

## Italian Military Operations Abroad: Just don't call it war

*Despite the Italian military's involvement in numerous operations abroad, Italian governments have glossed over realities on the ground, preferring instead for the country to be viewed as a peacekeeping force. **Angela Romano** reviews **Italian Military Operations Abroad** and notes the book provides the first thorough and serious analysis of Italy at war.*



**Italian Military Operations Abroad: Just Don't Call it War. Piero Ignazi, Giampiero Giacomello and Fabrizio Coticchia. Palgrave Macmillan. February 2012.**

*"The first, the grandest, and most decisive act of judgment which the Statesman ... exercises is rightly to understand...the War in which he engages, not to take it for something, or to wish to make of it something" (Carl von Clausewitz, On War).*

Since the end of the Cold War Italy has been very active in military operations abroad (MOA). In 2010, the country employed around 9,000 troops in 33 missions across the world (p 2). Yet Italian governments of any kind have been keen to assure public opinion that they were not embarking the country on *war*, or any military operations.

*Italian Military Operations Abroad: Just don't call it war* is a very pertinent title from a book which offers a thorough analysis of the Italian involvement in MOA and which explains its main characteristics and limits. The book considers all types of military missions undertaken by Italy in the last twenty years, and investigates the core beliefs that Italian governments and MPs have used to justify the decisions to send 'uniformed citizens' to foreign fields. The authors focus is on the role of values, norms and political culture in influencing the decision-making on foreign and defence policies using a constructivist approach, and show how this strategic culture affects operations on the ground.

The book is the product of a fruitful cooperation between three academics in international relations and, more importantly, between their complementary research specialties. Distinguished



and internationally renowned Professor Piero Ignazi contributed his extensive expertise on party systems in Italy and Europe; whilst Dr Giampiero Giacomello and Dr Fabrizio Coticchia added fresh in-depth research on security and institutional development.

The authors argue that the disastrous experience of fascist militarism, World War II, and the 1943-45 civil war, engendered long-lasting, extremely negative memories amongst Italians that since then anything related to the military domain has been met with suspicion. Not by chance the two post-war most significant political cultures – the Christian-democratic and the social-communist – emphasised the values of peace and multilateral cooperation, as did the Constitution of the new Italian Republic as stated in Article 11. This prevailing ‘pacifist frame’ has hampered the development of any informed debate on questions of security, warfare and defence well beyond the Cold War period.

The legacy of the past is evident in all parliamentary debates on MOA, which are thoroughly scrutinised. Concepts such as ‘multilateralism’ and ‘peace’ still dominate the political discourse, in which the military dimension appears “removed”. This is not only the result of the cultural backgrounds of politicians, but also of their unanimous consensus that “the word ‘war’ could be ‘dangerous’ in influencing Italian public opinion” (p 53). The chapter thus unequivocally underlines Italian governments’ “psychological artifice of presenting a rosier picture during the decision-making process to retain the support of the people” (p 82).

Having provided the political-ideological background in which the MOA are discussed and approved, the three authors show the implications that such a vague definition has on the ground. They reconstruct in detail the effective conduct of operations in the last twenty years, also considering the relations with allies and multilateral organisations. This detailed analysis highlights that the growing involvement in MOA “has now established the image of Italy as ‘peacekeeper’, both and internationally and domestically” (p 3). Yet it confirms that “in missions where security was provided through ‘offensive’ fighting (from Somalia to Afghanistan), the inconsistency with the political discourse was appalling” (p 186).

The book concludes that painting a rosy picture exposes the missions and the Italian ‘uniformed citizens’ to unnecessary risks. Moreover, it can undermine the nexus between politics and the military, which is a “delicate and yet crucial relationship even in modern democracies” (p 186).

This is also the impression that the reader gets from the *Afterword* – “A view from the ground”, where high-ranking Italian officer Gianmarco Badialetti offers valuable insights into Italy’s MOA – a cherry on top of the convincing arguments of this book.

*Italian Military Operations Abroad* has the great merit of providing the first thorough and serious analysis of the Italian case, and offers a substantial contribution to both IR studies and current political debates on mid-sized democracies’ involvement in military operations abroad.

The book is also well structured, and the reasoning is easy to follow for non-IR specialists. This is certainly a result of the choice to focus on values and political debates, something of immediate understanding to citizens and still scientifically sound for academics. It is also due to the apt decision to leave the explanation of methodological tools and dataset variables to the appendix.

My only criticism relates to chapter 5, which I found disconnected with the rest and also lacking inherent logic. The chapter does not focus on the construction of the Italian debate, as the title suggests, but rather provides three paragraphs whose links are not evident. A summary of the first chapter is followed by a debate of peace support operations and counter insurgency operations, which focuses almost entirely on the U.S. case. The only paragraph that fits well into the book is the latter titled "Defence spending and military capabilities". It would have added a great deal to the general analysis had it not limited to provide data and comparison with other countries, but offered explicit causal explanations for the inadequate level of the Italian spending.

Despite this slip, *Italian Military Operations Abroad* remains an excellent piece of research, accessible to a wide audience, which will certainly foster debates and comparative studies on mid-sized democracies.

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**Angela Romano** is Marie Curie Fellow at the LSE International History Department. She is a scholar of the Machiavelli Center for Cold War Studies (CIMA), and member of RICIE (Réseau International de jeunes Chercheurs en Histoire de l'Intégration Européenne). Her main research interests include: Cold War, external relations of the EC/EU, integration processes in Europe, the CSCE process, and transatlantic relations. [Read more reviews by Angela.](#)

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