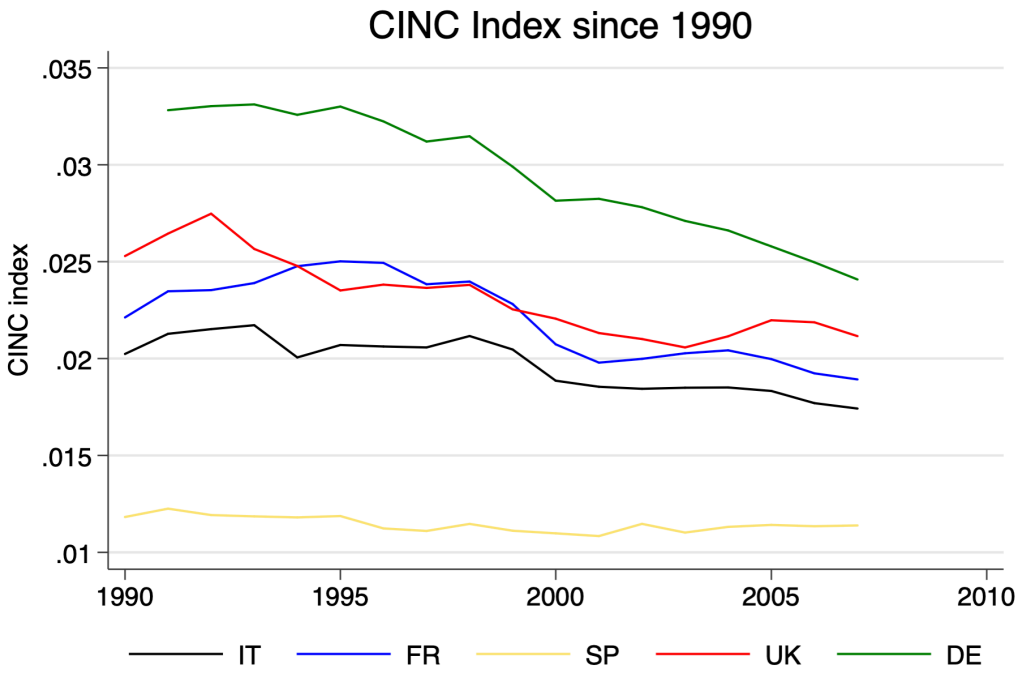
Figure 1. Power CINC index trends in the long run



Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

If we focus on the post-Cold War period thanks to Figure 2, we can see that all major European countries have lost power since 1990, except for Spain, which nonetheless shows by far the smallest war potential. However, while Europe shows a general loss of power as the main trend, the two most powerful European countries at the beginning of the post-Cold War era (Germany and the UK) have lost more than France and Italy, resulting in a clear convergence of power shares.

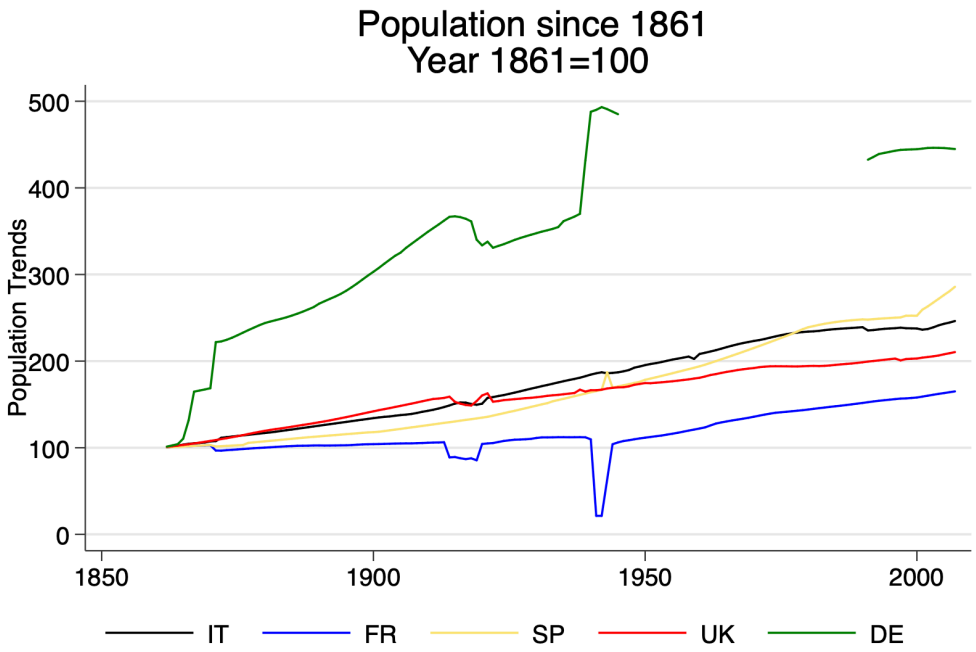
Figure 2. Power CINC index trends after the Cold War (1990-2007)



Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

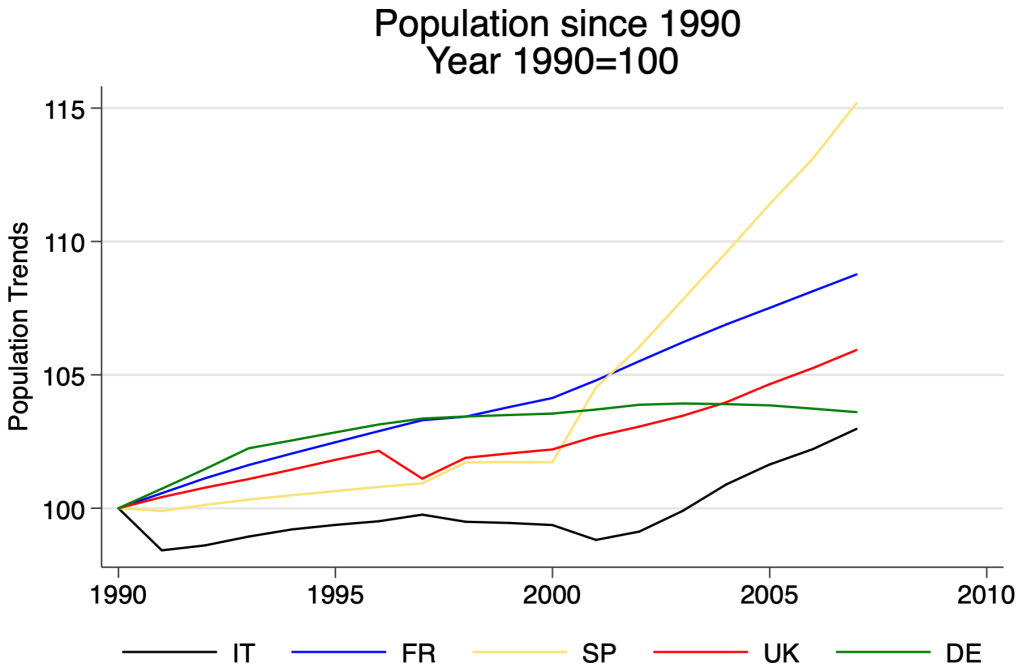
If we decompose the CINC index and look at some of the factors that are considered crucial in evaluating the power of states, we can have a better idea of the reasons behind the trends depicted in the figures above. Figures 3 and 4 show the evolution of the national populations of Italy, France, Spain and the UK in the long run and in the post-Cold War era. The reader should note that we have indexed as 100 the starting level of each country at the beginning of the time-series, to better gauge and compare the variations in the countries' populations. Figure 3 clearly shows that the Italian population experienced a huge growth in the long run, increasing the level of 1861 by about 2.5 times and therefore much more than in France and the UK. However, when we focus on the post-Cold War era and move to Figure 4, where we indexed as 100 the population in 1990, we can see that the situation is completely overturned: Italy shows the smallest increase in population among the four European countries considered and the Italian population actually experienced a net fall between 1990 and 2003, while the populations of the other countries have always, though slowly, increased. Demography, usually understood as a merely domestic factor that can affect labor force or public expenditure, is also a central indicator of the possible external power projection of a country. Demographic shifts have been studied to explain different levels of conflict and cooperation between countries (Brooks et al. 2019) and losses or gains of power status in the international system (Goldstone, Kaufmann, and Toft 2012).

Figure 3. Population trends in the long run



Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

Figure 4. Population trends after the Cold War (1990-2007)

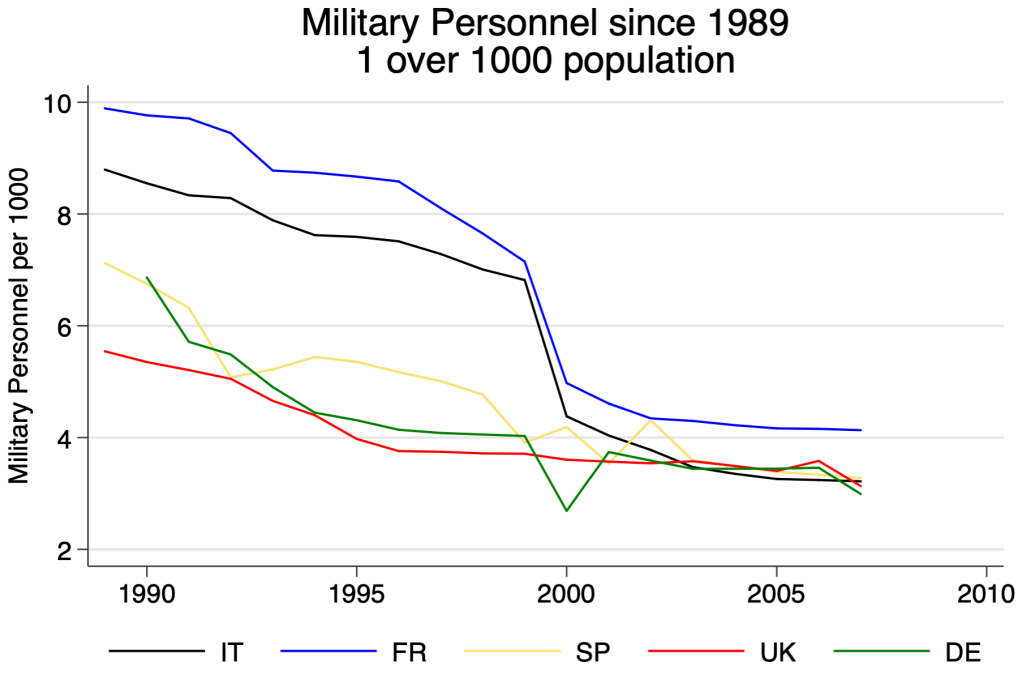


Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

If we go on unpacking the CINC components and focus more on the military dimension, as in Figures 5-8, we notice some other interesting time trends in the amount of military personnel per capita. In Figure 5 we can see that at the end of the Cold War, Italy and France could count on large armies relative to their population, with a share of military personnel over population close to the value of the US (in Figure 6): just fewer that 10 soldiers over 1000 inhabitants. In the following years, the major European countries reduced their military personnel and the value dropped significantly in Italy and France at the end of the 1990s. In 2007, Italy, Spain and the UK converged to a value of around 3.2 members of the armed forces over 1000 inhabitants, while France was just above 4/1000. Italy and France had more than halved their military personnel in 18 years. A similar trend also occurred in the three great powers studied in Figure 6 (USA, Russia and China), even though the slope of the decreasing trend is usually smaller than it is for the European countries. Among the three great powers, Russia is the one with the largest downward slope, but it still remains the great power with the highest share of military personnel over population.

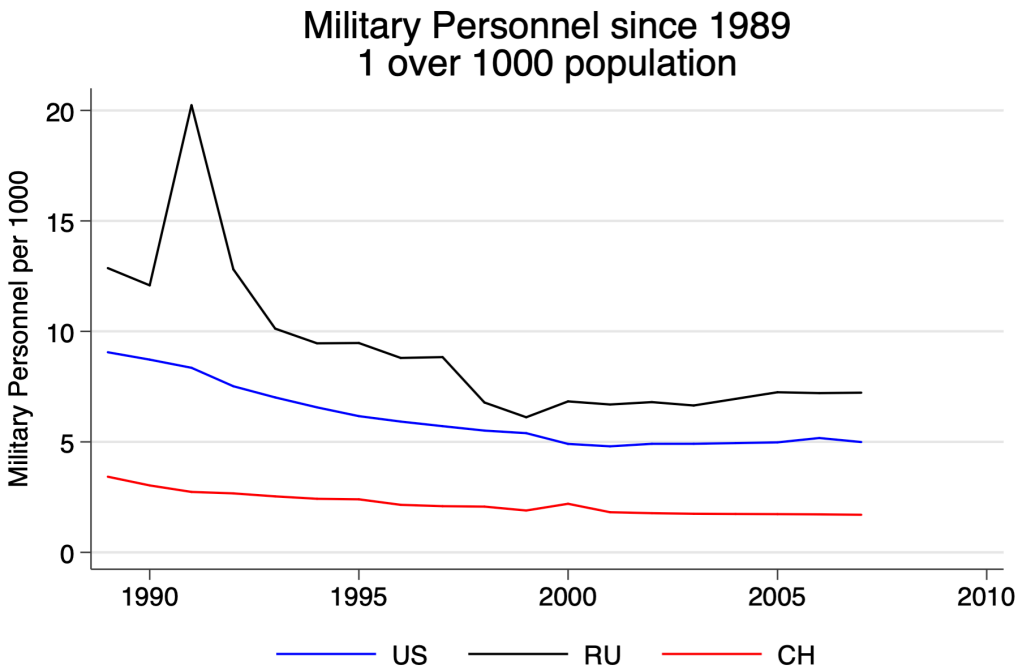
Figures 7 and 8 show post-Cold War data about military expenditure, another crucial component of CINC and war potential, even though in this case we used data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). These data are the most accurate and up-to-date cross-sectional empirics on national military expenditures (Dunne and Smith 2019). Interestingly, while the share of Italian government spending allocated to military expenditure increased in the second half of the 1990s and remained approximately stable for about ten years, it then experienced a decrease, and the initial (1990) and final (2019) values are approximately the same.

Figure 5. Military personnel trends in Europe after the Cold War (1989-2007)



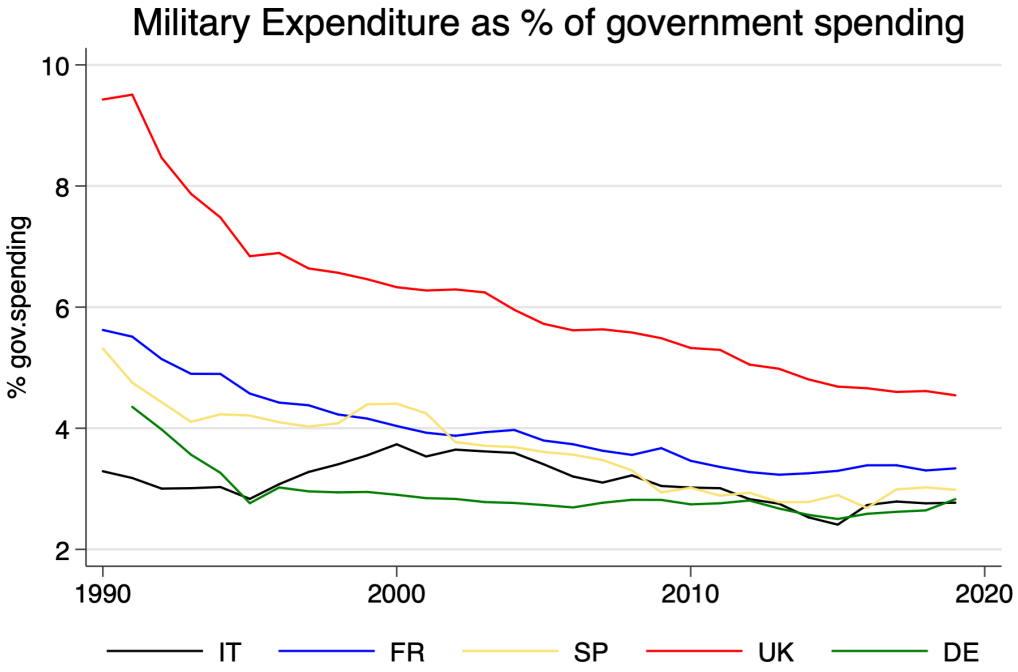
Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

Figure 6. Military personnel trends of the great powers after the Cold War (1989-2007)



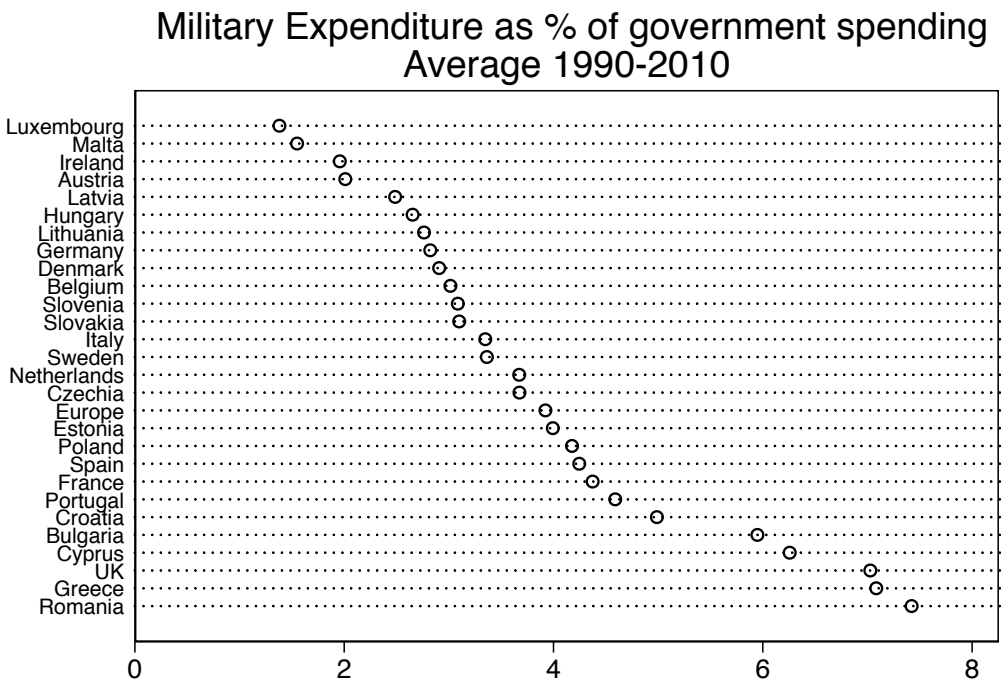
Data source: Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972). Correlates of War.

Figure 7. Military expenditure after the Cold War (1989-2007)



Data source: SIPRI (2020).

Figure 8. Average military expenditure among European countries (1990-2010)



Data source: SIPRI (2020).

On the contrary, the other major European states have reduced the share of government spending dedicated to the military sector to a much larger extent, thus leading to another case of convergence. In fact, while all other countries started the post-Cold War era with larger shares of public resources dedicated to the armed forces, nowadays Spain and Germany essentially allocate the same share of government spending as Italy (2.8%), with France just above (3.3%). Only the UK keeps assigning around 5% of its government spending to the military budget, but it is also the country that experienced the largest reduction over the post-Cold War period among the five countries considered. As terms of comparison, in 2019 the USA spent 9.4% of their government spending on the armed forces, China 5.4% and Russia 11.4%. It is useful to note that NATO's guidelines on defense expenditure as percentage of GDP is 2.5%: in 2019 Italy spent 1.4%, compared to 3.4% in the USA, 1.9% in France, 1.7 % in the UK, 1.2% in Spain and 1.4% in Germany.

Figure 8 shows average military expenditure as the share of government spending among European countries in the period 1990-2010. The mean in Europe was around 4%, with a wide variation from 1.3% (Luxemburg) to 7.3% (Romania) and with Italy (3.3%) below the European mean.

Therefore, considering different empirical proxies, if Italy often scores lower than the other major European countries in terms of power and power components, it definitely scores higher than Spain, and in the last three decades the other countries have been converging towards Italy in several measures of power capabilities. Some scholars have recently criticized the measurement of power through gross indicators (such as GDP), since these indicators systematically overstate the power of populous countries, accounting for the benefits of having a big population, but overlooking the costs of being a populous country (Beckley 2018). A large population can produce a large amount of

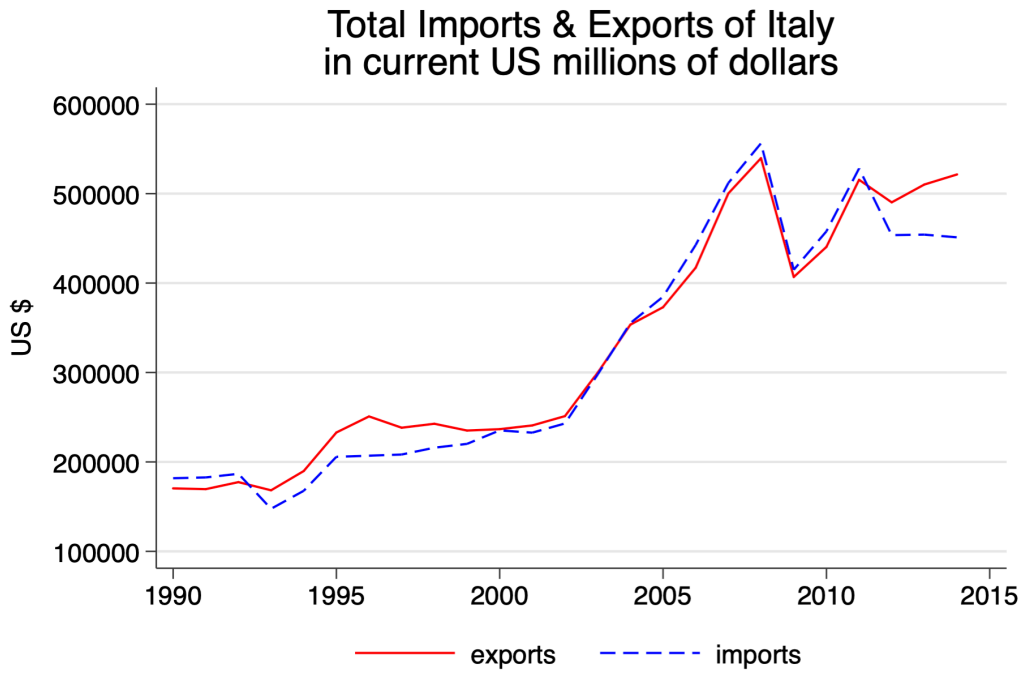
resources, but also consumes a lot. In order to be a great power, a state needs to stock a large mass of resources and therefore produce high output at low costs. Unfortunately, all gross indicators measure only the size of a country's resources, not how efficiently a country uses them. Anders, Fariss and Markowitz (2019) have proposed decomposing GDP into two distinct forms of income: "subsistence income" represents resources needed to cover the basic subsistence needs of the population, while "surplus income" represents the remaining resources that could be allocated to "guns" or "butter", that is the income states can devote to arming and projecting power. As a result of this shift from gross indicators to net indicators, Anders, Fariss and Markowitz (2019) recommend substituting GDP with SDP (surplus domestic product) and show that estimates using GDP as a proxy measure of power resources systematically overestimate the power resources of low-income states with large populations. This is particularly relevant for correctly ranking China during the Cold War and India in the post-Cold War era, but what is important for Italy is that irrespective of the measure used, Italy constantly features in the top ten powers ranked by their average share of global power resources since 1816. While this is clearly not a new finding, it is something that often goes unnoticed today and seems worthy of renewed consideration

3. Italy in a globalized world: international economy and transnational flows

Clearly, placing Italy in contemporary international politics requires going beyond pure international security and balance of power calculations. Foreign policy has always been a matter of composing economic benefits and security interests (Gilpin 1987), even more so after the end of the Cold War, with the exponential increase in all economic flows. Thus, it is crucial to understand the position of Italy in these flows, realize the size of Italian involvement in contemporary international economy and single out the countries that are more tightly connected to Italy. This is essential in order to evaluate what Italy can meaningfully do and what it cannot reasonably do, what the pros and cons are of specific foreign policy moves, the bonds and the opportunities. Thanks to an explicit understanding of Italy's position relative to other countries over different dimensions, it is possible to understand its own limits and constraints. Only by confronting ideas with these empirically grounded premises, can analyses and policy implications be fruitfully developed.

Figure 9 shows the evolution of Italian involvement in international trade in the post-Cold War era. As we can see, the value of international trade for Italy has significantly increased in the last twenty-five years, even though the negative consequences of the economic crisis that began in 2008 are clearly visible on the right-hand side of the figure. It is also interesting to see how the values of Italian exports and imports have been essentially the same over the period considered – therefore showing an extremely equilibrated balance of trade – even though in recent years the value of exports has been notably higher than the value of imports.

Figure 9. Italian imports and exports after the Cold War (1990–2014)

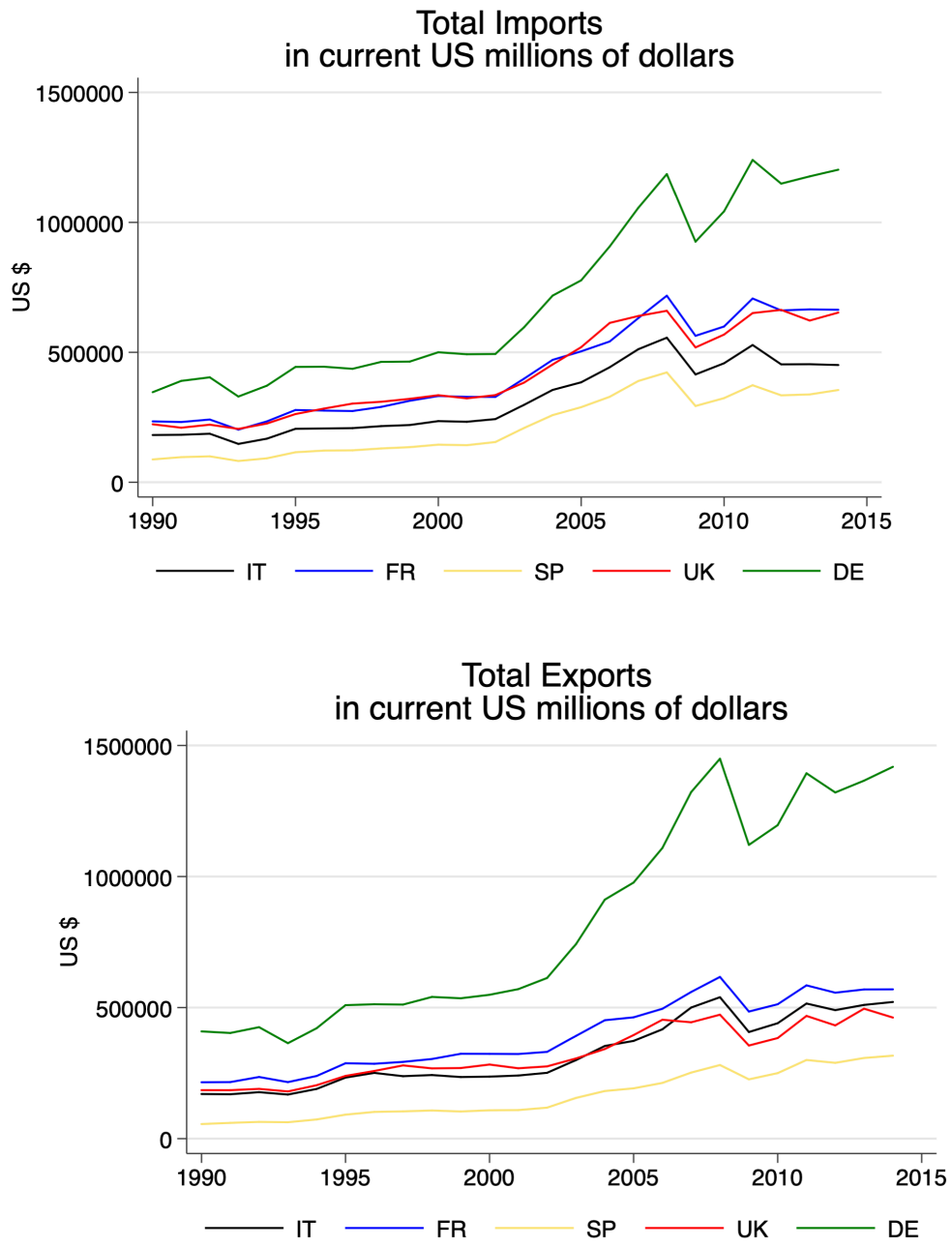


Data source: Barbieri and Keshk (2017).

In order to have a more accurate perspective on Italian involvement in international trade, Figure 10 compares the evolution of Italian imports and exports after the end of the Cold War with the same data for France, Germany, Spain and the UK. The trajectories of the countries' lines look quite interesting. First of all, we can see that exports increased for all major European states over the period considered. This was a global trend and represented the "optimist phase" of globalization. However, contrary to what happened in the area of international security and power relations, in the realm of international trade we witness a divergence, and not a convergence. As a matter of fact, the most striking trend is represented by the prominent increase in German imports and exports, beginning in 2002.

Germany already enjoyed the highest value of international trade among the five countries in 1990, and the gap between Germany and all the other four countries has remarkably expanded over the years. In particular, the difference between German exports and the exports of the four other countries has more than doubled. On the contrary, the trajectories of imports and exports for Italy, France, Spain and the UK have developed much more in parallel, even though the gaps have generally increased, and the position of Italy is worthy of note. In fact, while the value of Italian exports was lower than the value of British exports in 1990, Italy has been steadily exporting more than the UK since 2007. Moreover, while Italy imported less than France and the UK in 1990, this difference has more than doubled over the period considered.

Figure 10. Imports and exports of major European countries (1990-2014)

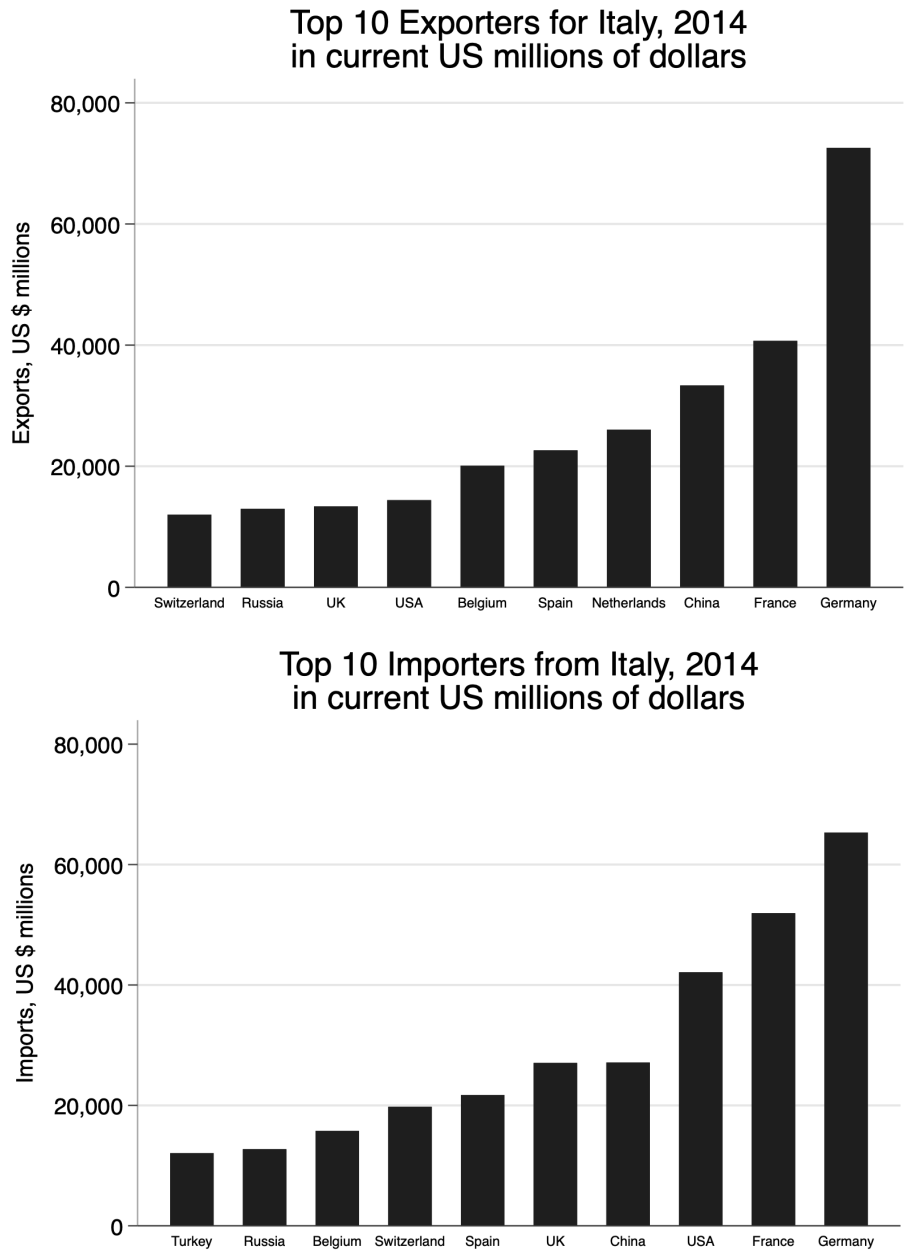


Data source: Barbieri and Keshk (2017)

If we disaggregate the data on Italian trade by country, we see Italy's major trading partners in contemporary international economy and the strength of the economic interdependence between Italy and Germany becomes immediately clear. In fact, Figure 11 shows that Germany is by far the top exporter to Italy as well as the largest importer from Italy. France scores second in both categories, whereas there is imbalance in the links between Italy and the US: while the US is the third destination for Italian exports, Italy imports more from the Netherlands, Spain and even Belgium than from the US. China is the third largest exporter to Italy and the fourth largest importer from Italy.

However, Italian trade remains robustly linked to Europe: it is sufficient to note that Italian exports to China match Italian exports to the UK and the value of Italian exports to Belgium is higher than the value of Italian exports to Russia.

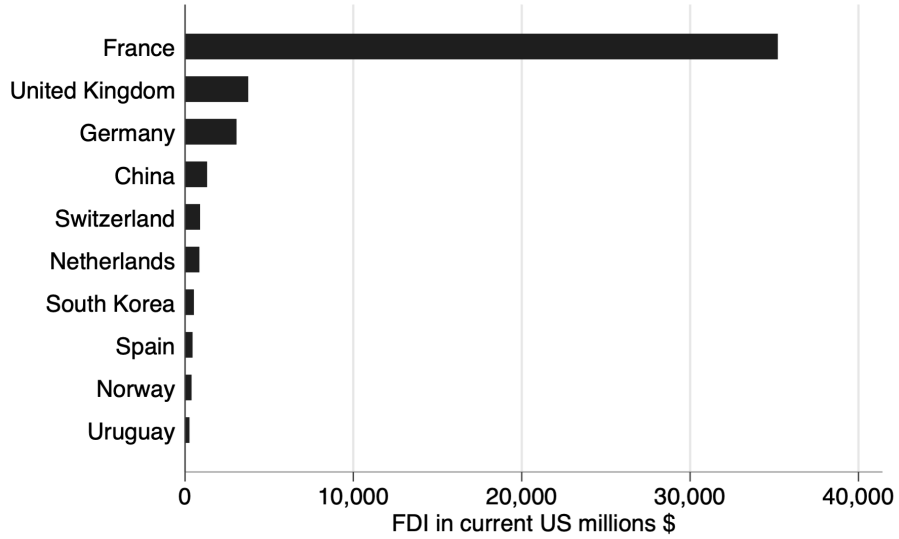
Figure 11. Italian imports and exports disaggregated by country (2014)



Data source: Barbieri and Keshk (2017)

The same holds if we shift from international trade to international investment flows. In fact, Figure 12 shows the ten largest sources of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stock in Italy in 2018, the latest available year in the OECD data, and we can see that France is by far the largest foreign investor in the Italian economy, while China is fourth and the USA does not appear among the top ten sources of FDI.

Figure 12. International FDI in Italy (2018)

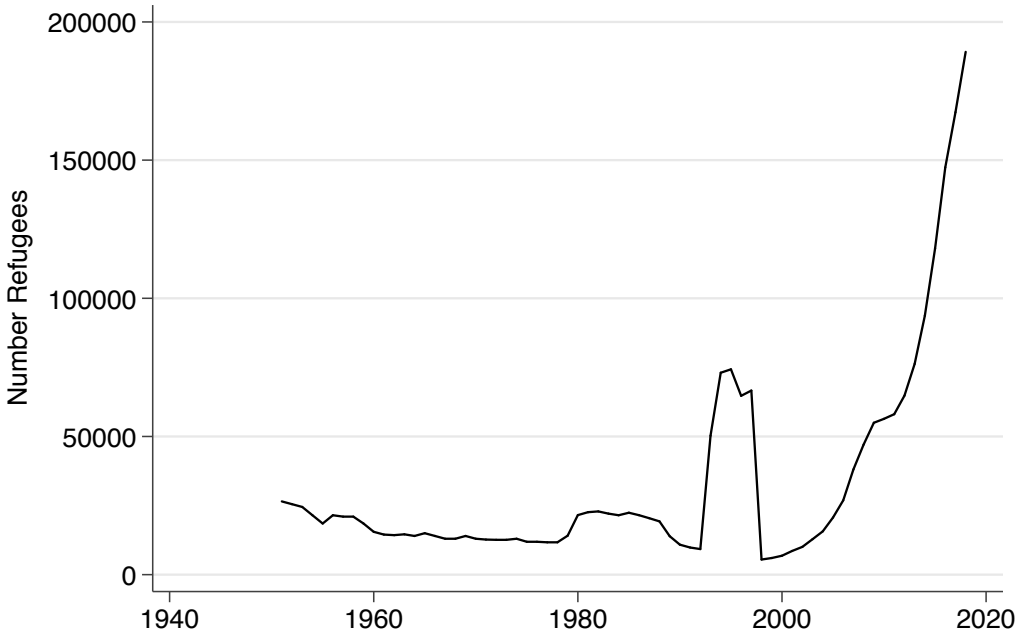


Data source: OECD (2020)

As we all know, the globalized world has different facets and it is not only about economic flows. Global politics is also about other social issues, such as migrations and refugee flows (Betts and Collier 2017), which have also sparked heated debates in Italy and Europe in the last few years. Hence, hereafter we provide some trends on movements of people, refugees and migrants. These are likely to remain key topics in the next few years and it is therefore important to recognize Italy's relative position in these dimensions to elaborate or assess its foreign policy. The overall number of refugees has been growing since 2011 and according to the latest data available we have reached 25.9 million refugees in the world (UNHCR 2020). Altogether, more than two thirds (67 per cent) of all refugees worldwide come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. At the end of 2018, the war in Syria had produced approximately 6.7 million refugees and Turkey featured as the country with the highest number of refugees on its territory (about 3.6 million). No European country was included in the list of top ten major host countries of refugees, with the exception of Germany, which hosted more than one million refugees. In fact, at the end of 2018 the major European countries showed a huge variation: Italy hosted 189.2 thousand refugees, while France hosted 368.3 thousand, the UK 126.6 thousand and Spain only 20.4 thousand. A similar remarkable variation also emerges from the analysis of the trends. As we can see in Figure 13, the total number of refugees in Italy has grown exponentially since 1998 and a similar trajectory can be found in France, even though the absolute figures are considerably higher, since France already hosted almost 130 thousand refugees in 1999. Quite differently, Spain never hosted more than 10 thousand refugees between 1992 and 2013, while the UK reached the highest number of refugees hosted (303.2 thousand) in 2005 and then experienced a sharp decrease for the following ten years and basic stability between 2015 and 2018. If we consider the number of refugees as a share of the host country's population, at the end of 2018 the ranking was dominated by Lebanon, where refugees equaled 13.6% of the population. In Jordan (which shows the second highest share), the number of refugees reached 7.2% of the population and in Turkey 4.5%.

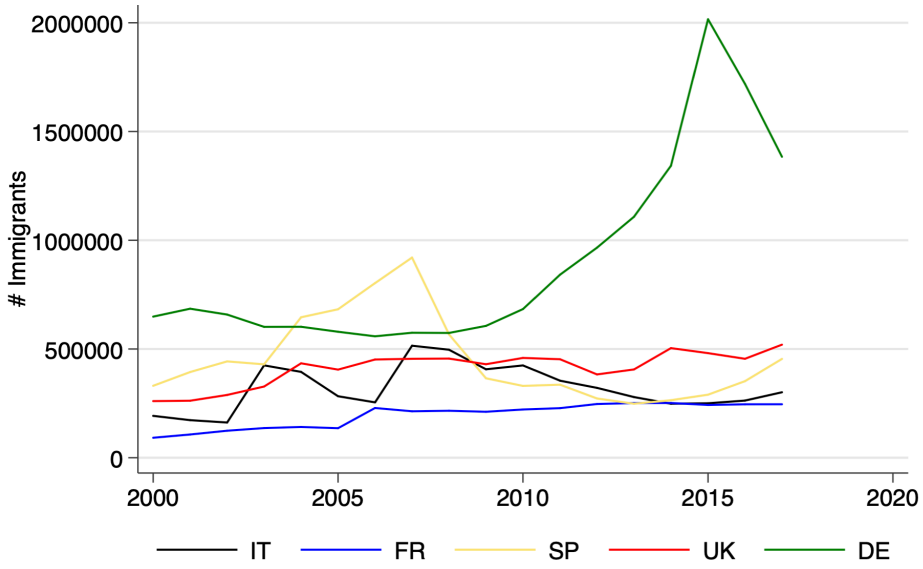
Sweden was the European country with the highest share of refugees (2.4% of the population), while in Italy refugees amounted to 0.3% of the population. In the same year, the refugees hosted in Germany equaled 1.3% of the national population, while France was at 0.5%, the UK at 0.2% and Spain below 0.1%.

Figure 13. Total number of refugees in Italy (1950-2018)



Data source: UNHCR (2020)

Figure 14. Migration inflows in the major European countries (2000-2017)

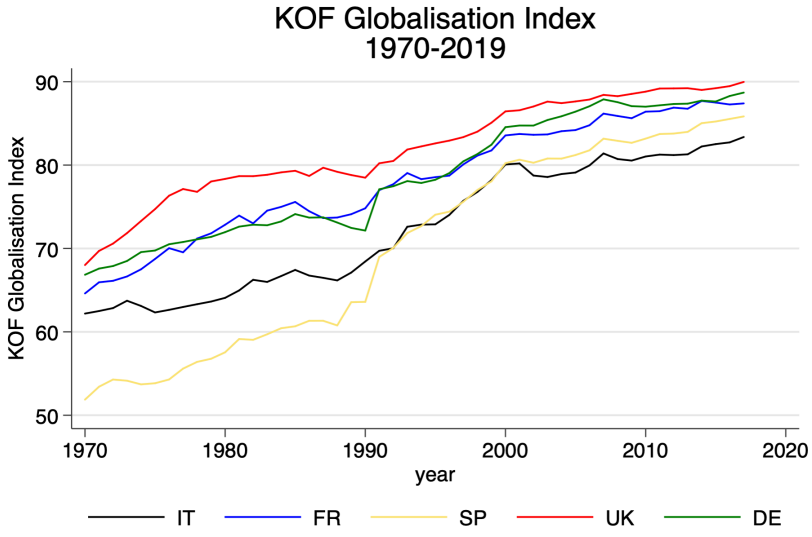


Data source: OECD (2020)

If we look at migrations, according to UN estimates (UNDESA 2020), the stock of international migrants in Italy in 2019 amounted to about 6.3 million people, and it has only mildly increased since 2010 (5.8 million people). The phase of a marked increase in the migrations towards Italy was from 2000 to 2010, and especially between 2007 and 2010, with a peak in 2007, when Italy received 515 thousand new immigrants. As we can see in Figure 14, the trajectories of migration inflows in the twenty-first century have been strikingly different for the major European countries. The French line remains almost flat for the whole period, although with a noticeable increase between 2005 and 2006, when the number of new immigrants in France went from 136 thousand to 228 thousand. On the contrary, Germany has constantly attracted and admitted more than 550 thousand new migrants per year since 2000, with a sharp increase beginning in 2010 and culminating in 2015, when Germany admitted 2 million migrants in a single year. As a result of these numbers, the UN estimates that in 2019 Germany hosted 13.1 million migrants, which means more than double the stock present in Italy and Spain (6.3 and 6.1 million, respectively) and 5 million more than in France.

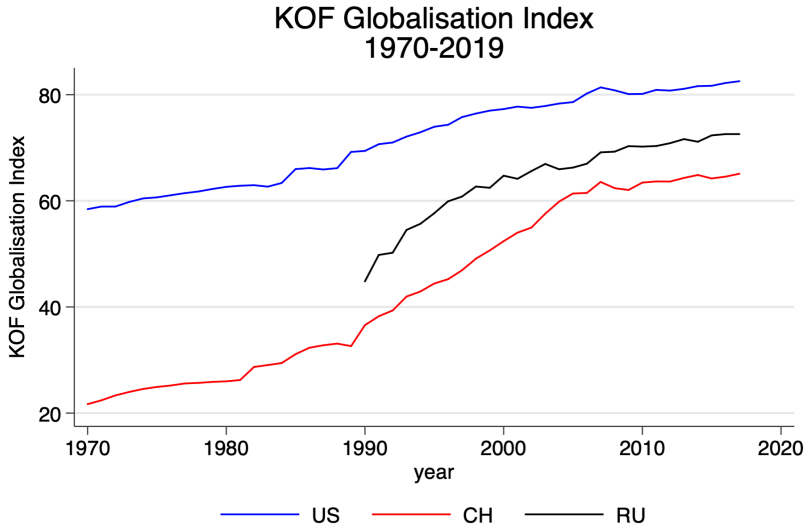
Concluding this section, we present the KOF Globalization Index, which measures the economic, social and political dimensions of globalization (Gygli et al. 2019). This is a synthetic index that summarizes several dimensions of globalization such as trade and finance, but also cultural and political aspects such as migration, freedom to visit and civil liberties. In Figure 15 we show that all the major Western European countries that we have studied so far increased their level of overall globalization between 1970 and 2019. However, since the early 2000s Italy has become the least globalized among these countries, following a sharp increase in the level of globalization for Spain in the 1990s. Moreover, according to the KOF index, all these five European countries are more globalized than the great powers of the international system (Figure 16). In fact, only the USA has a level of globalization comparable to Italy, while Russia's level of globalization today is close to the level of Italy twenty years ago and China is approximately as globalized as Italy in 1970.

Figure 15. Level of globalization for the major European countries (1970-2019)



Data source: Gygli, Haelg, Potrafke and Sturm (2019)

Figure 16. Level of globalization for the US, Russia and China (1970-2019)



Data source: Gygli, Haelg, Potrafke and Sturm (2019)

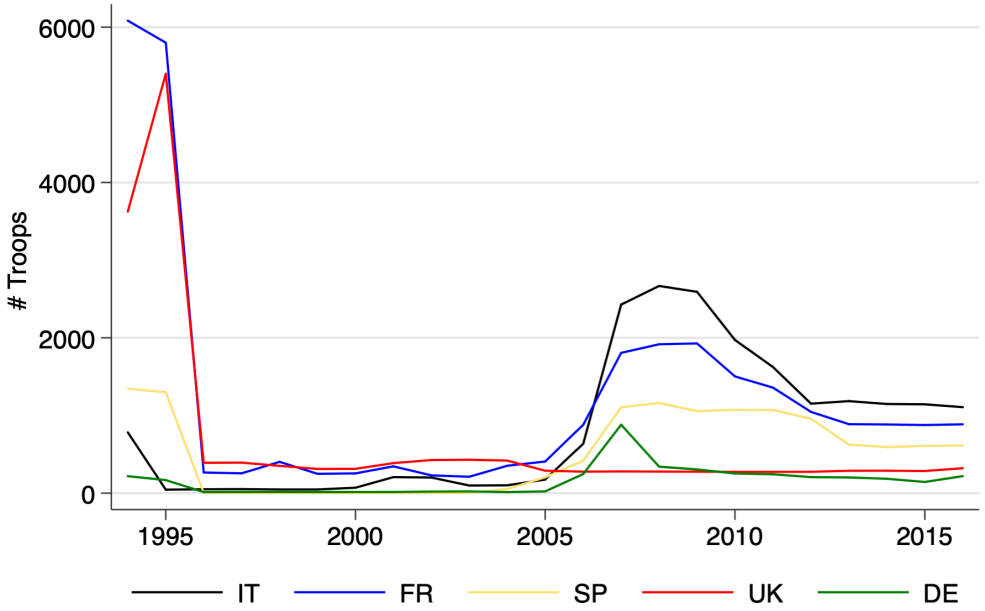
4. Italy's engagement via International Organizations

In order to have an appropriate and complete view of the position of Italy in contemporary international politics, it is also crucial to consider at least some of the actions taken by Italy and how Italy has interacted with other countries through diplomacy and within international organizations. Obviously, it is impossible to consider the actions of Italy in all international organizations within the limits imposed by this article. For this reason, we will focus on the UN and the EU, and especially on the peacekeeping missions enacted by these two organizations, given the importance attached to these activities by the Italian government.

After the end of the Cold War, Italy participated in a number of peacekeeping missions and military interventions abroad (Ignazi, Giacomello, and Coticchia 2012) and these missions represented one of the major foreign policy activities for Italy. Figure 17 shows the trend of troop contributions to UN peacekeeping missions by the five major European states we have so far analyzed and compared. The data are from the International Peace Institute in New York. As we can see, while European states were among the major contributors to UN peacekeeping missions in the early 1990s, their overall contribution has rapidly declined and remained almost absent for about ten years. Italy became the largest European contributor in 2006, when the UN Security Council decided to strengthen the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon, where Italy still has more than 1000 soldiers deployed. As we can see in Figure 18, originally drawn by Bove and coauthors (2020), Italy is the only European country and the only NATO member included in the list of the top twenty contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping missions. Notably, Germany did not provide any soldiers for many years until 2006 and is still the lowest contributor to UN missions among the major European countries. In fact, in the last twenty years UN peacekeeping missions have largely become an issue for Asian and African countries, which participate in the missions partly as a way to increase their status within the community of states and partly as a way to pay higher salaries to their armed

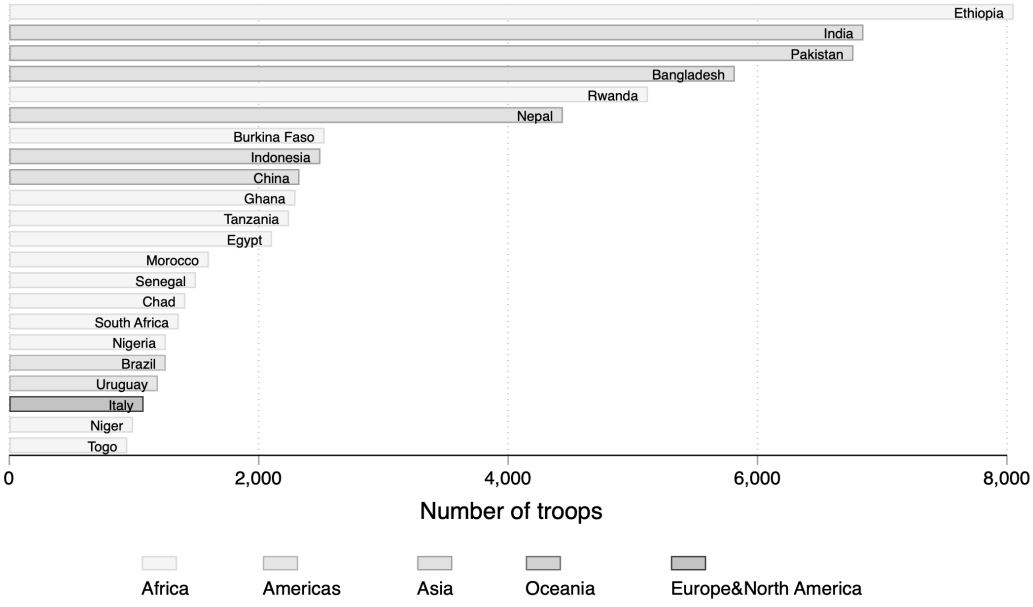
forces (Bove and Elia 2011). On the contrary the most powerful and developed states of the international system (with the exception of China) have privileged other forms of international intervention over UN peacekeeping missions, such as unilateral action, ad-hoc coalitions and regional organizations.

Figure 17. Troop contributions to UN missions by the major European countries



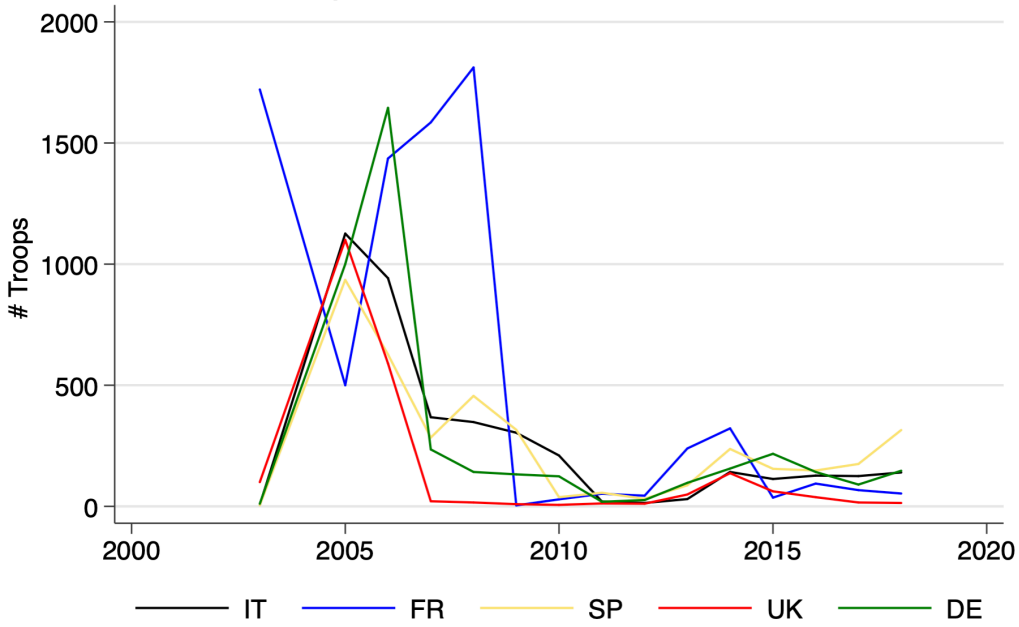
Data source: IPI (2020)

Figure 18. Top twenty contributors of troops to UN peacekeeping in 2017



Data source: IPI (2020)

Figure 19. Troop contributions to EU missions by the major European countries



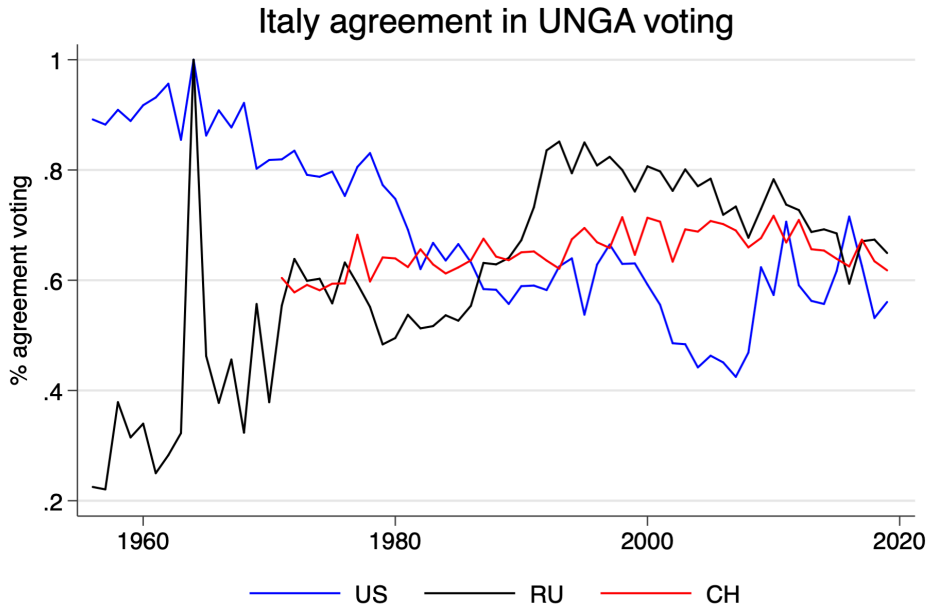
Data source: Meiske (2019)

Moving to briefly analyze the engagement of Italy within the EU security framework, Figure 19[4] shows that France and Spain have occasionally contributed to EU missions with several hundreds of soldiers, but only for very short periods and in any case the EU missions have counted on very low numbers over the last ten years, despite severe turbulence in the international system. France has been a major contributor, but in recent years all these countries have provided similar and small numbers of troops. It is important to stress this point because various studies (Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2019; Ruggeri, Gizelis, and Dorussen 2013) have demonstrated that contemporary multidimensional UN peacekeeping missions can effectively reduce violence in conflicts and stabilize post-conflict situations, but these missions often need more than ten thousand soldiers deployed to be fully effective. Thus, without robust deployments of troops, peacekeeping missions can hardly tackle the politically difficult and military dangerous situations they often have to face.

Finally, we show four Figures (20, 21, 22, 23) representing the pattern of Italian voting in the UN General Assembly, compared to the patterns of voting of the major European countries and the great powers of the international system (the US, China and Russia). The votes in the UN General Assembly have successfully been used in many studies to evaluate and compare the foreign policies of states over a broad set of issues, beyond specific topics and circumstances (Carter and Stone 2015; Voeten 2000). Figures 20 and 21 show the rate of agreement between Italian votes in the UN General Assembly and the votes of the US, China and Russia. When the value equals one, Italy and the country under scrutiny expressed exactly the same votes in a given year.

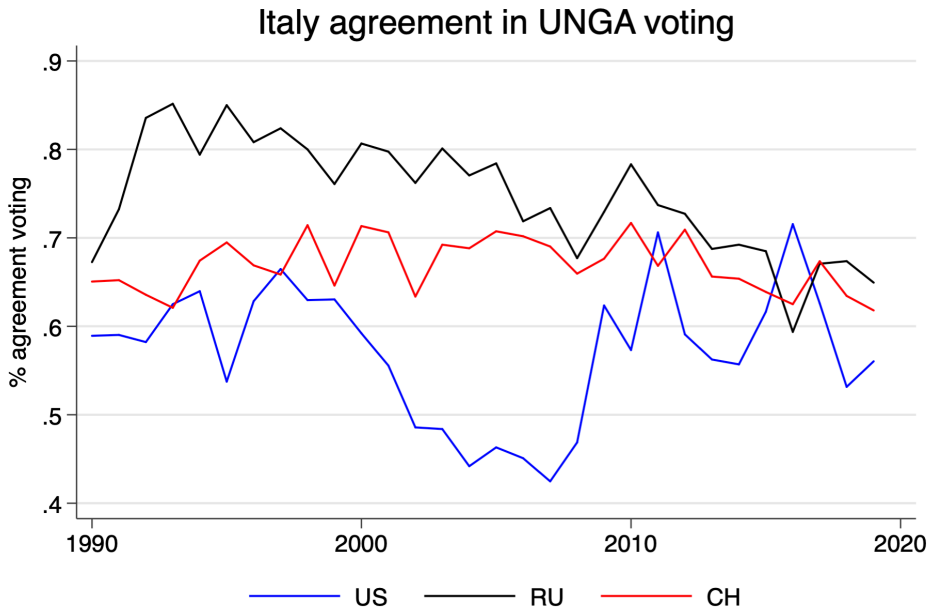
[4] We thank Maline Meiske for providing these otherwise unavailable data. For more on EU peacekeeping missions, see Meiske (2019).

Figure 20. Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. US, China and Russia), 1950-2019



Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

Figure 21. Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. US, China and Russia), 1990-2019

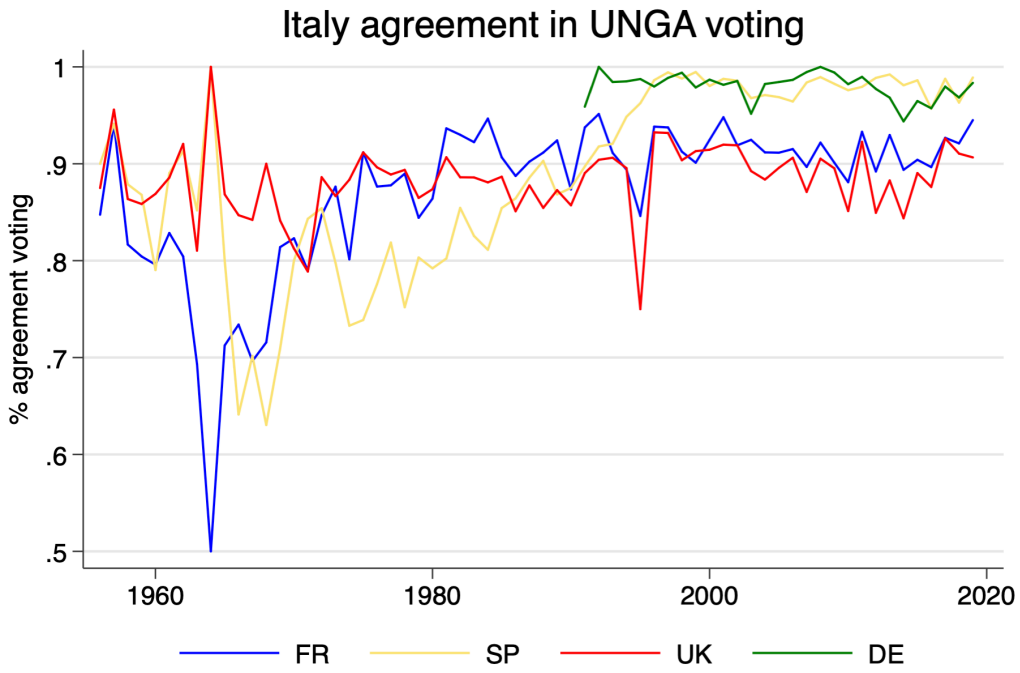


Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

As we can see, both the long-term trend (Figure 20) and the post-Cold War trend (Figure 21) display some clear and interesting features. Most notably, while public debates in Italy have focused on the growing distance between the American and Italian foreign policies only in specific moments, for instance at the time of the Iraqi War or currently under the Trump administration, agreement between Italian and US votes in the UN General Assembly has been decreasing for decades, essentially since the 1960s,

while the agreement between Italy and the USSR/Russia grew between the early 1960s and the end of the 1990s. Interestingly, the rate of agreement with Russia started decreasing with the advent of the Putin era, but it still remains higher than the rate of agreement with the US. For sure, the repeated votes of the UN General Assembly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a topic which separates the US from most European countries – contribute to making the distance between Italy and the US seem larger than it actually is. On the other hand, the long-standing relations and cooperation between the US and Italy within NATO cannot be forgotten, even though they do not appear in these data. However, the Israeli-Palestinian issue should influence trends only to a limited extent and tensions within NATO are a well-known fact. If we focus on the post-Cold War era, we can see that the rate of agreement with China has been much more stable and it has remained between the rates of agreement with the other two great powers for the whole period after 1990.

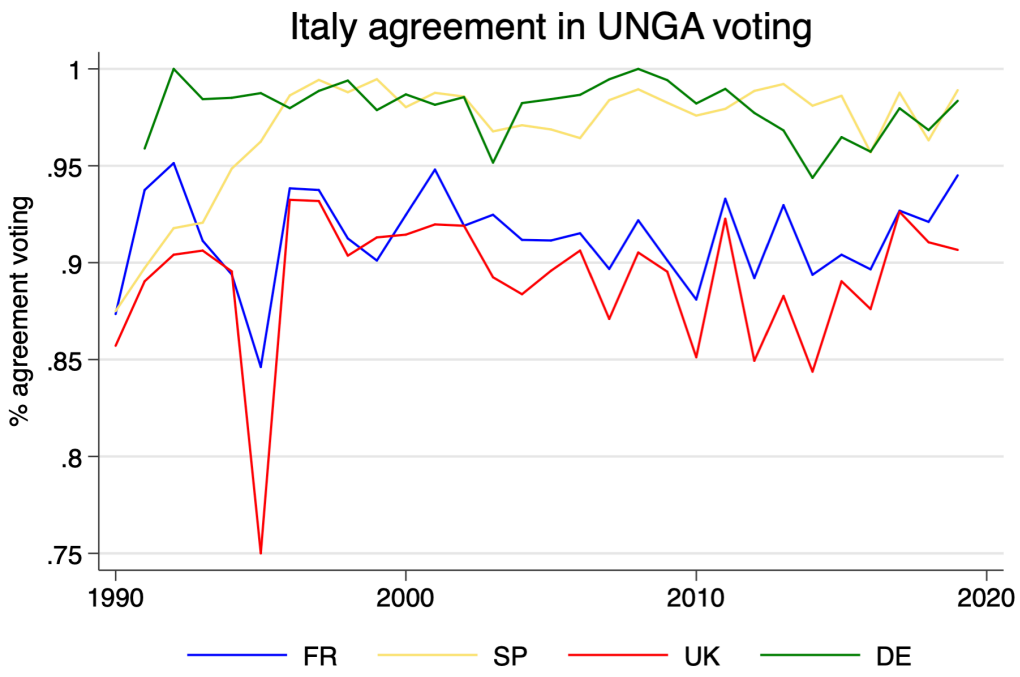
Figure 22. Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. Major European countries), 1950-2019



Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

Figures 22 and 23 also reveal some interesting trends. First of all, Figure 22 clearly shows that since the 1960s Italy has agreed much more with European countries than with any of the great powers, including the USA. Moreover, Figure 23 shows that since the end of the Cold War, Italy has constantly voted in agreement with Germany and Spain on more than 95% of issues. The rate of agreement with France and the UK has been very similar, but although high (above 85%), it is clearly lower than with Germany and Spain.

Figure 23. Voting in the UNGA (Italy vs. Major European countries), 1990-2019



Data source: Bailey et al. (2017)

5. Conclusions

Italy is not a major power and for this reason, perhaps counterintuitively, Italian policy-makers should be even more aware of their own country's capabilities, opportunities and limits than governments of major and rising powers. At the global level, we have experienced major changes and adjustments in trade and security patterns in the last two decades. Bipolarity is a faded memory, hegemonic stability a daily puzzle and multipolarity an increasing uncertainty. The core goal of this brief article was to provide some empirical bases to think more strategically and analytically about Italy in contemporary international politics. We do not claim to have provided an in-depth empirical analysis covering all the possible facets and issues that Italy can face in its international relations. Quite the contrary, we have drawn broad-brush patterns, but some of these patterns that have emerged call for further attention.

First, if we look at the security realm, in the last decades we have witnessed a convergence in terms of hard power among relatively comparable European countries. This convergence, however, is not due to an increase in military might from the Italian side, but rather to the decline and disinvestment of previously pivotal players in international politics such as France and the UK. Moreover, a demographic decline is more evident in the Italian case compared to other European counterparts. Neither defence policy nor demographic decline seems to have a key role in the agendas of the main Italian political parties and recent different governments.

Second, in terms of economic performance and interactions, we could indicate a divergence comparing Italy with other European countries. Germany's trade growth is not comparable with the Italian performance, but even in absolute terms the value of Italian trade is much lower than the values of trade for Germany, France and the

United Kingdom. Moreover, the FDI flows indicate major investments from neighbouring countries. When using indictors of globalization, we can see that Italy is relatively less globalized than major European countries.

Third, in terms of Italian engagement with international politics and international organizations, several patterns are notable. First of all, compared to other European countries, Italy has been more committed to deploying troops within the UN framework. In addition, Italy has also provided troops to the EU missions, but to an extent that is similar to what other European countries have done. Finally, as regards the voting patterns in the UN General Assembly, over time Italy has increasingly disagreed with the US, agreed to a certain extent with China and Russia, and converged with EU countries.

Hence, Italy faces several challenges in international politics. On the one hand, there are convergences with the European countries both in military capabilities and in the views expressed within international organization. However, this convergence could be more due to the declining role of European countries in the international arena than the result of coordination and convergence of strategies among them. On the other hand, when we observe Italy's position in the international political economy, trade and financial flows show that Italy is strictly linked to Europe, while losing terrain in terms of economic performance and also being tested by new migrations flows. These tensions partly explain why Italian foreign policy in the last years has appeared ambiguous and the overall picture seems to put the country at a crossroads. The future of international politics is uncertain, but it is time to make choices and develop sound strategies, starting from the reality of facts. If Italy and its ruling class do not face these realities and tackle these challenges the future could be less uncertain, but grimmer.

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Appendix: data sources for Figures

- *Figures 1-6; 9-11*: Data from the Correlates of War Project (online at: https://correlatesofwar.org). For this article we have used only data for their index CINC, population, military personnel, trade. This project began for data collection about conflict; now it is a data hub for several datasets by many IR scholars. Hence, there are many other datasets within the project such as militarized disputes, wars, alliances, and memberships in international organizations. The full reference for the trade data is Barbieri, Katherine and Omar M. G. Omar Keshk. 2016. Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set Codebook, Version 4.0.

- *Figures 7-8:* Data from SIPRI (https://www.sipri.org); we have used only the dataset on military expenditures, but SIPRI also collects data on arms transfers, arms industry and peace operations.

- *Figures 12 & 14*: Data from OECD (https://stats.oecd.org); this is an extremely rich source of data, especially for aid data.

- *Figure 13*: Data from UNCHR (https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/). They provide global data on refugees, but also asylum seekers and internally displaced people.

- *Figures 15 & 16*: Data from the KOF project, based at ETH (available online at: https://kof.ethz.ch/en/forecasts-and-indicators/indicators/kof-globalisation-index.html). We used their overall index but different dimensions of globalization have sub-indexes and can be explored.

- *Figures 17 & 18*: Data from IPI (http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org). We have used only the national contribution data to UN missions but IPI also provides data on missions' gender composition and financial support.

- *Figure 19*: Data are from the DPhil thesis by Maline Meiske; for the moment the EU does not provide out-of-shelf data.

- *Figures 20-23*: Data are from Bailey and coauthors (2017). They provide yearly updates on the UN general assembly voting patterns.

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SISP SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI SCIENZA POLITICA

The Me Too Syndrome reloaded: Change and continuity in Italian relations with France and Germany after Brexit

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Abstract

The 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum altered the European balance of power, leaving France and Germany as the only major powers in the EU. As a would-be peer within EU institutions, Italy was particularly exposed by this situation and adapted its foreign policy accordingly. Noting that Italy has displayed a mix of cooperation and conflict with France and Germany, our article seeks to answer why this has been the case. Focusing on the impact of party politics on foreign policy, we argue that Italian foreign policy resulted from the political synthesis developed by each of the Italian cabinets ruling since 2016. The political synthesis depended, in turn, on the interplay between party ideology (pro- or anti-EU) and coalition dynamics. A cooperative foreign policy is then related to ideologically divided coalitions and those sharing a pro-EU ideology. On the contrary, an oppositional foreign policy depended on homogeneous, anti-EU coalitions.

1. Introduction

One of the most debated issues among scholars of Italian foreign policy is to make sense of Italy's long-term trends amidst short-term variations. This problem has been evident since the end of the Cold War, with the demise of the so-called 'first Republic' and the consequential rise of a (sort of) bipolar political system. As witnessed most clearly in momentous times, like the 2003 war in Iraq or the 2007 mission in Lebanon, Italian foreign policy has displayed significant alterations due to the succession to power of either centre-left or centre-right coalitions (Andreatta 2008). Along with fluctuations, however, Italian foreign policy has shown remarkable continuities over the past three decades. Some of these continuities have dragged on from the long decades of the Cold War. Successive Italian governments, in fact, followed Atlanticist and Europeanist orientations in foreign policy. After the end of the Cold War, successive governmental coalitions began to swing between an Atlanticist and Europeanist orientation in the pursuit of a foreign policy course. To put it like Cladi and Webber (2011: 216-17),

> A lack of consensus on foreign policy has emerged between the centre-left and centre-right coalitions [...] The resulting controversies have constituted a problem in that successive governments have found it difficult to pursue a pragmatic

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foreign policy programme and to define the country's long-term security interests.

A second, related, point of contention – one that touches not just upon students of Italian politics, but IR scholars at large – relates to the relative weight of systemic and domestic factors in forging the conduct of foreign policy. This is also a long-standing issue in the political science literature, and one that has attracted significant attention over time (see among others Milner 1997 and Fearon 1998). In the case of Italy, this is not just a theoretical conundrum but also an empirical problem, given the peculiar features of the domestic political system (notably, a fragmented party system, whose main outcome is government instability). Moreover, the concomitant change in the early 1990s of the structure of the international system, along with the rise of the 'second Republic', has made it difficult to identify their distinct causal effects. For this reason, any attempt to explain Italian foreign policy in the long term needs to be eclectic to a certain extent (Cladi and Locatelli 2019), i.e., to blend variables at both levels of analysis.

In this article, we aim to narrow down our dependent variable to Italy's relations with France and Germany within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework since the Brexit referendum. We opt for this limited fraction of Italian foreign policy and in such a limited span of time for a variety of reasons. Firstly, France and Germany are Italy's main (would-be) peers in the European Union (EU) following Brexit; Rome's approach to Paris and Berlin can then be taken as a proxy for its Europeanism. Secondly, since the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum, diplomatic relations between Rome and Paris have experienced nothing less than a political rollercoaster (Darnis 2019); it is therefore a most evident case of foreign policy variation which needs to be explained. Thirdly, very few studies have analysed the impact of Brexit on EU member states' foreign policy so far – none in fact, to the best of our knowledge, has paid attention explicitly to the Italian case (although we tried to fill this vacuum in Cladi and Locatelli 2020).

Therefore, after Brexit, Italy displayed a mix of cooperation and conflict with its powerful European partners. Our questions, simply put, are: why is this so? What explains such variation? How should we account for both cooperation and tension? In order to tackle this issue, we first provide a concise overview of the main features of Italy's foreign policy. We then focus on the impact of party politics on foreign policy from a theoretical perspective, and we assess the interplay of structural and domestic factors in the case of Italy's relations with France and Germany. Finally, in the concluding section we wrap up our argument.

2. The pillars of Italian foreign policy

Foreign policy issues are rarely discussed during electoral campaigns. The March 2018 elections were no exception as the main political forces did not express a coherent foreign policy strategy (Tocci 2018). Yet, foreign policy can be very important and in Italy foreign policy decisions can be a factor contributing to the resignation of a Prime Minister. This happened, for instance, when Prime Minister Romano Prodi resigned in February 2007, after losing a vote of confidence in the Senate on the proposal to keep troops in Afghanistan (BBC 2007). Foreign policy decisions can bring down governments and they can also become ways to trumpet new courses.

Nevertheless, Italy has traditionally articulated its foreign policy priorities around three pillars: Europe, the transatlantic partnership and the Mediterranean. The 'Europe' pillar involves Italy being in favour of the process of European integration. Backing the process of European integration allowed Italy to pursue three aims: firstly, to secure the country's newly formed democratic institutions after World War II; secondly, to ensure further and continuous economic growth (Bindi 2008), and thirdly, to make Italy's voice be heard in the international community. As far as the transatlantic pillar is concerned, Italy relies on the US as a guarantor of security. Membership of NATO allowed Italy to benefit from protection against the Soviet threat during the Cold War and to keep its defence spending at a minimum. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Italy continued to benefit from membership of NATO but it began to invest more in defence and a lot in terms of political capital and goodwill in NATO initiatives such as the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 and the NATO-Russia Council, established in 2002 at Pratica di Mare (Stefanini 2014). Finally, the Mediterranean is also a very important pillar of Italian foreign policy. Whilst Italy is undeniably a Mediterranean country, the Mediterranean's importance as a foreign policy circle has been steadily increasing over the past decades and it came to include the Balkans during the 1990s (Carbone 2007).

Whilst Italy had limited independence to develop its own foreign policy during the Cold War, the dissolution of the USSR presented Italy with challenges as well as opportunities. On the one hand, Italy had the opportunity to pursue a pro-active foreign policy course (Tercovich 2017; Carati and Locatelli 2017). On the other hand, Italy was uniquely exposed to a wide array of security threats due to its proximity to the Balkans, where the unravelling of former Yugoslavia led to subsequent civil wars during the 1990s (Dyrstad 2012). Italian governments during the 1990s had to realise that membership of organisations such as the EU, NATO and the UN could no longer provide a low cost security option or guarantee of economic growth (Andreatta 2001). Nevertheless, these organizations provided a unique opportunity for Italy to raise its profile on the international stage, as it could now seek to play a more influential role in contributing to their adaptation and transformation. Subsequently, such opportunities came, for instance, as Italy took part in the reform debate of the United Nations Security Council, proposing, in particular, to create ten new permanent but shared SC seats to be assigned to twenty countries on the basis of certain criteria (Salleo and Pirozzi 2008). In terms of conflict resolution, Italy joined the US, Russia, France, Great Britain and Germany to establish the Contact Group in 1994, with the purpose of coordinating crisis management efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and subsequently in Kosovo (Schwegmann 2000).

As opportunities to make the most of membership of international organisations were not lacking, it is no wonder that successive centre-left and centre-right coalitions which alternated in power were in agreement that Italy should remain committed to the EU and NATO (Alcaro 2010). The three circles of Europeanism, Atlanticism and the Mediterranean would continue to influence the broad trajectory of Italian foreign policy (Croci 2008). However, the multitude of challenges which have arisen in recent years have exposed the need for Italian governments to invest more and more resources to tackle them. The challenges and their diverse nature have also exposed the lack of cooperation between states, contributing to a waning of the importance of international institutions. Italian governments have been called on to provide a response to the refugee

crisis, to a resurgent Russia, the Syrian civil war and, lately, to the Coronavirus. Such challenges highlight the unique mix between inter-state, intra-state and transnational security threats, calling for an immediate response and long-term commitment to contain them.

For a country such as Italy, containing such threats presents a unique set of challenges. Firstly, no matter how active a foreign policy course Italy pursues, it is still vulnerable. Secondly, Italy was badly hit by the 2008 economic recession, with Italian governments on both sides of the political spectrum being unable to provide a solution (Di Quirico 2010). Thirdly, Italy had to embark on a series of reforms to make sure it could remain engaged in areas of concern such as the Mediterranean whilst continuing to make good its commitments to ongoing military operations (Ronzitti 2016; Dessi and Olmastroni 2017).

At the same time, Italy needed to carefully manage the relationship with its two European partners, France and Germany. This is an ongoing problem, as we will see. Disagreements have arisen, and they shape the extent to which cooperation can be possible and far-reaching. Most notably, despite the fact that Italy and France share common interests in ending the Libyan civil war, promoting stability in North Africa and the Sahel as well as managing the refugee crisis, their positions on these issues have often differed. Italy's relationship with Germany was made more difficult by the dispute following the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis of 2010-2012.

3. Explaining foreign policy change: the role of parties and government coalitions

These themes opened up opportunities for a theoretical treatment of Italian foreign policy. Drawing from different theoretical streams, several authors have attempted to account for continuity and variation in Italian foreign policy. Among others, Lorenzo Cladi and Mark Webber (2011) adopted a neo-classical realist perspective to assess the extent to which variables such as elite perception of the distribution of power and domestic instability played a role in explaining the variation in the ways in which successive governmental coalitions responded to the different pressures of the post-Cold War international system. Writing from a structural realist perspective, Luca Ratti (2012) argued that there was continuity in the ways in which Italian foreign policy was conducted in the aftermath of the Cold War, still looking for a balance between the tendency to bandwagon with the United States and the search for regional autonomy. On the other hand, taking their distance from the realist view, authors like Paolo Rosa (2014), Fabrizio Coticchia (2014) and Piero Ignazi et al. (2012) have focused on Italy's strategic culture (or lack thereof). Finally, moving beyond mainstream theory, Elisabetta Brighi's (2015) contribution analysed Italian foreign policy comprehensively by drawing on the strategic relational model, which pays more attention to agency in conceptualizing foreign policy as dialectic rather than outcome (see also Hyde-Price 2013).

Differently from previous attempts, here we do not aim to elaborate or adopt a general theory of foreign policy. We will rather focus our attention on a narrower research variable – i.e., the weight of party politics on Italy's relations with France and Germany. In doing so, we borrow from an established literature which generally dates back to the debate on the second level of analysis (Waltz 1967). To be sure, we would not question

whether domestic politics matters – something that to a certain extent we believe is obvious and self-evident – but we will try to assess if, and to what extent, change in Italian foreign policy can be attributed to variations in cabinet coalitions. In order to proceed in an orderly manner, we will first define our variables and, secondly, we will suggest our hypothesis.

Our dependent variable is Italy's behaviour vis-à-vis France and Germany in the context of CSDP after the Brexit vote in June 2016. We take such a short span of time for our observation for a number of reasons: firstly, as we will see, due to government instability, Italy has seen as many as four successive cabinets: Renzi (2014-2016), Gentiloni (2016-2018), Conte I (2018-2019) and Conte II (2019-now). This allows us to observe significant variation in our independent variable. Secondly, Brexit has altered 'the actor constellation and preference configuration around the Brussels negotiating table' (Krotz and Schield 2018, p. 1175): by shifting the regional distribution of power, Brexit has forced most, if not all, EU member states to adjust accordingly. For Italy, Brexit meant losing a powerful ally to rely on (Carbone et al. 2011) and as such, it amounts to nothing less than systemic pressure, to borrow Waltz's (1979) jargon. Third, and partially related to this point, since 2016 France and Germany have revamped their cooperation, both bilaterally and within the EU. To put it bluntly, they have launched a number of initiatives aimed at giving the EU new momentum and, perhaps most importantly, to consolidate their leadership within the EU (Kempin and Kunz 2017).[1]

Subsequently, it is reasonable to expect that Italy had to decide how to respond to the double challenge of a declining voice in the EU arena due to the loss of the UK, and the rising activism of the two main continental powers. We operationalize this variable in terms of available policy options to avoid the risk of irrelevance. In this connection, we assume that strategic adjustment vis-à-vis France and Germany may take one of three forms: a) in a sort of balancing behaviour, one option could be to openly contrast the Franco-German initiatives, with a view to thwarting their bid for leadership; b) an opposite option could be to bandwagon with the Franco-German tandem, trying to open up the club to a third guest; c) the third alternative would be similar to the second one, but with a remarkable difference, i.e., to join arms with one of the two powers and exclude the other. Simply put, in our analysis we expect that Italian policy-makers follow at least one of these paths.

Our independent variable, as mentioned, takes party politics into account. Of course, this term may imply a variety of different meanings (for an overview, see Oktay and Beasley 2017). In fact, the literature has investigated the difference between single-party and coalition cabinets in terms of (*inter alia*) war initiation (Clare 2010), international commitments (Oktay 2014) and extremity in foreign policy (Beasley and Kaarbo 2014; Coticchia and Davidson 2019). Other scholars have focused on the role of junior partners within the coalition (Vignoli, 2020), as well as the interaction between coalition dynamics and the foreign policy machinery (Kaarbo 2012; Oppermann, Kaarbo and Brummer

[1] Just to name the main initiatives undertaken since June 2016, both countries updated their security strategies; France also championed the idea of a European Intervention Initiative (EII), to be launched independently from the EU. Most importantly, Paris and Berlin called for the advancement of CSDP and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Finally, they increased bilateral cooperation in a series of meetings, like the one held in Paris in July 2017 (soon after Emanuel Macron's presidential victory) and Aachen in January 2019 (Krotz and Schield 2018; Kempin and Kunz 2019).

2017) and, most recently, on populist foreign policies (Balfour et al. 2016; Destradi and Plageman 2019).

The four governments under consideration relied on three different ruling coalitions. Interestingly enough, two of them included populist parties. Their different compositions deserve consideration: the Renzi and Gentiloni cabinets were supported by almost identical (grand) coalitions, which included as main partners their home party (*Partito Democratico*, PD), the centrist party *Scelta civica per l'Italia* (founded and led by former prime minister Mario Monti) and the centre-right party *Nuovo Centro Destra* (NCD). Although the PD was the heavyweight in the coalition, it had to negotiate with the NCD (later rebranded as *Alternativa popolare*) to grasp a tiny majority over the opposition parties. The Conte I cabinet, on the other hand, was supported by two main parties, the Five Star Movement (M5S) and The League, in a more compact coalition, which to an extent was marked by a degree of ideological (i.e. populist) affinity. Finally, the current Conte II government is supported by the M5S and the PD, plus Matteo Renzi's own party *Italia Viva*, and the leftist party *Liberi e Uguali*.

Overall, these coalitions present striking differences both in terms of membership and ideological distance. As concerns the former, the grand coalitions supporting Renzi and Gentiloni included four parties to gain majority in both chambers of the Parliament. Differently from his predecessors, in his first cabinet Conte was supported by a coalition of two, while in the current cabinet to have a majority in Parliament he still needs four. However, the main difference relates to ideological orientation: the first two coalitions, although quite heterogeneous, saw an easy convergence towards a traditional – markedly pro-European – foreign policy course (Lucarelli 2015; Felsen 2018). The second coalition, as epitomized by the so-called 'contract of government' (Contratto per il governo del cambiamento 2018), found a common denominator in a revisionist rhetoric ('the government of change') and a markedly oppositional political platform towards the EU. Finally, the current coalition is marked by a deep ideological divide between the populist anti EU orientation of the M5S and the traditional pro-EU stance of the PD.

Summing up, we are left with three different configurations of cabinet coalitions: the first one features an ideologically homogeneous coalition, with a hegemonic party, plus three more crucial parties covering a wide section of the political spectrum (from centre-right to centre-left). The second configuration is a two-party coalition, with one having the upper hand, and still no meaningful ideological divide in terms of foreign policy. The third configuration resembles the first one (still four parties with a dominant one), but is marked by a deep ideological division with respect to foreign policy orientation.

We can now turn our hypothesis to how Italian behaviour towards France and Germany changed because of Brexit. Simply put, our argument is that Italy's behaviour towards France and Germany depended on the political synthesis of the governmental coalition, which in turn is the result of the main party's ideology and ideological homogeneity. More precisely, whilst the dominant party will try to enforce its own foreign policy vision, it will also need to negotiate with its coalition partners. Therefore, in the absence of an ideological cleavage, the leading party will not have to concede much to the partners; however, in the event of other partners sharing opposing visions, a compromise must be found. For these reasons, we expect substantial continuity between Renzi and Gentiloni,

and change from Gentiloni to Conte as well as from Conte I to Conte II. At first blush, a summary of our hypothesis is available in Table 1.

Table 1. Hypothesis on the impact of party ideology (pro-EU, or anti-EU), cabinet coalition, and Italy's behaviour towards France and Germany

Independent variable: Ideology of the leading party	Intervening variable: Cabinet coalition	Dependent variable: Italy's behaviour towards France and Germany
Pro-EU (Renzi/Gentiloni)	Ideologically homogeneous	Participate in Franco-German initiatives
Anti-EU (Conte I)	Ideologically homogeneous	Oppose Franco-German initiatives
Mix of pro-EU anti-EU (Conte II)	Ideologically divided	Mix of participation and opposition

4. Italy's relations with France and Germany after Brexit

As mentioned, within the EU context, the UK has been an important ally for Italy. To put it bluntly, the weight of London in European institutions was perceived (and sometimes used) by Rome as an asset to offset the all-too-evident prominence of Paris and Berlin. Brexit, then, represented a double challenge for Italian policymakers: not only did it undermine the achievements of the integration process, so potentially landing a fatal blow to the EU itself, but it also put the Italian voice within the Union at risk. Following these considerations, the Italian approach towards EU institutions and other member states was marked from the very beginning by a degree of cooperation and diplomatic activism.

In chronological order, the first Italian initiative dates back as early as August 2016 – i.e., just two months after the British vote and a few weeks in advance of the momentous Bratislava summit. Following an editorial authored by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Paolo Gentiloni and Minister of Defence Roberta Pinotti, the Italian government officially called on other EU states to work on a series of initiatives aimed at pushing ahead the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). It is not possible to describe the details of the Italian proposal; suffice to say that apart from some differences, the Italian roadmap for furthering diplomatic and military cooperation displayed striking similarities to a parallel Franco-German initiative. So, when European leaders met in Bratislava in September 2016, they shared a broad consensus on which steps to undertake. In particular, as formalized in successive EU summits, EU leaders agreed to revamp PESCO, a defence cooperation clause included in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty but never activated before (Council of the EU 2017). So, while de facto a Franco-German effort, PESCO was made possible by the broader consensus it enjoyed. Italy certainly contributed to selling the idea to other states, and probably helped Paris and Berlin frame the initiative in inclusive terms (Marrone 2017). As evidence of the consideration enjoyed by Rome in EU circles, France and Germany invited Italy (along with Spain) to appear as co-signatories of the proposal at the EU summit in November 2017.

Italy's involvement in PESCO was not just a diplomatic move aimed at signalling its ambitions within the EU. Quite the contrary, cognizant of its limited resources, Italy found in PESCO an opportunity to maximize its procurement capabilities and promote the Italian Defence Technology Industrial Base (DTIB) (Marrone 2018). This is confirmed by the sheer number of defence projects launched so far within the PESCO framework that include Italy as a participating country: in the first batch (in the final days of the Gentiloni government) Italy was present in 15 projects out of 17 and took the lead in 4, while France participated in 8 and Germany in 7 (Marrone and Sartori 2019). Moreover, it is worth observing that the three countries are all present in 6 projects, an indicator of Italy's success in being taken as a worthy candidate for the leadership of the EU.

Of the three foreign policy options discussed in the previous paragraph, the diplomatic activism displayed since the Summer of 2016 and the involvement in PESCO seem to conform to the one suggested by our hypothesis: both Renzi and Gentiloni perceived the possibility of intruding on the Franco-German tandem and turning it into a EU-wide triumvirate. These actions have been complemented with a well-known policy of presentialism, which led both prime ministers to portray themselves as honest brokers among EU major powers. For instance, at the end of August 2016, Renzi organized a summit with his French and German counterparts on the tiny but highly symbolic Ventotene island. Similarly, Gentiloni saw an opportunity to raise the Italian status in a series of high-profile events, like the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties, which took place in the Italian capital on 25 March 2017, and a couple of months later in the G-7 Summit held in Taormina. Ironically, the most evident effort to be treated as an equal by the two continental powers arrived too late: the draft of a Quirinal Treaty with France – a blueprint for future enhanced cooperation – was elaborated in the final days of Gentiloni's mandate, and could not be signed due to the opposition of Gentiloni's successor, Giuseppe Conte.

As mentioned, the first Conte cabinet was supported by the so-called yellow-green coalition (i.e. the M5S and Matteo Salvini's *The League*). Although the League was traditionally a right-wing party – something that can hardly be said for the M5S (Mosca and Tronconi 2019) – both parties shared a portion of their political platform due to their populist inspiration (see, among others Balfour 2016; Zulianello 2019, pp. 145-156). In particular, their rhetoric and ideology converged towards a radically more sceptical view of the EU and Italy's relations with European partners (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Franzosi, Marone, Salvati 2015). Euro-scepticism, combined with their populist attempt to portray themselves as a novelty in the Italian political landscape, led to the specification in their ruling agreement of their ambition to reform EU policies (especially on migration and economic austerity) (Contratto per il governo del cambiamento 2018, pp. 17, 26-28).

Coherently with the coalition's political platform, the Conte I government steered an impressive re-orientation of Italian foreign policy towards its European partners, particularly France. In its few months of life, a number of disputes emerged between Paris and Rome that severely strained their diplomatic ties. Obviously, tensions are an integral and deeply rooted part of the Franco-Italian relationship, so it should come as a surprise to no one if sometimes both states indulge in reciprocal finger pointing. However, what marked a significant departure from the past is the way these disputes were managed by

the government. In a nutshell, coalition leaders deliberately escalated tension with Paris, with a view to increasing internal consensus.

The lowest point was reached in February 2019, when France recalled the ambassador in Rome due to the flamboyant declarations of some senior cabinet figures. But even before that, evidence of Italian opposition to France came with the decision to drop out of the European Intervention Initiative (EII) – an extra-EU project aimed at developing an international rapid reaction force funded by a common budget and guided by a single doctrine. This initiative, championed by President Macron a few months after his election, was met with favour (although half-heartedly) by Gentiloni, who had agreed to participate. However, Conte seemed suspicious of the initiative: apart from duplicating assets otherwise available as NATO members, the main concern of the Prime Minister was to avoid the possibility of France gaining excessive influence in Europe (Marrone 2018, p. 7). Thus, one may conclude that the heightened tension in relations with Paris (and to a lesser extent with Berlin) originated from the competition for consensus between the M5S and the League (Darnis 2019, p. 4), but it is evident that such a strategy is also functional to curb the leadership of the Franco-German tandem.

After the League broke the coalition with the M5S, the Conte II government found an uneasy settlement with the PD. The empirical evidence available in the seven months since the Conte II government was sworn in makes it impossible to say a final word on its foreign policy course. For one thing, it is quite evident that the current approach to the EU and the allies has changed: even in times of hard negotiations with the Commission and within the Eurogroup on the controversial Eurobonds, the current government's approach has been at most one of negotiation, and not mere opposition. Still, we recognise that the Conte II government is a counterfactual case study requiring further investigation as its stance towards the EU is fully revealed.

5. Conclusions

This article has tried to make sense of the variations which have characterised Italian foreign policy towards France and Germany since the 2016 Brexit referendum. Since then, three governmental coalitions have been in power and they differed in several respects. The main difference, in our analysis, relates to the pro- or anti-EU stance of the major party within the government coalition. Secondly, as intervening variable, we observed whether this stance was shared or not by other government parties.

In our argument, we tried to assess if and how government coalitions have an impact on foreign policy. Following this logic, it should come as no surprise that there has been more variation than uniformity with respect to Italy's behaviour towards France and Germany. Whereas Renzi and Gentiloni sought to participate in Franco-German initiatives, the first Conte government decisively opposed and sought to thwart the influence of the Franco-German tandem. Whilst it is too early to tell in terms of the current Conte II cabinet's relationship with France and Germany, it is apparent that the approach has somewhat changed in favour of cooperation, thus resembling the attitude of Renzi and Gentiloni.

In order to trace the causal link between government coalition and foreign policy, we added as an intervening variable the ideological homogeneity of the coalition: the political synthesis resulting from ideology and homogeneity gave rise to a unique foreign

policy course. We found that each dominant party would seek to shape the foreign policy course in accordance with its ideological orientation but it would have to negotiate with its political partners. So, where coalition partners' ideologies converged, the leading party did not need to concede much to its partners. Conversely, where coalition partners' ideologies differed, a compromise had to be found. This is true for pro-EU as well as Eurosceptic parties: both the PD with Renzi and Gentiloni and the M5S with the Conte I government could easily push their agendas, leading respectively to a cooperative and oppositional foreign policy towards France and Germany; differently, while still the main coalition party under the Conte II government, the M5S had to come to terms with the PD, so forsaking its previous attitude.

As mentioned, since the current government came into office just a few months ago, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive assessment of its foreign policy. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis has made France and Germany critical allies so as to have all the support Italy needs within the Eurogroup. However, at least so far, both the rhetoric and actions of the Italian Prime Minister suggest a significant change from his previous term.

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Sleeping with the enemy: The not-so-constant Italian stance towards Russia

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Abstract

A taken-for-granted assumption within the Italian foreign affairs community argues that the relationship between Rome and Moscow follows a generally cooperative attitude, fostered by strong cultural, economic and political ties. This narrative misses a significant part of the tale, which is at odds with the idea that the good relations with Russia are a 'constant feature' of Italy's foreign policy. Indeed, competitive interaction has frequently emerged, as a number of events in the last decade confirm. To challenge conventional wisdom, the article aims to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the investigated relationship. Focusing on the outcomes of global structural changes on Italian foreign policy, it posits that Rome is more prone to a cooperative stance towards Moscow whenever the international order proves stable. By contrast, its interests gradually diverge from those of its alleged 'natural' partner as the international order becomes increasingly unstable. This hypothesis is tested by an in-depth analysis of Italy's posture towards Russia amidst the crisis of the international liberal order (2008-on). Furthermore, the recurrence of a similar dynamic is verified through a diachronic comparison with two other international orders in crisis, i.e. that of the interwar period (1936-1941) and that of the Cold War (1979-1985).

1. Introduction

Sanctions against Russia happened out of the blue for Italy in 2014, and only after much resistance did Italy align with the choice of its EU partners (Coticchia and Davidson, 2019). The sanctions triggered harsh criticism from the main national trade associations (Confartigianato, 2018; Coldiretti, 2018; Confindustria, 2018) and all Italian governments have evaluated them to be particularly burdensome for the country (Parsi, 2016). Although mostly confined to parliamentary debate, the significance of Italy's participation in NATO's *Enhanced Forward Presence* (EFP) was downplayed by the Renzi government in 2016 (Arnese and Rossi, 2016) but raised protests from the opposition (De Feudis, 2016). Moreover, some creeping tensions in the field of security, energy and EU integration are widening the gap between the interests of Rome and those of Moscow, having remained on the sidelines of the public debate. Recently, medical supplies provided by the Russian military in Italy in the wake of the COVID-19 emergency have raised a vibrant debate. The so-called *From Russia with Love* operation has been accused

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of being Putin's trap for the Italian government, which would be part of a broader strategy aimed at urging Italy to request the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia (Iacoboni, 2020; Razov, 2020).

Nevertheless, conventional wisdom diffused among Italian foreign policy (IFP) scholars, experts and practitioners is that Italy's stance towards Russia tends to be cooperative and focused on the pursuit of shared goals, without being influenced by political turnover. Also, growing Russian aggressiveness – which is a substantial part of its revisionist challenge to the liberal order (White House, 2017) – is not perceived as a threat to Italy, either by political elites or by public opinion (Olmastroni, 2017).

The supposed enduring friendly ties between the two powers have been explained through both domestic and external variables based on the asymmetry of international status, the lack of shared borders and the positive effects of long-term factors such as mutual cultural fascination and economic exchanges. However, this narrative misses a significant part of the tale, which is at odds with the idea that the good offices with Moscow represent a 'constant feature' of the IFP. As a matter of fact, competitive interaction has cyclically emerged as a number of events from the last decade confirm.

The article aims to challenge a deeply-rooted belief about the Italian posture towards Russia and provide a more nuanced theoretical framework. Therefore, it posits that intervening changes at the structural level trigger a competitive turn in this relationship. Accordingly, it diachronically compares Rome's stance towards Moscow across three different periods equally marked by the crisis of the international order. In particular, it brings out the competitive downturn between the two countries in the current crisis of the liberal order[1] and verifies the occurrence of a similar dynamic during those crises of the Interwar period (1936-1941)[2] and of the Cold War (1979-1985).[3] The in-depth analysis is based both on primary (strategic documents, international treaties and agreements, governmental websites) and secondary sources (scientific literature, policy reports, newspapers).

2. The 'Russia Factor' in Italian Foreign Policy

Undoubtedly, political, cultural and economic ties between Italy and Russia are rooted in past centuries and trace back to long before the birth of a unitary state in the Peninsula – as a vast historical literature confirms (Berti, 1957). As a result, this topic has mostly been explored by historians, although only a few of them have taken into consideration the post-Cold War era (Nuti, 2011; Bettanin, 2012). Instead, it has generally remained underinvestigated in the literature on International relations (IR). In this field of research, few works have paid specific attention to Italy's stance on Russia while others have analysed it in a wider effort to understand the IFP. Instead, their relationship has frequently been the subject of policy reports.

[1] The 2007-2008 crisis has been conventionally identified as the turning point for the liberal order (Parsi, 2018).

[2] The international order shaped at the Paris Conference definitively fell into crisis between the Italian aggression against Ethiopia and the turn of the war in Europe on a global scale in 1941 (Morgenthau, 1948).

[3] The bipolar order definitively fell into crisis between the war in Afghanistan and the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Gaidar, 2017).

This being said, five major interpretative strands emerge in the literature. A first strand explains Italy's policy towards Russia as linked to the quest for a new role within the Euro-Atlantic community after 1989-1991, as clearly pointed out by Caffarena and Gabusi (2017). According to them, Rome's goal was to emerge as a mediator with former Cold War enemies such as Russia and Libya within a changing international environment. Collina (2008) claims that Italy undertook the pragmatic mission of acting as a bridge between Russia and the EU and NATO ('bridge approach') due to Italy's needs in the energy sector and Russia's opportunity to be gradually accepted in the Western concern. Coralluzzo (2006), for his part, interpreted Italy's mediator role with Russia as the result of the shift from its traditional 'obsession for visibility' to a new 'obsession with mediation', even when such a role is not requested by the states involved.

Besides, a second strand in the literature emphasizes the weight of political leaders and party preferences on Italy's stance towards Russia. In the light of this, Romano (2009), Giacomello and colleagues (2009), as well as Carbone and Coralluzzo (2011), agree that this objective was pursued by Silvio Berlusconi, in particular through his 'personal diplomacy' strategy, based on the scenario of the future integration of Russia into the EU.[4] More broadly, Diodato and Niglia (2019) write that Berlusconi attempted to put the country in the position of the 'honest broker' in order to reconnect Russia and the West, establishing friendly relations with Vladimir Putin that were maintained even when Berlusconi was not in office.[5]

Ferrari and Pejrano (2011), together with Brighi (2013), illustrate that Berlusconi's appetite for a special relationship with Putin was also pursued to bolster his image at home. This choice requested immaterial costs such as defending the Kremlin from charges of human rights violations in Chechnya, and being subjected to the accusation of being Russia's 'Trojan Horse' in Europe after the Russo-Georgian war (Carbone, 2008). Coticchia and Davidson (2019), for their part, shift the focus on Matteo Renzi, explaining that the conciliatory stance of his Cabinet with Russia was finely tuned to maximize the prime minister's chances of winning the next election. Mikhelidze (2019), finally, points to a recent reconsideration of Russia as a pillar in IFP due to a political-cultural environment open to Putin's geopolitical narratives and to the rise to power of populist and anti-EU parties such as the Five Star Movement and The League in 2018.

The third group of explanations highlight economic and/or cultural reasons. Accordingly, Giusti (2009) considers Rome's search for a strategic partnership with Moscow to be motivated by its Russian gas supply dependence and increasing economic exchanges. Similarly, Carbone (2009) as well as Brighi and Giugni (2016) maintain that all Italian governments have invested in bilateral ties with Moscow, especially in the oil and gas sector. Lastly, De Maio and Fattibene (2016) posit that the lack of historical wounds and conflicting interests in strategic areas encourage Rome to implement a two-track strategy. This approach is based on both the simultaneous maintenance of its Euro-Atlantic commitments and on the search for a partnership with Moscow in the energy market.

[4] Differently, centre-left governments have been sceptical about Russia's membership in the EU (Romano, 2009).

[5] Nonetheless, his efforts resulted ephemeral because Germany established privileged relations with the Kremlin in the years of his II-III Cabinets (2001-2006).

Among those studies particularly devoted to the strategic factor, Romano (1994) does not believe in a sincere partnership between Italy and Russia and interprets their interaction as a mutual attempt to exploit the counterpart with the aim of achieving material advantages. They can mimic an alliance to deter other powers from their intentions or to increase their perceived power, as they did for the first time with the Racconigi Bargain (1909). Later, Croci (2005) argues that Italy's interest in undermining the gradual re-balancing of NATO's centre of gravity eastward matched that of Russia at the turn of the millennium. If the former wanted to avoid the weakening of the southern flank of the alliance, the latter aimed at thwarting the gradual 'encirclement' of Western powers. Similarly, Siddi (2019) maintains that Italy's middle power approach shows its commitment in favour of a *détente* in Russia-West relations and its need for the Kremlin's cooperation in contrasting the new security challenges in the Mediterranean basin.

Finally, another group of works more explicitly represent Italy's search for a partnership with Russia as a 'constant' of its foreign policy following a multiplicity of factors. Arbatova (2011) argues that the investigated relationship is marked by a close intertwining of cultural, political and economic contacts shared since the eighteenth century. Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet regime opened up new opportunities for the development of foreign trade and fostered political cooperation on major international issues, leading to the emergence of a 'privileged partnership'. Later, Giusti (2017) confirmed the idea of a privileged relationship between the two countries rooted in history. To her, Rome's cooperative posture towards Moscow has been further relaunched in the wake of four integrated narratives, namely the need to strengthen a lucrative relationship, the Italian diplomatic goal of becoming Russia's gateway to the West, the European strategic interest in avoiding 'closing the door' to Russia, and the tendentially positive feelings of our elite and public opinion towards Moscow. De Maio and Sartori (2018), for their part, state that, after 1991, the political turnover at Palazzo Chigi did not generate significant variations in the Italian ambition to include Russia in the wider European 'family'. On the contrary, Italy continues to try involving Russia in all negotiation tables and strengthening bilateral relations, while respecting the duties connected to its Euro-Atlantic membership. Finally, Alcaro (2013) assesses that cultural infatuation, economic interests and political parentage played a fundamental role in consolidating Rome's closeness to Moscow. Interestingly, the author makes the point that short-term gains push Italy towards Russia, while long-term advantages bring Italy on side with the US on crucial issues but, unfortunately, he does not address the argument.

3. Neither too much good nor too much harm

The rhapsodic nature of the debate on Italy-Russia relations has favoured the consolidation of rhetoric about their alleged special relationship. The first analysed strand highlights that Italy's stance towards Russia was primarily based on tactical considerations that lie outside bilateral relations with the counterpart. Instead, the strand that interprets it through domestic political variables has the advantage of incorporating the preferences and policies implemented by Italian leaders towards Russia. However, both of these explanations generally focus their attention on the post-Cold War era, without exploring the possibility of the existence of abiding trends in the relations between the two powers over the decades.

Consciously or not, the other three strands of the literature treat Italy's cooperative stance towards Russia as a sort of 'constant' (or 'permanent') feature of its foreign policy. This concept refers to long-term behaviours fostered by cultural accumulation, factual experiences, or geography and absorbed by the collective imagination of a country (Santoro, 1991; Isernia and Longo, 2017).

Nevertheless, the third group overemphasizes the weight of economy upon foreign policy, without considering that trade tends to 'follow the flag', especially during periods of crisis. The fourth, for its part, does not seem to be aware that some constant Russian interests – such as having influence in the Balkans and the access to warm seas[6] (Kotkin, 2016) – can persuade it to invade that circle of 'geographic proximity' where Italy cannot afford to keep a low profile (Andreatta, 2001). Instead, the last strand idealizes the Italy-Russia relationship, defining it as 'a rare case where the definition of close traditional ties is not an exaggeration or a tribute to diplomatic etiquette' (Arbatova, 2011, 5). This interpretation misses the fact that significant tensions between the Peninsula and Russia have emerged over the centuries, since before Italian unification[7], as denounced by some historians (Petracchi, 1993; Bettanin, 2012).

In the light of this article, what appears most important is that the above-mentioned works underestimate the impact of structural factors on Rome's posture towards Moscow. Except for Romano (1994), the last three strands of explanation bring out several instances of proof of cooperation between the two powers, accepting uncritically that Italy would be constantly looking for a partnership with Russia. Hence, they do not contemplate the possibility that some recurring interests might be subverted by the unforeseen and eroded by the inexorable flux of time (Wight, 1970). Furthermore, it must be noted that most of the literature here discussed seems to be generally committed to analysing Italy's preferences and policies towards Russia within a stable international environment. This implies that the level of 'day-to-day decisions' prevails, rather than in 'moments of great crisis', when the criterion of state affairs becomes more problematic (Watson, 1959, 43-44).

Therefore, the article investigates how a structural factor such as the intervening instability of the international order influences relations between States. 'International order' means 'a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down' (Kissinger, 2014, 9). As a result, it is based on the interaction between a normative dimension and a distributive one (Clementi, 2011). 'Instability' is not understood only by a 'negative' perspective, according to which the order is stable because it is peaceful (Waltz, 1964) or 'no state believes it profitable to attempt to change the system' (Gilpin, 1981, 10). Conversely, unstable is every international order suffering from a lack of acceptance by most of the major powers (Kissinger, 1957), a low degree of predictability (Schweller 2016), and uncertain durability (Andreatta, 1997). Thus, instability pertains to 'any state of affairs that [...] would continue to change until reaching some limit or breakdown point of the system' (Deutsch and Singer, 1964, 391).

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[6] Italy has always been concerned that the Black Sea could become a 'Russian lake' and about the presence of the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean Sea (Petracchi, 1993).

[7] Such as the sizable participation of Italians in the French invasion of Russia (1812), the leading role of the Czarist Empire in the Holy Alliance as guarantor of the status quo derived from the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) or the Kingdom of Sardinia's contribution to the Crimean War (1853-1856).

By adopting the logic of power transition theory, the crisis represents the peak of growing instability, when power hierarchies and principles of legitimacy on which the order is based are openly put under strain by revisionist states (Colombo, 2014). This phase is marked by the so-called 'interaction changes' intended as 'modifications in the political, economic, and other interactions or processes among the actors in an international system' (Gilpin, 1981, 43). In the meantime, states are called upon to make crucial decisions that will shape the global outcome of the crisis, such as their future rank within the next order (Colombo, 2014). Indeed, interaction changes frequently result from states' efforts 'to accelerate or forestall more fundamental changes in an international system and may presage such changes' (Gilpin, 1981, 43).[8]

Consequently, the mounting struggle for power is very likely to constitute an influential structural constraint on states – such as Italy (Santoro, 1991) – which are generally classified as middle powers. For most of them, the presence of a stable international order brings increasing opportunities and greater freedom of choice. This strategic context enables some middle powers to take initiatives of their own in regard to the core relationship of international politics, or it allows the playing of crucial roles in regional politics. By contrast, intensified competition between major powers, combined with an increasing polarization of resources, significantly narrows the range of middle powers' actions (Holbraad, 1984).

Their limited but still substantial power has a twofold implication. On the one side, median states recurrently seek external support from a major power and tend to align with it even if their interests partially diverge. On the other hand, major powers bid for their support (Wight, 2002) and must take their behaviour into account in their key decisions (Handel, 1990). Therefore, middle-sized states tend to side with the conservative power/s or with the revisionist one/s to defend or revise the international order (Organski, 1967). Choosing allies depends on intervening variables, such as a higher compatibility of strategic interests, pre-existing alliances and ideological affinity (Valigi, 2017).

Although the article is not aimed at denying the influence exerted by domestic, tactical or strategic factors on Italian foreign policy, it proposes a structural explanation of Italy's stance towards Russia. It posits that Rome seems to be more prone to a cooperative stance towards Moscow whenever the international order proves stable and exercises looser constraints over states. Conversely, a condition of growing international instability reveals escalating tensions between the two powers. Therefore, this work pursues a twofold goal: on the one hand, to challenge the taken-for-granted assumption about Italy's constant cooperative stance towards Russia and, on the other, to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the Italian posture towards its alleged 'natural' partner (table 1).

This is neither to say that Italy and Russia have turned into absolute enemies in the past, nor that they will become so in the future. In fact, as Constantino Nigra disclosed in a letter to Pasquale Stanislao Mancini in 1881,[9] they could do 'neither too much good nor too much harm' (Chabod, 1962, 620). Rather, it serves to highlight how Rome's interests gradually diverge from those of the counterpart when international uncertainty increases.

[8] In light of the periodization of the article, the systemic changes occurred respectively in 1941-1945 and 1985-1991. Conversely, we cannot speak of a systemic change that has taken shape within the contemporary international order.

[9] At the time, they were respectively the Italian ambassador in Russia (1876-1882) and the minister of Foreign Affairs (1881-1885).

Table 1. A century of Italy-Russia relations (1920-2020)

	Italy's policies towards Russia		
Period	**Cooperation within a Stable International Environment**	**Turning points**	**Competition within an Unstable International Environment**
The Interwar Order (1920-1941)	Recognition of the Bolshevik Government (1921); Agreement on FIAT Activities in the USSR (1931); Italo-Soviet Pact (1933)	Japan and Germany Withdraw from LoN (1933); Italian Aggression against Ethiopia (1935-1936)	Military and Diplomatic Skirmishes during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939); Adhesion to the Anti-Comintern Pact (1937); Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia (1941)
The Cold War Order (1949-1985)	Joint Communiqué on Italy's POW (1959); PCI Cooperative Posture with Moscow (1949-1977); DC Cooperative Posture with Moscow To Diversify the IFP (1953-1979)	Soviet-Afghan War's Outbreak (1979); Acceleration of the US-USSR Strategic Rivalry (1981)	Participation in the Boycott of Moscow Summer Olympics (1980); Denounce of USSR's Violation of Italian Territorial Waters (1982); Missiles Installation at the Comiso Airport (1983)
The Liberal Order (1991-2020)	Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (1994); NATO-Russia Council established in Rome (2002); Memorandum on the South Stream (2007)	Increasing Competition among the US and the Revisionist Powers since the Financial Crisis (2007-2008) and World Recession (2009)	Adhesion to the Sanctions against Russia (2014); Participation to the EFP (2016); Support to the NATO Membership of Montenegro (2017) and Macedonia (2020)

4. Looking for a *modus vivendi*?

The international order of the interwar period emerged amidst the beginning of the Paris Conference in January 1919 and the entry into force of the Treaty of Versailles in January 1920. It was marked by multipolarity and the absence of clear leadership, because the United Kingdom was lacking in terms of capacity and the United States was not willing to take the lead (Taliaferro et al., 2012). Although the Trotskyist project of the 'permanent revolution' expired in 1922, the Soviet Union was relegated to the sidelines of international diplomacy until 1934, when it joined the League of Nations (LoN) as a permanent member of the Council (Carr, 1969). This choice was justified by the Kremlin's objective to consolidate 'socialism in a single country', which implied the need to be progressively integrated into the international order (Ulam, 1974). Although maintaining a moderate ideological controversy, Fascist Italy established a *modus vivendi* with the USSR.

After the *de facto* recognition of the Bolshevik government in 1921, the progressive instauration of the Fascist regime did not thwart a rapprochement between the two countries. At the outset of its pragmatic foreign policy, Italy was the third state to recognize the USSR *de jure* in 1924 (Petracchi, 1993). Later, Italy's approach towards the Soviet Union was driven by its willingness to foster economic and diplomatic

cooperation. In 1931, a credit agreement was signed between the two governments and FIAT started its industrial activities in the USSR. Moreover, both Rome and Moscow found a common interest in publicly promoting the image of a cooperative attitude between two 'anti-capitalistic' countries (Bettanin, 2012). The Italian cooperative stance towards the USSR reached its peak with the *Pact of Friendship, Neutrality and Non-aggression* in 1933 (Petracchi, 1993).[10] Its signature overlapped with Adolf Hitler's rise to power, which was viewed with concern not only by Moscow, but also by Rome due to the Nazi Party's claim to unite the German people by including the Austrian and Italy's South Tyrolean populations (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006).

Shortly thereafter, Rome contributed to the definitive destabilization of the Interwar order that was already experiencing the first Japanese and German revisionist policies (Taliaferro et al., 2012).[11] In fact, its aggression against Ethiopia in 1935-1936 constituted a violation of the principle of territorial integrity (art. 10) of the LoN Covenant (League of Nations, 1919), proved the ineffectiveness of the collective security principle (art. 16) and, more generally, undermined the legitimacy of the post-War equilibrium (Morgenthau, 1948). As a result, Italy progressively aligned with Germany. This choice was fostered by the Nazis' *Neuordnung* project, which contemplated Rome's sphere of influence over the Mediterranean basin and by the ideological affinity of the two countries (Nolte, 1988).

The occupation of Ethiopia was fiercely opposed by Moscow because it clashed with its commitment to defend the LoN after 1934, its new willingness to strengthen its relationship with London and its leadership role of the 'popular fronts' (Strang, 2013). In the meantime, it gradually backed Italy to align with Germany. Galeazzo Ciano[12] signed the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936 and joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1937. These choices clashed directly with the maintenance of a cooperative posture towards the USSR. The first proof of this political shift belongs to the Spanish civil war, when the two powers found themselves on opposing sides (Mammarella and Cacace, 2006). Moreover, their relationship did not improve in the following years. In 1937, Moscow accused Rome of the sinking of some Soviet ships plying the Mediterranean by covert submarine and air attacks and, as a response, it expelled Italian peasants from the Soviet Caucasus and closed all the Italian consulates in the USSR (Petracchi, 1993). In 1938, commercial relations plummeted to almost nothing[13] (Issraelyan and Kutakov, 1967).

Although Italy intensified its alliance with the Third Reich,[14] Mussolini perceived the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) negatively for a twofold reason. On the one hand, he considered it a threat to Italy's ambition to play the role of mediator between the two powers. On the other hand, the Italian dictator was convinced that the Pact might be extended to South Eastern Europe, undermining his ambitions in the region. Rome's reaction was not long in coming. It encouraged the Romanian government to take a firm

[10] The Italo-Soviet Pact was considered to be complementary to the Four-Power Pact, signed by Italy, UK, France and Germany in the same year (Melograni, 1965).

[11] Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and together with Germany withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933.

[12] He was the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs (1936-1943) and Mussolini's son-in-law.

[13] Italy's exports to the Soviet Union dropped from 9 million lire in 1937 to 1 million lire in 1938, and its imports from 105 to 7 million lire.

[14] The following steps were the Pact of Steel (1939) and the Tripartite Pact (1940).

line on Bessarabia, promising assistance in the event of an attack, and hosted in Venice a meeting with the Hungarian Foreign affairs minister to contemplate the future of the Balkans (Pons and Romano, 2000). After the beginning of the Winter War,[15] Palazzo Venezia fostered an anti-Soviet media campaign and supplied Helsinki with weapons (Petracchi, 1993).

The evolution of the war in Europe triggered a change in the Nazi plan towards the USSR. At the beginning of June 1941, Mussolini offered Hitler an army corps and created the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia, which joined *Operation Barbarossa* (Issraelyan and Kutakov, 1967). In his diary, Ciano (1996, 895) remembered that 'the idea of a war against Russia is in itself popular, inasmuch as the date of the fall of Bolshevism would be counted among the most important in civilization'. However, he immediately noticed that this choice lacked an 'undeniable' and 'convincing' reason, with the exception of Berlin's military calculation.

5. An Atlantic loyalty combined with friendship with the USSR?

The Cold War order gradually took shape between the wartime conferences[16] and the Soviet Union's achievement of nuclear parity in 1949 (Gaddis, 2005). As a result, it was characterized by a strong balance of power in the military dimension and, at the same time, by the United States hegemony in the economic one (Kindleberger, 1996). The US-USSR strategic competition not only marked the security dynamics at the global level, but had a pervasive impact also on the regional and local ones (Aron, 1962). Each superpower took the leadership of a given institutionalized system of alliances – the so-called 'blocs' – within which it imposed constraints on the foreign policy of the states that belonged to it (Colombo, 2010). In the light of this perimeter, Italy recognized its subordinate role to the US but, in the meantime, it exploited its strategic weight to obtain a certain degree of autonomy (Nuti, 2011). In particular, it was able to maintain a relationship with the Soviet Union, mainly in order to enhance its position with Western partners (Bagnato, 2003).

The post-War relations between Rome and Moscow were definitively normalized with Stalin's death in 1953, Italy's admission to the United Nations in 1955 and the Joint Communiqué on the issue of Italian war prisoners in 1959 (Bettanin, 2012). From then on, Italy showed political nonchalance in developing commercial relations with the USSR, as proved by the economic agreements signed by ENI and Finsider in 1960 and by the agreement reached by FIAT for the construction of a car-assembling plant in the Soviet city of Tolyatti[17] in 1965 (Bagnato 2003). Furthermore, Rome's cooperative attitude towards the Soviet Union was favoured, on the one hand, by the deeply rooted political relations of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) with Moscow and, on the other hand, by the will of Christian Democracy-led governments to diversify the IFP from that of the Western allies on non-crucial issues (Bettanin, 2012). During the *détente* (1969-1979), Italy's international posture was further inspired by both an absolute Atlantic loyalty and

[15] It was fought by the USSR and Finland between November 1939 and March 1940.

[16] Among them, the conferences of Terranova (1941), Tehran (1943), Dumbarton Oaks (1944), San Francisco (1945), Yalta (1945), Potsdam (1945).

[17] Called after the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party Palmiro Togliatti.

the quest for a friendly relationship with the USSR. The good relations between the two powers culminated with the 1969 deal between ENI and the USSR Ministry of Foreign Trade for a twenty-year Russian natural gas supply to the amount of 6 billion cubic meters per annum.[18]

However, the outbreak of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1979, together with a sharp increase in the strategic rivalry between the US and the USSR enhanced by the arrival of Ronald Reagan in 1981 and the Soviet economic decline in the eighties, undermined the bipolar order (Gaidar, 2017). This led to the beginning of a new period of intense awakening of tensions and conflicts around the world (Halliday, 1989). Italy had been deeply integrated into the structures of the Western alliance since 1949 and its loyalty to the United States was never a matter of question.

Therefore, its stance towards the USSR was not insensitive to this change. As evidence of this, Jimmy Carter's decision to boycott the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics gained the official support of the Italian government, which did not allow athletes serving in its military corps to attend the Games.[19] Furthermore, the so-called 'second' Cold War allowed Italy to resume its international prestige. From 1979, the Italian government clarified its willingness to host the new NATO missiles to the great surprise of its Allies. It took the lead very early during the negotiations for the deployment of new weapon systems aimed at contrasting the continuing military build-up of the Warsaw Pact countries. In fact, the increasing capability of the latter in nuclear systems threatened Western Europe through the deployment of the Soviet SS-20 missiles. Furthermore, this choice was confirmed by the Craxi government, which allowed the installation of the Pershing and Cruise missiles at the Comiso Military Airport in 1983, raising violent protests from the Kremlin (Nuti, 2011).

Moreover, the new posture of the Italian government towards the Kremlin became clear when a nuclear-powered Soviet submarine was detected by the Italian submarine Leonardo Da Vinci in the Gulf of Taranto in 1982. Hence, the Italian Defence Minister Lelio Lagorio called the USSR Ambassador to denounce this violation of Italian territorial waters (Lagorio, 2005). In the same year, Italy participated in the Multinational Force in Lebanon with the ITALCON mission. Therefore, a major Italian force composed of 2,300 troopers of the Folgore Brigade and Bersaglieri regiments was deployed abroad for the first time since the end of WWII (Nuti, 2011). Although this choice was not explicitly directed against the USSR, it contributed to reaffirm Italy's special relations with the US, as well as its willingness to play a more decisive role in an area in which Moscow was traditionally engaged (Lagorio, 2005).

Finally, the 'second' Cold War restricted any room for political manoeuvre also for the PCI. As secretary, Enrico Berlinguer had already brought out the creeping frictions with Moscow that existed since the Prague Spring by opting for the historic compromise with Christian Democracy in 1976 and by launching the 'Eurocommunism' project in 1977. Although the PCI sided with Moscow in the Euromissile crisis, the Soviet-Afghan war and the 1981 military coup in Poland increased once more its distance from the

[18] Moscow was granted a loan of USD 200 million for the procurement of pipelines and equipment for the gas industry from Italian companies (Gazprom, 2009).
[19] The others participated under a neutral flag with the Olympic anthem played at each ceremony.

Eastern bloc. Therefore, Berlinguer affirmed that the October Revolution had exhausted its driving force and that he felt safer being within the Atlantic Pact (Gozzini, 2017).

6. Such a 'privileged' relationship?

The liberal international order that stemmed from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR is generally considered to be unipolar and hegemonic, being based both on the power preponderance and on the leadership of the US (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999). Although downgraded in the international hierarchy of power and prestige, the Russian Federation maintained a significant role after the intervening systemic change. Its persistent strength, whose main indicators were military capacity (especially nuclear), geopolitical weight and natural resources, made it the equal of any great power other than the US and an enduring potential threat to the European continent. Therefore, it remained a top priority for Washington and for its allies (Task Force on Russia and US National Interests 2011), among which Rome was prominent. The intervening changes in the international environment, made a low-profile foreign policy style no longer sustainable (Isernia and Longo, 2017; Monteleone, 2019). Among other policies, Italy outlined the political project to act as a 'bridge' (Collina, 2008) between Russia and the West.

The post-Cold War relationship between the two countries was officially launched with the 1994 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (Camera dei Deputati, 1995). Subsequently, Italy fostered a gradual integration of Russia in the Euro-Atlantic community, as confirmed by its sponsorship of Moscow's inclusion in the Contact Group on the Balkan wars. However, it is generally agreed upon that the most important success of the Italian approach towards Russia was reached with the 2002 NATO Summit in Rome. In fact, Silvio Berlusconi played a major role in the launch of the NATO-Russia Council (NCR) (NATO, 2002) and of the so-called 'Pratica di Mare spirit'.[20] It paved the way for a new age of cooperation and for Italy's upgrade to a pivotal diplomatic role (Diodato and Niglia, 2019). In 2006, Romano Prodi pushed ahead with negotiations to build another pipeline network that would directly link Italy with Russia, bypassing the transit countries. As a result, ENI and Gazprom signed a memorandum of understanding for the construction of the South Stream pipeline in 2007 (ENI, 2007). Finally, Italy moderated US pressures for Ukraine and Georgia to be given *Membership Action Plans* at the NATO Summit in Bucharest (NATO, 2008), in order to avoid such a step increasing friction with Russia (Gallis, 2008).[21]

In the light of these events, the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the following world recession represented a watershed for the shift of the liberal order towards instability (Colombo, 2014), as confirmed by the growing competition between its main guarantor, the United States, with some revisionist powers, including Russia (White House, 2017). In the wake of this event, Rome's posture towards Moscow did not suddenly turn into a competitive one. Mario Monti renewed support for the South Stream project and signed new economic agreements during his visit to Moscow in 2012 (Russian Government,

[20] The summit was held in the Pratica di Mare Air Base.

[21] Russia harshly denounced the dangers of the US-led international order at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, while the US began negotiating the deployment of a missile defence shield in Poland and Czech Republic and recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence (Natalizia and Valigi, 2020).

2012). Similarly, Enrico Letta was the sole EU leader to participate in the opening of the Russian Winter Olympic Games in Sochi when the 2014 Ukrainian revolution was ongoing (Letta, 2014). However, Italy's membership both in NATO and in the EU and the definitive authoritarian turn of the Russian regime since 2012 (Freedom House, 2013) have limited Rome's room for maneuver with Moscow.

As a result, Italy accepted the launch of the European Monitoring Mission in Georgia after the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, supported the launch of the European Eastern Partnership in 2009, and adhered to almost all of the EU initiatives under the project (Mikhelidze, 2017).[22] Furthermore, Matteo Renzi's cabinet did not recognize the legitimacy of Crimea's status referendum, but condemned Russia for the annexation of the Ukrainian region and agreed on suspending its participation in the G8 and on the EU sanctions against it (Coticchia and Davidson, 2019).

All these policies were implemented to contrast the Kremlin's growing aggressiveness and to thwart the definitive restoration of its influence over its 'near abroad' (Stefanachi, 2018). Afterwards, Rome's choices pointed to its firm alignment to the Western field, the secondary nature of its relationship with the supposed 'privileged' partner and the decline of the 'bridge approach'.

In the light of Russia's counter-sanctions, which negatively affected the Italian exportations of agri-foods, machinery and mechanical equipment (Giumelli, 2018; Morini, 2020), as well as its decision to abandon the South Stream project,[23] differently from the Nord Stream 2 project with Germany, Rome's stance towards Moscow has undergone a gradual structural revision including in the energy sector. As a result, ENI has improved its diversification strategy aimed at making Italy more independent from the Russian gas supply. In particular, its efforts turned to the exploration of offshore reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean area, where it made a world class supergiant gas discovery at its Zohr Prospect in the deep waters of Egypt in 2015 (ENI, 2015).

In the meantime, Rome's interests progressively diverged from those of Moscow in an increasing number of strategic issues. In the Balkans, Italy was among the main sponsors of growing EU cooperation with Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, in order to strengthen its traditional influence in the Adriatic-Ionian region (MAECI, 2017; 2018). In the same vein, it fostered the recent NATO membership of Montenegro and North Macedonia.[24] Russia, for its part, silently opposed the first integration not only to avoid losing its economic influence in the region, but also because it considers this process as parallel to that of acceding to NATO (IISS, 2019). Moreover, Italy confirmed its commitment to securing NATO's eastern flank, by sending 140 soldiers to Latvia. The Alliance's *Enhanced Forward Presence* in Poland and the Baltics was promptly accused by the Kremlin of constructing 'new lines of division in Europe, instead of deep, solid relations as good neighbours' (De Feudis, 2016). Finally, the most important case of emerging contrasts between the two countries concerns Libya. Here, Rome has fiercely supported the internationally recognized government of Tripoli and the 'one Libya' solution, just as it has tried to maintain a central role in the crisis by countering the interference of actors from outside the central Mediterranean, such as Russia

[22] Among them, the visa liberalization for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

[23] However, the Kremlin explored a new southern route to Europe via Turkey (Reed and Kanter, 2014).

[24] Respectively obtained in 2017 and 2020.

and Turkey (MAECI, 2019). By contrast, Moscow openly supports Tobruk, it has favoured the entry of the Russian mercenaries in the Libyan theatre of crisis alongside the warlord Khalifa Haftar, and it is, *de facto*, backing the option of splitting the country, therefore guaranteeing the strengthening of its position in the Mediterranean basin (Biagini, 2020).

7. Conclusions

The main goal of this article was to challenge a taken-for-granted belief about the IFP, such as Rome's alleged constant cooperative posture towards Moscow. Therefore, it investigates a century of relations between these powers, providing both theoretical and empirical insights.

The study of the Italian stance towards Russia underlines the weight of the structural factor on states' foreign policy in the long term. It proves that a certain kind of cooperation can take place between states belonging to different systems of alliance, distinguished by some conflicting strategic interests or marked by deep ideological differences in the presence of international stability. By contrast, it shows that the occurrence of a gradual shift in the global distribution of power and prestige and the consequential increase in international competition usually reverses this tide.

Furthermore, the investigation of the IFP in 1936-1941, 1979-1985 and 2008-2020 appears useful also to improve IR knowledge of middle powers' behaviour. It confirms their inclination, as in the case of Italy, to align with a major ally, such as the Third Reich or the US, in the face of a global crisis and to assume a competitive posture against the states – the USSR or the Russian Federation – belonging to the opposite side. At the same time, the diachronic comparison confirms that, when there is stable international order, they seemed to be more prone to cooperate with the counterpart.

The in-depth analysis shows that during the first part of the Interwar period, Italy was among the first states to recognize the Soviet government and to establish friendly relations with it, culminating in the Italo-Soviet Pact. Similarly, Rome developed economic relations with Moscow during the fifties and the sixties, reaching a peak with the 1969 deal for the shipment of Soviet gas to Italy. Finally, it presented itself as a 'bridge' between the West and the Russian Federation in the post-Cold War, playing a fundamental role in the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council.

Conversely, the diachronic comparison proves that instability of the international order calls into question the common belief about Italy's constant cooperative attitude towards Russia. After 1936, Rome's gradual alignment with Berlin fostered a competitive turn. It was not surprising that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact further worsened this shift because it posed a threat to its role as mediator and its interests in the Balkans. Similarly, at the turn of the eighties, Italy exploited the evolution of the international scenario to relaunch its prestige, particularly by playing a major role in the 'Euromissile crisis'. Finally, an increasing number of Rome's policies have clashed with Moscow's interests during the last decade. In particular, Palazzo Chigi aligned itself with Western powers regarding the 2014 sanctions, favoured the integration of the Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic security system and countered the Russian proxy in the Libyan theatre of crisis.

To conclude, we are aware of not having included in the present study another interesting case, namely that of the declining phase of European equilibrium before the

Great War. We opted for this solution because at the end of the crisis Rome entered the conflict on the same side as Petrograd, and this choice could be partially distortive. In a nutshell, it must be remembered that the secret Racconigi Bargain was immediately tempered by a new Austro-Italian agreement on the interpretation of article 7 of the Triple Alliance, that Rome's interest was thwarting both the Austrian and the Russian influence in the Balkans at the beginning of the century and, finally, that its vital interest in Fiume and Dalmatia was considered unacceptable by the then Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Sazonov (Vigezzi, 1966; Biagini, 1983).

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Italy-China relations and the Belt and Road Initiative. The need for a long-term vision

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Abstract

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit in March 2019, Italy and China signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As Italy was the first G7 country to formally join the BRI, the Memorandum caused alarm in the United States and Europe. The paper explains why Italy and China, apparently so distant from both a political and an economic point of view, opted for cooperation under the BRI. It concludes that, in order to seize the opportunities provided by the BRI and reduce the associated risks, Italy needs a long-term vision for the future of its relations with China, and a more structured and permanent public debate on its China policy.

1. Introduction

On 23 March 2019, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Rome, Italy and China signed the *Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative* (Governo della Repubblica italiana e Governo della Repubblica popolare cinese 2019). The document aimed to promote bilateral cooperation in six areas: (1) policy dialogue; (2) transport, logistics and infrastructure; (3) unimpeded trade and investment; (4) financial cooperation; (5) people-to-people connectivity and (6) green development cooperation. Although legally non-binding (as expressly stated in the text), the Memorandum was politically the most significant among the several documents signed during President Xi's visit to Italy. With the Memorandum, Italy became the first G7 country to formally join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the pillar of China's increasingly ambitious foreign policy under its current leadership. Also, the timing of the signature was particularly sensitive, as it overlapped with a European Council that was to discuss a common approach to China by the European Union (EU) (Casarini 2019).

For these reasons, the decision to sign the Memorandum alarmed Italy's partners. In Washington, National Security Council spokesman Garrett Marquis cautioned on 9 March that the BRI is a Chinese 'infrastructure vanity project', while the Council's official account on Twitter warned that 'Italy is a major global economy and a great investment destination. Endorsing BRI lends legitimacy to China's predatory approach to investment and will bring no benefits to the Italian people' (Giuffrida 2019; US National Security Council 2019). In Strasbourg, EU Commission Vice President Jyrki Katainen issued a reminder on 12 March that BRI loans are no 'free lunches' and warned

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that 'all the member states, and also Belt and Road operators, must comply with our regulations and rules' (von der Burchard 2019). The comments were made at the presentation of the Joint Communication on EU-China relations issued by the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2019), which for the first time presented Beijing not just as a 'cooperation' and 'negotiating partner', but also as an 'economic competitor' and a 'strategic rival'.

For both political and economic reasons, Italy and China could appear to be unlikely partners under the BRI. First, as a NATO, EU and G7 member, Italy is considered as unequivocally located within the US-centred network of Western alliances. Rome's official support for Beijing's foreign policy initiative seemed, then, incoherent with Italy's traditional foreign policy alignments, especially at a time when US-China relations were rapidly deteriorating and Washington was mobilizing an increasingly assertive rhetoric against the BRI as a 'debt trap' reportedly used by Beijing to secure strategic advantages (Bolton 2018; Pence 2018; Brautigam 2019). Second, since the 1990s and even more so after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, Italy has been exposed to fierce Chinese competition in the manufacturing sector. Compared to other European countries, Italy has been more exposed to such competition due to the significant similarities in the structure of the two economies, as both Italy and China rely heavily on manufacturing and specialize in the same industrial sectors (Prodi 2014; Andornino 2015a). From an economic point of view, the two countries seemed, then, destined to compete in third markets rather than to cooperate under the BRI.

The aim of this article is to explain why Italy and China, apparently so distant from both a political and an economic point of view, opted for cooperation under the BRI and signed the ad hoc Memorandum in 2019. In order to do this, we will focus on the considerations that, in each of the two countries, led to the identification of the other as a key partner and the BRI as a fruitful platform for cooperation. The article is organized in four sections. The first introduces the BRI as part of China's foreign policy and analyses some aspects of the initiative that are particularly significant for Italy-China relations. The second and third sections investigate, respectively, Chinese views of Italy's role in the BRI and Italy's reactions to the Chinese initiative. Finally, the conclusions identify the lack of a long-term vision as the main challenge that Italy needs to address if it wants to seize the opportunities presented by the BRI, while reducing the associated risks.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative

As China's first foreign policy initiative with global ambitions, the BRI is subject to intense scrutiny by policy analysts and scholars. In the West, the debate on the BRI has increasingly focused on its implications for the US-led liberal international order. On the one hand, some see the BRI as an indicator of China's changing attitude towards the existing international order, with a shift from a reformist to a revisionist agenda (for example Nicolas 2016; Rolland 2017; Brunnermeier et al. 2018; Nordin and Weissmann 2018). On the other hand, others place the BRI within the context of China's traditional reformist agenda and see it as a more proactive attempt by Beijing to reform the liberal international order from inside, in line with China's long-term efforts to 'change the world from second place' (Breslin 2016; see also Leverett and Wu 2016; Jones 2020). While reviewing the rapidly expanding corpus of literature on the BRI is beyond the scope

of this article, this section will focus on four aspects of the BRI that are particularly relevant for Italy-China relations.

The first aspect is the timing of the initiative and its progress. The land and maritime components of the project were announced by Xi in September and October 2013, in two carefully choreographed speeches at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University and the Indonesian Parliament respectively (Xi 2013a, 2013b). In March 2015, the project was then detailed in the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce. Then presented as an 'initiative' (*changyi*, 倡议), the project identified five 'cooperation priorities': policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people ties (Guojia Fazhan Gaige Weiyuanhui et al. 2015). Two years later, in May 2017, the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was convened in Beijing and concluded with a final Joint Communiqué issued by 29 heads of state and government (Waijiao Bu 2019). In October the same year, the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced a reference to the BRI in the General Programme of the party Constitution (Xinhua She 2017). In April 2019, the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was convened in Beijing, with the Leaders Roundtable attended this time by 37 heads of state and government (Waijiao Bu 2019).

The second aspect that is worth noting here is that the BRI is conceived in Beijing not just as a blueprint for economic cooperation, but as a political initiative with long-term strategic goals. In fact, the BRI was originally conceived as China's strategic response to the increasingly complicated international situation faced by the country in 2010-11, in the context of the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia'. The intuition behind the BRI is attributed to influential IR scholar Wang Jisi, who in 2012 called for a comprehensive readjustment of China's strategy: "in a situation where the tectonic plates of the world's geoeconomy and geopolitics are shifting, there is a need for new reflections on a geostrategic 'rebalancing' [*diyuan zhanlüe 'zai pingheng'*, 地缘战略'再平衡'] that is comprehensive and combines land and sea power" (Wang 2012). In proposing this, Wang was building on an academic debate that had been going on in China since the 1990s, with scholars discussing 'sea power' (*haiquan*, 海权) and 'land power' (*luquan*, 陆权) as two alternative paths for China's rise (Dossi 2018). Amid growing competition with the US in maritime East Asia, Wang recommended a 'March West' (*Xi Jin*, 西进) strategy integrating the two paths and reorienting China's rise toward Eurasia. This proposal provided the intellectual background for the BRI, which was then formulated by the Chinese foreign policy decision-makers as a quintessentially geopolitical initiative; that is, an initiative aimed at reshaping international space based on the preferences of a rising China. This is particularly clear in the 2015 *Vision and Actions*, which not only enumerates the principles, goals and priorities of the initiative, but also illustrates China's perspective on the reorganization of the Eurasian space in the twenty-first century. As such, the BRI is much more than an economic cooperation project: it is a 'space and order shaping' endeavour that aims to reshape international order by reshaping international space (Caffarena and Gabusi 2019).

The third aspect is the flexible and pragmatic nature of the BRI. Like other Chinese policy initiatives, the BRI does not work as a detailed plan, but rather as a general

framework that leaves considerable room for manoeuvre in its implementation. From this point of view, the BRI fits perfectly into the analytical framework of 'fragmented authoritarianism', the theoretical model that explains policy outcomes in China as the result of the interactions between decisions made at the Centre and the 'self-interested, short-term and parochial calculations' of the several institutional actors involved in the implementation process (Mertha and Brødsgaard 2017, p. 3; for the classic formulation see Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988, pp. 135-168). In the case of the BRI, while the Centre provides overall directives, provincial and local authorities, as well as state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies, are encouraged to contribute by developing their own initiatives within the broader BRI framework. Each of the several actors involved in implementation pushes for its own priorities, often by reframing its pre-existing projects so that they conform to the new BRI discourse. While the initiative is strategic in its ambitions, the picture is thus much less clear when we move from the level of the general design to the level of implementation, so that it is often difficult to say whether individual BRI projects respond to the strategic directives from the Centre or to the relatively uncoordinated agendas of the several actors involved. In turn, this leads to considerable flexibility in the boundaries of the initiative, with bottom-up pressures resulting in adjustments and expansions.

Finally, a fourth element that should be taken into account is that, five years after the publication of *Vision and Actions*, the BRI seems to be currently under review in Beijing. According to Chinese scholars (author's interviews, Beijing, November and December 2019), several BRI projects face resistance from local populations due to the 'free riding' attitude of China's partners, who value the BRI as a source of investment but are not willing to mobilize their political resources in support of the projects. Also, interviewed scholars complained that many BRI projects are promoted by the Chinese government out of political considerations and without adequate assessment of their profitability, potentially resulting in huge losses for the Chinese investors, especially in the cases of projects in politically unstable countries. Finally, interviewed scholars were aware that the strategic ambitions of the initiative resulted in a backlash from the United States, eventually contributing to the deterioration of China-US bilateral relations and complicating the external environment of China's foreign policy in East Asia and beyond. According to the interviewed scholars, these concerns have now triggered a review process of the BRI, whose implementation is going to become less 'impressionistic' and more focused on details, i.e. more prudent and centred on China's own interests.

3. Chinese views of Italy in the BRI

Italy's place in the BRI is related to the peculiar position that Beijing awards to the country as a bridge between two regional contexts of particular significance for China's interests: Europe and the Mediterranean region. Beijing sees Italy first and foremost as a European country and, more specifically, as a member of the EU: its Italy policy is then part of the broader policy toward the EU and Europe as a whole. From an economic point of view, Brussels is a key interlocutor for Beijing, as the EU remains China's largest trading partner (General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China 2020). From a political point of view, however, China's attitude toward the EU has changed significantly over the past two decades. In the 1990s and 2000s, Beijing had great expectations about the role

of the EU in the context of a perceived 'multipolarization' of the international system (Casarini 2009, pp. 82-86). Since the Eurozone crisis, however, Beijing's confidence in the EU as a political interlocutor has declined dramatically, leading to a shift in its approach to the continent: rather than investing in political relations with the EU, Beijing has continued to look at the EU as an economic partner, but has increasingly looked either at individual European states (especially the so-called 'big three': France, Germany and the United Kingdom) or at regional subgroupings for the development of political ties (Casarini 2015; Feng and Huang 2015). Most notably, Beijing has consolidated its relations with Central and Eastern Europe through the 16+1 framework (17+1 since 2019, following the inclusion of Greece), which not coincidentally involves both members and non-members of the EU (Szczudlik-Tatar 2015; Vangeli 2017). As the case of the 17+1 framework shows, Beijing is increasingly leveraging on divisions between European states to advance its agenda for China-Europe relations.

As a 'Southern European' (*Nan Ou*, 南欧) country, Italy is also part of the Mediterranean region, conceived in Beijing as the intersection between Southern Europe, North Africa (*Bei Fei*, 北非) and West Asia (*Xi Ya*, 西亚) (Andornino 2015c; Fardella 2014b; 2015; 2018; Fardella and Ghiselli 2017). Traditionally far from China's sphere of interests, the Mediterranean region has gained importance for Beijing since the beginning of the new century. As shown by ChinaMED data, Chinese imports from and exports to North Africa and the Middle East have increased since 2001. In the same period, Chinese investments in the two regions have also grown, together with the number of Chinese contract workers deployed there (ChinaMED 2020). The Mediterranean Sea has become increasingly busy as both a destination and a transit for shipping from and to China (Deandreis 2016; Panaro and Ferrara 2018). This is reflected in Chinese investments in port infrastructures in the region, with the acquisition of a majority stake in the Piraeus port authority by COSCO Shipping in 2016 as well as significant Chinese investments in other ports on the southern shores of the Mediterranean (Luo 2018). Since 2011, political instability in North Africa and the Middle East has created concerns regarding the security of Chinese investments and workers in the region. In early 2011 China had to evacuate over 35,000 Chinese nationals from Libya, with a second evacuation operation being organized in 2015 from Yemen (Dossi 2015; Ghiselli 2018). For Beijing, the region thus gained importance also from the point of view of security, resulting in the establishment of China's first military base abroad in Djibouti in summer 2017 (Ghiselli 2017).

In their interactions with Italian counterparts, Chinese officials tend to emphasize the role that Italy plays in these two regions and the tradition of friendly relations between the Chinese and Italian peoples dating back to ancient times. As noted by the former ambassador to the People's Republic of China (PRC) Alberto Bradanini (2018), however, such positive comments are largely rhetorical and do not reflect the real perception that Chinese officials have of Italy and its role in Europe and the Mediterranean region. A more effective way of investigating Chinese perceptions of Italy is, then, to look at what Chinese scholars write about Italy and what courses of action they recommend to the Chinese decision-makers. A particularly interesting perspective is the one provided by scholars who work at government-affiliated research institutions and write for their official journals. In this respect, a first set of indications regarding the role assigned to Italy can be inferred from purely bibliometric data. If we consider, for example,

Dangdai Shijie (当代世界, *Contemporary World*), the journal of the International Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee, only 38 articles whose title includes the word 'Italy' (*Yidali*, 意大利) have been published since 1994, compared to the 63, 77 and 99 whose titles include the words 'England' (*Yingguo*, 英国), 'France' (*Faguo*, 法国) and 'Germany' (*Deguo*, 德国) respectively.

The perception of Italy that emerges from the limited number of articles that have been published in this and other journals is that of a country in an increasingly difficult position from both an economic and a political point of view. Chinese analysts emphasize the negative impact of the economic and financial crisis on Italy's political position in the EU (Cao 2016; Dong 2018; Shen 2017; Sun 2018; Sun 2019b; Zhong 2016). A second issue that is mentioned as a source of weakness is the migrant crisis, which is viewed at least partly as the result of a foreign policy failure, as Italy did not manage to prevent Western military intervention in Libya (Zhong 2016). Against this complicated background, Chinese analysts expressed optimistic views when Matteo Renzi's government was formed in 2014. The discontinuity that Renzi's leadership seemed to introduce in Italian domestic politics and his more vocal approach to foreign policy were seen as potentially contributing to an Italian comeback in the EU (Sun 2017; Zhong 2016). As recalled by Bradanini (2018), these positive attitudes toward the new government were common among Chinese officials, and they were reflected in the considerable attention that Renzi's visit to Beijing in June 2014 received in the Chinese media (Dossi 2014). Yet these expectations were eventually disappointed when Renzi resigned after defeat in the 2016 constitutional referendum, whose results came as a shock to Chinese analysts (Cao and Li 2017; Sun 2017).

Since the 2016 referendum, Chinese analysts have mostly looked at Italian politics through the lenses of 'populism' (*mincuizhuyi*, 民粹主义) (Cao 2018; Dong 2018; Li 2018; Shen 2017; Wang 2017). The 2018 general election was seen as the triumph of 'anti-system and extremist parties' (*fan jianzhi zhengdang he jiduan zhengdang*, 反建制政党和极端政党) (Sun 2018, p. 42; see also Dong 2018). According to Sun Yanhong, associate researcher at the Institute of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and secretary of the Chinese Association of Italian Studies, the rise of the Five Star Movement and of the League was due to four main reasons: the persisting economic difficulties of the country, the ongoing migrant crisis, the growing Euroscepticism of Italian public opinion, and the innovative use of social media by the two parties. The performance of the Conte I government was assessed negatively by Sun, as the new government failed to achieve its two main goals in the EU, i.e. the end of austerity and a shift in migration policies (Sun 2019a). These negative views of the Italian political situation were amplified by the 2019 government crisis, seen in China as a further demonstration of the traditional political instability of the country (Cao 2019). Instability reportedly continues to characterize Italian politics under the Conte II government formed in September 2019, as the new majority is seen as extremely weak and the League is expected to make a comeback at the next general elections if not earlier (ibid.; Sun 2019d).

Despite this grim picture of Italy's political and economic conditions, Chinese analysts tend to be more positive when it comes to Italy's place in the BRI. On the one hand, Rome has much to gain from its participation in the BRI. First, Italy enjoys the

'geographic advantage' (*diyuan youshi*, 地缘优势) of its location at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, where it plays the role of a natural 'hub connecting mainland Europe, North Africa and West Asia' (Zhao and Zhang 2019, p. 27; see also Liu 2018). As such, Italy is ideally located to become the Western terminal of the BRI: despite China's investments in the Piraeus port, the fact that the ports of Northern Italy are much closer to continental Europe makes them a natural destination for Chinese investments in infrastructures under the BRI (Sun 2019b; 2019c). Second, Italy has a sizeable economic presence in Central and Eastern Europe, North Africa and Central Asia, regions where China has growing interests too. This creates the conditions for fruitful cooperation in third countries: for example, Italian banks Unicredit and Intesa Sanpaolo are expected to be involved in the financing of Chinese infrastructure projects in the region (Sun 2019b). On the other hand, Italy has much to offer to the BRI and to Chinese companies willing to invest in the country. As the second manufacturing power in the EU and an 'industrial and technological power' (ibid.), Italy is an interesting destination for Chinese investments. At the same time, due to its difficult economic situation, the huge size of its public debt, and the challenges posed to its exports by US protectionist policies, Italy is better disposed toward Chinese investments than other EU countries. As noted by Zhao Xianjin and Zhang Xiaoting (2019) from Shanghai University, foreign investors are not exposed to any specific restrictions, and benefit from the same treatment as local companies. From this point of view, what makes Italy particularly attractive for China in the context of the BRI is its peculiar mix of strengths and weaknesses. As a developed country, Italy has an industrial base and technological know-how that most of China's BRI partners do not possess; as a country in endemic economic crisis, on the other hand, Italy is better disposed toward Chinese investments than the European 'big three'.

At the same time, however, Zhao and Zhang also warn of the 'risks' (*fengxian*, 风险) that Chinese investors face in Italy. First, one of the main problems is limited access to credit by financial institutions: Chinese companies investing in Italy need to know that they will have to rely on their own capitals. Second, Italy's labour law creates significant restrictions in the management of personnel: 'particularly in some areas, Italian labour policies offer excessive protection [*guodu de baohu*, 过度的保护] [sic] to workers' (ibid., p. 28). Third, as an EU member state, Italy is exposed to the changing climate toward Chinese investments that is now occurring at the European level, with the introduction of more stringent mechanisms to screen foreign investments in strategic areas. Fourth, rather than being complementary, the Chinese and Italian economies are largely in competition: Chinese companies investing in the country or exporting there should, then, expect fierce resistance from Italian companies and public opinion as a whole. Based on these risks, Zhao and Zhang make specific recommendations to Chinese companies and authorities. First, China should strengthen its 'top-level planning' and consolidate 'guidance and oversight' over Chinese companies, providing them with adequate support in risk assessment and compensation policies. Second, Chinese companies should diversify their 'mode of investment' in Italy, complementing mergers and acquisitions with the establishment of joint ventures, and they should identify innovative sources of financing. Finally, Chinese investors should learn more about the local context, manage appropriately cultural differences, labour disputes and environmental issues, and invest in 'social responsibility' (*shehui zeren*, 社会责任).

4. Italian views of China and the BRI

For Italy, China has never been a foreign policy priority. As argued by Carlo M. Santoro (1991) at the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy of Italy as a 'middle power' is traditionally focused on the regional system composed of the Euro-Atlantic, Balkan, Middle Eastern and North African subsystems. Three decades later, this regional focus continues to characterise Italy's foreign policy, although in a context that has been altered dramatically by the crisis of the EU and by instability in the Middle East and North Africa (Mammarella and Cacace 2013, pp. 290-316; Diodato and Niglia 2019; Isernia and Longo, eds. 2019; for a critique of the 'middle power' model, see Romero 2016). While certainly not a priority, however, China has been the recurrent target of Italian ambitions, driven by a mix of economic and political motivations. On the one hand, sectors of the business community have been attracted by the economic opportunities offered by China, although such attraction has often been based on a rather limited understanding of the real conditions of the Chinese market. On the other hand, the Italian government has periodically looked at its China policy as a tool to demonstrate Italy's international status. At different stages of Italian history, relations with China thus assumed a symbolic meaning that went beyond the bilateral relationship in itself (Samarani and De Giorgi 2011, pp. 18-32; Samarani 2008, pp. 118-19; Samarani 2014; Fardella 2014a; Olla Brundu 2004).

While this traditional mix of economic and political elements persists, since the 1990s the economic rise of China has introduced a major discontinuity by dramatically altering the structure of bilateral relations. Exposed to fierce competition in the manufacturing sector, Italy now runs a large deficit in its trade with China, while Italian companies compete with Chinese ones in third markets (Prodi 2014; Andornino 2015a). In addition, since the Euro crisis, Italy has looked to China as a source of capital for its economy, in the context of high levels of public debt and a reduction in credit supply (Andornino 2014). In Italy's calculations, China is thus no longer just a 'land of opportunity', but also a manufacturing competitor and a potential source of investments: accordingly, reducing the trade deficit and attracting Chinese investments have become key goals of Italy's China policy.

It is in this context that Italy has increasingly focused on economic cooperation as a key dimension of the 'comprehensive strategic partnership' (*partenariato strategico globale*; *quanmian zhanlüe huoban guanxi*, 全面战略伙伴关系) established with China in 2004. In June 2014, during Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's visit to Beijing, the two sides signed the *2014-2016 Action Plan for Economic Cooperation between Italy and China* and a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in five major areas: environmental protection and energy, agricultural products and processing, food security, urbanization, medicine and health, and aviation (Andornino 2015b). Between 2014 and 2015, important Chinese investments in Italy were finalized. In 2014, Chinese SOEs Shanghai Electric and State Grid Corporation of China acquired respectively a 40 percent stake in Ansaldo Energia and a 35 percent stake in CDP Reti, which in turn manages holdings in Snam (construction and integrated management of natural gas infrastructure) and Terna (electricity transmission grid) (Andornino 2015b; 2016). The People's Bank of China bought stakes in eight major Italian companies (ENEL, ENI, Prysmian, FCA, Telecom Italia, Generali, Mediobanca, Saipem), while Chinese SOE ChemChina acquired

Pirelli, with the involvement of the Silk Road Fund, the investment vehicle launched by the Chinese government in December 2014 to support BRI projects (Fatiguso 2015).

Coherently with this focus on economic cooperation, Italy showed interest in the BRI and China's related initiatives at a rather early stage. The goal was to rebalance bilateral trade by obtaining greater access to the Chinese market, while at the same time attracting Chinese investments that would help Italy's economic recovery. In 2015, Italy was one of seventeen EU member states to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member (Gabusi 2019). In the following years, Italy expressed its high-level support for the BRI during bilateral meetings, as stated in the Joint Communiqués of the seventh and eighth meetings of the Italy-China Governmental Committee in 2016 and 2017 respectively (Ministro degli Affari esteri e della Cooperazione internazionale della Repubblica italiana e Ministro degli Affari esteri della Repubblica popolare cinese 2016, 2017). Also, the BRI figured prominently in two speeches delivered by Italian President Sergio Mattarella (2017a, 2017b) during his visit to China in February 2017. In particular, in his *lectio magistralis* at Fudan University, Mattarella referred to the BRI as a 'new, important direction in relations between our continents' and confirmed that Italy would 'participate with conviction in this ambitious project' (Mattarella 2017b). In May 2017, Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, the only head of government from a G7 country to do so (Casarini 2019).

Begun in 2014-15 under the centre-left governments, Italy's march toward the BRI accelerated dramatically under the 'yellow-green' Conte I government formed in June 2018. Interactions with China were immediately intensified, most notably with separate visits to China by Minister of Economy and Finance Giovanni Tria and Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Economic Development Giuseppe Geraci in the summer of 2018 and then by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Development Luigi Di Maio in September and again in November (Santevecchi 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). In January 2019, at the ninth meeting of the Italy-China Governmental Committee, Foreign Ministers Enzo Moavero Milanesi and Wang Yi declared the two countries' "interest in joint collaborations within the 'Belt and Road' Initiative" and announced the imminent visit to Italy by Chinese President Xi Jinping (Ministro degli Affari esteri e della Cooperazione internazionale della Repubblica italiana e Ministro degli Affari esteri della Repubblica popolare cinese 2019).

When it was revealed that the agenda of Xi's visit included the signing ceremony of a BRI Memorandum, Italy's China policy became the subject of heated debate. The domestic context was provided by the tense political situation of spring 2019, with endemic conflict between majority and opposition, as well as growing contradictions within the majority itself. The prospected Memorandum opened a new front in this unstable political situation, with a foreign policy debate apparently centred on two alternative strategies: a new pro-China strategy advanced by the government versus the traditional strategy centred on Italy's alignment with the US and the EU. Negative comments from Washington and Brussels, amplified by the Italian mainstream media, further reinforced the polarized nature of the debate. Under the surface, however, the situation was far more complicated. On the one hand, the decision to sign the Memorandum by the Conte I government was not the manifestation of a comprehensive strategy, but rather

the outcome of a contingent mix of factors. On the other hand, those who contested the Memorandum from the opposition camp did so for different reasons and with different views of Italy's relations with China.

Two main factors contributed to the Conte I government's decision to sign the Memorandum: uncoordinated initiatives by some members of the government and infighting in a coalition with highly heterogeneous views of foreign policy. First, the government included members with considerable experience and connections in China: Minister Tria, who had studied in China in the late 1970s, and Undersecretary Geraci, who had been teaching in Chinese universities for a decade. Geraci, in particular, was extremely vocal in supporting closer relations with China and Italy's involvement in the BRI. Just before his appointment, he had written a controversial piece on Italy-China relations for the blog of Five Star Movement leader Beppe Grillo, where China was uncritically presented as a model for Italy in several fields (including the management of public security) (Geraci 2018). Once in power, Geraci assumed a highly visible role in Italy's China policy, for example by establishing at the Ministry of Economic Development a working group of China experts tasked with promoting relations with China – the so-called 'Task Force Cina'.

Second, some sectors of the majority – especially in the Five Star Movement – identified closer relations with China as crucial for a more proactive foreign policy, as opposed to the alleged subservience of the centre-left governments to the US, the EU institutions, Germany and France. The Memorandum thus assumed a symbolic value that went far beyond Italy-China relations. This can be seen in the arguments presented by the Five Star Movement in support of the Memorandum in the parliamentary debates. The MP Santi Cappellani, for example, cautioned against 'submission [*servilismo*] to the North Atlantic Treaty allies' and expressed his 'admiration' for a government that 'finally dares to sign a Memorandum in the interest of the country and its citizens, thus rediscovering the geopolitical tradition that transformed Italy into the great nation that it used to be and that we should return to being' (Camera dei Deputati 2019, p. 37).

While advocated by some sectors of the majority, however, closer relations with China were resisted by others, most notably in the League, as reflected once again in the parliamentary debates. Although never contesting the Memorandum in itself, League Members of Parliament insisted on Italy's traditional alliances and called for reciprocity in trade and investment under the BRI. MP Giulio Centemero, for example, declared that 'we are and we will always be loyal to our alliance with the United States as a pillar [of Italy's foreign policy]' and called for greater scrutiny of the BRI's implications for Italy's infrastructures, communications and networks as 'sectors that impact on national security' (Camera dei Deputati 2019, p. 21). Similarly, Senator Paolo Formentini called on Minister Moavero Milanesi to protect communications infrastructures and networks as 'strategic national interests that are not on sale': 'we say yes to trade, but trade stops when a national interest is at stake – a national interest that our historical ally, the United States, urged us to protect' (Senato della Repubblica 2019).

In the opposition camp, the Memorandum was criticised by most political forces (with the notable exception of the small Liberi e Uguali party) but for different reasons. On the one hand, centre-right party Forza Italia and right-wing party Fratelli d'Italia were opposed not just to the Memorandum, but to the BRI as a whole as a major economic

and political threat. According to Forza Italia MP Deborah Bergamini, the government was 'closing ports to migrants but opening our country to an invasion of Chinese products' (Camera dei Deputati 2019, p. 51) and threatening Italy's membership of the 'Western bloc' by transforming the country from 'NATO's aircraft carrier' into a 'dock for the biggest infrastructure tentacle that the world has even known' (ibid., pp. 18, 51). On the other hand, the Democratic Party – despite its rhetoric against the Memorandum – did not criticise the BRI as such but rather the Memorandum as a tool, which it considered to be a unilateral political concession made by the Conte I government to China. According to MP Ivan Scalfarotto, who had served as Undersecretary at the Ministry of Economic Development in the Renzi and Gentiloni governments, the Memorandum was 'the achievement of a praiseworthy goal in the worst possible way', because 'agreements with China and work with China have to be done, but without selling out [the country]' (ibid., pp. 54-55).

In conclusion, the Conte I government's decision to sign the Memorandum was not the manifestation of a new comprehensive strategy; similarly, the 'great debate' on China triggered by the Memorandum was not a truly strategic debate centred on clearly defined alternative options. The whole issue of the Memorandum was rather a by-product of Italy's contingent domestic political situation in spring 2019. On the one hand, substantial divergences within the 'yellow-green' majority left room for uncoordinated foreign policy initiatives; on the other hand, endemic conflict between the majority and the centre-left opposition contributed to a highly polarized debate that failed to recognize long-term elements of continuity in Italy's China policy. By the end of summer 2019, however, the domestic political context had changed dramatically, with the collapse of the Conte I government and the establishment of a new Conte cabinet, whose majority also included the Democratic Party that had vehemently opposed the Memorandum. Just a few months after the signing ceremony, the political conditions that had led to the Memorandum had largely disappeared.

5. Conclusions. The need for a long-term vision

For both political and economic reasons, Italy and China might seem to be unlikely partners under the BRI. As we have shown, however, several considerations led Rome and Beijing to identify each other as important partners and the BRI as a key platform for bilateral cooperation. On the one hand, China values Italy's position as a bridge between different regions involved in the BRI and sees the country as an interesting destination for investments, due to both Italy's strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, Italy soon identified the BRI as an opportunity for gaining greater access to the Chinese market and for attracting Chinese investments into the country. While in line with Italy's long march toward the BRI, however, the Conte I government's decision to sign the Memorandum in 2019 was the product of a contingent political context that has since changed significantly.

This leaves open the question of the prospects for the Memorandum and the implications for the future of Italy-China relations. As a non-binding document, the Memorandum does not produce immediate returns for the two parties, but rather provides a framework for the negotiation of specific and legally binding documents in the areas that it covers. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the Memorandum is merely

symbolic. For Beijing, it is a demonstration of Italy's political support for the BRI as China's most ambitious foreign policy initiative and, more broadly, a demonstration of Italy's political support for China's proactive role in international politics. Such support was taken very seriously in Beijing, especially at a time when the BRI was increasingly contested elsewhere. From China's point of view, the Memorandum thus brings relations with Italy to a new level and creates the conditions for a qualitative leap forward in bilateral cooperation. In fact, Beijing has repeatedly signalled this positive attitude to Rome, for example by reserving special treatment to Foreign Minister Di Maio when he visited Shanghai in November 2019 for the second China International Import Expo (Santevecchi 2019).

The ball is, then, in Italy's court. Rome has to decide what it wants to achieve through the Memorandum, a decision that is now considerably complicated by the growing tensions between Washington and Beijing. But a decision has to be made, and it has to be made rapidly, as the BRI itself is under review in Beijing. As mentioned above, there is the perception among Chinese scholars that the BRI will be adjusted, with a stronger emphasis on China's own priorities. If Italian policy-makers are not focused enough, the whole issue of Italy's participation in the BRI might, then, transform into just another missed opportunity for the country. In this respect, the real risk for Italy's engagement in the BRI is the lack of a long-term vision, which is also the main lesson from the 2019 debate and a striking element of asymmetry between Italy and China. The BRI is underpinned by a clear vision of China's future place in the world: it is a quintessentially strategic initiative that was articulated in Beijing as a response to an increasingly complicated international context and based on a long-term vision for China's rise. On the contrary, Italy's approach to China and the BRI seems to be still largely reactive: what is missing is a long-term vision for the future of Italy's relations with a rising power that is going to exercise growing influence – both in economic and political terms – in Europe and in the Mediterranean region.

The lack of a long-term vision is in turn related to the poor conditions of the Italian public debate on China. In a country where foreign policy is rarely the subject of public debate, relations with China are no exception. It is notable that Chinese investments in strategic sectors of the Italian economy under the Renzi government took place in the absence of any public discussion. In this respect, the debate around the BRI Memorandum, with all its limits, was a useful step forward. For a couple of weeks, Italy's China policy was at the centre of discussions among policy-makers, with the involvement of both branches of Parliament. While much of the pathos was merely instrumental to domestic agendas, this nonetheless ensured media coverage of the issue, which created a rare window of opportunity for scholars and experts, who were invited to share their views on China, the BRI and the state of Italy-China relations. Unfortunately, in the turbulent political situation of spring 2019, the attention of the media declined rapidly, and Italy's China policy soon returned to be the specialized field of a small community of foreign policy experts and decision-makers. Yet, if Italy wants to seize the opportunities that participation in the BRI might offer and reduce the associated risks, a more structured and permanent debate on China and Italy-China relations should be encouraged. The current year, 2020, – which marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations – might offer a unique opportunity in this respect.

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Domestic sources of 'mild' positions on international cooperation: Italy and global climate policy

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Abstract

This paper investigates Italy's position on global climate change politics in order to explore the larger question of why this country, like similar middle powers, may adopt ambiguous positions on global public policy issues. I start from the observation that in recent history Italy has taken a rather mild position on international climate cooperation and climate policy more broadly. To explain this, I propose an argument in divergence with those who claim Italy has low salience in the issue or lack of interest in international climate leadership. I put forward a political economy perspective and claim that different salient concerns motivate the domestic actors that shape the country's international position. I maintain that these different concerns offset each other, resulting in overall mild preferences. I present support for my theory, zooming in on the motivations of two domestic sources of international positions: economic sectors and public opinion. The empirical data largely corroborates the theory.

1. Introduction

The international relations literature classically studies the global policy preferences of very powerful nations (Krasner 1991) or, alternately, of states with extreme policy positions (Keohane 1971). However, international cooperation is rarely dictated only by hegemons or outliers. International policy is commonly centered on the preferences of middle powers (Milner 1997; Alesina, Angeloni and Etro 2005), especially when the debate pivots on public good issues where the benefits of action are diffused. Yet, the positions of these countries remain largely understudied. This is presumably because they are assumed to have relatively low salience for the issues at hand, and, therefore, little motivation behind the matter of discussion at international organizations. But is it true that middle power countries – i.e. sovereign states that are neither negligible nor a superpower – tend to adopt mild positions on global public policy issues? If so, why?

This paper argues that the international positions of such middle powers are indeed often modest. However, and in contrast with other views, I claim that this is not necessarily due to the low salience of international issues. Rather, I argue that these positions are more likely due to the way salient drivers of national positions neutralize each other. I focus my argument on one specific issue of international cooperation, climate change, which is an increasingly major focus of foreign affairs. I maintain that international positions on climate change mitigation and adaptation are drawn on important factors at the foundations of states' domestic political economy. In the case of certain countries, these factors tend to offset each other and hence lead to 'mild' international positions.

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I look at Italy as an example of such positioning on international climate cooperation. Italy is an interesting geographical case, for it is a clear example of mid-sized power in the modern international world. It is currently neither too influential nor too trivial in most international organizations, and it is generally important though not crucial in institutions such as the European Union. With respect to international climate politics, the Italian case is relevant because the country is in the middle of the global spectrum of environmental progress. In 2015, 16% of the country's total energy consumption came from renewable energy[1], just one percentage less than the EU average. However, fossil fuel demand and subsidies are still significant.[2] Along these lines, Italian politicians have been on the fence in terms of embracing UNFCCC targets and proposals (De Blasio, Hibberd and Sorice 2013). So, altogether, Italy is a country with a climate action position which is neither too bleak nor too ambitious.

I empirically show how domestic motivations in Italy have offset each other and therefore diluted the country's international positions on issues related to climate change. For practical reasons, I concentrate on two domestic factors of climate policy largely discussed in the political economy literature: industrial sectors and public opinion. I present evidence that, for both industries and the public opinion realm, political ambition and economic constraints counterbalance a predisposition for deep climate cooperation. This, I argue, explains why countries like Italy have only taken 'mild' positions on climate change action.

The findings have implications that go beyond the study of Italy or climate change per se. The paper's main insight into international politics is that, for mid-sized countries that have domestic contentions (like Italy), positions on pressing global issues can be lukewarm due to the fact that opportunities and costs nullify each other. This suggests that it is not lack of salience, but rather the neutralization of multidimensional domestic concerns that explains foreign affairs in middle powers. More generally, the paper contributes to the knowledge on international organizations and cooperation. Middle powers' positions are often close to decision-making outcomes in bargaining contexts with a unanimity vote, which is the rule adopted by the United Nations and other bodies of international governance (e.g. the Council of the European Union). By shedding light on the motivations of middle powers and the mixed forms of salience they attach to international issues in these institutions, the paper provides food for thought for understanding the often-neglected driving forces (and hurdles) of international cooperation.

2. Theory: the roots of mild positions on climate action and Italy's international climate policy

The global climate is a collective public good that requires coordinated international efforts. A growing literature discusses the external reasons why countries take positions on international climate policy. Some point to competitive peer pressure and

[1] Legambiente. 2016. 'Rapporto Comuni Rinnovabili 2015' http://www.comunirinnovabili.it/il-rapporto-comuni-rinnovabili-2015/

[2] Support for fossil fuel consumption is slightly below the median OECD rate, although it has risen sharply since 2012. See Climate Transparency. 2017. 'Brown to Green. The G20 Transition to a Low-Carbon Economy: Italy'. https://www.climate-transparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/B2G2017-Italy.pdf.

transnational norm diffusion (Dechezleprêtre, Neumayer and Perkins 2015; Fankhauser, Gennaioli and Collins 2016). Others mention the role of alliances and joint membership in international clubs (Keohane and Victor 2011; Hovi et al. 2019). Much of this literature finds a vital role played by countries with high salience in the focal issue of international discussion. Often, these countries are equated to major economies (Johnson and Urpelainen 2019) or issue-relevant coalitions (Genovese 2020).

This literature, however, tends to ignore the role of internal contentions and the way governments need to balance domestic disagreements. Differently from structural perspectives in the international relations literature, this paper takes a political economy view to explore the domestic politics behind international climate positions (Bayer and Urpelainen 2016; Lachapelle and Paterson 2013; Newell 2019). A domestic political economy perspective is relevant, for it can shed more light on the distributive concerns that motivate climate positions in countries that are neither materially nor morally indispensable to international cooperation. In other words, a domestic political economy analysis can provide insights into the motivations of countries that are otherwise assumed to have medium salience in international cooperation.[3]

Evidently, there are many moving elements in the domestic political economy of any country. Here I focus on two specific factors: *industries* (as in, economic sectors and their respective businesses) and *public opinion*. Many studies show that these both shape preferences for international policy (for a comprehensive review, see Bernauer 2013). Recent climate politics research has also shown their complementarity (Mahlotra, Monin and Tomz 2019). I argue that in most countries both of these sources of national positions attach salience to international climate policy. However, in many countries each of them is respectively pulled by different motivations. If the motivations are contradictory, business and public opinion will not have a coherent effect on national positions on the climate. Consequently, under mixed internal incentives national governments will more likely settle on timid international positions on climate policy. I claim these dynamics are observable in the Italian case, as per below.

With respect to *industries*, I expect that economic businesses are confronted with a basic 'trade-environment' friction, according to which unconstrained trade is a propeller of profits and innovation, while the environment is a source of costs (Aklin 2014). Along these lines, two fundamental dimensions in which businesses contend their power are environmental effectiveness and economic constraints (the latter intended here through the lenses of free trade). Depending on how these two dimensions intersect, businesses may win or lose from international climate regulations, and therefore keep their governments accountable to a particular international position.

Companies that are *both* environmentally efficient (i.e., clean) and economically unconstrained (i.e., exposed to international trade) tend to be the winners of climate regulations (Meckling 2015; Genovese 2019). These businesses have incentives to lobby for meaningful climate cooperation because they are more likely to profit from it.

[3] To be sure, it is plausible that the domestic political economy of a country is shaped by international phenomena and institutions. In the case of Italy, it is equally plausible that the nation's economic and political preferences are the result of coordination among other European countries. While I do not exclude the EU influence on Italian climate policy stands, I remain agnostic of this effect in this paper. Instead, to avoid measuring on EU-level positions, I try to trace data that is as nationally focused, i.e. not-EU dependent, as far as possible.

Consequently, countries with a high density of these 'climate champions' should have rather uncontroversial, clear-cut positive attitudes towards deep climate cooperation. Vice versa, if an economic sector is both environmentally inefficient and economically profiting from unconstrained free trade, businesses regard international climate policy as a hurdle, because of the scale of adjustment this requires. Consequently, countries with a high density of these 'climate laggards' should be clearly resentful of climate cooperation (Genovese 2019).

Evidently, these two types of businesses may not be the most common ones. If environmental ambition and economic constraints are somewhat mixed, the country's position would also fall in between. In the case of Italy, I expect to observe several industrial sectors and businesses with such mixed motivations: some globally trading industries that are inefficient in terms of greenhouse gas contribution and, vice versa, some industrial sectors that are environmentally sustainable but not fully scaled up on international trade. This contention is one possible way to reconcile the country's willingness to be both an economic leader and an environmentally responsible actor at international organizations (Padovani 2010).[4]

With respect to *public opinion*, a similar environment-economics nexus can be expected to be at work and, thus, put similar pressure on the national government. On the one hand, the average citizen in virtually any country should appreciate environmental sustainability – either because of its intrinsic value or its relevance for economic livelihood (Kolstad 2014). On the other hand, economic constraints due to the easiness of diverting material resources and investing funds in the environment should affect citizens' positions on climate. Amongst financially resourceful people that place a lot of value on the environment, ambitious climate policy should be a clear, positive opinion. Vice versa, amongst poor people with little attachment to the environment, climate policy would be a second-order consideration at best. But if these two considerations are mixed, public opinion should also be torn.

This mixed opinion on international climate policy is what I expect to observe amongst the Italian public. Italy is a country with many natural resources and several nature-dependent industries (agriculture, but also tourism, which in 2019 corresponded to 13 percent of the Italian GDP). Also, one third of Italians in 2018 lived outside of cities, in direct contact with natural land (Romano et al 2017). Also, a large number of jobs are sensitive to a functional natural environment, either because of their vulnerability to the integrity of the ecosystem (Egan and Mullin 2011) or because of the direct link between job concerns and preferences for climate policy (Bechtel, Genovese and Scheve 2019). In light of these considerations, it is reasonable to expect the average Italian to attach significant saliency to the issue of climate policy.

At the same time, Italy is a financially constrained country with little wiggle room for investments outside of core economic areas. Especially since the recent financial crisis, a great deal of climate policy discussion in Italy – and other Southern European countries – has focused on the (in)capacity to ramp up current standards of climate action (McCrigh, Dunlap and Marquatt-Pyatt 2016). We know from other public opinion research that this

[4] In the paper I exchange the use of words 'businesses' and 'sectors', assuming that the latter are an aggregation of the former (Genovese 2019). In the interest of space, I limit my attention to some selected sectors. As I show later in the empirics, I focus on agriculture and mining.

type of material consideration is very effective in taming preferences for climate cooperation (Bechtel and Scheve 2013). Along these lines, Italy's austerity-minded technocratic governments in 2011-12 contributed to people believing that the EU should not increase its emissions reduction target for 2020 beyond the existing 20% (Skovgaard 2014). This insight suggests that Italy's public opinion should be split between the political interest to act on climate and economic concerns related to the capacity to act on climate. I expect these considerations to co-exist and to be equally meaningful, hence justifying why countries like Italy remain mildly interested in pushing for bold international climate positions and cooperation.

3. Empirical evidence

In broad terms, my theoretical argument suggests that competing political economy motivations can drive climate policy preferences in directions, diluting each other and essentially settling countries on 'mild' international different climate positions. In what follows I show empirical evidence in support of this mixed incentives argument.

First, I focus on the interests of some selected Italian economic sectors. Combining descriptive and comparative data, I show how the burden of pollution abatement and the benefit of trade openness offset their respective effect on the country's international climate positions. Second, I concentrate on the mixed interests in Italy's public opinion; employing a regression analysis, I show how interests in climate politics and concerns with economic capacity have counterbalancing effects on individuals' preferences for climate policy. Inevitably, the observational data underlying these analyses is imperfect. For example, the first empirical analysis of sectors is based on data covering the years between 2001 and 2011, while the second analysis on public opinion covers more recent years (2017 and 2019). Despite the limitations due to data availability, I maintain that the evidence offered below indicates patterns that go in the direction of my theoretical argument.

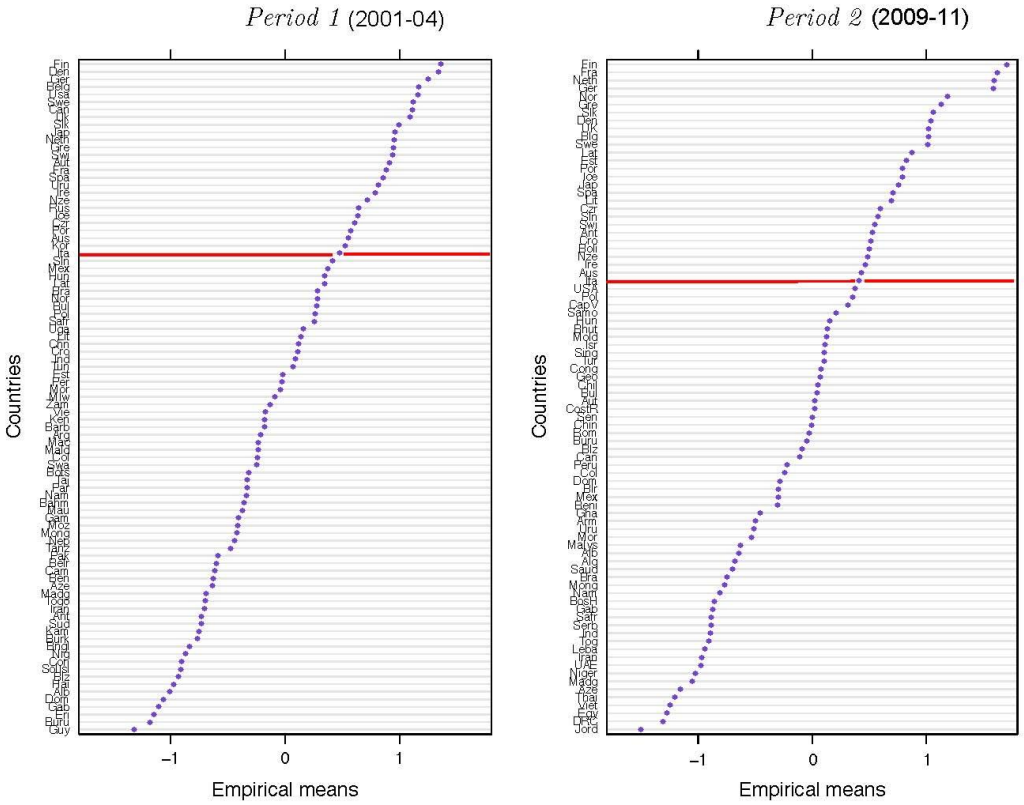
3.1 Mixed motivations in industrial sectors

With respect to industrial sectors (i.e. businesses), the testable hypothesis derived from my theory is that ambition for environmental leadership pulls companies in one direction while economic opportunities (or constraints) dictated by free trade pull in the other direction. Only if an economic sector is *both* environmentally efficient and oriented towards free trade can it then be considered a winner of international climate coordination. Vice versa, if a sector is both environmentally inefficient (i.e., pollution intensive) and oriented towards free trade, then it would suffer the most from credible climate regulation. If an economic sector falls in between these categories, then it sits in between climate leadership and opposition, and so the governments they lobby.

To evaluate the validity of this hypothesis for Italy, I require specific measures. For the outcome variable, I need a systematic estimate of its international climate positions. For the explanatory variables, I need measurements of sectors' trade openness and environmental performance. For both I use here a dataset presented in Genovese (2019). The data was constructed to compare the causes and consequences of countries' positions at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In the interest of space, I focus on two sectors: agriculture and mining.

With regards to the outcome variable, I rely on the aggregated scores of countries' positions in Genovese (2014; 2019). These are based on the National Communications that national governments periodically submit to the UNFCCC. The issue-specific positions from the National Communications were collected with a careful qualitative coding exercise for two periods of the climate negotiations, namely the meetings before the Kyoto Protocol's entry into force (2001–2004) and the post-Kyoto Protocol negotiations (2008–2011). The data coding followed a measurement procedure in which governments' positions were coded for most national governments (115 countries). Although the data are originally coded at the issue level, I estimate preferences for a broadly defined measure of global climate cooperation using an aggregated score calculated with a factor analysis.

Table 1. Comparison of national positions on climate cooperation at the UNFCCC, 2001-2004 and 2009-2011.



Notes: the dot plots illustrate the distribution of the country scores calculated with the factor analysis of the National Communications coded in Genovese (2019). The country scores go from less cooperative on the left to more cooperative on the right. Dots closer to the zero empirical mean (on the x-axis) are interpreted as scores for more moderate positions. The Italian score is highlighted in red for each of the two respective UNFCCC periods.

Figure 1 reports the country means of the main factor scores for each of the two periods covered in the dataset. The red line highlights the relevant estimates for Italy. The figure clearly shows what I assumed at the beginning of this paper: Italy has historically maintained a relatively modest position at UNFCCC negotiations. One could say it is 'spatially' located in the middle of the cross-national distribution. A close look indicates that Italy's score is in the neighborhood of other developed countries. These cluster at the top right of the scale, which can be interpreted as the more 'cooperative' side of the

distribution. Still, Italy is next to well-known hawkish countries like the United States. Also, if one were to account for confidence intervals (not reported here for simplicity), these would show that Italy's position is indistinguishable from zero.

Following the theory, one way to think about the roots of Italy's UNFCCC position is by looking at how its industrial lobbies -- i.e., its sectors -- score in terms of pollution costs and trade openness. Presumably, I would find a mixed scenario to explain the mild UNFCCC positions. For example, some of Italy's more trade-exposed sectors are only partially sustainable, and vice versa where the more environmentally efficient sectors are not necessarily very trade dependent. To elucidate how Italian sectors score on these two dimensions, I follow Genovese (2019) and I employ two indicators. To capture pollution costs, I resort to sector-specific GHG volumes, which are million tons of CO_2-equivalent emissions divided by the total CO_2-equivalent emissions of the country. Contrastingly, to capture trade opportunities, I use trade openness, which is calculated as the sum of exports and imports divided by GDP generated by each sector.[5]

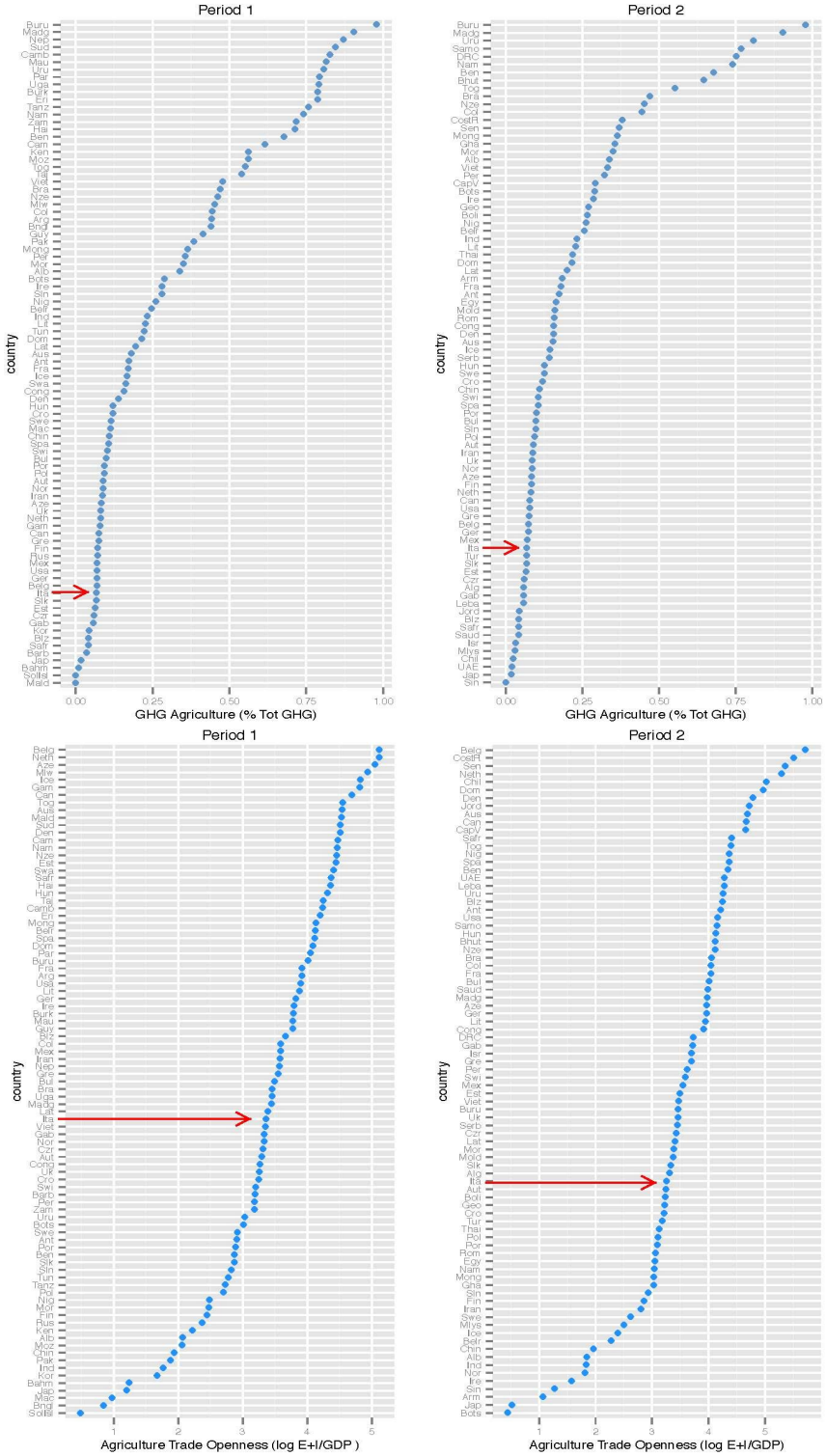
Figures 2 and 3 show how two main sectors – namely, agriculture and mining – fare with respect to these two measurements. The specific measurements for Italy are highlighted with the red arrow.

With respect to agriculture (Figure 2), it is evident that Italy is relatively efficient: this sector contributes to less than a tenth of the national greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (around 7%). However, this sector is only partly involved in international trade compared to major European traders like the Netherlands and Denmark and a large number of developing countries (in Italy in 2016, agriculture accounted for 6% of all exports, contrarily to the average European agricultural sector that accounts for 10% export). The snapshot in Figure 2 provides some illustrative support to the intuition of my argument: the efficiency of Italian farming can enjoy the benefits of stricter international climate regulation, but it is not maximized by trade. This mixed scenario is in line with the narrative that Italy has been supportive of cooperation in some farming-related UNFCCC issues (e.g., accounting efforts of mitigation through land and forestry projects in developing countries), but has not made this a priority either within European Union talks or at international climate negotiations (Padovani 2010).

The data regarding the mining sector (Figure 3) are flipped, but essentially lead to a similar conclusion on how pollution concerns and trade opportunities can generate mixed policy positions. On the one hand, Italy's extraction and refining industries are among the more polluting ones in the developed world. At the same time, this sector has relatively little exposure to the international market, mostly because it is internally sufficient, featuring small imports from foreign companies. This low trade exposure dilutes the otherwise presumably harsh opposition that high-CO2 Italian industries would have against international climate policy.

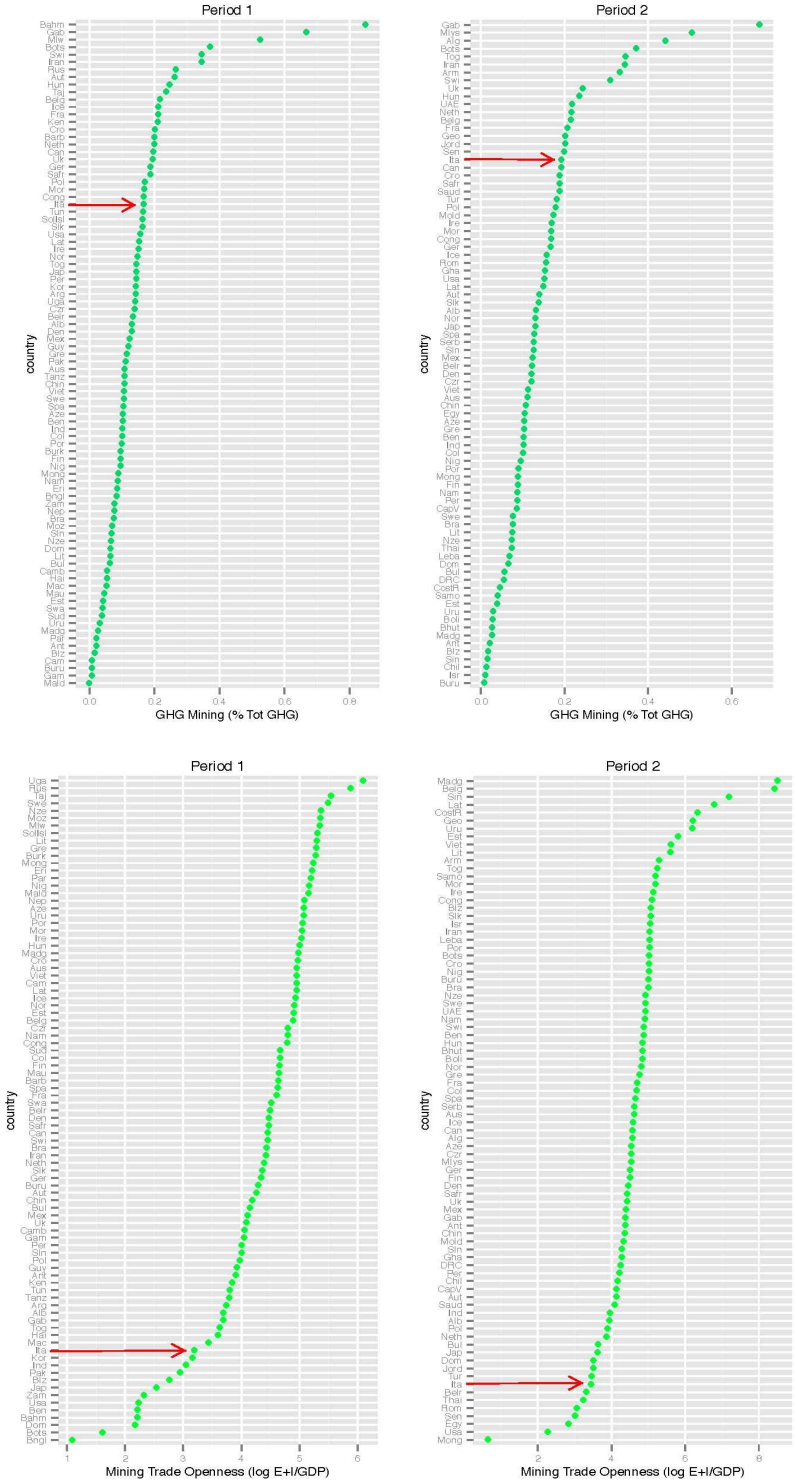
[5] See the Appendix for a more systematic definition of the variables. See also Genovese (2014; 2019) for more details on the data sources.

Figure 2. GHG Volume and Trade Openness of Agricultural Sectors.



Note: The dot plots illustrate the cross-national distribution of (a) relative pollution burden (measured via sectoral GHG emissions/total GHG emissions) and (b) log of trade openness (import and export exposure/GDP) for the agricultural sector (ISIC category A). The calculations for Italy are highlighted with the red arrow.

Figure 3. GHG Volume and Trade Openness of Mining and Extraction Sectors.



Notes: The plots are equivalent to the ones in Figure 2 but for the mining and extraction sectors (ISIC category B). The calculations for Italy are highlighted with the red arrow.

This interpretation is corroborated by the historical position that Enel has taken on climate action. Italy's most powerful natural gas lobby has played lip service to the climate cause, but has also been a significant user of coal, failing to set out an explicit plan for ending coal use. That said, Enel's concern with international climate regulation seems small because much of its market is internal, so – given its historically monopolistic role in Italy – it fears little competition in the domestic market.[6] Consequently, lobbying against international policy has not been a priority.

The evidence presented here is obviously descriptive. Other factors may be at play: for example, the leadership of institutions (e.g. the EU) and the strategic preferences of parties involved in government may also affect the equilibrium of UNFCCC positions. That said, and in light of the critical role of economic actors expressed in the literature, the sector-level analysis at least suggests why Italy has not shown either noteworthy support or utter refusal of some of the mining-related decisions at the UNFCCC. Hence, the configuration of the environmental and trade dimensions for these crucial economic sectors seem to reasonably account for the neutral positions that Italy has regularly taken on international climate policy.

3.2 Mixed preferences among the public

The previous section showed evidence of how environmental ambition and economic (i.e., trade) opportunities can offset each other and therefore explain neutral preferences for international climate action. But I have also argued that these dynamics apply to other domestic drivers of international climate positions, in particular public opinion. In this section I investigate this with an analysis of climate policy preferences among the Italian public.

The data I rely on here come straight from the Eurobarometer surveys. The Eurobarometer provides representative, individual-level responses to questions related to environmental policy, including preferences for climate policies in line with UNFCCC targets. To this end, the Eurobarometer has also fielded climate change-specific questionnaires across Europe. For my purposes I focus specifically on the last two of these climate change surveys: the Special Eurobarometer 459 Wave EB87.1 (from 2017) and the Special Eurobarometer 490 Wave EB91.3 (from 2019).

These surveys ask a number of specific, forward-looking questions about climate action. They also include other questions, including – and relevant here – responses on political interest in the issue and information on individuals' economic resources. Following my argument, the expectation is that, while political interest can increase interest in climate policy action, economic constraints would reduce it – hence resulting in conflicting pressures on opinion.

I proceed with testing this conjecture on the Italian battery of the Eurobarometer data. Before moving to the test, however, it is worth demonstrating that, like the Italian government's position at the UNFCCC, public opinion in Italy is indeed situated in a rather neutral position on climate policy. I show this by comparing the Italian and aggregate European responses to two specific questions highlighted in the surveys: one on the importance of the growth of renewables ('*How important do you think it is that the*

[6] Fisher, LittleCott and Skillings. 2017. 'Italy's National Energy Strategy'. E3G Consultation Response. https://www.e3g.org/docs/Italian_Energy_Strategy_v3_EN_website.docx.pdf

[nationality] government sets targets to increase the amount of renewable energy used, such as wind or solar power, by 2030?') and another question on household energy efficiency ('*How important do you think it is that the [nationality] government provides support for improving efficiency by 2030 (e.g. by encouraging people to insulate their homes or buy electric cars)?*'). For both sets of answers, the outcome is spread over four categories, from 'Not at all important' to 'Very important'.[7]

Figure 4 shows that the Italian responses (averaged across the 2017 and 2019 samples) are very close to the mean European response. To put the data in perspective, the majority of respondents in the Netherlands (>75%) and a minor part of respondents in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (<35%) think these issues are 'very important' for their governments to prioritize. Contrastingly, roughly one in two Italians consider these important. At the same time, more than one in ten Italians are either indifferent ('Don't Know') or deem the issue not relevant. While the questions are by construction inducing a positive reaction (Holbrook, Green and Krosnick 2003), the Italian position seems rather average -- i.e., mild -- by European standards.

Do mixed concerns at the individual level help explain why the Italian public is moderate on climate policy issues? To get at the core of this hypothesis, I resort to a regression analysis in which I correlate the individual-level responses to the two questions above with two proxies. To get at environmental concern, I rely on a response to political interest, and use the Eurobarometer index that goes from 1 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested). To get at economic concern, I rely on the response to the question '*Have you had difficulties paying your bills at the end of the month*?', which goes from 1 (almost never/never) to 3 (often).[8] In addition to these two variables, I enter in the regression equation a number of standard control variables, namely age, gender and education (measured in education years). I also add the individual's type of occupation to control for motivations derived from the job (Bechtel, Genovese and Scheve 2019). The results are qualitatively equivalent if I use these models or more parsimonious specifications. The results are also robust to other specifications, e.g. a logit model (see Appendix).

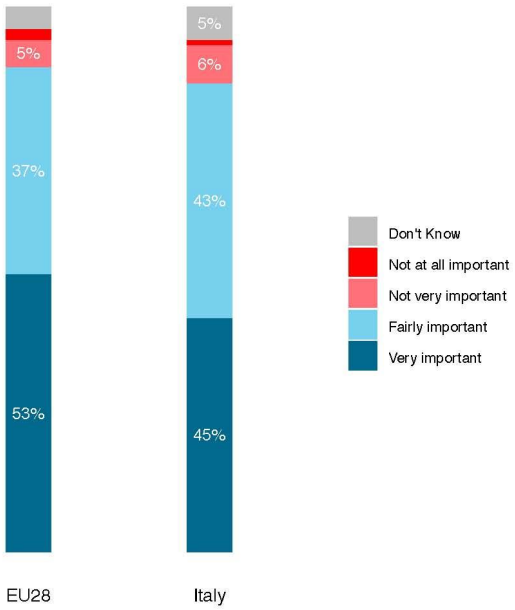
Table 1 reports the results of linear (OLS) models for each of the two responses. As expected, I find that the coefficients of the two relevant covariates are significant and go in opposite directions. Political interest is positively correlated with the importance that people give to increasing targets for clean energy and incentivizing environmental efficiency. At the same time and basically by the same magnitude, Italians who have greater financial difficulties are less likely to deem climate policy very important.

[7] In secondary analyses reported in the Appendix, I also explore to what extent respondents agree with the statements 'Fighting climate change and using energy more efficiently can boost the economy and jobs in the EU' [present only in EBS 459]; and 'More public financial support should be given to the transition to clean energies even it means subsidies to fossil fuels should be reduced' [present only in EBS 490]. The results are consistent with the main analysis.

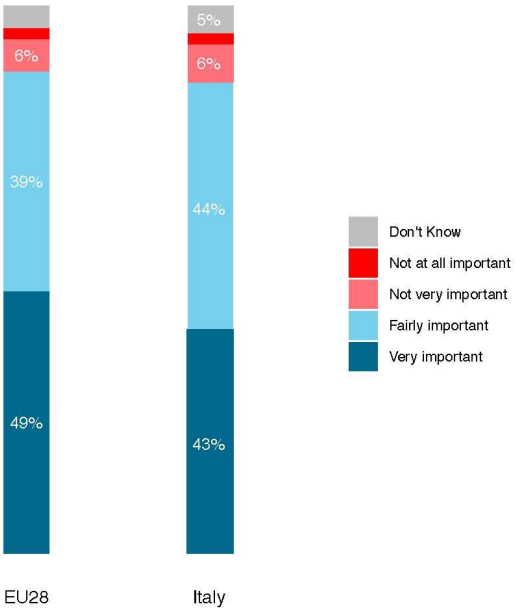
[8] I prefer the answer to the bills question rather than the classic 'household income' item, because household income is systematically underreported or missing.

Figure 4. Public opinion on climate policy issues: Italy versus Europe.

Q: How important do you think it is that the government sets targets to increase the amount of renewable energy used, such as wind or solar power, by 2030?



Q: How important do you think it is that the government provides support for improving energy efficiency by 2030 (e.g. by encouraging people to insulate their home or buy electric cars)?



Notes: The bar plots show the aggregate distribution of public positions on two issues related to climate policy: (a) renewable energy, and (b) energy efficiency. Data are averages from Eurobarometer surveys 87.1 (2017) and 91.3 (2019).

The results are externally relevant because Italy has a high rate of political mobilization, with electoral turnout historically well above 70%, but also substantial levels of poverty vis-à-vis other OECD countries. The direct implication is that the public in politically interested but financially constrained nations like Italy is substantially torn between political imaginary and economic incapabilities, and both seem to generate mild governmental positions on climate policy. More generally, the findings imply that it may not be a lack of salience but rather the offsetting effect of multidimensional concerns that explains mild positions on global affairs. As for domestic economic sectors, mixed pressures in national public opinion seem to explain 'mild' positions in international political issues.

Table 1. The effect of political interest and economic constraints on public opinion on climate policies.

	Importance: *Growth of renewables*	Importance: *Household efficiency*
Political Interest (1 to 4)	0.064***	0.069***
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Difficulty of Paying Bills (1 to 3)	−0.071***	−0.060**
	(0.026)	(0.025)
Age	−0.001	−0.003**
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.047	0.058*
	(0.033)	(0.032)
Education Years	0.001	0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Occupation: Student	−0.069	0.014
	(0.072)	(0.053)
Occupation: Self-employed	−0.038	0.033
	(0.053)	(0.052)
Occupation: High-skilled job	0.024	0.033
	(0.053)	(0.052)
Occupation: Low-skilled job	0.014	0.025
	(0.045)	(0.044)
Survey Wave (EB91.3 = 1)	0.052*	0.081***
	(0.031)	(0.031)
Intercept	−1.554***	−1.498***
	(0.121)	(0.120)
Observations	1,696	1,707
R^2	0.020	0.027

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

Notes: Linear (OLS) estimation. The reference category for the 'Occupation' variable is Unemployed.

4. Conclusions

It is often assumed that few countries attach high relevance to issues discussed in international politics. Consequently, negotiations and decision-making in contemporary international relations are often depicted as a result of hegemony or key alliances, i.e. of actors assumed to attach more salience to their international issues. This thinking assumes that other countries do not have salience for these international issues, thereby often leaving a number of mid-sized countries like Italy understudied.

In contrast with this view, in this paper I argue that these understudied countries do, in fact, give importance to international issues; however, they may be driven to mild positions by mixed domestic incentives. Consequently, it is not the lack of intrinsic salience but the offsetting role of counterbalancing sources of national interest that dilute the international position of countries like Italy on issues such as international climate change action.

To explore this argument, the paper investigates the domestic drivers of Italy's position on international climate policy. I specifically focus on two political economy actors: industrial lobbies and public opinion. I maintain that ambition for environmental leadership and economic constraints due to limited financial resources have systematically counteracted each other for both these two fundamental sources of national positions. Observational data are put forward in support of the argument. Evidently, the research has limitations. The design is exploratory and the results are only correlational. The observations on industries' concerns are novel yet constrained across time and only updated to 2011. The public opinion data, which is pertinent to more recent years and therefore does not overlap with the industry data, uses imperfect proxies to capture the variables of interest.

Nonetheless, conditional on these caveats, the evidence suggests how Italy compares to other countries on international climate policy, and how lukewarm the Italian position has been in the past few years. The data also indicates that, in line with the argument, Italian businesses and voters are torn between the awareness and willingness to act on climate and the material burdens the issue imposes.

Altogether, the paper offers some lessons on how to think about countries in international politics that are often assumed to pay little attention to global issues or to 'bandwagon'. The paper also gives some predictions on how positions on global public good issues may vary as some of the offsetting domestic concerns may relax or intensify. For example, Italy's cooperation on climate change may strengthen if Italians become wealthier or if they suffer more from climate change-induced natural disasters. At the same time, and importantly for the post-COVID19 world, Italy may become less cooperative on international issues where its businesses face harsh terms from trade partners following a national recession. Future work may want to explore the merit of this argument on the false dichotomy between economic and environmental concerns in other fields. For example, at the onset of the COVID19 pandemic, similar dynamics may affect how governments position themselves between health protection and economic growth.

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Appendix

Table A1. Variables definition and sources.

Variable	Source	Definition
	1. Cross country industry analysis	
UNFCCC national positions (Figure 1)	Genovese 2014 (see also Genovese 2019), based on UNFCCC National Communications.	Empirical means calculated with a latent Bayesian factor analysis of manually coded national positions over 43 UNFCCC issues. The distribution spans between -2 and +2 circa.
GHG emissions of each sector (Figure 2 & 3)	UNFCCC yearly country data averaged for 2001-4 and 2009-11 (see also Genovese 2019)	Greenhouse gas emission profiles summarized in million tons of CO2-equivalent emissions for each UNFCCC member across six main IPCC sector groups (the paper focuses specifically on the agriculture and mining/extraction sector, but Genovese 2019 presents also the figures for manufacturing). The standardized value of sectoral emissions was calculated by the author by weighing (i.e. dividing) each sector's emission by the total CO2-equivalent emissions of the country. The distribution is between 0 and 100.
Trade openness for each sector (Figure 2 & 3)	Global Trade Analysis Project (GTAP), database 6 for 2001-04 and database 7 for 2009-11.	The sum of exports and imports in USD prices divided by sectoral GDP (as coded in the value added of the World Development Indicators database). The data is logged (distribution between 1 and 5)
	2. *Public opinion analysis*	
Salience of issues related to (a) renewable energy, and (b) energy efficiency (Figure 4; see exact question wording in the main text).	Eurobarometer 459 Wave EB87.1 (2017) and the Eurobarometer 490 Wave EB91.3 (2019).	Four-category ordinal response, from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). 'Don't Know' coded as missing.
Political interest (Table 1)	Eurobarometer surveys above	Four-category ordinal response, from 1 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested).
Difficulty in Paying Bills (Table 1)	Eurobarometer surveys above	Three-category ordinal response, from 1 (almost never/never) to 3 (often).

Notes: the empirical material presented in the paper is drawn from different sources. In the table I clarify the definition and sources for the main variables in cross-country industry analysis (part 1), and then for those in the public opinion analysis (part 2).

Table A2. The effect of political interest and economic constraints on public opinion on climate policies: wave-specific regressions of responses to renewables growth question.

	Importance: *Growth of renewables*	
	EB87.1	EB91.3
	(1)	(2)
Political Interest (1 to 4)	0.084***	0.046**
	(0.027)	(0.023)
Difficulty Paying Bills (1 to 3)	−0.005	−0.128***
	(0.039)	(0.034)
Age	0.003	−0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Gender (Female = 1)	−0.003	0.088**
	(0.050)	(0.043)
Education Years	−0.001	0.002
	(0.005)	(0.003)
Occupation: Student	−0.031	−0.093
	(0.110)	(0.096)
Occupation: Self-employed	−0.132	0.030
	(0.083)	(0.070)
Occupation: High-skilled job	−0.005	0.059
	(0.082)	(0.068)
Occupation: Low-skilled job	0.001	0.031
	(0.067)	(0.060)
Intercept	1.333***	1.704***
	(0.196)	(0.156)
Observations	787	920
R^2	0.028	0.028

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Notes: linear (OLS) estimation. The reference category for the 'Occupation' variable is Unemployed.

Table A3. The effect of political interest and economic constraints on public opinion on climate policies: wave-specific regressions of responses to household efficiency question.

	Importance: *Household efficiency*	
	EB87.1	EB91.3
	(1)	(2)
Political Interest (1 to 4)	0.108***	0.036
	(0.027)	(0.022)
Difficulty Paying Bills (1 to 3)	0.041	−0.144***
	(0.038)	(0.033)
Age	0.004**	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.017	0.093**
	(0.049)	(0.042)
Education Years	−0.005	−0.0003
	(0.005)	(0.003)
Occupation: Student	0.033	0.001
	(0.108)	(0.094)
Occupation: Self-employed	−0.092	−0.029
	(0.082)	(0.068)
Occupation: High-skilled job	0.040	0.040
	(0.080)	(0.067)
Occupation: Low-skilled job	0.051	0.003
	(0.066)	(0.059)
Intercept	1.161***	1.729***
	(0.194)	(0.153)
Observations	787	920
R^2	0.041	0.031

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Notes: linear (OLS) estimation. The reference category for the 'Occupation' variable is Unemployed.

Table A4. The effect of political interest and economic constraints on public opinion on climate policies: alternative question (EB87.1).

	Agree: *Fighting Climate Change and Using Energy More Efficiently Can Boost the Economy and Jobs in EU* (EB87.1)
Political Interest (1 to 4)	0.105***
	(0.029)
Difficulty of Paying Bills (1 to 3)	−0.044
	(0.042)
Age	−0.001
	(0.002)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.021
	(0.053)
Education Years	0.005
	(0.006)
Occupation: Student	0.078
	(0.117)
Occupation: Self-employed	0.090
	(0.089)
Occupation: High-skilled job	−0.104
	(0.087)
Occupation: Low-skilled job	−0.179**
	(0.072)
Intercept	−1.855***
	(0.210)
Observations	787
R^2	0.042

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Notes: linear (OLS) estimation. The reference category for the 'Occupation' variable is Unemployed.

Table A5. The effect of political interest and economic constraints on public opinion on climate policies: alternative question (EB91.3).

	Agree: *Public Financial Support Should Be Given to the Transition to Clean Energies Even It Means Subsidies to Fossil Fuels Should Be Reduced* (EB91.3)
Political Interest (1 to 4)	0.059**
	(0.024)
Difficulty of Paying Bills (1 to 3)	−0.118***
	(0.036)
Age	0.0004
	(0.002)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.067
	(0.045)
EducationYears	−0.003
	(0.003)
Occupation: Student	−0.199*
	(0.102)
Occupation: Self-employed	−0.019
	(0.074)
Occupation: High-skilled job	−0.064
	(0.073)
Occupation: Low-skilled job	0.003
	(0.064)
Intercept	1.833***
	(0.165)
Observations	920
R^2	0.034

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Notes: linear (OLS) estimation. The reference category for the 'Occupation' variable is Unemployed.

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Immigration and Foreign Policy: Italy's Domestic-International Linkage in the Management of Mass Human Movements

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Abstract

Especially since the outbreak of the 2014-2015 so-called 'migration crisis', immigration policy has come to be frequently regarded as part of Italy's foreign policy. Although the management of inbound population movements clearly comprises a relevant external dimension, the relations between immigration and foreign policy are less plain than might appear at first sight. Based on this assumption, the paper examines the domestic-international nexus in Italy's immigration policy, the association of the latter with foreign policy, and how this process is connected to Italy's participation in the migration and asylum policy system of the European Union (EU). In particular, the article examines the role played by Interior Ministers in bridging the domestic-international divide typical of this policy area, as well as how the country's participation in the EU migration policy system has backed up this process.

1. The politicising issue of migration in Italy's political and public discourse

At least since 2013, international mass immigration has become a major issue in Italy's political and public debate (Carvalho 2014). Although it is not the first time that the entry and stay of foreigners in the country has ranked so high among national concerns, the breakout of the so-called 'refugee' or 'migration crisis' has certainly contributed to putting the issue in the spotlight of Italian policy and politics (Geddes and Petracchin 2020). Underlying this heightened attention are not only crude facts, such as the unprecedented number of arrivals during the most critical months of the crisis,[1] the steady increase in size of the foreign component of the country's population, (slightly more than one every ten residents), and the estimated number of irregular immigrants (i.e. with no valid permit) – roughly 9 percent of the 6.222 million foreigners living in Italy

[1] Around 170,000 and 150,000 in 2014 and 2015 respectively, according to the figures provided by the Italian Ministry of the Interior and the International Organisation for Migration (2018).

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(Blangiardo and Ortensi 2020).[2] The impact of perceptions and social discursive construction on this trend is evidenced by the social alarm generated by the presence of immigrants, groundlessly associated with an increase in crime rates (Bove et al. 2019) and grossly overestimated, with the number of immigrants residing in the country being perceived as amounting to as much as 25 percent of the population (Eurobarometer 2018).

In fact, social discourses have construed migration in several different ways. Foreigners who (try to) move to and stay in Italy have been represented as the target of compassion and pity or rejection and fear, the subject of integration policies or users of public resources and, to a significantly lesser degree, as active partners of their own inclusion in Italian society (Cava et al. 2018; Musarò and Parmiggianini 2017). To a significant extent, the inflow of migrants into Italy has been represented as a threat to national security, e.g., linking foreigners moving to the country with the risk of terrorist attacks (Galantino 2020), and/or a menace for Italian identity and national values, e.g., criticising the commitment to save migrants with an 'Islamic pedigree', especially while disregarding Christians persecuted in remote countries, as an act against Italy and Western civilisation as a whole (Ceccorulli 2019). Alternatively, the media, politicians, and an array of social actors have also discursively construed migration as a way to cope with the 'demographic gap' generated by Italy's distinctive low low population growth (Saraceno 2020), the only source of manpower for jobs largely shunned by Italian workers (Cordini and Ranci 2017) or as a 'historical phenomenon' in which vulnerable people actively push themselves to manage their own lives against the strongly oppressive conditions of global and local injustice structures, and successfully settle in Italy's socio-economic texture (Musarò and Parmiggianini 2017).

In Italy, as in most European countries, the outbreak of the 'migration crisis' not only heightened public attention to the phenomenon, but also sparked a flare of negative outlooks on – if not flat-out scaremongering about – international human movement (Berry et al. 2015). In fact, migration has remained a priority even in periods when other issues ranked higher among the population's and policy-makers' concerns (Biassoni and Pasini 2014). Reportedly, over the last five years or so, the Italian media and (party) politics have presented migrations for the most part through a 'permanent crisis' narrative framework (Osservatorio di Pavia 2017). This trend has been fuelling sentiments of insecurity, suspect and social fragmentation among Italian citizens, aggravated by an increasingly weak correlation between the actual number of arrivals and the diffusion of these gloomy views, but also accompanied by a distinctive process of 'accustomisation' to the emergency climate (Diamanti 2019). This worried-*cum*-jaded attitude is in fact ambivalent, as it changes depending on the degree to which immigrants are regarded as a structural component of Italian society. Accordingly, Italians have proved relatively benevolent with regard to the already settled migrated population, but very apprehensive towards new migratory waves, feared to trigger again the welfare and domestic security problems experienced during previous dramatic increases in the inflow of foreign nationals (Cesareo 2020).

Yet, compared to previous experiences, the latest immigration wave hitting the Italian borders stands out not only for its sheer magnitude and its prominence in the public

[2] Migration Data Portal. *Italy*, Data available at https://migrationdataportal.org/data?i=stock_abs_&t=2019&cm49=380.

and political debate. A unique feature of the 2015 crisis is that the issue has been widely framed as a component of the country's *foreign* policy, even though its domestic reverberation was the predominant concern in the eyes of the public and the policy makers, and the (political and administrative) responsibility of the issue remained largely with the Ministry of the Interior. Between the end of World War II and the seventies, (im)migration policy had already been a foreign policy matter in Europe, as reconstruction and economic expansion led to a mutually beneficial interdependence between most of Western Europe and the rest of the world (especially North Africa and the Middle East), regulated through more or less formal international arrangements. Notably, Italy participated in this economic complementarity mostly within the framework of the 'guestworker model' (Castels 2006), an exclusionist immigration policy that functioned mostly as a labour-provider, based on bilateral recruitment agreements, designed to fill in low-qualification vacancies for a prearranged time-span. Clearly, the vanishing of the economic circumstances did not put an end to international human movement as such, as forced and unforced migrants continued to move within and across Europe's boundaries, and the Single Market's advancements allowed for increased mobility. Yet, by and by, the issue of international migration became largely confined within the realm of domestic policy, attended to as a matter of internal order (and European Community/Union policy) rather than an instance of international affairs. As a mostly low-politics issue throughout Europe, the issue of migration underwent a process of depoliticisation: that is, the ebbing of public debates signalling demands for policy change with regards to a certain question (Birkland 1997). If polarisation assumes that parties react to these public debates by emphasising existing divergences on the topic, and/or coming up with new migration-related political cleavages, with some of them challenging the status quo and further polarising the debate, de-polarisation postulates a process which is the exact opposite (Downs 1972). Until the nineties, de-politicisation was particularly evident in Italy, as the country was only relatively affected by economic immigration, and positioned at the margins of the politically charged question of asylum seekers from socialist countries (*see below*). The immigration waves generated by the collapse of socialist regimes and later the Eastern enlargement of the EU, as well as the growing inflow of refugees and asylum seekers from politically unstable and economically less developed regions in Africa and Asia, periodically increased public attention and political conflict in Italy, similarly to the rest of Europe. That being so, the politicisation triggered by the 2015 'crisis' may be regarded as the latest instance of a well-established trend. Yet, besides the unprecedented magnitude of the human flows and of their salience in public and political discourses, the degree to which the issue has been framed in foreign policy terms stands out as a distinguishing feature worth further investigation.

Hence, the paper examines this re-activation of the domestic-international nexus, in order to see whether and how the mentioned process of politicisation of the migration issue fuelled by the 2015 'crisis' has affected its association with Italy's foreign policy. The following section of the article looks into the reasons why and the extent to which the 'external' or 'international' dimension of Italian immigration policy has been the object of analytical conceptualisation and policy practices. Section three deals with the general terms of the conceptualisation and practice of immigration as a genuine foreign policy problem, and the changes undergone by some crucial distinctions underlying them

(Oltman and Renson 2017). In the fourth section, the recent transformation of Italy's immigration policy into an instance of foreign policy is examined. We point out the role played by Interior Ministers in bridging the domestic-international divide typical of this policy area through the externalisation and securitisation of the issue, implemented via political discourses and practices, at a national level and within the migration and asylum policy system of the European Union (EU) (IAI 2018; Cetin 2015). A few concluding remarks will sum up the article's argument and results, with a few mentions of the present situation.

2. The external dimension of Italy's immigration policy

Remarking that the immigration policy of a country such as Italy has a potentially relevant external dimension may sound like a platitude at a time when the former has come to be commonly regarded by policy-makers, public opinion and (foreign) policy analysts as a crucial part of the country's foreign policy, especially through the conceptual bridge offered by the notion of 'global issues' (Camera dei Deputati 2018; DIPSOC/LAPS and IAI 2017; Di Filippo and Palm 2017).

In fact, the Italian political elite paid little-to-no attention to migration until the fall of the Berlin Wall. Before this, the international human movement was only opposed by radical right-wing forces and the issue was virtually absent from the electoral contest. It was only in the 1990s that Italian governments intensified their foreign policy initiatives in order to facilitate the regular entry and stay of foreign workers from selected categories of countries, and to reverse the traditional trend of low-skilled immigration directed towards Italy (Dottori and Poletti 2014). The wave of Albanians who, in 1991, turned up on Apulia's coastline triggered a response by the Italian authorities which included the dispatch of a thousand unarmed soldiers in the country. This event not only ushered in a steady intensification of irregular immigration and sparked off public and political debates, but also served as a case where international human movement triggered a complex foreign policy action (Perlmutter 1998). The 1990s also marked the start of Italy's commitment to strengthen collaboration on migration with third countries – as evidenced by an almost continuous, albeit frequently troubled, diplomatic relationship with Libya. After the 9/11 attacks, discourses about immigration focused on questions about identity and religion, albeit with a strong security connotation that had a bearing on the foreign policy conduct of the country, such as Italy's participation in the international military campaign launched by the United States government to tackle Sunni Islamist fundamentalist armed groups (Zotti and Parsi, *forthcoming*).

However, it was the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2014-15 – which, as regards Italy, peaked in 2016, when about 180,000 people sailing from North Africa reached the country's coast – and the sudden increase in the salience of the issue that put back in the spotlight the supposedly crucial nexus between Italy's migration and foreign policies. The centre-left coalition governments in office at the height of the crisis – Matteo Renzi's (2014–2016) and Paolo Gentiloni's (2016–2018) – had to manage an unprecedented humanitarian crisis triggered by a dramatic rise in the number of ship wreckages and deaths at sea along the Sicily-bound central Mediterranean route. In fact, in terms of security policy, already in 2013 Italy had increased the resources made available for coastal patrols by launching the search-and-rescue Operation Mare Nostrum. The year-long operation

brought to safety at least 150,000 migrants, but was ended on 31 October 2014 owing to Italian frustrations with the inadequate commitment of EU institutions and the other member states to share the burden of crisis management (Cusumano 2019). Italy's irritation was justified *ex post* by the much more limited scope of the Frontex-conducted Operation Triton that replaced Mare Nostrum, as the former was only designed to control the Union's external borders. This was in line with the duties of the EU agency and the Schengen countries' unwillingness to share the responsibility of a mission operating in proximity of North Africa's coastline. Moreover, throughout the crisis, and even after the number of arrivals dropped in 2017, the Italian government engaged in an increasingly contentious relationship with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) participating in the management of the emergency through their search-and-rescue operations. Despite the crucial contribution provided by organisations such as Migrant Offshore Aid Station, Médecins Sans Frontières and Sea Watch in preventing more tragedies at sea, the Italian governments acquiesced to the notion that NGOs served as a (more or less conscious) pull factor in migration and as enablers of smuggling and trafficking. Accordingly, Italian authorities put their efforts into imposing limitations on non-governmental migrant rescuing, most notably through a code of conduct to be signed by maritime NGOs engaged in search-and-rescue missions. The Gentiloni cabinet – especially through the action of interior minister Marco Minniti – also launched negotiations with President Fayez al-Sarraj of Libya in a new agreement on the repatriation of irregular immigrants leaving for Europe from the country's shores. This foreign policy action was complementary to the reopening of Italy's Identification and Expulsion Centres, which resulted in a significant increase in the repatriation of irregulars. The Minniti-led 'foreign immigration policy' of the Gentiloni cabinet also included the 2017 meetings with the Interior Ministers of Niger, Chad and Libya in order to build migration centres in North Africa to cut off the migration flow along the Central Mediterranean route.

The attempts of centre-left governments to respond 'assertively' to the migration crisis can be held to evidence a sort of contagion effect by part of the centre-right political platform. Yet, although during the crisis both centre-right and centre-left representatives did change their negative views of the effects of immigration – especially as concerns repercussions on the national economy – the literature has identified no evident sign of a general culture-based shift towards the rejection of immigrants (Di Mauro and Verzichelli 2019; Urso 2018). If that is so, the 'continuity of external immigration policy' (Strazzari and Grandi 2019) after the handover to the Conte I cabinet – the 'first populist government of Western Europe' (laboriously) formed after the 2018 general election, supported by League (*Lega*) and the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 stelle* - M5s) (Garzia 2018) – cannot be traced back to a dramatic change in the ideological orientations of Italy's political actors, but to structural aspects which will be examined in section four. For the moment, it is worth pointing out the inconsistency between, on the one hand, the substantial continuity of the Conte I cabinet's international dimension of immigration policy with those of previous governments' – as regards, for instance, restrictions on search-and-rescue activities at sea, and a higher-profile role for the Interior Minister in issues that had once fallen within the remit of the Foreign Affairs Ministry (Strazzari and Grandi 2019) – and, on the other hand, the emphasis with which the new executive

presented itself as the 'government of change', declaredly aimed at disrupting the entrenched patterns of mainstream Italian politics and policies.

Especially in the domestic sphere, the government did forcefully argue for and, to some extent, actually launch even more severe immigration policy measures, blending together issues of national identity, public order and anti-terrorist measures (Helbling and Meierrieks 2020). This is clearly the case with the so-called 'Security Decree' and the 'Follow-up Security Decree' (*Decreto Sicurezza* and *Decreto Sicurezza bis*) both represented as aiming to increase Italians' security through a restrictive reform of Italian policies, in compliance with an emergency approach, embraced despite the drop of arrivals to pre-2014 levels. The adoption processes of the decrees also served as highly effective focal points of the national, and to some extent European, public debate. Among the changes brought about by these secondary legislative measures are the reform of the status-determination process and the reception of asylum-seekers (with the replacement of humanitarian protection with time-limited special permits unconvertable into residence permits). Moreover, the decrees radically redesigned the reception system by granting to beneficiaries of international protection access only to the reception structures directly managed by local councils, formerly known as the much-praised System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers, and Refugees – SPRAR. Tougher sanctions were also levied on NGO ships seeking to bring into Italy migrants rescued in the Mediterranean. The latter measure, in particular, created the conditions for the government – namely in the person of the deputy head of government, Interior Minister, and League leader Matteo Salvini – to put more effectively into practice its antagonistic stance towards NGOs, as evidenced by the June 2019 incident with the Sea Watch 3 vessel.[3] The government would eventually pursue a fully-fledged strategy aimed at denying entry to Italian ports to vessels involved in search-and-rescue operations (including commercial ships and even the Italian coast guard unit Diciotti) (De Vittor 2018).

A string of incidents with NGOs dominated the political and public debate on migration, and were cunningly played out by Matteo Salvini, who used his prominent official position as a platform from which to conduct what seemed like a permanent election campaign around the issue (Newell 2020). On this account, key members of the cabinet and a number of politicians, pundits and parts of the media kept on referring to migrants as 'clandestine', which simply refutes and abridges the difference between forced and unforced immigration (*see below*), e.g., 'the free ride is over (*la pacchia è finita*) for clandestine immigrants' (Adnkronos 2018). In fact, the League and the M5s respective anti-immigration stances rested on only partially overlapping ideological premises and have been incorporated in different political strategies in different policy arenas (Carlotti and Gianfreda 2020). While the League's opposition to immigration is based on xenophobic, nativist, welfare-chauvinist or nationalistic arguments, that of the M5s is more

[3] On 12 June 2019, Sea-Watch 3 rescued 53 migrants off the Libyan coast. The ship's captain, Carola Rackete, refused to disembark the rescued migrants in Tripoli, arguing that this could not be considered a 'safe harbour', and instead moved towards Lampedusa, considered the closest safe one. Two days later, on the basis of the first version of the Follow-Up Security decree, Interior Minister Matteo Salvini issued an administrative decree that banned Sea-Watch 3 from entering Italian waters. After a two-week standoff with the Italian authorities, on 29 June, Rackete decided to dock in Lampedusa, in defiance of Salvini's ban, arguing that the rescued migrants were exhausted. After disembarkation, Rackete was arrested for having broken the blockade. She was released a few days later.

instrumental to a general denunciation of the mismanagement of the *res publica* by mainstream parties, and the elite's alleged collusion with organized crime (Bulli and Soare 2018). Moreover, the M5s position on immigration was also characterised, like the League's, by a string of recriminations against the EU's inaction and lack of solidarity. Nonetheless, the League's aggressive rhetoric on the topic also gave voice to sentiments quite widespread among M5s voters and some representatives, despite the latter party's more nuanced official position (Mosca and Tronconi 2019). By more or less explicitly subscribing to simplistic formulas such as 'let's help them at home' (*aiutiamoli a casa loro*), the M5s not only reinforced the numerous clichés on which the Italian public debate on migration was so largely built (Ambrosini 2020), but also undermined its declared support for the international regime of refugee protection, which provides for the assessment of asylum seeker status *after* their arrival in a safe haven. The idea is to limit – if not circumvent – the country's duty to deal with asylum requests as formulated in the Geneva Convention by presenting a foreign policy intervention designed to eliminate humanitarian migration's root causes as a more effective and just policy option. That being so, a closer look into the relations between foreign policy (as a practice and an object of analysis) on the one hand, and the different 'kinds' of migrants on which this policy area is premised, on the other, seems in order.

3. Categories of international human movement and the immigration/foreign policy gap

This sketchy overview may appear to be evidence enough to substantiate the currently common assumption that immigration has become, thus and simply, part of Italy's foreign policy. At a closer look, though, one can see that the inclusion of a country's immigration policy within the fold of foreign policy needs at least to be qualified. As argued by Oltman and Renshon (2018), the instruments of foreign policy analysis have rarely been used to examine immigration policy. The point does not merely signal a blind spot in scholarly work; in fact it can be assumed that the theoretical instruments though which the phenomenon is approached may well have been playing an effective role in shaping and perpetuating (and possibly generating) the pressing policy problems posed by international human movements (Scholten 2018; Mayblin 2017; Singleton 2015).

Ordinarily, analytical perspectives place themselves on either side of the domestic-international divide. On the one hand are the approaches focused on domestic politics: that is, those designed, among others, to meet the demands of the national economy for foreign labour and to integrate migrants into society. These research programmes are largely grounded in the methods and assumptions of political economy, and focus on the 'pull' or demand factors that incentivise and regulate migration to a receiving country. This methodological orientation is warranted by the fact that, to this day, immigration remains a matter of individual state policy, and that the sweeping institutionalisation process undergone by international politics over the last seventy years has never included any explicit multilateral mechanisms for cooperation over the labour movement. On the other hand are those theoretical perspectives that concentrate on international relations, especially international norms regarding the treatment of migrants – with an emphasis on asylum seekers and refugees – with an international protection regime of forced migration that is comparatively more formally developed. These approaches focus on 'push' factors

that drive people from their homelands, and concentrate on displaced populace, human rights norms, and institutions and cooperation between states.

This conspicuous separation in the body of work on immigration is reflected in the analytical and practical distinction between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants'. While commonly accepted by practitioners as well as scholars, and fixed in international law by documents such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, the difference between forced and unforced migrants is by and large the result of states' contingent economic and political interests, and is grounded in the structure of the international system that emerged in the aftermath of World War II. At the time, countries found it convenient to differentiate between, on the one hand, foreign workers needed to sustain their post-war reconstruction and industrial development, and on the other, people fleeing from hostile regimes, mostly to re-join their homeland after the dramatic redrawing of national borders and regime-changes experienced by European countries since the 1940s. Throughout the Cold War, each of the contending camps maintained a vested interest in welcoming asylum-seekers claiming to be persecuted by their countries' political regimes. Depriving them of human capital and undermining their credibility, both with their own public and with the international community, amounted to scoring points in their economic and ideological competition with the opposing party.

However, for all its resilience, each arm of the expedient two-fold notion of migration has been put under pressure by a number of factors. As it turned out, (economic) migration was not simply the same as imported labour – apart from the case of 'guestworker systems' – as it came with the costly supplements of family unification and the difficult task of singling out the highly-skilled foreigners sought by increasingly advanced economic systems. At the same time, with the end of the ideological confrontation between liberal-democracies and socialist regimes, the intake of asylum-seekers lost much of its strategic purpose as well as of its economic appeal. The growing humanitarian immigration flows directed towards Western countries were no longer made up prevalently of qualified defectors, but rather destitute people from developing countries.

Since the outbreak of the 2015 migration crisis, Italy, together with most European countries, has been contributing to the gradual erosion of the practical and conceptual backgrounds of the (economic) migrant/refugee distinction. In doing so it has been affecting the conception of immigration policy as a component of its foreign policy. The substitution, via the Security Decree, of humanitarian permits with special permits is a telling case. According to the League, the measure was grounded in the 'excessively wide margins for extensive interpretation' left by the old permits. Admittedly the weaker but also more flexible form of legal protection for refugees in Italy was the one most commonly granted to asylum-seekers until 2017, giving recipients the right to work and access to basic services (Geddes and Petracchin 2020; Ambrosini 2019). The change, though, may not only undermine the conditions of forced immigrants, but it also effectively denies a practice that has allowed Italy to comply with the international regime of refugee protection (and the EU's directions on the issue) despite Italy-specific conditions such as the infamous slowness and backlog cases of the country's judiciary system. Questioning the basic legal premises and the established practices of the international protection regime 'pushes' the protection issue out of the 'protected' domain of international law into that of the more contingency-prone one of international politics. The magnitude of these

increasingly overt reservations about the rationale of the regime might become even more consequent depending on the degree to which the League might succeed in creating a consistent enough coordination among Eurosceptic EU Member States, possibly in connections with extra-European forces interested in undermining the integration process (Bulli and Soare 2018; Makarychev and Terry 2020).

Ironically, the 'artificial' distinction between forced and unforced immigration has been traditionally questioned, pointing out that humanitarian discourses and policy practices aimed at protecting refugees from harm actually end up preventing them from securing an economic livelihood independent of humanitarian assistance (Long 2013). Conversely, anti-immigration forces in Italy – policy-makers and the media – have been playing on, and at the same contesting, the distinction, especially by introducing a number of indefinite categories, making headway towards the notion of 'illegal immigrant' (Greblo 2017). Typical arguments defying the migrant/refugee differentiation are those based on the image of the illegitimate/false asylum seeker, deriving from the spontaneous and/or deliberate exaggeration of valid information – e.g. by Italian police and judicial authorities – about proven or suspected cases of baseless applications (Benzoni 2019). The aim is to diffuse the notion that all people fleeing from persecution are *by default* potential freeloaders on the international protection system and the receiving country's resources (Bontempelli 2016). On the other hand, the idea of 'helping migrants in their own home countries', a notion prominent in the public debate since the time of the Renzi government, is premised on the idea that immigration is a pathological symptom whose root-causes have to be extirpated (Ambrosini 2020). Accordingly, finding durable solutions for immigrants is out of the question, as the emergency framework for forced migration is also projected on human movement triggered by the explicit desire to move and settle in a different country, with the prospect of starting a family, or reuniting with members thereof who have already emigrated. This is consistent with the emphasis put on the link between migration and development, whose mutual relations have been extensively explored. Admittedly, the resources and the political commitment assigned by the Italian government to development aid – alone and within the framework of the EU international cooperation and development policy – have hardly ever been up to the task of actually 'helping them at home'. Moreover, the politicisation of this link deliberately overlooks the evidence that, for the most part, the development of poor countries is generally associated with an increase rather than a decrease in emigration, and that international aid is unlikely to have any effect on flows of 'irregular' migrants coming from countries that are either at war or oppressed by regimes persecuting their populations, although development and international partnership with countries of emigration can indeed improve the management of the flows generating from them (Caselli 2019). None of these handicaps, however, is particularly significant to the extent that the actual political goal of immigration policy consists in virtually eliminating immigration, drying out the *transnational* dimension of the phenomenon. The more the *inter-national* dimension of immigration policy is emphasised, the more integration policy issues can be made solely dependent on national economic demands and identity politics, and the object of extremely strict regulation, if not of mere political contention.

4. The emerging foreign policy processes of Italy's immigration policy: the role of Interior Ministers

Determining whether the international-domestic nexus has shifted to the point where immigration policy is now to be examined through the lenses of foreign policy analysis – see Hudson (2005) – is beyond the scope of this article. While the challenging question is better shelved for future inquiry, paying closer attention to the link between micro- and macro-factors, the focus on decision-makers and the interplay between material and ideational factors (as foreign policy analysis does) may offer some interesting insights into our object of study. This is all the truer in light of the strain placed, in recent years, on the material conditions, conceptual distinctions and policy practices that migration policy has been resting on.

Focusing on the process through which the international dimension of Italy's immigration policy has been designed and conducted, one of the most outstanding aspects appears to be the increasingly high-profile role of Interior Ministers who, as far as migration is concerned, have been acting as some of the most prominent 'rivals' of Foreign Affairs Ministers in the country's decision making process (Hill 2016). This trend climaxed during Matteo Salvini's stint at the helm of the government department, and appears to be tightly intertwined with the politicisation process of the issue of immigration. The League leader's pre-eminence in the cabinet may be regarded as an effect of the extraordinary political circumstances that emerged from the 2018 general elections. The Interior Minister's ascendancy can also be seen as just another effect of the 'polycrisis' that had been affecting the EU for the previous ten years, the wave of anti-establishment sentiments that had already arisen in a number of general and local elections across the continent, wreaking havoc on Italy and leading to a relatively unprecedented tri-polar party system, and the impasse of the customary government formation procedures (Garzia 2018; Ceccarini and Bordignon 2018). The 'unnatural' agreement between the M5s and the League – based on a declared aspiration to abandon failed conventional paths in order to improve/transform the country (Giannetti et al. 2018) – was complemented by the inclusion in the cabinet of 'independent' ministers, including Foreign Affairs Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi and, under certain aspects, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte himself (at the time a politically unknown law professor, albeit seen as ideologically close to the M5s). Salvini's politicisation of the immigration issue and its cunning use of the media not only soon made him a figure widely known to the European press and a prominent exponent of the circle of Eurosceptic politicians gearing themselves up in view of the imminent European Parliament election, but also led to his area of activity expanding well beyond the traditional remit of his department, at the expense of a somewhat compliant Foreign Affairs Minister.

Yet, as pointed out by Strazzari and Grandi (2019), the trend of the growing role of the Interior Minister in the external dimension of migration policies had already become apparent with the previous government, as the figure of Marco Minniti had already gathered significant responsibilities in the areas of intelligence and security while in office. The regulation on migrant flows achieved by Minniti proved highly successful in terms of the reduction in migrant landings on Italian shores, although it was his successor who reaped the fruits of these measures, presented as the result of Salvini's repressive actions in government (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019).

Nevertheless, the high-level profiles gained by Minniti and Salvini in this *sui generis* component of Italy's foreign policy – as mentioned, one made possible by the structural transformation of immigration policy – seem to have distinct reasons. As for Marco Minniti, besides his famous (or infamous, depending on the points of view) connections with intelligence services and police forces, other powerful rivals of traditional foreign policy-makers, according to Hill (2016), one may argue that his contribution to the transformation of the role of the Interior Minister into national foreign policy making hinged primarily on his (successful) intention to act on behalf not only of Italy, but of the entire EU. In line with the Renzi cabinet, though with a less swashbuckling attitude, Gentiloni's government tried to forge alliances with EU member states such as France, Germany and Spain, as well as with Mediterranean countries with problems similar to Italy, rather than with the Eurosceptic countries of Eastern Europe (Fabbrini and Zgaga 2019). The person in charge of pursuing this strategy in the migration and asylum policy domain was Marco Minniti, whose approach was largely praised among allied governments and the EU institutions, and equally criticised by the United Nations, NGOs and left-wing leaders due to the questionable effects of his policies in terms of protecting migrants' human rights (Paravicini 2017). Italy's approach became not only a model for other member states, but the *de facto* solution to the migration problem of the entire Union. This is evidenced by the endorsement received by the Council of the Union on July 2017 after the signature of an anti-smuggling memorandum with the Libyan government, the subsequent peace deal he brokered between tribes of the Fezzan region, and the relaunch of the Libyan coast-guard to prevent migrants' boats from leaving the country. The former Minister's enduring reputation within EU policy-making circles is confirmed by his much talked-about candidacy as EU Special Envoy to Libya. Minniti's 'desert diplomacy' in Libya was perfectly consistent with, and deeply embedded in, the more general externalisation of migration and asylum policy pursued by the EU since the issuing of its Global Approach to Migration in 2005, and its revised version in 2011 – the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility. In this perspective, externalization seems to be rather ingrained within the management of migration by the EU. Resembling concentric circles (Parkes 2017), migration management begins with the Schengen area, in which free movement is counterbalanced by increased border surveillance and deterrence, reaches the EU's external border with frontline member states carrying the responsibility for search and rescue and asylum processing, with countries in the European Neighbourhood being increasingly involved, and extends to third countries – as far as Central Asia and the Horn of Africa – via the policy of externalisation of border control and migration management (Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi 2014).

In a nutshell, the transformation undergone by the relations between migration and foreign policy under the Gentiloni cabinet can be regarded as perfectly in line with Italy's traditional goal of being put on a par with member states such as Germany and France, and in a more central position in the EU decision-making process – and in doing so, trying to manage, and possibly defuse, the increasing politicisation of the issue. On the other hand, Matteo Salvini's role in the inclusion of immigration as a foreign policy component, while not independent from the EU policy framework, seems to rest on yet another traditional feature of Italian foreign policy. Elaborating on Furlong (2014), it may be argued that Salvini's prominence is a remarkable case of the re-emergence of a 'normalisation

trend' of this policy area; that is, the assimilation of foreign policy making with the rest of national public policy. The interaction of foreign and internal politics in Italy before the international and domestic political upheaval triggered by the end of the Cold War was usually understood to be dominated by the so-called *vincolo esterno* ('external constraint'). Owing to the country's geopolitical position, the presence of a sizeable communist party effectively prevented from taking ministerial office and the propensity of potential allies and powerful opposition parties to use foreign policy issues for short-term political advantage, the range of foreign policy choices available to the governing parties was limited, the quality and openness of debate low, and the country's orientation in international affairs directly tied to coalition choices. Before the 1990s, dominant parties and actors played a gate-keeping role in foreign policy, determining the entry and exit of the Foreign Affairs Minister to substantive and partisan policy arenas – i.e., respectively, those aimed at pursuing the interest of the country as a whole, and those of one or more factions and their clients. Hence, due to the figure's lack of 'political dividends' to carry out their own partisan policy, Foreign Affairs Ministers in Italy have almost always been outliers as regards not only the setting and implementation of foreign policy but also the definition of this policy area's effective boundaries. This feature of Italian foreign policy making has in fact never really disappeared, but was restrained by the post-1994 bipolar structure of the party system, which limited political bargaining within the boundaries of each coalition. The exceptional conditions that emerged from the post-2018 general election re-emphasised the gate-keeping role of dominant parties, providing more leeway for political bargaining in cabinet politics, before and after the executive's formation. It comes as no surprise that the unprecedented salience of the migration issue, the changes in the conceptual and material structure of the latter together with the policy practices linked to them – combined with the politicisation of the migratory problem successfully carried out by the League – made the senior position of Interior Minister all the more appealing to Matteo Salvini, as it could be used as a political springboard, unlike the 'hammock post' offered by the Foreign Affairs ministry. What is more singular, though, is that the regained gate-keeping role of an assertive (and experienced) party such as the League and of a personality like Salvini, who had successfully personalised the political process, presenting himself as the 'strongman' able to tackle Italian society's migration-related demands for security, allowed the extension of his ministry's remit to virtually the entire external dimension of immigration policy.

This is not to say that Salvini's 'immigration policy as foreign policy' is independent of the European dimension. The EU has indeed offered a specific context – a fertile ground one might say – in which Salvini's discourses and policies on migration, otherwise likely to be regarded as 'extreme' and 'unacceptable', could be relatively 'normalized'. This phenomenon, rather counterintuitive given the values the EU is usually associated with, seems especially evident in the peculiar area of migration represented by 'migrant smuggling'. In particular, during the migration crisis, migrant smuggling rapidly gained relevance in the EU's agenda (Perkowski and Squire 2018), as laid out in a series of policy documents adopted in fast succession between 2015 and 2016 (Fassi 2020). Overall, the measures elaborated by the EU to contrast migrant smuggling, from EUNavForMed Sophia to the strengthening of Frontex and Europol's mandate, convey the notion of a serious security threat – closely compatible with Matteo Salvini's agenda and rhetoric

against *i trafficanti di uomini* ('people traffickers/smugglers') – and one that demands 'a powerful demonstration of the EU's determination to act' (European Commission 2015: 3). Significantly, observers have used the expressions 'EU's war against smuggling' (Albahari 2018) to describe this policy and narrative stance. In this view, the EU discourse on human smuggling echoes the 'security narrative' that the literature has identified more generally in relation to migration (Ceccorulli and Lucarelli 2017), and seems to bear strong linkages with the 'threat/risk narrative' that has been recognized as one of the main strands in EU external relations (Nitou 2013). Shifting the focus on smuggling, away from the much more sensitive issue of migrant rescue and reception, makes it more likely that the EU and its member states find an agreement around a (normative) lower common denominator (Fassi 2020). In addition, the proposed solution is increasingly based on the recourse to an externalization logic that shifts the material and normative burden towards third countries, reinforcing the already existing dynamics we have observed in the case of Italy.

5. Conclusions

The somewhat unexpected termination of the 'unnatural' League-M5s (quasi-)coalition has seemingly put a stop to the high profile of Interior Minister as regards the external dimension of Italy's foreign policy. Nevertheless, the choice of a 'technocrat' such as Maria Lamorgese – a long-standing civil servant, former prefect and member of the Council of State[4] – might also be regarded as confirmation of the significance of the rise of Italy's migration policy to the status of 'high politics', at least to the extent the appointment serves as a break from the increasing politicisation of the policy issue and the prominence lately acquired by the heads of the Ministry of the Interior. As the article has tried to show, the transformation of the external dimension of migration policy into an indeed crucial component of the country's immigration policy is deeply, if problematically, intertwined with the complicated – to the point of incoherent – inner working of the EU migration policy system and the Union as a political system at large.

On the one hand, Marco Minniti, a left-wing minister who tried to snatch the right's monopoly of security issues, succeeded to a significant extent in turning his 'philosophy' – according to which 'security is freedom because it is quite clear that there cannot be an idea of security if individual freedom is not guaranteed just as there is no real freedom if the safety of everyday life is not guaranteed' (Gargiulo 2018) – into that of the EU. In so doing he became the champion, as much praised as contested, of the externalisation of the latter's migration and asylum policy.

On the other hand, much of Matteo Salvini's political fortunes are the outcome of the politicisation not only of migration issues, but of EU political processes. This is evidenced by the position that Eurosceptic stances have gained in the League's political platform and the importance acknowledged to intra-EU alliances with likeminded parties. At the same time, one can see that, although as Interior Minister he remained quite aloof from EU ordinary policy making, he found a significant consonance – albeit somewhat distorted to his own political ends – with some trademark migration policy measures and strategies of the Union. These were based on the criminalisation and

[4] A legal-administrative consultative body ensuring the legality of public administration.

securitisation of migration that inform such a big part of EU policy in this domain, and part of an even wider trend (Böhmelt and Bove 2019). It remains, therefore, to be seen if Italy will be able to hold such a prominent position in European and Mediterranean 'circles' of its foreign policy (another 'traditional' interpretative scheme of Italy's external action) as was the case for 'equal and opposite reasons' with these two ministries, while also contributing to a more solid protection of migrants' human rights, possibly providing them with the possibility to actively participate in a reasonable process of integration (or failure to do so) in Italian and European society.

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From enthusiasm to retreat: Italy and military missions abroad after the Cold War

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Abstract

Italy represents an important case of defense policy change after the Cold War. While during the bipolar era the country rarely intervened abroad and was deeply constrained in its defense policy by domestic as well as international factors, in the post-Cold War era, Italy has constantly intervened in major conflicts in the Balkans, the Middle East and Afghanistan. Yet, in the past decade, and especially after the 2011 Libyan intervention, Italian activism has consistently diminished. The purpose of this article is to describe this trend and to review theories that have been put forward to explain Italian activism (and retrenchment). While several insights can emerge from multiple studies dedicated to the topic, we argue that some elements such as legacies and institutional constraints have been somewhat overlooked and actually open promising avenues for research.

1. Introduction

In 2019, Italy deployed around 6,300 soldiers in military missions abroad. In 2005 there were almost 11,000. In 1990, before the end of the Cold War and national involvement in the operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm (Iraq, 1990-91), just fewer than 100 Italian troops were involved in (United Nations) military interventions around the world. In the 1945-1989 time frame, Italy participated in seven UN missions with military personnel. In 2001 Italy deployed its soldiers in ten UN operations *at the same time* (Coticchia 2014). These numbers summarily describe the trend in Italian interventionism after the end of the Cold War. Starting in the 1990s, overall commitment grew fast, then further expanded in geographical scope and intensity of commitment, and has finally been declining steadily since 2009-2010, maintaining in the most recent years the same average (around 6,000) of personnel deployed abroad. Furthermore, Italian troops were mostly (re)located to the most vital area for Italian interests – the so-called 'Enlarged Mediterranean' (White Paper 2015).

What explains this pattern? The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, the article reviews three decades of Italian military operations abroad, dissecting the major trends. We do not look at all defense policy changes or their relationship with foreign policy, as

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this has already been well dissected elsewhere (Carati and Locatelli 2017; Isernia and Longo 2017; Cladi and Locatelli 2019; Colombo and Magri 2019). We do not, either, look in detail at interventions on the ground (Coticchia and Moro 2015, 2016; Ruffa 2018). While most analyses focus on post-2001, we believe a detailed analysis of the 1990s is in order as it is essential to understand subsequent developments. As we briefly argue below, looking at this not-so-distant past allows us to consider factors that play a considerable role over time. The 1990s constitute, in fact, a decade of upheaval in Italian defense policy, featuring important military commitments abroad – which started with participation in the Gulf War and proceeded with large deployments in Somalia and (especially) in the Balkans – and with key reforms that have re-shaped the institutional landscape of Italian defense.

Second, the article reviews the most compelling explanations for how interventions unfolded and for variations across time. We reconstruct the debate and the different approaches, singling out what different contributions have said to explain each phase. We also argue that factors such as domestic political context, and especially institutional constraints and legacies, have been somewhat overlooked and actually open promising avenues for research. We mention three types of factors particularly for understanding Italian military missions abroad. First, one element of remarkable continuity across these three decades is the relative bipartisan consensus by major parties on foreign interventions. Second, Italian institutional context provided favorable conditions for military interventions to occur: parliamentary veto powers were never really a hurdle for governments willing to intervene. In the last decade, we show that endogenous changes interacted with external ones to reduce the margin of action of executives. Finally, change in Italian defense policy has been deeply shaped by experience on the ground. In other words, by being extremely active, Italian armed forces have undergone a process of thorough change that has been elsewhere defined as 'transformation in contact' (Foley et al. 2011). The article – part of a research agenda that has involved the authors for more than a decade now – preliminarily shows how these elements contribute to explaining *why* interventions occurred, but also *how* the Italian armed forces effectively acted on the ground and implemented change 'at home'. The focus of the analysis is on force deployment over time, although inevitably defense reforms will be touched upon as they both reflected the lessons of interventions and subsequently shaped them (Coticchia and Moro 2014).

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 looks at interventions in the nineties. Rather than providing a complete overview of such interventions (Ignazi et al. 2012), the section aims to present the 'key decisions' that were made and that are needed to understand subsequent choices. Section 3 looks into the post-9/11 phase, delving into Afghanistan and Iraq (but also Lebanon). Section 4 discusses the intervention in Libya and Italian retrenchment in the last decade. The key question here is related to how the political parties that are emerging as leading the restructuring of the political system view military operations abroad. The conclusion summarizes findings and suggests four themes to advance the current research agenda.

2. Searching for a new role: interventions in the 1990s

The military intervention in the 1991 Gulf War signaled a clear watershed in Italian defense policy. Italian armed forces had participated in some relevant UN-mandated

missions during the Cold War, such as ONUC in Congo (1960-1964) and UNIFIL in Lebanon (1978), but the Gulf War represented a clear scaling up in terms of size and intensity of commitment. For the first time since the end of World War II, Italian warplanes were involved in air strikes against a sovereign country. The decision to intervene was made with the Andreotti government, invoking article 11 of the Constitution, interpreted as mandating participation to UN-led missions that consisted of 'international police' functions (Coticchia and Moro 2020). The mission clearly proved the operational limits of armed forces that were designed for territorial defense in the Cold War scenario, were based on conscription and had a fairly limited number of troops deployable in complex military operations.

Yet, the Iraqi endeavor was just the first of a long series of undertakings. Italian armed forces participated in the UN missions in Somalia and then in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as in the NATO airstrikes against Serbia in 1999. In 1997 Italy also led a (successful) multinational mission in Albania. Somalia showed another key feature of the post-Cold War environment and the role of Western armed forces in it. Originally designed as a non-combat mission within the UNITAF umbrella (*Unified Task Force*), whose primary objective was to guarantee the possibility of aid and immediate relief action to go through in a large-scale humanitarian crisis, the situation on the ground for intervening forces rapidly deteriorated (Loi 2004). The following UN-mandated UNOSOM II recognized the need for more combat-ready troops, and Italy sent armored vehicles, attack helicopters, *Carabinieri* and army paratroopers. Somalia was important for two major reasons. First, it was an early (and, by future standards, quite limited) attempt to deploy troops in high-intensity environments. Second, it showed the type of activities Italian armed forces would engage in while deployed: a focus on social and economic development and reconstruction, especially through civil-military cooperation (later known as CIMIC), as well as on the training of local police and military forces. At the same time, the operation 'Ibis' in Somalia revealed a problem that would (dramatically) also affect other Italian missions abroad in the post-Cold War era: a dangerous gap between the war-like reality on the ground and the peacekeeping/peacebuilding setting of the operation, with limited availability of appropriate military assets and inadequate rules of engagement (Ignazi et al 2012), a gap that in Mogadishu, as later in Iraq (and, especially, Nasiriya), led to dramatic consequences.

The interventions in the Balkans, from Albania to Bosnia, from Macedonia to Kosovo, reveal the transformation of Italian armed forces and their growing capabilities in carrying out multiple operations with very different tasks, such as peacekeeping, peacebuilding, naval blockade, humanitarian intervention, and even air strikes. National military engagement in the Balkans, from 1991 onwards, was constant and remarkable, with thousands of troops deployed – and employed – on the ground (as well as at sea and in the air). Italy provided its significant contribution to allies as well as to regional and international organizations (NATO or UN), thus transforming its foreign policy role from 'security consumer' – as it was in the post WWII era – to 'security provider' after the end of the bipolar era (Walston 2011). Italy became an 'international peacekeeper' (Giacomello and Veerbek 2011), adopting the armed forces as the main tool of its foreign policy. Such a stunning evolution is well described, supported, and justified by official documents such as '*Nuovo Modello di Difesa*' (1991) and the 2002 'White Book' (2002).

What are the major drivers of such an important commitment? On the whole, by adopting concepts and terminology provided by Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature (Hermann 1990), we can affirm that the transformation of Italian foreign and defense policy in the 1990s represented something between a 'goal change' and even an 'international orientation change', which modified Italy's global role and activities. Notwithstanding such a striking evolution, the overall debate on the topic has been relatively limited, also due to cultural constraints in discussing defense matters in public (Panebianco 1997; Rosa 2014, 2016; Coticchia 2019). However, reviewing the scholarly debate, we can distinguish several potential explaining factors, connected to different IR paradigms and approaches. In this context, four main variables that the literature has emphasized to explain the specific directions of Italian defense policy in the 1990s can be identified: systemic changes and national interests, prestige, multilateral institutions, and norms.

First, some authors looked at the broader levels of analysis as a vital premise to understand the transformation that has occurred: the end of the bipolar era *and* the collapse of the Italian party system, along with their Cold War constraints (Andreatta 2001; Cotta and Verzichelli 2008; Brighi 2013), were identified as clear watersheds. Andreatta (2001) argues that the end of the Cold War opened an unprecedented space of action for Italian foreign and defense policy. In a similar vein, Carati and Locatelli describe the passage as a change in terms of 'permissive cause' of Italian military engagement in multinational operations (2017). Second, in line with a traditional structural realist approach, some authors focused on the strategic adjustment (Coralluzzo 2012) required by the evolution of the international system, which posed new threats (such as regional instability, affected by the spread of civil conflicts at the beginning of the 1990s) that Italy had to address for protecting 'vital national interests' (Bonvicini and Silvestri 2015), also with military tools (Croci and Valigi 2013). Second, rooted in the neo-classical realist approach, other scholars argued that the military dynamism of a 'middle power' like Italy (Santoro 1991) was mainly aimed at improving its 'prestige' (which is conceived as the social recognition of their power) abroad (Davidson 2008, 2011, Cladi and Webber 2011, Coticchia 2019). Third, in line with neoliberalism, the desire to maintain strong involvement in multilateral institutions (Attinà 2009; Bonvicini et al 2011) is another crucial explaining variable in Italian military activism, from Somalia to the Balkans, where the Italian contribution to the UN mission has been most relevant. This explanation is sometimes linked to alliance politics, which is a crucial variable from a realist perspective. 'Realists also expect states to act in ways that may be costly – even in domestic political terms – in order to preserve valued alliances' (Coticchia and Davidson 2019, Ratti 2011).[1] In other words, Italy was 'a multilateral actor' (Ratti 2011). Finally, authors emphasized the influence played by humanitarian norms and strategic culture in shaping foreign and defense policy decisions since the beginning of the 1990s (Ignazi et. al. 2012, Rosa 2014). According to this viewpoint, Italy modified its national role conception (Holsti 1970), adopting the function of 'international peacekeeper'.

[1] The literature on Italy and coalition building through the use of "allied payments" is still limited, if not absent. On state-to-state payments (i.e. "deployment subsidies" or "political side deals") as practices to convince allies to take part in multinational operations see Henke (2019).

These (non-mutually exclusive) explanations certainly contribute to our understanding of the motives that have pushed Italian governments to intervene abroad since the collapse of the Berlin wall. Three types of factors have been somewhat overlooked by the afore-mentioned analyses. First, starting in 1992, political support for troop deployment has been very broad, including all major parties on both sides of the political spectrum. Recent empirical analyses (Coticchia and Vignoli 2019) confirm the existence of a long-standing bipartisan consensus on military operations. Especially the UN multilateral frameworks and non-combat operations are correlated with a high level of parliamentary support. On the contrary, the 'politically contested missions' (e.g., Iraq in 2003), which rarely eroded the bipartisan consensus, had a strong combat component without a clear multilateral framework (Coticchia and Vignoli 2019). This consensus is also forged on the basis of a shared narrative that takes hold: military interventions are always labelled as 'peace missions', no matter their differences in terms of context (more or less violent) and type of activities that are undertaken (more or less combat-prone) (Battistelli et al 2012, Ignazi et al. 2012, Coticchia 2014, IAI-LASP 2017). The narrative of 'peace missions' is an enduring feature of all subsequent interventions, despite the evolution of Italian missions on the ground.

The second factor that should be looked at more closely is the level of parliamentary scrutiny. Literature on parliamentary war powers (Peters and Wagner 2011, Mello 2014, Dieterich et al. 2015) has shown how different arrangements in terms of legislative-executive relations can affect the propensity to intervene: cabinets that deal with parliaments that have fewer formal and informal powers of authorization and oversight of the missions face a favorable opportunity structure that allows them to act more freely. This is the story that unfolds in Italy after the Cold War. The Italian parliament rarely intervenes *ex ante*, that is before the mission, and generally is presented with a *fait accompli* and the ensuing pressure to approve the deployment of troops once these are already operating on the ground (Coticchia and Moro 2020). Mandates and rules of engagement are debated here, but rarely, if ever, has this meant that parliament was able to affect how missions operated on the ground. Besides, debates in parliament also raise minimal attention in public opinion: street protests against interventions occurred in the nineties – especially before the interventions in Iraq and Kosovo (Bellucci and Isernia 1996; Battistelli 2004) – but they were rarely translated into meaningful parliamentary debates as minorities could do little to affect the legislative outcomes (Ronzitti 2016; Coticchia and Vignoli 2019; Coticchia and Moro 2020).

A third, and often overlooked, element is linked to how the first military interventions contributed to shaping future ones. This happened indirectly and also directly, as armed forces operating in new environments started identifying a series of practices, operational procedures, and doctrines that were passed on to units that were intervening in the same and subsequent missions. This 'transformation in contact' was at first relatively informal, embedded in the practices of the deployed units (Coticchia and Moro 2016). But effects on future interventions were not limited to such outcomes of transmission. The experience of the early interventions, in fact, also shaped major defense reforms in the 1990s. For sure, the overall change in the security environment mattered a lot: the end of the Soviet threat meant in Italy, as elsewhere, a reduction in the overall defense budgets and a shift from territorial defense. Yet, experience on the ground contributed to shaping

the direction taken by Italian armed forces. In 1991, the so-called 'New Defense Model' represented a clear move toward power projection capabilities, paving the way for the suspension of conscription, and also focusing on the need for digitalization of the armed forces. The lessons of the 1991 Gulf War were clearly a strong push in that sense (Briani 2012). In 1997, a major overhaul of the defense establishment (the so-called Andreatta law of 1997, after the minister of defense that promoted it) led to an increase in jointness and interoperability, with increased coordination between the armed forces seen as essential to operating in the new threat environment (as proven by the missions undertaken until then, from Somalia to the Balkans). At the beginning of the new century, conscription was suspended. An all-professional force, again, was the only one deemed capable of deploying rapidly and effectively (Coticchia and Moro 2016a).

3. Interventions in the age of the global war on terror (2001-2011): threats, followership, ideas and the role of domestic factors

Enthusiasm towards the so-called liberal interventionism of the 1990s soon gave way to a different context in which military interventions took place. 9/11 and the US Administration's response to it, in fact, drastically changed the overall rationale for interventions, with the global war on terror substituting for the humanitarian paradigm (Weiss 2004). The literature has illustrated the gradual convergence between the goals of the defense policy adopted by Western countries in the bipolar era: from territorial defense towards expeditionary crisis-management missions (Dyson 2008). Such a process was marked by a fast transformation in the new century, when countries like Italy started to be constantly engaged also in complex and dramatic missions within the framework of the 'war on terror' (Farrell et al 2013). The Italian contribution to international operations in the post-2001 era was remarkable: in the first decade of the century Italy had an average of 8,000 units employed abroad (Carati and Locatelli 2017). Moreover, contrary to European countries like Germany, France and even the UK, Italian troops were deployed in *all* the relevant crises that occurred: Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and, on the eve of the following decade, Libya.

Italy contributed to both NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission, becoming the leading nation of the Western area in 2006, and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, 2001-2006), participating in the mission Nibbio (2003) at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. ISAF is the most important mission that Italy has undertaken since the end of WWII, as well illustrated by its length and dramatic (economic and human) costs. The Italian government deployed troops also in the controversial operation 'Antica Babilonia' (2003-2006) in Iraq. Italy provided its contribution to the US some months after the beginning of the operation, which was the most contested at the domestic level (Battistelli et al 2012). Only when the Iraqi regime collapsed did the Italian troops arrive on the ground in southern Iraq. Peace rhetoric, here, has been deemed as severely affecting operational requirements (Coticchia 2018, 118), with dramatic consequences in terms of adequate equipment, caveat, and rules of engagement. Indeed, on November 12th, 2013, Italy suffered the bloodiest attack in its post-WWII defense: 17 soldiers and 2 civilians were killed by a suicide truck (Petrilli and Sinapi 2007).

The military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan laid emphasis on the role of counter-insurgency as a crucial approach to addressing the crisis on the ground (Kilcullen 2011),

revealing how the post 2001 interventions were qualitatively different from those of the nineties. The mission in Lebanon was, in this sense, an exception (Cladi and Locatelli 2019). This is both because of its traditional peacekeeping nature and also for the substantial support from Italian public opinion which, on the contrary, has generally provided limited backing to post-2001 Italian interventions (Battistelli et al 2012). Finally, at the beginning of the next decade, Italy participated in the operation 'Unified Protector', NATO's intervention against the Gaddafi regime in 2011, exactly one century after the Italian war in Libya with the first air strike against civilians in history. Despite its initial reluctance, due to the close economic and political relationship with the regime, the Italian government provided its relevant military contribution to the mission.

How can we explain the significant military activism that marked the Italian defense policy in the new century? Different possible explanations exist. First, the terrorist threat posed to national security, along with the never-ending instability at the borders, have been interpreted as vital reasons behind national military dynamism, from Afghanistan to Libya (Coralluzzo 2012). However, analyses of the parliamentary and public debates, as well other empirical assessments of the decision-making process, have revealed how the threat posed by transnational terrorism in the post-2001 period did not play a significant role (Ignazi et al 2012; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2017). Nonetheless, the existence of crucial economic and strategic interests has often been viewed as fundamental in the case of Libya (Croci and Valigi 2013).

Second, despite recognizing the relevance of new multidimensional threats to international instability (Pirani 2010), several scholars have focused on values and global norms. For instance, the so-called 'Responsibility to Protect', R2P, shaped UNSC resolution 1973, paving the way to the military intervention in Libya (Bellamy 2015). From a constructivism point of view, the cultural interpretation of global norms shaped Italian defense policy, fostering an active humanitarian role in regional and humanitarian crises. The case of the Italian mission in Haiti, after the earthquake of 2010, could be adopted as another clear example (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2016).

Third, the interplay of prestige and alliance politics can be considered the mainstream variable adopted within the scholarly debate to explain the Italian military involvement in dangerous combat operations. According to this perspective, Italy has deployed troops from Afghanistan to Libya in order to acquire prestige in terms of social acknowledgment, increasing its relative power (Davidson 2011). It must be noticed how in this period, and especially in the case of Iraq, the prevailing view in going for troop deployment was linked to increasing the country's place within the alliance, by being a loyal and reliable ally to the major power (at least more loyal and reliable than, for instance, France and Germany).

Finally, from a broader viewpoint, the search for status has been identified as a driver of Italian military activism. Status-seeking has been defined as an attribute that is 'granted or accorded by others' (Dafoe et al. 2014). Unable to have recognition due to its institutionalized role, as happens to comparable countries in terms of GDP such as France and the UK that have a UN permanent seat, Italy has increasingly viewed contribution to multinational and multilateral military operations as a means to acquiring the reputation and prestige that would give Italy the 'right place' among nations. In this vein, Carati and Locatelli (2017) developed the concept of 'followership': Italian military commitment as a tool

for seeking status and recognition in the international community. For the authors, followership "is more than just a quest for status" but rather a "deliberate policy that finds its ultimate goal in 'being part' of the international community" (2017, 10). Such an interpretation offers an explanation for the relevance of multilateralism for Italy, despite its potential costs (as indeed illustrated by the expensive and dramatic missions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya).

Academic debate was (temporarily) lively on the specific theme of the supposed discontinuity of the Italian defense policy under the Berlusconi government with reference to multilateralism (Ignazi 2004; Brighi 2008; Croci 2008; Walston 2011). The Berlusconi government's decision to intervene in Iraq after the US unilateral mission, along with the manifold bilateral relationship personally developed by the then Italian Prime Minister, were the main disputed issues. As noticed, Iraq represented a turning point in foreign policymaking as it created an unprecedented need to balance between solidarity with America and with key European allies such as Germany and France (Parsi 2006). This discussion paved the way for further reflections on the role of new drivers behind Italian post-bipolar defense. On the one hand, mainly thanks to Berlusconi's personal activism abroad, several scholars started to pay attention to the role of leaders in Italian defense policy (Ignazi 2004, Diodato and Niglia 2018). On the other hand, the assumed discontinuity in foreign and defense policy was interpreted by looking at the role of 'foreign policy paradigms' that for Brighi (2013) represent mediating factors between domestic and international levels.

All the above-mentioned analyses help in providing a comprehensive picture of the (not mutually exclusive) mechanisms that led to Italian military activism in the new century. Nonetheless, factors such as domestic political context, and especially institutional constraints, have been generally overlooked also in explaining national involvement in the most important Italian operations since WWII. Some authors have occasionally focused on the links between the contingencies of domestic political debate and foreign and defense issues (Carbone 2007, Calossi and Coticchia 2009, Coticchia and Davidson 2018), or on the relevance of electoral politics to explain the (timing of) decisions, such as to intervene in Iraq in 2003 (Davidson 2008). Yet, the recent so-called 'domestic turn' in IR and FPA (Kaarbo 2015), featuring growing attention towards the role of domestic factors such as parties and parliaments, has not been dominant within the Italian scholarly debate on defense policy (an exception is D'Amore 2001). Relatedly, three elements should be emphasized concerning the Italian military missions in 2001-2011.

First, as stressed by Coticchia and Vignoli (2019), an analysis of the votes by Italian parties on military operations in the new century confirms – despite the controversial debates which occurred in the case of Iraq – the permanence of the above-mentioned bipartisan consensus on operations, revealing also how the Italian case corroborates the curvilinear model of the relationship between partisanship and foreign policy (Wagner et al 2017; Osterman et al 2019), increasing from the left to the center-right and then declining again towards the radical right. Second, the dynamics of government–opposition are extremely relevant in explaining the support of parties towards specific operations (Coticchia and Vignoli 2019), revealing a considerable 'instrumentality of the votes', that mainly change according to the current position of parties. Third, despite the approval of the 'Ruffino Resolution' (2001), which introduced the practice of voting on the (re)financing of missions, Italian parliamentary oversight remained limited in practice. Through

legal decrees, the government informed parliament of all the missions abroad but presented them all together (every six months or annually), without providing details on the overall financing, RoE, and nature of the operation. For instance, as reported by Coticchia and Moro (2020), Italian MPs complained regarding the lack of information relating to the significant changes in the structure, aims, and caveats of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan over almost 13 years of intervention. In that sense, the executive autonomy was remarkable, without incurring audience costs (Fearon 1994).

A final driver that merits further attention in explaining the evolution of Italian missions at the beginning of the new century is the way through which the experience on the ground in complex military interventions such as ISAF has contributed to shaping Italian defense policy, fostering organizational learning. For instance, Italian defense was able to learn and adapt regarding the protection of forces after the massive efforts made in the IED's counter-warfare across Afghanistan, Iraq and also Lebanon (Coticchia and Moro 2016b). In this regard, the emulation of allies on the ground was vital, while the influence exerted by the NATO framework – after been involved for years in a combat scenario like Afghanistan – was crucial in shaping the direction of Italian military transformation in Italy, also in terms of doctrinal review. The perception of how precious operations on the ground were in terms of bringing about innovation by allowing the improvement of interoperability and cross-country learning was widely viewed by the leadership of Italian Armed Forces. For example, the Italian Air Force pushed strongly in 2011 to have a NATO framework in the Libyan intervention (Coticchia and Moro 2016b). Multilateralism was not just a guideline for Italian defense but also a required framework for members of the Italian armed forces who had 'got used' to specific common (NATO) procedures and rules after years of engagement. More junior officers seemed to share the belief that participation in international missions was a major driver of military transformation (Moro et al. 2018).

4. The age of restraint: domestic crisis, deployment fatigue and the return of national interests?

The new decade opens with renewed commitment in Afghanistan, strictly linked to the stepping up of the American effort in the region. While Afghanistan, as said, was clearly the most important mission undertaken by the Italian armed forces in the post-WWII era, it was possibly the Libyan War of 2011 that had more visible consequences for the development of Italian defense. On the whole, the 'failures' of most of the post-2001 missions – among which, the negative effects of the Libyan interventions on Italian interests being more easily perceived by political leaders and public opinion (e.g., instability, rising security threats from terrorism to smuggling, collapse of previous economic ties, etc.) – may represent one of the key variables in explaining the considerable shrinkage of Italian military commitment abroad after 2001.

Indeed, two main puzzles emerge by observing the evolution of Italian defense in 2011-2020. First, as stated, following decades of rising military engagement in operations, the numbers of troops deployed in international missions decreased. The overall number of Italian military personnel deployed abroad varied from 9,000 in 2001 to less than 5,000 in 2013 (Coticchia and Moro 2015). Second, Italy started to relocate troops towards a strategic area for vital national interests, defined as the 'Enlarged

Mediterranean' (Brighi and Musso 2017; Grandi and Strazzari 2019). Such a strategic shift, which has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention (exceptions are Marrone and Nones 2016, Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020), has been stressed by both official documents (such as the White Paper 2015) and (bipartisan) political decisions to send troops in new missions in Niger, Tunisia, and Libya.

Therefore, two questions need to be addressed: What are the causes of the reduction in Italian military commitment? What were the drivers of the Italian strategic relocation towards the 'Enlarged Mediterranean'? With reference to the first question: we group together four major hypotheses: 'war fatigue', change in the external environments, the impact of the financial crisis, and a changing domestic political landscape. As stressed above, scholars have noticed how 'war fatigue' and disappointment over the outcomes of major missions abroad – starting with the inability to achieve a satisfactory end state in Afghanistan and Iraq – led public opinion and policy-makers in the West to increasingly doubt that large scale projects of political transformation, supported by considerable troop commitment to guarantee security, were viable at all (Belloni and Moro 2019).

At the same time, changes in the external environment have been seen as deeply affecting the Italian posture. First, US retreat – rhetorically magnified under the Trump administration but started earlier under Obama – signaled shifting US priorities. While overall troop decline in the US, linked to the reduction in deployed personnel in Afghanistan (with Iraq-related reductions starting much earlier) has not been linear, (for instance the end of 2014 saw an increase in deployed troops linked with the anti-ISIL fight), it is clear that the US has adopted a much less interventionist approach in the last decade. The impact on Italian military operations has been seen through realist lenses: the overall shift of the US posture has required Italy to focus more directly on direct management of its immediate threat environment (see also *infra*). In theoretical terms, realist lenses – and especially neo-classical realist ones – can be a good starting point to observe the current wave of change (for a review see Coticchia 2019).

Domestic factors have played an important part as well. First, Italy had to absorb the heavy effects of the financial crisis which started in 2008, which deeply impacted Italian public expenditures, especially since 2011 (with the advent of the caretaker government led by Mario Monti). Budget shrinkage was a crucial determinant of this decline: starting from 2012, the defense budget was reoriented in order to reduce expenditures as a whole while maintaining a relatively high level of operational efficiency. Defense minister Di Paola, previously Chief of the Italian Defense General staff, supervised one of the most radical reforms of defense since the 1990s, entailing a restructuring of the organizational setup that affected overall numbers of personnel as well as careers, offices and structures. The key logic underpinning this reform was that the Italian military could maintain 'deployability' in different missions as a key asset, notwithstanding some cuts: effectiveness was guaranteed by the ability to learn from a now large body of operations. Where operating, in other words, Italian forces would be able to exploit the advantages of their experience and ensuing transformation.

The question of 'where operating', though, became more and more pressing. The financial crisis, in fact, affected the sustainability of large-scale military commitments in operations abroad. Besides political reasons, willingness to limit the extension of national commitments was behind the non-involvement of Italy in operations in Mali and

in Syria. This is clearly connected also with the shift in public opinion. Amid a context of a severe financial crisis, surveys revealed how Italians favored a reduction in global military engagement (IAI-CIRCaP, 2014). In sum, Italian governments have become more reluctant to commit the country to costly and unpopular (Battistelli et al. 2012) military operations abroad. Finally, rising criticism towards the Italian military operations from new and electorally successful (populist) parties such as the M5S (Tronconi 2015) has perhaps shaped the debate and may have contributed to revising Italian military dynamism all around the globe (Coticchia and Vignoli 2020). Despite their 'pacifist' rhetoric, however, the M5S when in government, voted for all the missions supported by the previous Italian government, sharing the new strategic focus on the 'Enlarged Mediterranean' (see Coticchia forthcoming).

Two factors seem particularly appropriate in explaining the Italian strategic relocation in the Enlarged Mediterranean, where Italy acted – as it did in Niger – without the traditional multilateral framework that almost always featured in national military engagement in the post-Cold War era. First, the role of new and rising threats to national interests appears fundamental. As well illustrated by official documents (White Paper 2015, Gilli et al. 2015), public and parliamentary debates (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2020), and surveys on threat perceptions in the armed forces (Moro et al. 2018), the interlinked challenges posed by regional instability, terrorism and illegal human trafficking have apparently been a crucial element in shaping political decisions regarding Italian involvement in the region. Ceccorulli and Coticchia (2020) have highlighted how the Italian strategic considerations related to the 'pivot to Africa' – with the 'relocation of troops' from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Sahel and Northern Africa – were strongly connected to the perceived need to support the capabilities of local states, such as Niger, in fighting against terrorism and, especially, migrant smuggling/trafficking. Second, domestic factors matter in explaining the evolution of Italian defense policy and military engagement abroad. The political preferences of Italian parties clearly converged (as illustrated by the bipartisan votes in parliament in 2018 and 2019) around the goal of re-focusing military interventions in the Enlarged Mediterranean, where national interests are perceived to be at risk. Moreover, this consensus seems to be in line with the rising attention and concern of Italian public opinion towards the challenges posed by terrorism and, above all, by illegal immigration (Eurobarometer 2016; 2017; 2018; IAI-Laps 2018). In sum, the salience devoted by domestic actors (parties, leaders, and public opinion) towards the threats caused by instability in the Enlarged Mediterranean contributes to explaining the evolution of Italian defense policy in recent years.

A last change is worth mentioning, as it refers to institutional constraints. In 2016, a comprehensive law on missions (Law 145/2016) was introduced. While in the previous decades voting on missions had been, in substance, reduced to a choice over whether to finance all ongoing missions (with troops already operating on the ground), the new law allowed opposition parties to finally discriminate between the various (groups of) operations (Ronzitti 2017). This would permit parliament to take back some of its 'war powers', ending a long period in which executives were largely free of constraint. It is yet too early to assess the impact of the reform. At the time of writing, only four votes have occurred with the new law. Delays in parliamentary discussion have remained dramatically unaltered: in the case of

the mission in Niger deployment was again precedent to parliamentary vote. Thus, de facto, parliamentary oversight of the executive seems to be still quite limited.

5. Conclusions

Italian defense policy has undergone major transformation in the three decades since the end of the Cold War, with frequent participation in military interventions abroad that lasted from the 1991 Gulf War to the 2011 Libyan War, to then somewhat diminish in the past decade. The objective of this piece is to review this evolution and to assess the arguments brought to the fore to explain it.

Table 1 provides a map of the major explanations of Italian military operations in different phases and across different interventions. We do not argue that some theories 'do better than others', but simply state that theories under the chosen labels have been used to shed light on Italian interventions. There is no pretense of exhaustivity, and we have selected articles and authors that make somehow *explicit* reference to the different drivers of military interventions mentioned here. Perhaps in the future further studies will close gaps and address the phenomenon under new lenses or re-adapt existing ones.

As revealed also by Table. 1, the nature of the specific subset of foreign and defense policy represented by military missions lends itself to multiple interpretations. A starting point is the changing systemic incentives to which Italy has to respond. Several authors have indeed focused on the strategic adjustment imposed by the end of the bipolar confrontation to Italian defense, which acted in a different scenario mainly to protect its vital national interests.

Other scholars insist that power, in this context, should not just be intended in strictly material terms. In fact, the search for prestige and status has been identified as a powerful driver of Italian military policy. Within the same perspective, the concept of followership allows for the illustration of the Italian need for recognition among allies in the international community.

From a different viewpoint, international organizations are crucial, especially in spreading global norms (such as the 'responsibility to protect') that have been received (and then socialized) at domestic level. Multilateralism – as a value as well as an international framework within which to act abroad – has a fundamental function in explaining Italian involvement in missions abroad. Relatedly, a specific strategic culture has been gradually affirmed, transforming the Italian role into 'an international peacekeeper'. In this sense, ideas and discourses represent a mediating factor between the two levels of analysis.

With reference to domestic variables, other authors argue that looking at the domestic institutional and political landscape provides answers to describe both the macro-trend as well specific decisions to intervene. Recently, specific attention has been devoted to (limited) parliamentary oversight in affecting the calculation made by executives before sending troops abroad as well as to the participation in government as main explaining variable in the parties' decisions whether or not to support military operations. Further studies will better examine the influence played by successful populist parties in shaping the Italian decision-making process regarding military operations abroad, contributing to the rising, but still limited, scholarly debate on populist parties and foreign policy (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020).

Table 1. Explaining Italian Military Missions. A Review.

Phase	Mission	Type of mission	Strategic adjustment & vital national interest	Prestige, Status & Followership	International norms, ideas & strategic culture	Institutional constraints, electoral & party politics	Economic interests of domestic actors
1	Iraq 1990/1991	Air strikes	Cucchi 1993; Diodato 2015	Santoro 1991	Ignazi et al 2012	Aliboni 1991; Coticchia & Moro 2020	
	Somalia 1992/1994	Stabilization			Ignazi et al 2012	Coticchia & Moro 2020	
	Bosnia 1995	Peacekeeping			Foradori 2007; Pirani 2010		
	Albania 1997	Stabilization		Cladi and Webber 2011	Coticchia 2013; Foradori 2018	Greco 1998	
	Kosovo 1999	Air strikes	Andreatta 2001	Cladi and Webber 2011; Davidson 2011; Carati & Locatelli 2017	Ignazi et al 2012; Foradori 2018	Greco 2000; Coticchia and Moro 2020	Paolicelli and Vignarca 2009
2	Afghanistan (2001-)	Stabilization	Bonvicini and Silvestri 2015; Coralluzzo 2012	Davidson 2011; Ratti 2011	Brighi 2013	Coticchia and Moro 2020; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020	Mini 2003; Paolicelli and Vignarca 2009
	Iraq 2003/2006	Stabilization	Coralluzzo 2012; Bonvicini and Silvestri 2015	Cladi and Webber 2011; Davidson 2011	Brighi 2013; Ignazi et al 2012	Andreatta 2008; Davidson 2008	Mini 2003; Paolicelli and Vignarca 2009; Caruso 2018
	Lebanon 2006-	Peacekeeping		Cladi and Locatelli 2018	Attinà 2009; Ignazi et al 2012; Cladi and Locatelli 2018	Andreatta 2008; Cladi and Locatelli 2018	
	Libya 2011	Air strikes	Lombardi 2011; Croci and Valigi 2013	Carati & Locatelli 2017	Miranda 2011; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2015	Coticchia and Moro 2020; Coticchia and Vignoli 2020	Lombardi 2011; Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2015
3	Iraq (2014-)	Stabilization		Coticchia 2018		Olmastroni 2014; Coticchia and Davidson 2019	

Authors' notes: we have provided general definitions to the types of missions waged by Italian forces according to their mandate and tasks. It is worth noticing that general definitions of complex operations are just attempts to connect each mission to broad labels for the sake of a (parsimonious) categorization. While 'air-strikes' (raids carried out by Italian aircrafts) and 'peacekeeping' (neutral interposition by 'blue helmets' after wars) do not require further clarification, we are aware that the selected category 'stabilisation' is vast. Despite referring to the shared aim of providing stability in different civil war/post war contexts, this category encompasses – to a different extent – combat activities (Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq 2003-2006), military assistance and training of local forces employed on the ground (Iraq 2014-) and peacebuilding and capacity building measures (Albania 1997).

Finally, despite still playing a marginal role in the scholarly debate, also the economic interests of relevant domestic actors (from the military-industrial complex to oil and gas companies) have been identified as important drivers of renewed Italian activism.

In sum, Table 1 provides a (concise) picture that collects different views and interpretations concerning the drivers behind Italian military operations in the post-Cold War era.

Beyond reconstructing the debate, this paper has also illustrated the factors that merit additional interest in order to explain or understand Italian defense policy. For instance, we stressed that factors internal to the armed forces – starting from learning while deployed – has been shaping *how* subsequent operations have been undertaken and, to an extent, defense policy reforms. This last set of factors is just sketched in the present manuscript and constitutes what we believe to be a promising research agenda. Another two agendas could deserve further attention. The first one revolves around how external factors will reshape Italian military interventionism in the near future. Increasing American de-commitment in the Mediterranean and the Middle East has created a power vacuum where European countries, and Italy to begin with, have not yet played the role of substitute. How this will occur, and how the European Union will enter this scenario, remains pretty uncertain and clearly constitutes a relevant research avenue. The second theme is related to how interventions are changing. If the last decade saw an overall decrease in the number of troops deployed, it nonetheless saw armed forces acting in (increasingly) diverse domains, from now traditional peacekeeping missions to counterterrorism, from maritime security to fighting against human trafficking. Technological changes, with increasing remote surveillance and strike capabilities, are also affecting the toolbox that armed forces and policymakers have to intervene. Investigating this heterogeneity of missions and the new available toolbox is one of the key challenges for scholarship addressing 'military' interventions, in Italy and elsewhere.

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Italian post-2011 foreign policy in the Mediterranean caught between status and fear: the case of Libya

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Abstract

Cold War and post-Cold War Italian foreign policy has been articulated by accommodating and harmonizing three sets of partnerships: Atlanticism, Europeanism and the Mediterranean. Following the 2011 Arab Uprisings, increasing fragmentation in the MENA region, a more ambiguous US role and rising intra-EU divisions have constrained Italian foreign policy in the region. By looking at the case study of post-2011 Libya, the article, through historical process-tracing and in-depth interviews, illustrates how fear of abandonment by its US ally and of marginalization within the EU arena has characterized Rome's approach towards a key Mediterranean energy and political partner.

1. Introduction

The Mediterranean has historically been Italy's geographical backyard, encapsulating an idea, a dream of an African empire (Varsori 2016), an arena, and an ensemble of policies where ambitious appetites could be displayed. Recently, however, the Mediterranean, far from being the natural locus for a search for status (Felsen 2018), has become the graveyard of Italian political and diplomatic efforts at power projection. The way in which Italian foreign policy increasingly looks at the Mediterranean region, however, is through the lenses of United States (US) policies and intra-European Union (EU) dynamics. The article argues that, from 2011 onwards, Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean has struggled to effectively navigate between three geographical and political dimensions, or circles — the Atlantic, the European and the Mediterranean — which until 2001 were balanced and substantially consistent among themselves (Andreatta 2008). The article frames Italian foreign policy towards the region within a broader framework, taking into account how post-2011 Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) politics has become increasingly fragmented, and how this ongoing regional reconfiguration has exposed intra-European and US-European divergences. Against this backdrop, the article investigates how Italian post-2011 foreign policy has balanced the three circles around a key dossier: Libya. The paper looks at Italian Libyan policy as an example of strategic weakness, resulting from the diminished consistency between Italy's Atlanticism, Europeanism and a strong Mediterranean policy. The article identifies fear as a defining feature in post-2011 Italian policy choices vis-à-vis Libya. It does so by focusing on the emotional element of fear and the way in which it has become institutionalized and come to influence key foreign policy choices. Secondly, it shows the extent to

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which the Italian view of the southern Mediterranean operates through the prism of American or European lenses and how this impacts Italian policy. In order to do so, the paper analyzes a central case study, Italian post-2011 Libyan policy, methodologically through historical process-tracing, the analysis of secondary sources and in-depth interviews with Italian foreign policy analysts and diplomats.

2. Linking status and emotions in Italian foreign policy

In the words of Leopoldo Nuti, since the end of World War II, Italian foreign policy has been externally driven by the quest for status and recognition, while domestically, it has been instrumentally used as a tool to maintain shaky political equilibria (Nuti 2011). As pointed out by Ennio Di Nolfo (1990), this search for status and recognition was dependent on four interlocking variables: subordination (to the US), interdependence (with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO), integration (with the EU), and attempts at autonomy. The four constraints under bipolarity translated into three circles or dimensions, around which Italian foreign policy was shaped in the Cold War and early post-Cold War period: Atlanticism; Europeanism and the Mediterranean. As argued by Andreatta, in the early post-WWII period, Italian governments managed Cold War foreign policy constraints by keeping a careful balance between the Atlantic Alliance — embodied by NATO —, Europe — within the European Community first and European Union later—, and the Mediterranean — with a projection mostly over the Arab world and Israel.

Nuti and Di Nolfo refer to status and prestige interchangeably and, without offering further analytical unpacking, seemingly point to the diplomatic dimension of a state's power projection. In international relations theory, however, prestige is only one dimension of status: prestige depends on military victories and success in peace and war (Onea 2014), while status refers to social rank and has a relational nature. Recent scholarly work in the field has extensively delved into the notion of status and its role in foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis the outbreak of conflicts. This literature examines strategies of accommodation in rising powers' status demands (Paul 2016), status aspiration blockages (Ward 2017), status discrepancies as causes of conflict (Onea 2014), and major powers' strategies for resisting status decline. Status has been approached differently, according to the weight attributed to material or non-material aspects of power and identity-related dimensions. According to T.V. Paul, Larson and Wohlforth (2014), status can be understood as "collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes (wealth, coercive capabilities, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, diplomatic clout)". Being a positional good, status revolves around what others believe about a state's relative ranking. Status has a clear link with social hierarchy, as it is recognized through voluntary deference from others. Within an informal social hierarchy, status recognition points to the state's position vis-à-vis other actors. In other words, status is not merely about becoming visible, but is also reckoned with in key foreign policy dossiers by the most significant foreign policy actors.

Others have focused on the less visible drivers of war, downplaying the role of material capabilities or factual elements of power ranking, choosing instead to focus on the existential dimensions of international politics. Richard Ned Lebow has interpreted the search for status as the need by states to be esteemed, to be accorded a ranking among other states, and to be honored (Ned Lebow 2010). Following a culturalist reading of international relations,

Ned Lebow argues that the lack of such recognition is responsible for most international conflicts, as it ignites desire for revenge. Status decline is particularly visible in cases where a country raises expectations about its military prowess and encounters a harsh military defeat, as was the case with Mussolini's Italy, rapidly categorized as a 'paper tiger'. Onea considers it a case of status inconsistency, typical of 'arrivistes' powers which, at best, only excel in one dimension of power, and often not the military one (Onea 2014: 134). The devastating experience of World War II and the ways in which Italian historical responsibilities have failed to be scrutinized in Italian public discourse have hampered an honest assessment not only of racist behavior in Italian domestic and foreign policy in the 1930s and early 1940s but it has tainted any public debate concerning national interests and the instruments to be used to pursue them. In postwar Italy, public conversations about the atrocities committed by Fascism, domestically as well as in Europe and Africa, were mostly swept under the carpet (Judt 1992). In addition to this, the adoption of general amnesties for former members of the regime led to a postwar normalization of Fascism and fascists in Italian history and society. This, *de facto,* engendered a sense of mistrust in the country's public self-representation. In failing to address historical responsibilities linked to crimes committed against minorities domestically and against local populations in countries where Italy ventured into colonial adventures, in the post-war era national discourse focused on the need to be internationally appreciated, acknowledged, and accepted (Aresu and Gori 2018: 61).

The search for external recognition — premised on a fear of being undeserving — has influenced Italian foreign policy in the three circles in which it operates, i.e. the Atlantic circle, the European and the Mediterranean, or Middle Eastern and North African one. More to the point, because of its wartime legacy and postwar alliances and unification projects, Italy has, with few exceptions, sacrificed its autonomy vis-à-vis the Mediterranean, subjugating its preferences to US and European interests or veto powers. Italy has increasingly looked at the first two circles, Atlanticism and Europeanism, through the lenses of fear — of abandonment and of marginalization — and this has in turn impacted its policy in the third circle, torn as it is between the constraints provided by the two former circles and the search for strategic autonomy. The role of fear — fear of abandonment by the US in the post-war and post-Cold War eras, and the fear of marginalization from European allies during and after the Cold war — is an illuminating explanatory device if we grant emotions the ability to influence and shape behaviors and choices. In line with the works of Neta Crawford (2000; 2002) and Brent Steele (2008), emotions cannot be discarded as an ontological basis for state behavior. Far from positing a cold, all-calculating state, neorealists and neoliberal scholars accept two important emotions, fear and hate, as drivers of state behavior (Steele 2008: 16). As succinctly put by Neta Crawford, "emotions and beliefs structure the acquisition and organization of knowledge and the development of standard operating procedures and routines handling challenges" (2014: 547). Specific emotions, in other words, rather than being posited in contrast with reason and rationality, should be understood as social forces which come to be internalized by policymakers and diplomats, cognitively driving their reading and perceptions of choices that can be made and decisions that are in the country's best interest. Emotions are embedded within specific cultural and social contexts and are interwoven with existing and prevailing ideas, interests and discourses (Hutchison and Bleiker 2014). Emotions permeate contemporary understandings that underpin how politics, and foreign policy, operate in value-terms.

3. Fear as an analytical element behind the first two circles of Italian foreign policy

These three circles — Atlanticism, Europeanism and the Mediterranean — encapsulated Italian national interest in a bipolar and unipolar world (Garruccio 1982; Andreatta 2008; Brighi 2013). At least until the ascent of Silvio Berlusconi in 2001, these circles balanced and reinforced each other (Andreatta 2008). From then and until 2006, the Italian government unequivocally aligned with the US and prioritized Atlanticism over the other two circles. This was made painfully clear by the 2003 US military intervention against Iraq. In a way, some scholars argue, when Rome adhered to Bush's coalition of the willing, spearheaded by the United States this represented a shift from being, as was the case during the Cold War, merely a 'security consumer' to becoming and acting like a 'security producer' or security provider (Croci and Valigi 2013). However, this decision contributed to weakening international multilateralism, as it occurred without United Nations Security Council authorization and was, as later reluctantly admitted by the then UN Secretary General Annan, in explicit violation of the UN Charter (The Guardian 2004). Siding with the US on a polarized issue also reverberated within Europe, where two opposing camps were created according to who intervened in Iraq (United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Poland) and those who remained critical of the intervention (France and Germany *in primis*). This drove a wedge within the EU and dealt a blow to EU foreign policy that took time to heal. Others have framed this phase of Italian foreign policy as one where a clash materialized between traditional internationalist approaches and the re-nationalization of foreign policy (Quaglia 2007: 144).

Under unipolarity, two facets occur: a vast reduction in constraints on the unipole, and the continuation of alliances from previous eras, albeit with less bargaining power for minor allies as there are no alternative great powers and the "systemic imbalance of power magnifies uncertainty about the unipole's intentions" (Monteiro 2011/2012: 24). What this has meant in practice for Italian foreign policy is that Rome has sided even more assertively with Washington in most Middle East and North African dossiers. The beginning of the end of the unipolar moment came with the 2003 Iraq war, which polarized European allies and fragmented EU foreign policy consensus. Since then, fear of US abandonment, a classic risk or pathology in alliances (Snyder 1984), has accounted for much of Italian subservience to Washington even in key hotspots such as 2011 Libya. It could therefore be argued that the first circle was perceived through fear. Fear of being left behind and of being considered the weak link in the alliance is the key reason behind the choice made by Italy to prioritize US preferences over European ones and the identification of national interests with automatism in looking first and foremost across the Atlantic. Andreatta recalls the cases of Albania in 1993 and 1997 and the crisis in the former Yugoslavia, where Italy was initially excluded from the Contact Group (ibid).

Another kind of fear dominated the second European circle in the eyes of Italian policymakers during and after the Cold War: fear of marginalization within the EU. In the last decade, this has been coupled with a fear of neglect, as Rome has felt left alone in dealing with southern Mediterranean challenges. These feelings developed into a perception of either being or at least being treated as a second-class citizen among EU powers, or what a diplomat has dubbed the 'Violetta syndrome', the Verdi character who is desperate to be loved back by her lover and never stops asking for reassurances (Aresu

and Gori 2018: 60). This motivated much of Italian foreign policy in EU circles (Cladi and Webber 2011), especially vis-à-vis the perceived motor of European integration, the Franco-German engine. As in the previous circle, fear — here of being a second-class European power — changes what we look for, what we see and the way we think (Crawford, 2014). It affects how we filter and organize knowledge and can contribute to cognitive dissonance by leading us to discount alternative information. In the words of a senior diplomat, the Franco-German condominium was particularly hard to swallow for Italy as it basically denied Italy's aspiration to be a 'regional power' (Aresu and Gori 2018: 66). This is arguably a reformulation of what Varsori asserted about Italian Cold War status expectations of being recognized as a 'middle power', aware of its subordination but searching status parity with other middle powers (Varsori 1998).

The EU circle changed in its dynamics and in the eyes of the beholder, i.e. Italy, with the emergence of a *directoire* in charge of negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran in the second half of the 2000s. This was even more apparent after the 2008 financial crisis, with decisions increasingly taken between Berlin, Paris and, to a lesser degree, London, and then somewhat superimposed on remaining partners (Aresu and Gori 2018: 67).

For Italy, the fear of neglect by the EU in the migration portfolio was deeply felt with the deterioration of the situation in the southern Mediterranean and in sub-Saharan countries. The assumption that the combination of revolts, deteriorating economic conditions and climate shocks would trigger new migratory waves towards Europe, and southern Europe in particular, was a motivating factor in Italian policymakers' appeals to the European Commission and Council for joint policies, especially throughout 2015 and since then. The lack of a European consensus over migratory policies and the difficulties in changing the Dublin Regulation meant that legal provisions envisioned for non-emergency phases of migratory flows proved to be highly inadequate in 2014-2017 and Italy bore the brunt of the rigidity of other European member states. Between 2013 and 2017, over 650,000 migrants reached Italian shores, a fourth of which in 2016 alone (Rome Med 2017: 26). The Italian Interior Minister, Marco Minniti, appealed to the other member states for help in 2017: only Germany seemed to listen, accepting a small number of asylum seekers and pushing the EU to assist Italy in maintaining refugee camps in Libya (Longo 2017). On the Italian political landscape, the migratory crisis represented the short circuit between the second and the third circle, the Mediterranean. In 2017, 90% of migrants came from Libya (ibid). The 2003 Dublin Regulation foresees the criteria of attributing to the first country of arrival the duty to process asylum requests. Already in 2008, the European Parliament acknowledged that the system "in the absence of harmonization will continue to be unfair both to asylum seekers and to certain member states" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR). This was echoed by the European Commission, which proposed amendments, endorsed by the European Parliament, which remained on paper for a decade.

After several years of painful negotiations, the Regulation was eventually 'temporarily' modified at the La Valletta summit in September 2019, theoretically sharing the burden across European states vis-à-vis migratory flows. This, however, was done outside existing EU treaties and inter-governmentally, at an informal meeting of Interior ministers in Malta (Carrera and Cortinovis 2019). In the case of Italy, both the delayed

timing of the acceptance of solidarity and the lack of implementation of the decision were the nails in the coffin in terms of perception of neglect, verging on abandonment, by Europe.

The latest testing ground of the second circle for Italy is the 2020 Covid-19 related crisis. The devastating impact of Covid-19 diffusion in early 2020 wreaked havoc, not just in terms of sustainability of the health system but also of the skyrocketing level of the country's debt and its entering into recession because of the impact of the lockdown adopted to contain the pandemic. Demands for a coronabond or the mutualization of public debt encountered resistance from a coalition including Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. While many parallel the ongoing health and economic crisis in Italy, and potentially also Spain and France, to the one experienced a decade ago after the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the demands and supply shocks experienced, with varying degrees, by most European countries present a different set of challenges, requiring qualitatively new policy responses both at the national and supranational level.

4. The Mediterranean, between a dysfunctional EU second circle and an increasingly reluctant first US circle

As aptly illustrated in the previous paragraph, with the exemplary case of the handling of migratory pressures from the southern Mediterranean on southern Europe, the expanded Mediterranean increasingly represents a plethora of security challenges. More than that, it encapsulates all interlocking threats identified in 2003 by the European Union in its first strategic document. EU diplomacy identified five pressing challenges to the security of the continent in the European Security Strategy: regional conflicts, terrorism, WMD, organized crime, state failure (European Union 2003). In it, a preferred and endorsed policy approach which should have informed EU policies in a consistent way was depicted as 'effective multilateralism'. There the idea was to act, whenever possible, under the *aegis* of legitimate international organizations, *in primis* the United Nations, in a forceful way.

Since then, however, both the nature of the international system and European politics have significantly changed. Internationally, the unipolar moment (Monteiro 2014) has faded away while, at the EU level, qualitatively new phenomena have included the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic political parties and governments across the Union and the loss of one of its core members with Brexit. The EU has also faced spillovers from external shocks, ranging from terrorist attacks on its soil to unprecedented migratory flows. The combination of these elements has transformed the proactive and optimist outlook of the early 2000s into an increasingly torn and inward-looking Europe. The changing landscape was aptly epitomized in 2016 by a new strategic document, the Global Strategy where, rather than focusing on the kinds of threats the continent faces, or the specific kind of multilateralism to be endorsed and sustained to face them, two notions are spelled out: principled pragmatism and resilience. Coupled together, they signaled a less ambitious agenda, the abandonment of transformative ideals (Juncos 2017) and the adoption of a post-liberal foreign policy attitude (European Union 2016). The EUGS also embodies European fears, articulated in the fear of losing identity and the European way of life in the section dedicated to the 'Security of Our Union'. This materialized in December 2019 in the post of the European Commission's Vice President in

charge of the portfolio 'Promoting our European way of life', problematically linked to migration and security management. Paradoxically, this has sat quite well with Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean, which, far from being driven by transformative goals, aims at navigating increasingly complex challenges, rising geopolitical competition and ensuring that Italian economic and energy interests are safeguarded (Barberini 2020). In other words, fear of losing out from what was acquired in the past, the status quo ante, becomes the justification for policies aimed at protecting values and interests vis-à-vis external challenges threatening core principles and values. This is a full reversal of the European Security Strategy transformative ethos, less so for Italian foreign policy guiding principles, which, as demonstrated in the case of Libya, are articulated with the core goal of preserving and losing as little as possible rather than rethinking, relaunching, revising, and transforming the country's approach to the dossier.

5. Italian Libya policy and the short circuit of the three circles

In the words of a senior Italian diplomat in charge of MENA affairs at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), four drivers explain Italian foreign policy in North Africa and towards Libya in particular: energy needs, responding to migratory challenges, countering terrorist threats and the search for status (interview, Rome, February 2020). The Libyan dossier epitomizes all of them.

Italian-Libyan relations have been marred by the legacy of Italian colonialism (1912-1943), which only with the 2008 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed between Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi solved all Libyan claims related to colonialism, especially economic ones. Italy committed to pay 5 billion dollars' worth of reparations over the course of two decades in exchange for sustained cooperation on migration (Croci and Valigi 2013). Rudely but honestly, the agreement was dubbed by Berlusconi as enabling 'more oil, fewer migrants' (Paoletti 2010). Italian Libyan policy, it is widely held, has been a bipartisan one, as no notable difference could be detected in the different center-left and center-right governments since the 1990s.

After 42 years in power, Muammar Qaddafi was ousted after an initially peaceful nation-wide protest movement, militarized after brutal repression by the regime, coupled with aerial bombing by NATO forces between March and November 2011. Italy joined Operation Odyssey Dawn-Unified Protector on March 19, 2011 after the no-fly zone had been approved by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, profiting from the abstention of China and Russia (and among the non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, UNSC, Germany, India and Brazil). Italian center-right Foreign Minister Franco Frattini pushed for a NATO mission rather than an ad hoc coalition. The reason might reside in the fear that a non-NATO operation would be led by a small *directoire* (Croci and Valigi 2013), Italy being antithetic to such foreign policy practice out of fear of being marginalized. Even then, however, Rome displayed reluctance to contribute troops on the ground to aid NATO's efforts. It did however, with the 'Cirene' mission from 2011, albeit in a limited fashion, engage in military and security cooperation with Libyan forces, training them to patrol borders and in maritime security. In May 2012, the two sides — the Italian government and the Libyan transitional government headed by Ali Zeidan — signed a Memorandum of Understanding

(MoU) which officially sealed this bilateral security cooperation, mostly aimed at avoiding losing what had been secured since 2008 in political and economic terms (IAI 2014). Between late 2011 and the June elections in 2014, Libya seemed to be on track for a domestic-led transition. In July 2012, assisted by the UN Support Mission to Libya (UNSMIL), the country held peaceful and democratic elections. What the first Libyan democratic elections produced were formally democratic institutions (a parliament and a government) which, however, resembled an empty shell more than functioning bodies. The aftermath and the period up to the June 2014 elections already pointed to an existing and increasing divisiveness among Libyan political forces. Fractures revolved around the secular-Islamist cleavage, interlocking with personal and local exclusionary political dynamics. The 2014 elections, however, proved to be the nail in the coffin of the country's democratic trajectory. Islamist political parties lost the vote but failed to accept the electoral results, did not recognize the legitimacy of the new legislative body, and refused to hand over power.

As the dispute over the 2014 elections results triggered a widespread clash and a relapse into violence was materializing, the international community committed to a negotiated settlement and the establishment of a new governing authority. Such efforts eventually led to the Shirkat Political Agreement in December 2015. The agreement, however, failed to tackle the most controversial issues, including security arrangements (Droz Vincent 2018). While the UN-recognized authority, the Government of National Accord (GNA) was established in Tripoli and was led by Fayez al-Serraj, the Islamist forces, refusing to hand over power, maintained control over the House of Representatives (HoR) in the eastern part of the country and appointed Khalifa Haftar as Field Marshal Libyan National Army (LNA), a mixture of military units and tribal or local-based armed groups mostly supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. From late 2014 and throughout 2015, Haftar and the LNA took control over Cyrenaica, Libya's eastern region, and expanded south, controlling most of Fezzan by 2018 (Lacher 2019). The proliferation of domestic and external actors further complicated the political dynamics between the two polities. Low-intensity violence characterized the period until April 2019, when, a few days before the National Conference set up by the UN envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salamé, general Haftar moved his forces towards Tripoli and started staging an attack that has been ongoing ever since. The attempt by military means to take control of the entire country, attempted again in April 2020, failed to succeed.

While officially the European Union, which has played virtually no role in the Libyan crisis, recognizes and supports the UN-sponsored Tripoli government, since early 2015, France has been supporting general Haftar with military advisers and special forces (a fact which became impossible to deny once two French military advisors were killed in a helicopter crash near Benghazi in July 2016) (Harchaoui 2017). This occurred under the watch and patronage of French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who served as Defense Minister under President Hollande (2012-2017) and who shares French President Macron's view of Libya through the prism of combating terrorism, political Islam and serving French national interests. In this context it should be noted how, Paris, especially since its 2013 intervention in Mali, which France considers a success, looks at North Africa through the prism of the Sahel, and does so from a securitized perspective where countering terrorism and limiting the spread of Islamists are its

driving goals. In July 2017, President Macron organized a meeting at La Celle-Saint-Cloud, which served its purpose, i.e. legitimizing Haftar in the eyes of the international community. Besides this aspect, the political value of the meeting between Haftar and Serraj was null as they did not sign the final communiqué. The French diplomatic initiative did not go unnoticed and it ruffled a few feathers in Rome, as French activism was perceived as a way to bypass Italy (Falchi 2017). Again, Italy — this time reasonably so — feared marginalization by a European power in what Italy perceives its backyard, because of colonial ties and energy relations, ENI being in Libya since the late 1950s.

In order to take back control of diplomatic initiatives in Libya, Italy went back to its first circle and in September 2018, Prime Minister Conte visited the United States and obtained what was interpreted as a green light from the Trump administration to relaunch the mediation process. Shortly afterwards, in November 2018, Rome organized the Palermo conference, considered an important milestone in Italian diplomatic activity. According to a senior diplomat, though, it was the perceived success of the conference that created a false sense of security in the Italian government which led Conte to sit on his laurels (interview, Rome, February 2020). As previously mentioned, a few months later, in April 2019, general Haftar launched a surprise large-scale attack against Tripoli, something which caught Italy and Europe unprepared (Wehrey and Lacher 2019). The fear of abandonment came into play when Rome realized that the US, despite being one of the few external powers able to leverage enough incentives and threat of sticks (sanctions) to bring both sides to the table, would be unlikely to engage more in the conflict. This reverberated in Rome in particular after the only Italian hospital in Libya was almost hit by Haftar forces in a bombing against Misurata in July 2019. Italy maintains there a military hospital with 300 servicemen and considers it a crucial logistical base. Within the void determined by scarce US action, in September 2019, Russian mercenaries arrived in support of Haftar in southern Tripoli. While Russia had been stepping up its efforts in Libya since 2015, this was unprecedented in scale, as Russia provided the LNA with anti-tank missiles, laser-guided artillery and support through paramilitary forces, the Wagner group (Wehrey and Harchaoui 2020). Italy had renounced any kind of military activity on the ground, from 2011 onwards, thereby also limiting its appeal to Serraj who, by mid-2019, accepted an aid offer from Turkish president Erdoğan and in November 2019 signed an MoU with Turkey.

Italy had lost valuable time due to domestic reasons. Between late spring 2019 and the summer, the Lega-5Star movement had crumbled and a political crisis erupted, culminating in a government reshuffling, and substituting the Lega with the center-left Democratic Party. If the former Foreign Minister in 2018-2019, Moavero Milanesi, had been barely visible on the Libyan dossier, the new Foreign Minister from the 5Star movement, Luigi Di Maio, had no international or diplomatic experience and little appetite for foreign policy. He only grasped the importance of the Libyan dossier for Italian domestic and foreign policy on the occasion of the Rome Mediterranean Dialogues, which took place in late November 2019 and saw the participation of most Arab Foreign Ministers. Unfortunately, despite renewed interest in Libya, the successive diplomatic initiative was a fiasco. In January 2020, prime minister Conte tried to arrange a meeting in Rome between the two Libyan leaders, Serraj and Haftar, offending the former and falling short of creating a viable track two diplomatic channel with the latter. Shortly

afterwards, on January 19, 2020, Germany took the lead and set up the Berlin conference, whose main output was the adoption of an arms embargo. Italy's fear of marginalization was then substantiated. The wound, however, was partially self-inflicted. As a consequence of the Berlin conference, a new naval military operation, Irini, replacing the previous Operation Sophia, was launched on May 4, 2020. Serraj, however, complained that this mission would mostly facilitate Haftar forces, whose refurbishment from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) arrived by air or by land from Egypt, while Turkish military support to Tripoli would be the one most likely to be intercepted by Irini. While Italy supports the military naval mission, it is left with few arrows to spare and has become mostly an observer of the complex interlocking domestic developments in Libya, impacting also on Italian politics, from migratory flows to energy cooperation to political relations.

This section intended to show how Italian Libyan policy has become hostage of the first two circles and Italian fears of abandonment or of marginalization by Europe — and France in particular — on the Libyan dossier have become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leaving Italy an invisible player in the heavily populated Libyan theatre.

6. Conclusions

By analytically unpacking the three circles and the first two in particular, this short paper has attempted to illustrate how, identifying the emotional dimension of each circle, post-2011 Italian foreign policy in a key Mediterranean dossier like the Libyan one, has been characterized by strategic weakness. This resulted from increasing challenges in having the two circles — Atlanticism and Europeanism — converge in the Mediterranean, which, rather than providing increased room for maneuver for Italian foreign policy, has been read through the lenses of fear of abandonment by the US and fear of marginalization within the EU.

The article has offered a reading premised on the identification of a key emotional dimension accounting for Italian foreign policy relations with the US and within Europe and has tried to illuminate how the emotional backbone of these relations is premised on the element of fear, be it of abandonment or marginalization. Through historical process tracing, secondary sources and in-depth interviews with Italian foreign policy analysts and diplomats, the article has provided a series of empirical illustrations from the Libyan post-2011 period in order to testify to the self-sabotage of Italian foreign policy in its third circle due to excessive weight placed on external constraints attributed to the US or the EU or other European powers. With regard to the former, a sense of subordination has led Italy to postpone actions and launch initiatives, uncertain of a clear US mandate, only to be left alone to deal with its own diplomatic fallouts. With regard to the latter, Libya, in European terms, has become a battlefront for status rivalry between Italy and France, where the two European powers, while formally supporting the same side, the UN-backed Tripoli GNA, are rivals on the ground as France has increasingly supported Haftar and the LNA. The failure of the January Rome meeting and the Berlin conference, where most of the issues agreed by the parties were particularly welcomed by Paris, only reinforces this point. The Irini naval military mission, while on paper aiming at implementing those decisions and the arms embargo, might end up reinforcing the side France has been not so silently supporting for the past

five years, also with covert operations, while Italy has refrained from doing so, in abidance with UN resolutions. The combination of US abandonment, French isolation and lack of diplomatic clout have eventually brought about the demise of Italy in one of the last theatres in the Mediterranean which it considered its own backyard and a foreign policy priority.

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