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Foreign Posture in Comparative Perspective: A Quantitative and Qualitative Appraisal of Italian Foreign and Defence Policy during the Renzi Government

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Abstract

The performance of the Renzi government (2014-2016) in the realm of foreign and defence policy is a mixed bag. Struggling with significant structural constraints at home but called upon to shoulder increased responsibilities abroad, Italian foreign policy (IFP) has balanced instances of retrenchment, characterised by inward-looking tendencies and continued budget shortfalls, with its traditional emphasis on bandwagoning with stronger allies to retain a degree of influence over international events. Secondary only to Italy's traditional focus on the European project and the broader North Atlantic Alliance, the Mediterranean pillar – including the fight against extremism and the search for new markets and economic opportunities – has dominated IFP under the Renzi government. While staying true to its traditional reluctance to 'go it alone', Italy has pushed hard in Europe to consolidate a common response to the migration crisis, while seeking to assume a leading role in efforts to support political reconciliation in Libya. Italy has also enhanced its participation in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, but has to date refused repeated requests by the US and its allies to begin offensive military operations in Syria and Iraq. The article analyses Italian foreign and defence policy from a comparative perspective, employing a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Italy's foreign posture between 2014 and 2016.

Keywords: Italy; foreign policy; defence; government; Renzi.

Introduction

Following a prolonged period of political uncertainty caused by the global financial downturn and subsequent Eurozone crisis, a new Italian government dominated by the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) was sworn in on 22 February 2014. Led by the charismatic former mayor of Florence and PD secretary, Matteo Renzi, the government presented a programme of ambitious domestic reforms, most notably in the institutional and economic domains, but also including proposals aimed at reorganising and improving the effectiveness of Italy's foreign and defence policy in light of dwindling resources and stringent fiscal constraints.

Coming on the heels of technocratic and 'grand coalition' governments led by Mario Monti (2011-13) and Enrico Letta (2013-14) respectively, the Renzi cabinet benefitted from consolidated support in Parliament and a clearer political mandate to act in foreign and security affairs. Holding office thanks to an alliance with a number of smaller centre-right and independent parties, Renzi's PD remained the largest and most influential party in the government, staffing a number of key posts, including the offices of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

As the youngest Prime Minister in Italy's history, Matteo Renzi, aged 39 at the time of his appointment, enjoyed high standing in opinion polls, with 56% of Italians expressing a positive view of the new executive upon his taking office in February 2014 (source: Demos & Pi 2014). While not having a direct electoral mandate – Renzi assumed the premiership through Machiavellian political manoeuvres which saw him replace the former Prime Minister and fellow PD member Enrico Letta – Renzi subsequently campaigned hard during the May 2014 European Parliament elections, leading his party to secure the highest number of votes. Largely viewed as a vote of confidence in the Renzi government, the outcome – with the PD securing 40.8% of the vote – brought a significant boost in Renzi's popularity, which reached a peak of 69% directly following the elections (source: Demos & Pi 2014).

During his three years in office, Renzi was confronted with a long series of international challenges. These ranged from the worsening refugee and migrant crisis, continued turmoil and violence in Libya and Ukraine, the advent of so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as IS, ISIL or *Daesh*) and a mounting string of terrorist attacks in Europe and beyond. On top of these challenges, Italy was also engaged in a number of on-going international military missions, commitments that span various governments and were reaffirmed by Renzi. These included Italy's participation in the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, its active contribution to the UN UNIFIL mission in Lebanon – which an Italian general, Luciano Portolano, commanded for two years between 2014-2016 – anti-piracy and anti-smuggling naval missions in the Horn of Africa and the Mediterranean and its continued commitment to the Balkans in a variety of EU and NATO support missions. In total, Italy was contributing to 29 international military missions in December 2016 with approximately 6,750 personnel (source: Italian Ministry of Defence) and a number of important

command positions in multilateral military missions abroad (in 2013 the number was 25).¹

As a 'middle-ranking' power that has traditionally suffered from a sort of 'inferiority complex' vis-à-vis the big three European powers of Germany, France and the UK, Italy has seen its participation in international missions as a means of increasing its international visibility and profile (Carbone 2011; Davidson 2011). It has traditionally aligned its policies with those of larger allies, the United States *in primis*, in the attempt to hedge against excessive risks, while seeking to maximise returns (Davidson 2011). This has provided Italy with an avenue to promote its interests and enhance its standing on the world stage, making the country an important force contributor to UN, EU, NATO and US-led 'coalition-of-the-willing' missions (Ignazi, Giacomello, and Coticchia 2012). However, even within these missions, as in the more general diplomatic and political sphere, Italy has rarely raised its voice and spoken out of turn, even when disagreeing with partners and allies on important issues (Giacomello and Verbeek 2011).

In this context, Renzi's government remained true to Italy's multilateral vocation, its action conditional upon not being confronted with a united front of countries thinking the opposite. An explicit request from recognised political authorities or a Chapter VII United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution remains the *sine qua non* for Italian military intervention abroad. This has led Renzi to refuse US requests to begin military action against ISIS in Syria, while agreeing to increase Italy's participation in the anti-ISIS coalition active in Iraq and neighbouring states. In the EU, Italy has traditionally considered European unity on foreign policy issues an important objective, and has generally avoided taking public positions that would break the fragile EU consensus. This was the case with the issue of imposing and renewing sanctions on Russia. After some diplomatic scuttling and protests in late 2015 ("Gentiloni: La Ue" 2014, 7; "Gentiloni: dialogo" 2015, 3), the Renzi government eventually backed down, realigning itself with the EU position and in particular with those of France and Germany (ECFR 2016, 49-52; "Mogherini: È con le sanzioni" 2014, 10; "Bruxelles rinnova" 2016, 14; see also Olmastroni 2014).

By carefully balancing quantitative and qualitative analysis and performing a comparative assessment of Italy's foreign posture between 2014 and 2016, this article examines Renzi's foreign and defence policy, also reflecting on its performance as compared with previous executives. The multidisciplinary approach will be key. In order fully to evaluate Italy's foreign policy (IFP) during the Renzi government we will discuss the country's capabilities and actions in the more general context of crisis and uncertainty gripping the international system as a whole. To this end, IFP will be quantitatively and qualitatively compared to that of other large EU member states – namely France, Germany and the United Kingdom – in terms of hard and soft power.

Italy's Foreign Posture in an Uncertain World

The economic and migration crises, Brexit, a slowdown in European integration and the rise of populist and nationalist political forces have contributed to general inward-looking trends across Europe and the US. Public weariness with drawn-out international and multilateral initiatives, particularly of a military nature (Conetta 2014; Pew Research Center 2016a, 2016b), has spilled over into politics, strengthening these trends and contributing to a more general decline of internationally mandated UN, NATO or EU missions. The difference is particularly striking if one thinks back to the 1990s, the heyday of liberal interventionism. As observed in a previous study (Olmastroni 2014), the paradox is that these general trends are occurring precisely at a time when more needs to be done collectively and multilaterally in response to major international challenges and threats. From climate change to migration, Syria, a resurgent Russia, European recovery and tensions in the South China Sea, multi-lateral action alone can hope to counter the increasingly convoluted and antagonistic nature of the international system (European External Action Service 2016a; de Hoop Scheffer et al. 2016). The general international context, however, is one in which short-term domestic political interests and crude material calculations have returned to dominate the national capitals of major states, undermining cooperation and accentuating differences and disagreements between major players (Rachman 2016; Cha 2016; de Waal 2016).

With respect to these inward-looking trends, Italy is no different from its neighbours. Italy, however, is particularly exposed to a number of the most pressing international challenges. This has left the Renzi government little choice than to assume new responsibilities in its immediate neighbourhood, especially in the Mediterranean. While domestic constraints of a political and economic nature have continued to hamper Italy's international action, the Renzi government has not shied away from enhancing its contribution, both military and diplomatic, in a number of important theatres. In this respect, Italy – like other European countries of a similar stature – has desperately tried to 'do more with less', seeking to reorganise its ministries and strategies, and focus its limited resources and political leverage on those areas of most immediate concern to Italian national interests.

Within this framework, the Renzi government oversaw a long overdue process of legislative reform in the realm of Italian foreign and defence policy. In April 2015, a *White Paper for International Security and Defence*, drafted by Italy's Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti, was released. Besides aiming at the reorganisation of the defence budget (see next section for details), it engages in a forward-looking exercise meant to elucidate the country's strategic interests and improve Italy's diplomatic and military preparedness, particularly in the Mediterranean (Marrone and Camporini 2016; 2-3)². A further example is given by an important amendment (Art. 7 bis) made to law 198/2015 governing Italy's participation in military missions abroad. Approved in December 2015, the legislation sought to reaffirm Italy's participation in on-going international missions and enhance the Government's ability to support political and strategic

objectives militarily. Mirroring a more general international trend which has seen the concentration of decision-making power in the military realm in the hands of the executive, the amendment allows the Prime Minister to dispatch limited numbers of Special Forces to support intelligence operations and protect Italian nationals or strategic interests abroad with a rather limited degree of parliamentary oversight (Ronzitti 2016).

The amendment was subsequently used to dispatch Special Forces and intelligence officials to Libya, a major theatre of Italian military and diplomatic involvement under Renzi (“Intervento italiano” 2016). This was a *political* decision meant to enhance Italy’s credentials as an active contributor in the Mediterranean, providing the executive with a greater degree of freedom to act in the intelligence and security realm. As such, it represented a signal by the Renzi government of its willingness to shoulder some of the burden of these challenges, in turn presumably bestowing on Italy greater credibility and influence over international debates in these settings.

The Renzi government also launched a broader legislative initiative aimed at reviewing official guidelines governing Italy’s participation in international military missions. The first comprehensive review of Italy’s legal and political mechanisms since 1982, the date of Italy’s first post-war foreign military engagement, in the context of the French-Italian-US dispatch of peacekeepers to Lebanon, the legislative proposal (L. 145/2016) was approved in July 2016 and formally entered into force on 1 January 2017 (Ronzitti 2017). Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate an increased understanding – and urgency – on the part of Italy’s political and military leadership of the need to oversee a comprehensive review of Italian foreign and defence policy with an eye to improving performance in times of limited resources and enhanced international uncertainty.

The nature and results of these and other efforts will be assessed in the sections below. These trends will be tested and analysed by combining quantitative measurements of Italy’s defence, foreign policy and international cooperation budgets, participation in international missions abroad and the number of personnel deployed therein, with a qualitative analysis of the Renzi government’s diplomatic and political contributions to important international issues. While the Renzi government’s showing in foreign and defence policy remains a mixed bag, characterised by elements of continuity and change, a clear and more grounded assessment of it will emerge from the analysis below.

The Force Compared: Defence, Foreign-Policy Spending and Military Personnel in Operations Abroad

Italy's defence budgets have constantly shrunk in the last decade. It has been observed elsewhere that this decline began before the recent economic crisis and has continued beyond it (Olmastroni 2014). It has not been determined, however, whether it occurred at the same pace in other European countries. By comparing levels of defence expenditures in nominal and real terms, Figure 1 not only shows that Italy noticeably ranks below France, Germany³ and the UK, but it also depicts a steady and specific decrease in Italy's overall defence budget between 2008 and 2015 (from 1.4% to 1.1% of GDP at 2010 prices). While defence spending also fell in France and the UK at the beginning of the 2008 recession, these countries show either a stable trend (i.e., France) or a partial recovery (i.e., United Kingdom) in the 2010-2014 period. Only in 2015 did the countries under observation exhibit substantial cuts to their nominal (not real) budgets, partially offset by positive variations the following year (see also Marrone, De France and Fattibene 2016).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In this context, the Renzi government marked a marginal but significant departure from its predecessors, with the largest increase in defence expenditure since 2008 (Figure 2). Although it remains to be seen whether the recent upward turn (+10.6% based on NATO estimates at constant 2010 prices) will be sustained over the next few years, what is certain is that a reform aimed both at balancing resources and at improving the efficiency of Italy's armed forces is underway. As part of a process of reorganisation of the whole defence sector initiated in 2012 (law 244/2012 entered into force on 31 January 2013) and intensified after the publication of Minister of Defence Roberta Pinotti's *White Paper for International Security and Defence* (April 2015), the Renzi government significantly improved the allocation of resources to align with other European and NATO countries. As shown in Figure 3, a reduction in personnel costs – still high if compared with those of Italy's largest European allies – was accompanied by an increase in equipment costs and the strategic goal of a drastic reduction of the permanent staff from 88% to 50% of the whole military personnel (Pinotti 2015)⁴. While providing the Armed Forces with the resources, infrastructure and operational means to effectively address short and medium-term challenges, a similar reform is intended to establish an integrated defence system that would be more cost effective and oriented towards the internationalisation of military capabilities (Pinotti 2015). Implementation of the reform package announced in the *White Paper* has been slow however (Marrone and Camporini 2016), and it was not until 10 February 2017 that the Government approved a law outlining a road map for its enactment (“Approvato il decreto” 2017).

[FIGURES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE]

If a comprehensive reform process was therefore initiated in the defence sector, a longitudinal comparative investigation of resources allotted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Official Development Assistance (ODA) reveals a less optimistic picture. As for the first, Figure 4 shows that both the nominal budget and the percentage of GDP earmarked for the Italian MFA net of ODA have slowly but steadily shrunk in the period spanning Italy's last two legislatures. This trend conflicts with the ones observed in countries such as France and Germany, where expenditure for foreign affairs not only remained higher but also increased. And while a comparison with the UK, whose nominal spending has fluctuated to a significant degree, seems to depict a similar (if not harsher) trend, the cross-country evaluation is completely unbalanced when we examine their ODA in absolute and relative terms. The British aid budget is far higher than the Italian one, the UK being the first G20 country to achieve the UN target of contributing 0.7 per cent of its gross national income to international development cooperation. Although still lagging behind France and Germany (i.e., two of the largest donor countries by volume), one could interpret Italy's recent increase in development assistance as a positive and encouraging signal for the future (see Figure 5). Indeed, ODA rose by US\$1.8 billion during the Renzi government, with a yearly average increase of 18.2%. Notwithstanding the increase, and in this respect Italy is no different from other European countries (e.g., Germany and Sweden), the upward trend is artificially produced by the costs attributed to the hosting of refugees. Stripping out the funds spent in the country for administrative costs, debt relief and refugees, only 37% of bilateral aid reached beneficiary countries (Simonelli 2016), whereas more than 20% of the whole Italian ODA was accounted for by refugee-related expenses (OECD 2015).

[FIGURES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE]

In relation to Italy's financial and military commitment to the European Union and the United Nations – i.e., two of the main institutional arenas for coordination and cooperation with other countries – the Renzi government's performance was also mixed (Figure 6). On the financial side, relative contributions to the EU and UN regular budgets fits a long-term pattern of reduced funding that is the result of macro-economic conditions, resource projections and attempts at cost management. At the EU level, in particular, while the economic performance of some countries – namely Germany and the United Kingdom – has resulted in an increase of their payments relative to other members, economic stagnation has led Italy to reduce its relative contribution to the EU in the last years. The new global economic outlook, moreover, has pushed many member states – Italy included – to suggest improvements in efficiency and implement funding cuts to the UN's regular budget.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

That said, Italy, which still remains one of the top ten donors to the UN budget, has shown itself to be one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations in terms of military personnel. The number of troops serving in UN missions has remained stable over the last five years (Figure 7), with the largest contingent in Lebanon (1,073 men at the end of 2016). Similarly, Italy's commitment to EU and NATO missions has been extended and, in some instances, it grew considerably during the Renzi government. By December 2016 Italy had the second largest troop contingent deployed in Afghanistan (n=1,037) and Kosovo (n=551) under the NATO-led *Resolute Support* and *Kosovo Force* missions respectively; it took an active part with its naval units in security operations in the Mediterranean Sea (*Mare Nostrum*, *Operation Sea Guardian*, *Mare Sicuro* and *EUNAVFOR Med*) and the Western Indian Ocean (*Ocean Shield-Atlanta*); it was a leading member of the multinational coalition fighting Islamic State with more than 1,300 military and police trainers deployed in Iraq and other neighbouring states as part of *Operation Prima Parthica*. Although the Renzi government refused to join Britain, France, the US and other countries in the bombing of *Daesh* in Syria and Iraq, Italy deployed air units and ground troops to carry out reconnaissance missions, safeguard the Mosul Dam project⁵, train local forces and protect the Iraqi cultural heritage. At the end of 2016, Italy remarkably maintained the largest troop contingent in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition after the United States. Meanwhile, Italy deployed about 300 troops and medical operatives as part of the Italian operation *Ippocrate* to support and provide security for a field hospital providing medical care to Libyan fighters battling Islamic State in the vicinity of Misurata in the West of Libya.

[FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

More than Meets the Eye: A Qualitative Assessment of IFP under Renzi

The comparative trends presented above demonstrate the gradual but clear impact of Italy's fiscal and structural constraints on the country's international action. Yet, to provide a comprehensive and balanced assessment of IFP under Renzi, the data needs to be contextualised across time and weighed against the contemporary realities that are dominating the international system as a whole. One also needs to account for other, less visible efforts made by the Renzi cabinet during its time in office. This section seeks to compliment the quantitative analysis with a qualitative assessment of Italian diplomatic and political initiatives in a number of key domains.

While hard to quantify in numbers, current international realities demand a return to the hard work of diplomacy, coalition building (and maintenance), mediation and multilateralism. As a country that enjoys good relations with many pivotal actors in a number of key settings (i.e., the United States, Russia, Iran, EU Member States and Middle East and North African countries), Italy does enjoy significant potential to act as a facilitator in support of multilateral dialogue and consensus building. Positioning Italy to maximise its leverage and

visibility within international fora as a means to counterbalance its structural and financial weaknesses has therefore represented a traditional objective of IFP.

While struggling with the necessity of doing 'more with less', the Renzi government has combined elements of continuity with some, hesitant but nonetheless important, efforts at change. Unless exposed to an existential threat, the first priority of any Italian government relates to the domestic political and economic sphere, with foreign policy becoming a tool at the service of the economic and political interests of the State rather than a means to project force or support normative ideals abroad. In this, Renzi has pursued a clear line of continuity with regard to previous executives, seeking to maximise the attractiveness of Italian exports and of Italy as an investment destination. Italian military exports, for instance, have experienced a significant boom over the past years, reaching €14.6 billion in 2016, a 85.7% increase compared to the previous year ("Boom di export" 2017).

On the other side of the coin, there is little doubt that Italy's successive cuts to the Foreign Ministry budget stand out as the most significant and worrying indicator outlined above (-€286 Million net of ODA in the last two legislatures). Limited resources and stringent budgetary constraints are impacting all European countries. Yet, Italy has been particularly exposed to these challenges due to years of limited economic growth, political instability and high deficits. Moreover, Italy has been exposed to a number of major challenges unfolding in the Mediterranean, and has shouldered a significant burden to save the lives of countless migrants and refugees attempting to cross to Europe. Italy's finances have also been hit hard by a series of devastating earthquakes that took place in central and northern Italy in August and October 2016, as well as in January 2017.

In this respect, while cuts to the MFA have progressed under Renzi, the indicators displayed above do demonstrate a hesitant reversal of this trend with regards to Italian defence spending and, less so, its foreign aid budget. In both respects the Renzi government therefore deserves a credit for improvement compared to recent executives. The fact that Renzi committed his government to progressing these reform efforts is a positive signal and demonstrates an understanding of the urgent need to put Italy's house in order as a means of freeing up important resources needed to support the country's foreign interests and concerns. Yet, efforts at budgetary and institutional reform cannot alone be sufficient criteria for assessing IFP under Renzi, not least in light of the fact that these processes remained very much 'work in progress' at the time of Renzi's resignation in December 2016.

A more nuanced assessment can be given by focussing on a number of key areas of Italian diplomatic and military action. In this respect, Renzi has continued a process that seeks to focus Italy's limited capital on those areas where the country's vital national interests are most at stake or where an Italian contribution is believed to be of particularly significant added value. This was the case, for instance, in the realm of anti-piracy and anti-smuggling operations

in the Mediterranean as well as in the Horn of Africa and Indian Ocean, where the Italian navy has gained considerable expertise. It is also the case in the context of Libya, where Italian diplomacy has been particularly active in support of UN efforts to stabilise the country, albeit with somewhat meagre results as of December 2016.

Italy has also been active in the diplomatic sphere in the Balkans, another traditional priority area of IFP, where successive governments, including that of Renzi, have sought to encourage the processes of institutional and political reform in the context of the EU's enlargement policy. Italian efforts in both Libya and the Balkans were highlighted by the yearly Scorecard on European Foreign Policy published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), with Italy being graded as "leader" on both dossiers in the 2016 edition and "leader" on Libya in the 2015 edition (ECFR 2015, 2016).

In other, more remote settings, Italian contributions appear to rest on a combination of responsibility for past involvement, and therefore to be also a means of protecting Italian investments in blood and treasure, and an effort to reassure major allies of Italy's continued reliability as an international partner. These instances were more pronounced in such settings as Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon, where Italian personnel have a long history of activity and yet their presence is arguably harder to justify in terms of direct national interests alone.

With regard to Italy's traditional alliances, the experience of the Renzi government followed a clear line of continuity with the past. Relations with Barack Obama's United States were marked by improvements, with the US President congratulating Renzi on his ambitious reform programme and even hosting him at his last White House reception dinner in October 2016 ("Obama rolls out red carpet" 2016). The US-Italian relationship also benefitted from Italy's enthusiastic support for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and from Italy's commitment to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan. In January 2016, after months of difficult negotiations, Italy also allowed the US use of Italian military bases for armed US drone missions over Libya. Italy has however remained firm in its insistence that US drones use Italian bases *only* for defensive missions and reconnaissance, not targeted killings or offensive action ("L'Italia concede" 2016; "Italy Quietly Agrees" 2016).

A similar debate was held regarding Italy's contribution to the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, with Italy refusing requests by the US and its allies to commence offensive operations in Syria and Iraq ("ISIS: Pentagono chiede" 2016). Notwithstanding this refusal, as described in the previous section, Italy's contribution to the US-led anti-ISIS coalition has expanded under Renzi. The Government's decision to considerably enhance Italy's participation in Iraq is perhaps the clearest example of the country's efforts to consolidate its foreign and military commitments in areas where economic, political and diplomatic returns are expected and closely interrelated. In this respect, the choice to dispatch Italian troops to support work on the Mosul Dam can be described as a calculated risk that it is hoped will yield economic benefits for an Italian company while at the same time providing the Italian government with an

opening to secure a place at the top diplomatic table together with key allies such as the US, France and the United Kingdom. A similar reading can be given to the Government's decision to dispatch troops and medical specialists to Libya. Indeed, and in the broader context of the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Italy's willingness to assume greater responsibilities appears to have been recognised by its allies, with Rome being chosen as the location for the third ministerial meeting of the International anti-ISIS Coalition on 2 February 2016 after previous meetings were held in Paris and London.

At the diplomatic level in Syria, the Renzi government has remained firm in its opposition to military measures and supported efforts by the UN envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. Italy's role and visibility did grow in this domain under the Renzi government, with Italy being invited to participate in the UN-sponsored peace talks on Syria for the first time in late 2014 (Geneva II). In this context, Italy had long argued for the necessity of including Iran in diplomatic negotiations on the future of Syria, a view that is shared by other actors. Iran was ultimately invited to join the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG), which met in Vienna in November 2015 and again in February 2016 (European External Action Service 2016b).

Italy has also been active in the humanitarian sphere in helping to launch the EU's Regional Trust Fund to coordinate humanitarian aid for the Syrian crisis in cooperation with the European Commission. Launched in December 2014 and known as the Madad Fund, Italy contributed 3 million euro as founding donor of the initiative ("European Commission and Italy" 2014). While lagging behind other major European partners, Italian humanitarian contributions in response to the Syrian conflict are said to have totalled about €120 million between 2011 and late 2016 according to Foreign Ministry figures (see "Alfano: 25 milioni di euro" 2016). A further \$400 million pledge was made by Italy's Foreign Minister during the London Donor Conference for Syria in early February 2016 for the period 2016-2018.

In Europe, Italy struggled with certain EU countries on many thorny dossiers – fiscal restraint, austerity, the migrant crisis, sanctions on Russia, European reform and integration – but on the whole has maintained close relations with European leaders in France and Germany, as well as with the UK, both pre-and-post Brexit. The same cannot be said with the leaders of EU institutions which have been criticised repeatedly by Renzi and his ministers – and more so by the Italian opposition – for not doing enough to support European recovery, respond to the refugee and migrant crisis or accord Italy more flexibility when it comes to the deficit. In return, and on more than one occasion, these EU representatives have expressed pungent criticism of Italy's finances and reform programmes, contributing to an atmosphere of confrontation that reached a peak in the months leading up to Italy's December 2016 constitutional referendum (Greco and Ronzitti 2016:11-41).

A major issue of contention with Europe revolved around the migrant and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. Italy has repeatedly called on Europe to show more solidarity and help shoulder some of the burden in running search

and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. In this context, between October 2013 and 2014 Italy spent a total of €114 million to fund the *Mare Nostrum* mission in the Mediterranean (Marrone and Nones 2015: 122). The operation was discontinued with the launching of the *FRONTEX Triton* mission in November 2014, which however had fewer staff and was less funded than the Italian-led mission. Finally, in April 2015, following a significant rise in the number of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, EU leaders agreed to expand the *Triton* mission, providing it with similar resources compared to the previous *Mare Nostrum* operation (“Two more migrant boats” 2015). Italy, meanwhile, also launched a second naval and reconnaissance mission in March 2015, known as *Mare Sicuro*, which is presently working in parallel with the EU *NAVFOR MED* mission launched in June 2015. Now in its third phase, EU *NAVFOR MED* is headquartered in Rome and the Italian Rear Admiral Enrico Credendino holds operational command, while Rear Admiral Andrea Gueglio is Force Commander and head of the operation’s flagship vessel, the Italian Aircraft Carrier *Cavour*.

While repeatedly calling on Europe to do more, and pushing hard for the ultimately unsuccessful EU refugee quota system that was approved in September 2015, Italy has found itself in the difficult situation of having to shoulder an important part of the manpower, financial and logistical burden of the migrant and refugee crises in the Mediterranean. By December 2016, only 5% of the promised 160,000 migrants had been relocated from Greece and Italy to other EU countries (“EU met only 5%” 2016; UNHCR 2016), figures that only served to increase Italian protests vis-à-vis EU institutions and other Member States.

On the whole, therefore, while the Government may deserve good marks for effort and initiative, the choice of strategy, sequencing and implementation of these reforms remains problematic. In this respect, Renzi’s ambitious persona and reform plans quickly fell prey to Italy’s turbulent and fractured domestic politics, diluting the scope of a number of attempts at reform while slowing their actual implementation. Ultimately, and as has been the case with previous Italian executives, domestic constraints of a political, economic and institutional nature would combine to limit the effectiveness of Renzi’s reform agenda, both foreign and domestic. Indeed, many of the initiatives overseen by Renzi yielded only limited results or remained ‘work in progress’ at the time of his resignation in December 2016.

Conclusions

As a highly ambitious politician, Renzi is known for refusing to shy away from confrontation. Yet, excesses of confidence and a tendency to neglect his political opponents both near and far ultimately led to his downfall as Italy’s Prime Minister. By gambling on a controversial constitutional reform package that was voted down in a popular referendum on 4 December 2016, Renzi was unceremoniously forced to resign, to be replaced by his close ally and former Foreign Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, who subsequently formed another government.

The abrupt end to Renzi's three-year premiership necessarily makes any assessment of his impact on IFP partial and incomplete, notwithstanding the fact that the subsequent government clearly affirmed its intention to continue Renzi's agenda⁶. While Renzi placed the country on a more solid track of institutional and budgetary reform, much remains to be done, not least an effort at actually implementing and carrying through the many reform plans announced by Renzi.

That said, it is clear that Renzi has shown himself to be a more proactive leader compared to his two immediate predecessors, as well as his successor. Benefitting from consolidated support in Parliament and a clearer political mandate to act in foreign and security policy, Renzi, known as the '*rottamatore*' (loosely translated as 'the scrapper') took it upon himself to inject a much needed dose of self-confidence and ambition into Italy's political debate and international initiatives.

Modelled on the example of Barack Obama, who Renzi has often described as the most inspiring contemporary leader, Italy's youngest Prime Minister has tried, with mixed results, to change Italy's engrained culture of complaining and political deadlock, seeking to address a whole number of institutional, political and economic challenges that have long plagued Italy's reputation abroad. In this respect, Renzi has sought – at one and the same time – to reform Italy's constitution and electoral law; reorganise and speed up the on-going reform of Italy's foreign, defence and aid budgets; clarify the guidelines for Italy's participation in international missions abroad; position Italy as a major force contributor in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition while resisting requests to deviate from Italy's long-standing policy of non-intervention; establish and consolidate a position for Italy as a key diplomatic player in the context of Libya; and become a major voice in Europe for a cooperative approach to the migrant and refugee crises in the Mediterranean.

On top of these issues, Italy under Renzi also emerged as a strong voice in Europe calling for a more flexible approach to the financial recovery, insisting on the need for more investment and less austerity ("Renzi: 'Europe has taken'" 2016). In this Renzi found an important supporter in the Italian head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, who embarked on a programme of quantitative easing to help struggling European countries reach economic recovery. Italy has also emerged as a key European voice supporting debates for enhanced integration among EU states in the realm of defence, security, R&D and procurement strategies as a means to better exploit resources, share expertise and limit unnecessary duplication.

Banking on those sectors where Italy does have some important added value – ample expertise in peacekeeping and multilateral initiatives; naval search, rescue and reconnaissance operations; good relations with Arab and Muslim states as well as with Israel, the United States and Russia; and a wide array of existing and potential economic opportunities in the energy, construction and service sectors across the Southern Mediterranean – seems to be the most efficient avenue to

protect, and eventually enhance, Italy's international visibility while stimulating a domestic recovery. Indeed, while Italy's increased participation in military missions abroad can be framed as a continuation of the country's tendency to bandwagon with larger allies, the Renzi government's activism in Libya and on the migration and refugee crisis do stand out as two of its major contributions to IFP.

One major criticism that can be levelled against Renzi and his cabinet is that they tried to do too much at once, at times appearing to neglect political opponents or the complexity of the issues at hand. In the drive to produce concrete results on numerous parallel issues, Renzi unwillingly sowed the seeds of his own downfall. His signature reform package, the electoral law and constitutional reform, was criticised by many as rushed and unclear, with Renzi himself admitting that a better job could have been done ("Renzi: 'Più soldi," 2016; "PD in assemblea" 2016).

Paradoxically perhaps, while ultimately costing him his premiership, Renzi's drive to 'get the job done' provided Italy with somewhat greater visibility on the international stage. He oversaw the first major increases in Italian defence spending in almost a decade, and Italy has received praise from many quarters for its humanitarian actions in the Mediterranean. Italy has also enhanced its credentials as an important US ally in Europe while, however, remaining firm in its refusal to engage in offensive military action in Iraq, Syria and Libya. At the same time, in two of these theatres – Iraq and Libya – Italy has demonstrated its ability to make difficult choices and to respond quickly to international crises. In 2014, Italy was among the first European countries to respond to the call for assistance by Iraqi authorities and the Kurdish Regional Government on the front line with ISIS by sending light weapons and ammunition (Greco and Ronzitti 2016: 93-101). Since then, the Italian troop contingent in Iraq and the broader anti-ISIS coalition has grown to be the largest after the United States', no small feat for a 'middle power' with stringent political and financial constraints at home.

While one can debate the strategy and usefulness of Italian commitments in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and other locations, there is little doubt that Italy under Renzi has not skirted its responsibilities vis-à-vis its international allies and has backed these alliances with muscle and diplomatic support. Libya has been perhaps the most complex and problematic theatre of Italian involvement under Renzi, and also the one where both qualitative and quantitative measurements can only go so far in providing an assessment of IFP. While investing diplomatic, financial and military capital in the Libyan conflict, Renzi left power with little to show for the investment, which also, no doubt, carries real security risks for Italy. Yet, with much secrecy and little fanfare, Italy's contribution in Libya may still bear fruit.

In January 2017 Italy announced that it would become the first Western country to re-open an embassy in Libya two years after its original closure ("Italy reopening embassy" 2017). Three months later, in April 2017, unexpected news hit the international headlines: Italy had successfully brokered an agreement

between Libya's warring sides at a secret meeting in Rome ("Libya's warring sides" 2017). While it is too early to tell if the agreement will hold and help pave the way for further diplomatic talks as well as a real push for a political agreement between Tripoli and Tobruk, the meeting goes to show that quiet diplomacy, if sufficiently supported by strong political will and some military muscle, still has the potential to pay off.

In light of Italy's multilateral vocation and good relations with key international actors who often disagree with each other, policy makers would be best advised to seek to steer a middle course between East and West, North and South, seeking to provide expertise and added value in building more cooperative relations among major state actors. It is perhaps an accident of history that Renzi will not be leading Italy in this capacity during 2017-2018, a period when Rome will be put to the test in a variety of international forums. In 2017, Italy will hold the rotating presidency of the G7; it will Chair the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Mediterranean Contact Group and will have a seat on the UNSC (for one year). Following that, in 2018, Italy will assume the Chairmanship of the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, another institutional role that could be used by Italy's leaders as a platform to maximise the country's international influence and leverage while balancing the country's still significant domestic and structural constraints.

Italian politics have not seen the last of Matteo Renzi. The 'scrapper' is likely to be back in a leadership position in the not too distant future. Having secured re-election as head of the PD in the April 2017 primaries with almost 70% of the vote, Renzi is positioning himself to make a comeback as Prime Minister in the next national elections, tentatively scheduled for 2018. While Renzi's first stint as Prime Minister did not end well, forcing him to abandon Italy's helm at a time when many of his domestic and institutional reforms remained incomplete, his ambition and political drive are not likely to dissipate.

Renzi's legacy is presently being carried forward by his less charismatic ally and former Foreign Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, ensuring that when Renzi makes his comeback, Italy's citizens and international allies will again no doubt notice a significant change of rhetoric and tone from Rome. Yet citizens, as much as international allies, will soon expect concrete and quantifiable results from Italy's lengthy process of seemingly open-ended reform. The country's ability to weather the financial crisis and emerge in this new and convoluted international setting with increased self-confidence and resolve will ultimately depend on these results. Whoever leads Italy in the near future, domestic politics and the economic recovery will no doubt dominate the Government's agenda. What remains to be seen is if Italy will be able to justify and consolidate its many foreign and security engagements in such a way as to strengthen and support this ultimate, fundamental goal.

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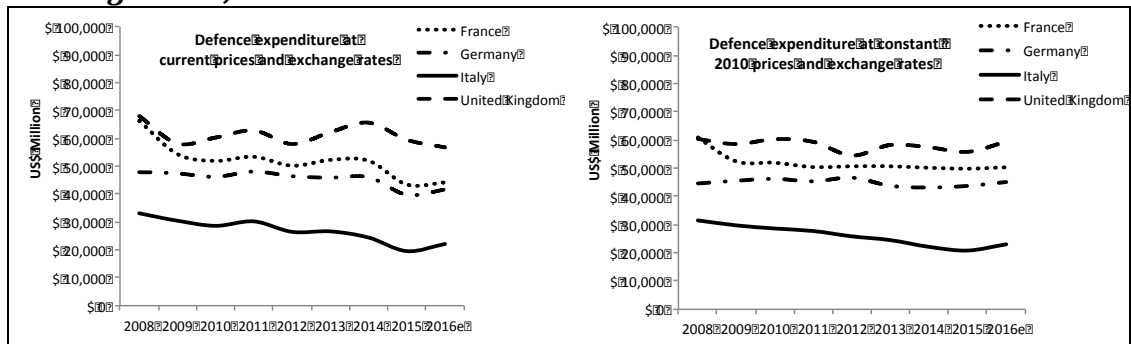
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Figures

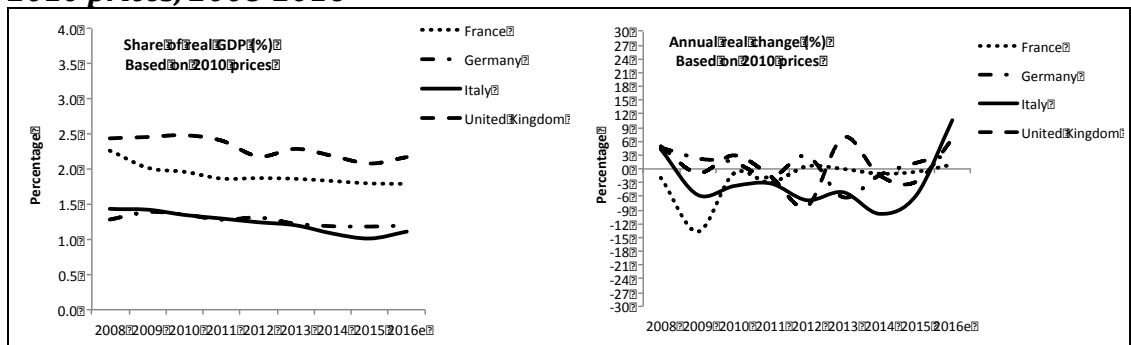
Figure 1 Defence expenditure at current and constant 2010 prices and exchange rates, 2008-2016



Source: Authors' elaboration of NATO defence expenditure data.

Defence expenditures do not include pensions. Figures for 2016 are estimates.

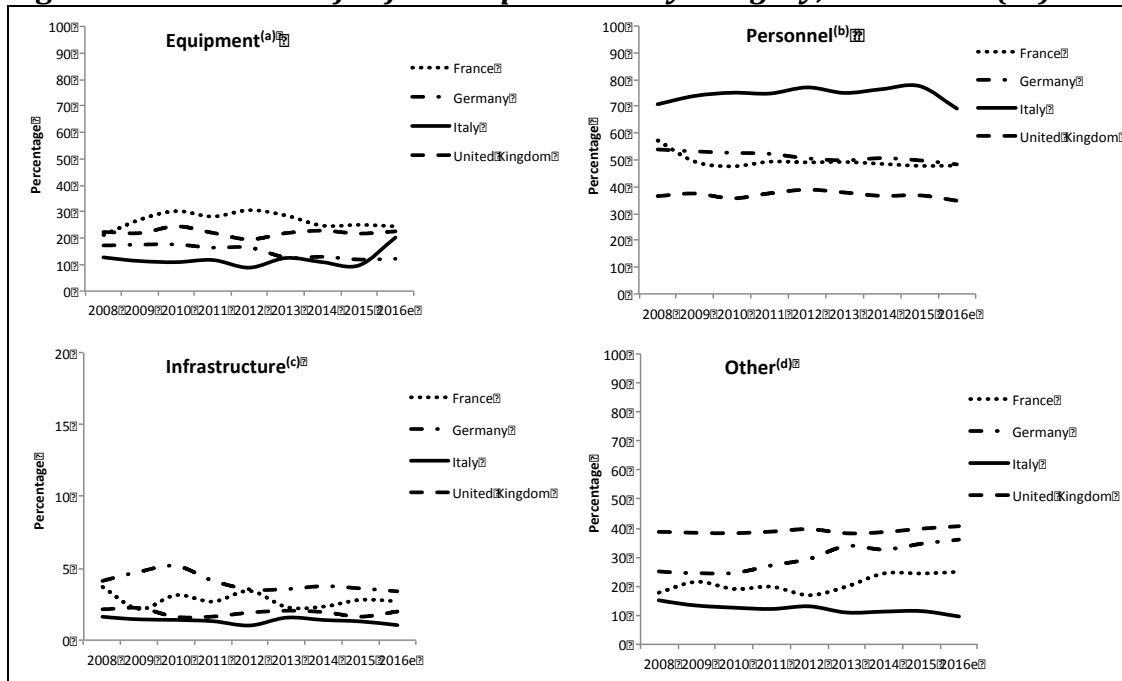
Figure 2 Defence expenditure: share of GDP and annual real change based on 2010 prices, 2008-2016



Source: Authors' elaboration of NATO defence expenditure data.

Defence expenditures do not include pensions. Figures for 2016 are estimates.

Figure 3 Distribution of defence expenditure by category, 2008-2016 (%)



Source: Authors' elaboration of NATO defence expenditure data.

Defence expenditures do not include pensions. Figures for 2016 are estimates.

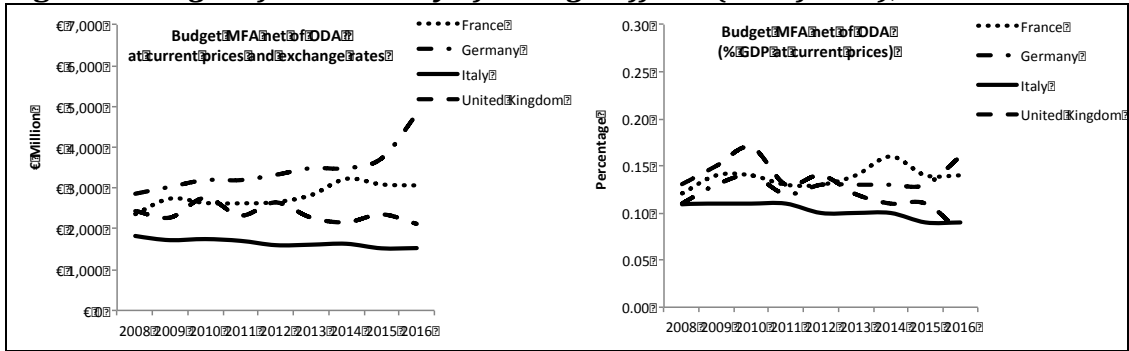
(a) *Equipment* expenditure includes major equipment expenditure and R&D devoted to major equipment;

(b) *Personnel* expenditure includes military and civilian expenditure and pensions;

(c) *Infrastructure* expenditure includes NATO common infrastructure and national military construction;

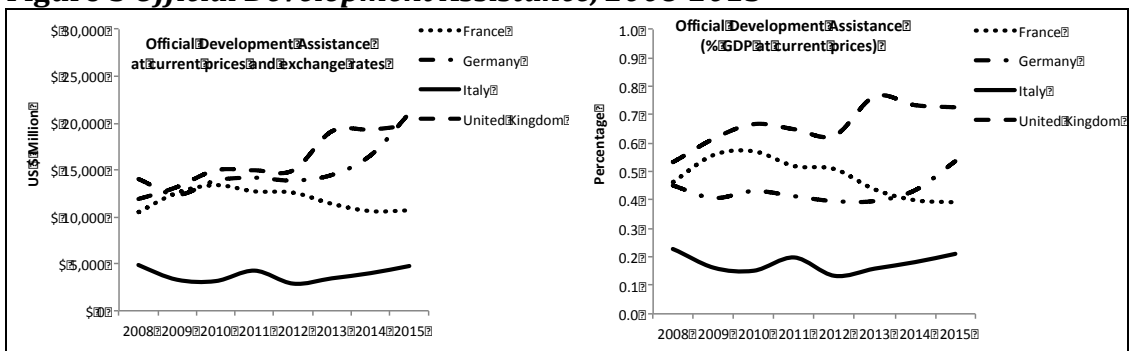
(d) *Other* expenditure includes operations and maintenance expenditure, other R&D expenditure and expenditure not allocated among above-mentioned categories.

Figure 4 Budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (net of ODA), 2008-2016



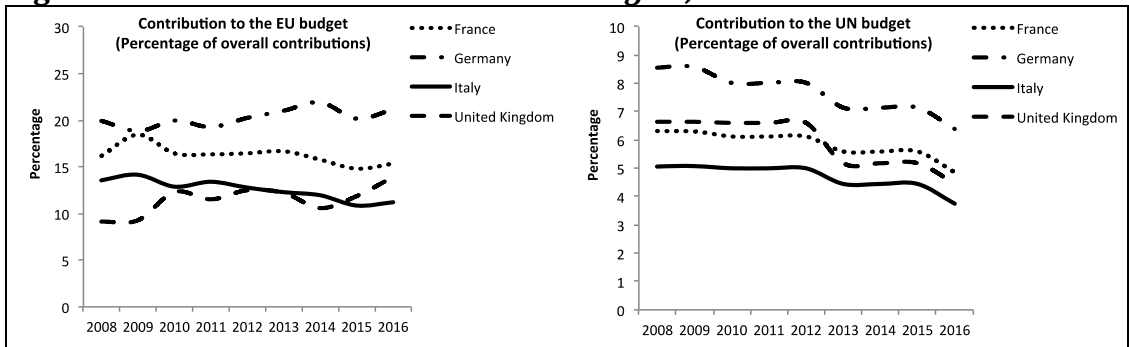
Sources: Authors' elaboration of Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Statistical Yearbook) data.

Figure 5 Official Development Assistance, 2008-2015



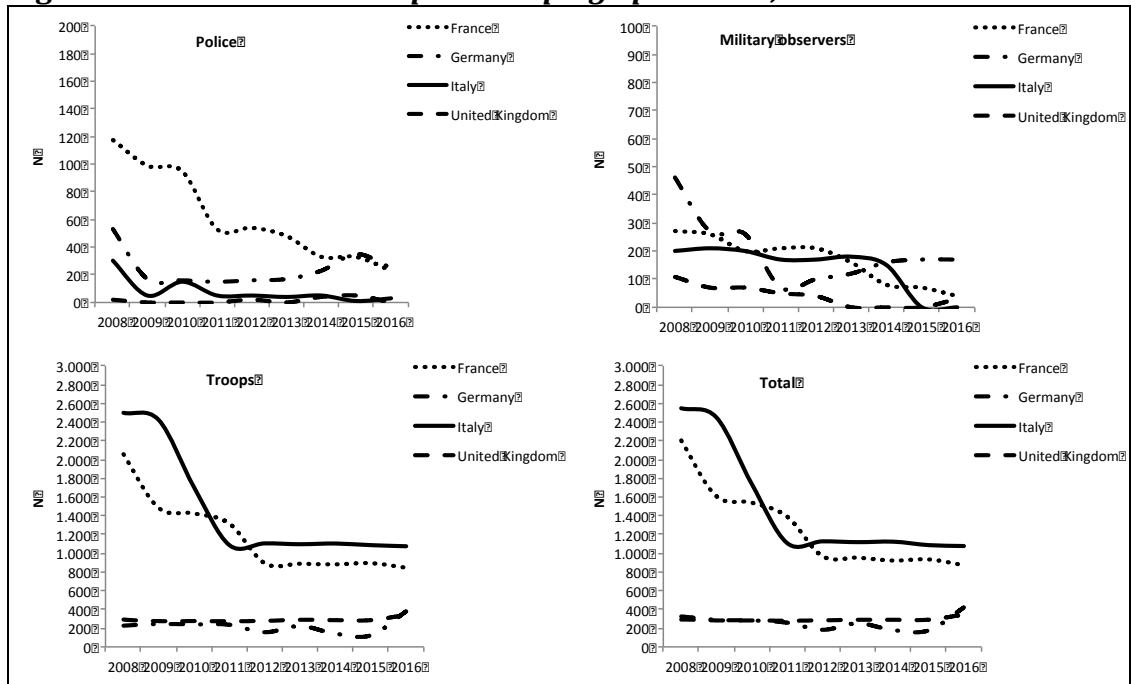
Sources: Authors' elaboration of Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Statistical Yearbook) data; OECD.

Figure 6 Contribution to the EU and UN budgets, 2008-2016



Sources: Authors' elaboration of EU Commission (2008-2014) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2015-2016) data; UN Committee on Contributions.

Figure 7 Contribution to UN peacekeeping operations, 2008-2016



Source: Authors' elaboration of data from UN Peacekeeping archives.

¹ This number also includes Italy's operation *Mare Sicuro*, launched in March 2015. In total, including military missions on Italian territory, Italy was participating in 31 military missions with about 14,400 personnel by the end of 2016 (Source: Italian Ministry of Defence).

² It has to be noted that the last time a similar document was produced by Italy's military top brass was in 1986, in itself an indication of the Renzi government's willingness to redress Italian institutional shortcomings in this domain (Greco and Ronzitti 2016: 47-55).

³ Remarkably, Italy and Germany spend about the same percentage of GDP on defence (see Figure 2).

⁴ In the case of France and the United Kingdom, equipment costs include nuclear weapons.

⁵ Italian soldiers patrol the area north of Mosul, protecting the employees of the Trevi Group, the Italian company awarded the contract to repair Iraq's largest dam – the fourth largest in the Middle East.

⁶ This was particularly evident in the areas of defence and economic policy. Both the Defence Minister, Roberta Pinotti, and the Minister for the Economy and Finance, Pier Carlo Padoan, retained their posts under the Gentiloni government.