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ITALY AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: THE STRATEGIC DILEMMA OF A MEDITERRANEAN MIDDLE POWER

ABSTRACT

Negli ultimi anni, l'Italia ha progressivamente ampliato la sua presenza nell'Indo-Pacifico. Questa decisione ha suscitato un notevole interesse tra gli studiosi, i quali si interrogano sulle motivazioni alla base di questo cambiamento e sulle relative implicazioni. Molti di essi sono scettici riguardo alla capacità dell'Italia - tradizionalmente riconosciuta come media potenza - di svolgere un ruolo rilevante ben al di là del suo vicinato. In effetti, l'Indo-Pacifico è distante dalla principale area di interesse strategico di Roma, il cosiddetto Mediterraneo Allargato, una regione caratterizzata da crescente instabilità e da una sempre maggiore penetrazione da parte di potenze esterne. Per contribuire a questo dibattito, l'articolo analizza gli sviluppi più recenti della politica estera italiana tra l'Indo-Pacifico e il Mediterraneo Allargato, ponendosi un duplice obiettivo. Da un lato, fornire al lettore una chiave teorica per comprendere le motivazioni alla base delle scelte del Paese in questi due quadranti. Dall'altro, evidenziare le sfide poste dall'equilibrio tra le tradizionali ambizioni mediterranee e quelle emergenti nell'Indo-Pacifico.

In recent years, Italy has progressively expanded its presence in the Indo-Pacific. Its moving has stirred considerable academic curiosity among scholars, who seek to understand the motivations driving this shift and its implications. Recognizing Italy as a “middle power,” many scholars are skeptical of its ability to play an important role far beyond its neighborhood. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific lies distant from Rome’s area of primary strategic interest, the so-called Enlarged Mediterranean, a region characterized by increasing instability and growing penetration from external powers. To contribute to this debate, the article discusses the most recent developments in Italy’s foreign policy between the Indo-Pacific and the Enlarged Mediterranean by setting a twofold objective. On the one hand, to provide the reader with a theoretical key to understanding the motivations behind the choices our country is making in these two quadrants. On the other hand, to bring out the challenges posed by balancing its traditional Mediterranean ambitions with those emerging in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Italian foreign policy, Indo-Pacific, middle power, Enlarged Mediterranean, NATO

Introduction

Over the past decade, Italy has progressively expanded the scope of its foreign policy to the Indo-Pacific. The country has stepped up its commitment to the region through increased involvement in economic, diplomatic, and military efforts (Dell’Era & Pugliese, 2024). On the economic side, Italy has increased its trade ties with several countries in the region. UN data reveals that Rome has boosted its interactions with the top ten trading nations in the area by approximately 16 percent over the past decade (Abbondanza, 2023a). Diplomatically, Rome concluded a significant number of development and strategic partnerships with key Indo-Pacific states and institutions, including Vietnam, South Korea, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and India. In the military dimension, Rome has launched meaningful industrial and operational initiatives. The decision to kickstart a defense partnership with Japan and the United Kingdom for the development of a sixth-generation jet was hailed as a turning point. On the operational front, Italy has deployed several naval vessels to the region to take part in joint exercises and ocean patrols. Italian ships have garnered attention from local navies, evidenced by a recent historic agreement between Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri and Indonesia for the supply of two ships initially designed for the Italian Navy (Arthur, 2024). Additionally, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has announced plans to ramp up these efforts by the end of 2024, with Rome deploying its aircraft carrier strike group to the region (Marrone, 2023). Although it is not the only European power to have launched new initiatives in this quadrant – being anticipated by France, the United Kingdom, and Germany – Italian activism in the East has caught the attention of many observers. The Indo-Pacific theater lies well outside the “three circles” in which Italian foreign policy has typically developed (Santoro, 1991). They are, as confirmed by the last two incumbent governments, the Atlantic perimeter (through NATO and the U.S.), the European dimension, and the Mediterranean (Draghi, 2021; Meloni, 2022). Italy’s “pivot” towards the Indo-Pacific then comes as a surprise, particularly considering its strong focus on the Mediterranean since 2015. Italian strategic documents now refer to this region as the Enlarged Mediterranean (*Mediterraneo allargato*), an area encompassing southern Europe, the Middle East, and northern and sub-Saharan Africa (Ministero della Difesa, 2022). In response to growing instability in this area, Rome has initiated various initiatives, including military endeavors, regarding the Enlarged Mediterranean as Italy’s primary strategic interest (Coticchia & Mazziotti di Celso, 2024).

In light of these factors, Rome’s decision to broaden the scope of its foreign policy to include the Indo-Pacific has sparked significant debate among academics. Some believe its decision is timely and crucial, almost a necessity, given that the Indo-Pacific has become the focal point of global geopolitical dynamics and calls for an Italian Indo-Pacific Strategy (Abbondanza, 2023b). Further, others believe that Rome’s action in the region demonstrates its firm stance towards China following an initial wavering (Palma, 2023). Other authors note how Rome’s interests in this context cannot be underestimated, considering the contracts for the supply of armaments currently in force between the countries of the Indo-Pacific and the Italian defense industry, as well as their potential increase in light of the ongoing tensions and the economic growth of various actors (Dell’Era & Pugliese, 2024). On the other side, however, some scholars urge caution, suggesting that the Mediterranean should remain the priority (Coticchia & Mazziotti di Celso, 2024;

Mazziotti di Celso, 2023) and that efforts in the Pacific may constitute a waste of resources (Mazziotti di Celso, 2024).

This article aims to contribute to this debate with a dual objective. On the one hand, to provide the reader with a theoretical key to understanding the motivations behind the choices Italy is making in these two quadrants. On the other hand, to bring out the challenges posed by balancing its traditional Mediterranean ambitions with those emerging in the Indo-Pacific.

The article is structured as follows. The first section is theoretical and introduces the conceptual framework of the article, describing Italy's behavior on the international stage as that of a "middle power." The second section, on the other hand, is entirely empirical and is further divided into three subsections: the first discusses the reasons for Italy's push to increase its presence in the Pacific; the second presents the situation in the Mediterranean, showing the challenges that Rome must face to ensure its security in the area; the third and final subsection illustrates the resources available to Rome to pursue its foreign and especially military policy. Finally, in the third section the article presents the conclusions.

Middle powers and foreign policy

The scholarly literature is almost unanimous in considering the Italian republic as a clear example of a middle power (Santoro, 1991; Vigezzi, 1997; Ratti, 2011; Varsori, 2022; Diodato & Marchetti, 2023). The country displays the distinctive elements of one of the three subcategories into which these types of states have been usually divided: i) those that, capacity-wise, are endowed with a numerically intermediate population worldwide but a high human development index; ii) those with an advanced economy and global connections; iii) the countries capable of militarily defending their interests on a regional or slightly more than regional perimeter (Holbraad, 1984; Handel, 1990).

On the relational level, moreover, middle powers usually share three major characteristics that the Italian case seemingly possess: i) being able to provide for their security; ii) acting as major powers and exerting influence or leadership over the small states within their range; and iii) being more exposed than great powers to external, international dangers, enough to constantly seek formal alliances, partnerships with the stronger actors and interactions within multilateral contexts (Holbraad, 1984; Wight, 2002).

Starting from these conditions, the middle powers can play significant roles in international affairs. The major powers, on the other hand, may be interested in cashing in on their support in times of peace and to unload some security costs in a given region onto them and be eager to have them at their side even more in times of crisis in the international order. During these times, a distinction emerges between states that stand in defense of the status quo and those acting with the ultimate goal of revision (Organski, 1967; Gilpin, 1981; Natalizia & Termine, 2023). In this case, the major powers may seek middle powers support because they fear that them moving into the opposing camp would contribute to an imbalance unfavorable to them and, thus, also systemic outcomes (Handel, 1990; Wight, 2002).

In this scenario two behaviors emerge among the middle powers: the first adopted by middle powers more inclined to risk because they possess such quantities of strategic resources that increase their "bargaining" power is to try the neutrality card and maintain an open dialogue with all parties to maximize the benefits of their position (Burgwyn, 1997; Spektor, 2023); the second, chosen by middle powers less prone to risk – although able to carve out significant spaces of autonomy when the

international order is stable (Santoro, 1991; Diodato & Marchetti, 2023) –is to align rigidly with the major ally concerning the increasingly sharp distinction between the “revisionist” and “conservative” camps (Termine & Natalizia, 2020).

Italy: a middle power in times of crisis

In light of the considerations made in the previous section, how do we explain the choice of a middle power to project itself outside its regional perimeter? What prompted a middle power like Italy to expand the scope of its foreign policy to such a distant region? Moreover, what consequences could this choice entail for Italy?

The global rebalancing towards the Indo-Pacific and Italy

The Chinese crackdown on protests in Hong Kong (2019-2020), the Russian aggression of Ukraine (2022), the massive military exercises ordered by Beijing in the Taiwan Straits (2022-3), and, most recently, the Hamas attack on Israel (2023) constitute only shock-indicators of the crisis facing the international order first shaped and then led by the United States after the end of the Cold War (Ikenberry, 2012). While it is only recently that world public opinion has become fully aware of this phenomenon, it has been the subject of animated debate within the community of scholars and practitioners of International Relations, at least since the financial crisis of 2007-2009¹.

Over the past fifteen years, therefore, Washington has been forced to rethink its grand strategy in light of this challenge, as highlighted by the three presidencies’ – Obama, Trump, and Biden – strategic documents (White House, 2010; 2017; 2022a; 2022b). The process of identifying a functional equivalent to the Cold War containment and the 1990s and early 2000s democratic enlargement, led to the formulation of the first pillar, i.e. the Pivot to Asia (Clinton, 2011). Although the changes implied by it had already been sketched out by George W. Bush (Silove, 2016), the Obama years transposed the concept into an overall, concrete rebalancing in the area then defined as Asia-Pacific (Dell’Era & Mazziotti di Celso, 2021). With the Trump and Biden Administrations, this choice has come to full maturity (Termine & Ercolani, 2021). Second, the region that constitutes its preferred perimeter has been renamed “Indo-Pacific” to include India in this complex chessboard (White House, 2017; 2021; 2022a; Department of State, 2019). Finally, the first U.S. strategy dedicated to the area was published (White House, 2022b). Functional to effective rebalancing in the Indo-Pacific has been the second pillar of the new U.S. strategic approach: retrenchment, i.e. the gradual cut to non-vital commitments (Natalizia, 2022). This had started from the conviction that resources are scarce even for a superpower like the United States and should not squandered (Gilpin, 1981; Colombo, 2014). The withdrawal from Afghanistan was only the most striking translation of this strategic choice, which made evident how Washington considered rational to take on the high reputational costs of giving up commitments in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the post-Soviet Space. In these regions, U.S. interests were no longer defined as “strategic” but as “important” (White House, 2010; 2017), stressing the new disengagement trajectory. This dynamic has experienced only a partial adjustment after the events of February 24, 2022, and October 7, 2023 (White House, 2022a). It should be remembered, moreover, that the publication of the Indo-Pacific Strategy preceded only a few days Russia’s attack on Ukraine – given as imminent for months by the CIA itself – in

¹ As a matter of examples for the Italian debate, see Colombo (2014); Natalizia & Carteny (2022); Parsi (2022); Catapano et al. (2023).

which the White House stated how its main international goal was to “shape the strategic environment in which the People’s Republic of China operates” to build “a balance of influence” favorable “to the United States, [its] allies and partners” (White House, 2022b).

The third pillar, finally, is the demand to allies, mainly NATO, to “share the burden” of preserving the international status quo. For Washington, the international order stands as guarantee for both European and American values, security, prosperity and interests. This claim has been declined in two ways. On the one hand, Washington called on allies to spend more on defense – a solution formally accepted with the Defense Investment Pledge of the Atlantic Alliance Summit in Wales (NATO, 2014). On the other, it asked them to make themselves available to operate increasingly “out of area” both as an alliance – a request proposed under the “global NATO” formula but tacitly accepted as “NATO with global connections”² – and individually by linking up with U.S. forces. The U.S. demands have been accepted at least doctrinally, though not without contradictions nor fundamental ambiguity, by major European middle powers such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany³.

For the years ahead, Italy faces some crucial choices given the evolving political-strategic context. Although it has not yet adopted its national security document, in the face of the mounting challenge to the U.S.-led order (Sullivan, 2023), it has initiated a gradual adaptation to the changed international reality that, in substance, seems to follow other European allies’s positions. If on one side, Italy has confirmed and expanded its commitments on NATO Eastern flank, supported Ukraine’s war effort, and drastically reduced Russian gas imports within two years, Italy has also more cautiously recalibrated its attitude toward the People’s Republic of China both directly and indirectly. Let it suffice here to recall the adherence to the Global Combat Air Program (Del Monte, 2023) or the Indo-Pacific campaign of the ship Francesco Morosini (Piasentini, 2023), passing through the elevation of bilateral relations with Tokyo to Strategic Partnership, as well as the non-renewal of the 2019 BRI Memorandum of Understanding signed with Beijing (Mazziotti di Celso, 2023).

Rome’s Enlarged Mediterranean barycenter

The U.S. demand to share the burden and the reconfirmation of Italy’s Atlanticist stance presents our country with a dilemma. Should it follow the out-of-area rebalancing and commit more outside the Enlarged Mediterranean or instead limit its role, contribute to containing revisionist powers along the United States but without expanding its range of action and act as a proper middle power?

To identify possible solutions to the dilemma that the U.S. demand for burden sharing poses for Rome, it is first necessary to define what fundamental interests Italy cultivates in the Enlarged Mediterranean and what challenges it faces in protecting them. Italy’s first fundamental interest in the area, shared with almost all

² The consecration of this perspective is to be found in the reaffirmation of the task of “cooperative security” as it emerges in the Strategic Concept 2022 (NATO, 2022).

³ France published, in 2021, a Strategy for the Indo-Pacific (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2021). The United Kingdom, in its Integrated Review, speaks of an “Indo-Pacific tilt” and points out that the Indo-Pacific has become “a crucial area for the Kingdom’s economy and security, as well as a key element in the British attempt to promote the creation and preservation of open societies across the globe” (Mazziotti di Celso, 2021; HM Government, 2021). Germany published a Strategy for China in 2023 (Bundesregierung, 2023). Finally, remember that the European Union has also adopted its own strategy for the Indo-Pacific (European Union, 2021).

European countries, is its status as the world's eighth-largest power by Gross Domestic Product, with an economy based largely on exports (Diodato & Marchetti, 2023). This makes it particularly interested in the functioning of an open international economy, and consequently in the security of maritime trade routes and, in particular, choke points. Recent events off the coast of Yemen strongly testify to the importance of freedom of navigation for our national security: recent estimates state that the cost of sending a "typical" container from Shanghai to Genoa has almost quadrupled from October 2023 to January 2024, from \$1,400 to \$5,200 (ISPI, 2024), partly due to the increase in shipping time by 10-12 days. The spillover to Italy, moreover, is not limited to price increases but also passes through the marginalization of its ports. The detour of a portion of maritime traffic to Cape Good Hope to the detriment of the Suez Canal, which has seen a 38 percent reduction in ship transit in recent weeks, incentivizes shipowners to favor European ports in the Atlantic rather than those in the Mediterranean (Crosetto, 2024). It should also not be forgotten that the Italian economy is primarily a processing economy and that the insecurity of the Suez, Bab al-Mandab, and Hormuz bottlenecks also affects our fossil fuel supply. This, combined with the decision to move toward a substantial zero energy dependence on Russia, which has further elevated the strategic importance of security in the Mediterranean both at the surface and underwater levels (where gas pipelines lie).

However, navigation security is not the only source of concern inside Enlarged Mediterranean. Italy's geographic position implies that the consequences of instability in the region can have much broader and more diverse repercussions on it than other countries. Rome's concerns relate primarily to Africa. First, Italy has significant trade relations with countries in the area. In 2022, Italy's trade with the African continent was about 30 billion euros, registering a growth of about 105 percent compared to 2016 (MAECI, 2023). Second, the stability of these countries, especially in North Africa, can guarantee Italy and Europe better management of regular and more importantly irregular migrations, which produces severe sociopolitical consequences in European countries. Third, the instability of African regimes makes them easily permeable to outside influences. On the one hand, they become breeding grounds for terrorist and criminal groups, which end up controlling even some state institutions. On the other, they provide space for action for "hybrid" actors with external powers patronage who are interested in expanding their presence in the region and threatening the interests of Italy and Europe.

Although, Rome has promoted several initiatives to support countries in the area in recent years, today, the *Mediterraneo allargato* remains characterized by widespread and growing instability. The Middle Eastern arc has experienced an escalation in the level of conflict with the outbreak of the conflict between Israel and Hamas and, even more recently, with the crisis that erupted in the Gulf of Aden following the increase in Houthi-led attacks on cargo ships bound for the Mediterranean. Syria, for its part, remains a country plagued by endemic instability, aggravated by a deep and enduring economic crisis and constantly fueled by the widespread and still entrenched presence of the Islamic State. The Eastern Mediterranean Sea, which has become an important global focus of geopolitical and economic interests due to recent discoveries of offshore energy resources, continues to be characterized by tense factors, including the historical disputes between Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, coastal states' claims to offshore natural gas resources, and disputes concerning disputed maritime boundaries in the Levant Sea. In the Horn of Africa, on the other hand, the most critical situation is that of Ethiopia,

which has reached final bankruptcy due to economic insolvency in 2023, followed by Eritrea, which is isolated from the international community and increasingly close to China and Russia, as well as Somalia, which does not appear to be able to handle the terrorist threat of al-Shabab. Sahel, on the other hand, has been subject to a wave of coups in recent years, which has infected Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Guinea, Gabon, and Sudan and, above all, Mali. The margins for action offered by the continuing instability in the region have allowed the proliferation of jihadist groups, which have contributed to making the security architecture even more precarious. As for North Africa, the main threats to Italy's national security stem from the continuing Libyan crisis, border tensions between Morocco and Algeria, the Tunisian political crisis, and the unresolved territorial sovereignty issue in Western Sahara.

In recent years, Italian executives, aware of the importance of Africa's stability for Italy and its security, have taken the lead in renewed activism in the area, launching various initiatives in the diplomatic, commercial, and military fields. In addition to the publication of a new Security Strategy for the Mediterranean, released by the Draghi government in 2022, and the launch of an ambitious strategic plan for building a new partnership with Africa, the Mattei Plan, Rome has also reinforced its military presence in the region with the launch of new missions, intensified its diplomatic activity in Africa with the opening of new diplomatic offices and increased visits by government representatives throughout the continent. Finally, it has forged important trade and energy agreements with several countries in the area.

Italy's allies and resources

The outlined context is a source of considerable concern for Rome. Such concern increases significantly if we take into account the allies on which Rome can rely to ensure its security in the Mediterranean and the resources it has.

As anticipated, its principal ally, the United States, has long been attempting to completely rebalance its commitments to Asia, relegating the Mediterranean to a secondary position. In its Enlarged Mediterranean policy, Rome can count on Washington's support in a residual way than the past. On the other hand, the American strategic reorientation has nurtured the effect of pushing Europeans to seek greater integration in their foreign and security policy. In 2016, the European Union embarked on a series of initiatives to achieve a greater capacity to intervene even without American help, a concept that has earned the catchphrase of "strategic autonomy." Italy has thus embraced Brussels' initiatives, hoping that an accelerating European defense integration could provide a solid ground to the Italian policy in the Mediterranean.

Italy's expectations, however, have been sharply disappointed since Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The outbreak of war contributed to further exacerbating the already significant divergence of member countries' interests in foreign and security policy within the EU (Meijer & Brooks, 2021). Since the war, the priorities of the countries on the Southern flank, which continue to identify the Mediterranean as the source of the most significant challenges to their security, have taken a back seat to those of the northeastern European countries, which identify a resurging Russia as the main threat to their security (Coticchia & Meijer, 2022).

Outside of the relevant international organizations, Italy could move, including through bilateral, minilateral, or multilateral agreements, mainly seeking backing from the countries that most share its interests toward the south. Besides Spain, the leading candidate remains France (Mazziotti di Celso & Tosti Di Stefano, 2023).

Indeed, Paris and Rome share concerns about what is happening on Europe's southern flank. This should imply, at least ideally, an inevitable convergence of interests on the main dossiers related to this quadrant. It is no coincidence that, in 2021, the ratification of the Quirinal Treaty, signed by French President Emmanuel Macron and then-Council President Mario Draghi, reflected the desire on both sides of the Alps for enhanced bilateral cooperation on many dossiers, including the policy to be adopted toward Africa.

Rome has often taken diverging positions from Paris. Indeed, on the African continent, the interests of the two countries have diverged on several dossiers. In Libya, for example, Italy strongly supported the government then headed by Fayez al-Sarraj, while Paris seemed to adopt a more ambiguous approach, repeatedly dialoguing with General Khalifa Haftar and including him in diplomatic negotiations (Falchi, 2017; Duclos, 2020). Even on migrations, the relationship between Paris and Rome has often resembled more of a nerve-wracking tug-of-war than a collaboration. Indeed, the migration boom from the African continent in early 2023⁴ reignited tensions between Rome and Paris rather than ushering in a new phase of collaboration. This does not imply that there cannot be room to maneuver between the two countries for joint initiatives. In recent years, Italy and France have also shown an ability to collaborate on other dossiers. Among these, one of the most relevant, albeit short-lived, was the Italian contribution to French operations in Mali, where Rome sent a task force of special military units to support French forces and earned Paris' praise (Mazziotti di Celso, 2023)⁵.

Therefore, Italy finds itself in a rather unprecedented situation in the international context that has emerged since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. While it has little room for maneuver in both the European Union and NATO to develop a Mediterranean policy within a multilateral format, never before has it been called upon to play a leading role in managing operational activities on Europe's southern flank (Calcagno, 2022).

Turning to resources, Italy seems to encounter additional limitations. Although Italy is traditionally one of the most significant contributors to international operations, especially those conducted by NATO, Italy is one of the countries in Europe that spends the least on defense as share of GDP. The table below compares the Italian defense budget with other important NATO countries. It shows how, when related to GDP, the Italian defense budget is among the lowest. Furthermore, not only is Italy one of the countries that spends the least on its defense, but Italy is also one of the few countries in Europe that has not increased defense spending since the onset of the war in Ukraine. As the graph shows, the Italian defense budget, in real terms, has slightly decreased.

⁴ From January 1 to May 4, 2023 alone, 42,405 people landed in Italy compared to 11,226 in the same period in 2022 (Le Grand Continent, 2023).

⁵ The component was later withdrawn because of the coup in Mali.

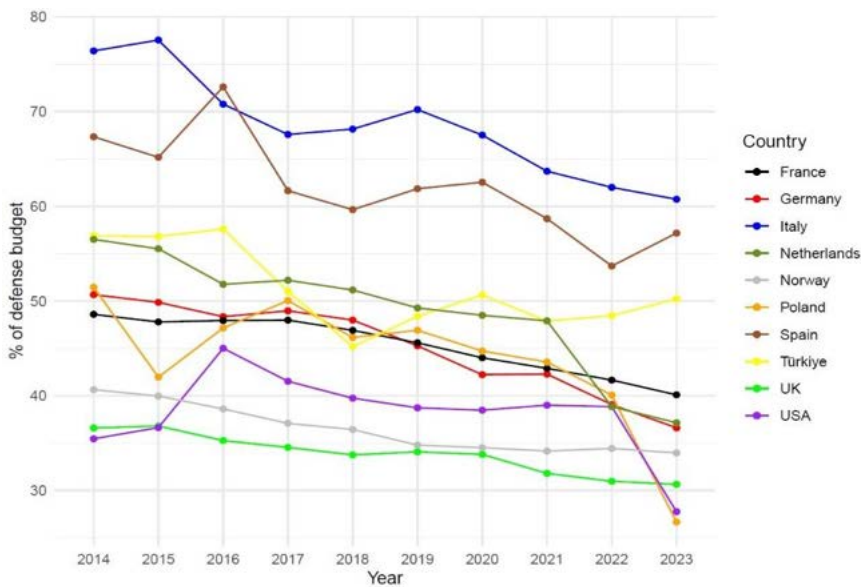


Figure 1: Defence expenditure as a share of GDP (based on 2015 prices) (NATO, 2023)

Italy not only has a problem of insufficient resources but also of poor spending. According to data provided by NATO, Italy’s defense budget is severely unbalanced. According to NATO standards, military spending should be divided, allocating 50% to personnel, 25% to investments, and 25% to training. However, as shown in the graph, Italy’s military spending is skewed towards personnel, with training receiving a much smaller share. Italy, therefore, must contend not only with limited but also unbalanced spending (Mazziotti di Celso, 2024).

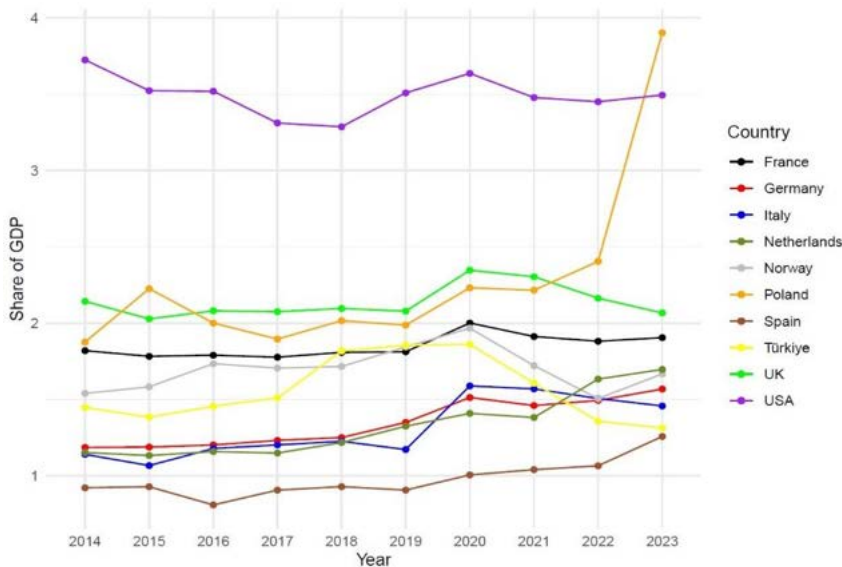


Figure 2: Percentage of total defense expenditure devoted to Personnel (2014-2023) (NATO, 2023)

Conclusion

The analysis has shown that Italy's decision to expand the perimeter of its foreign policy to the Indo-Pacific is primarily due to the pressure stemming from its significant relationship with the United States. However, the analysis has also demonstrated that Italy is subject to another important pressure in the Mediterranean, where increasing threats and the positioning of its allies require Italy to assume a leading role in the region. However, the assumption of this role is hindered by the country's limitations in terms of resources, especially in the military dimension. Italy is thus faced today with a twofold order of commitments.

If on one side U.S. is indeed calling for a greater burden sharing outside Europe, on the other Italy is facing greater pressures to play a leading role and manage the growing challenges in the Enlarged Mediterranean. Judging from the initiatives undertaken in recent years, Italy has tried to meet both requirements. Consistent with its status as a middle power, it has adhered wholeheartedly to the U.S. demand to share the burden, showing considerable activism in both the diplomatic and military fields in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, in addition to the diplomatic and military initiatives already underway, it is preparing to send a substantial deployment of naval units centered on the aircraft carrier *Cavour* during 2024 (Brown, 2023). Still consistent with its rank, however, Italy cannot afford to neglect the Enlarged Mediterranean (Coticchia & Mazziotti di Celso, 2023), within which the implementation of the Mattei Plan could be an upgrade in terms of involvement in the dynamics of the area. In the coming months, Rome's ability to take a leading role in the Mediterranean and, at the same time, meet the American demand for burden sharing will depend first and foremost on the support it can obtain from its allies. In this direction goes the recent appointment of Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone as head of NATO's Military Committee, which is an essential recognition of our country and facilitates its task of promoting more significant attention to the challenges coming from the southern flank. However, Rome will also have to be more persuasive with its U.S. ally on the need to keep the Enlarged Mediterranean safe and free from external powers influence.

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