Unveiling Thirty Years of Italian International Peacekeeping: Drivers and Causal Mechanisms

# Abstract

Foreign Military Deployments (FMDs) have been a key element of Italy’s foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, with the country taking part in nearly all major regional and international crises through organizations like NATO, the EU, and the UN. Despite this active role, from peacekeeping to counter-insurgency operations, the literature on Italy’s FMD policy is still fragmented, lacking a comprehensive framework to explain military interventions abroad. This article aims to address this gap in two ways. First, it critically reviews the literature to identify the drivers and highlight which of these require further research. Second, it builds on the results of the literature to inductively develop causal mechanisms that link these drivers to decisions in FMD policy. Thus, the article lays the groundwork and a research agenda for developing a theoretical framework that allows for an understanding of the general characteristics of Italy's FMD policy over the past thirty years. The article also contributes to the broader literature on overseas operations and peacekeeping by advancing causal mechanisms driving troop deployments for middle powers.

**Keywords:** Italy, foreign military deployments, peacekeeping, defense policy.

# Introduction

Foreign Military Deployments (FMDs) have been pivotal to Italy’s foreign policy in the post-bipolar era. Since the end of the Cold War, Italy has deployed troops in nearly all major regional and international crises, including those in Iraq, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Libya. These deployments have been conducted through all the major international organizations Italy is part of, including the EU, the UN, and especially NATO. In 2024, this assertive approach led the country—traditionally seen as a ‘middle power’ (Santoro, 1991; Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2022)—to solidify its role as a major ‘international peacekeeper’ (Coticchia & Ruggeri, 2022) by deploying up to 12,000 soldiers across three continents and participating in 40 missions, a record figure for the country. This made Italy the top contributor to EU operations, the second-largest provider to NATO after the USA, and the leading supplier of troops among Western nations to UN missions (Ravazzolo, 2024).

However, despite the relevance of the case Italy, the literature on Italian FMD policy remains rather fragmented. Cultural, historical, and political reasons (see, among others: Panebianco, 1997; Ignazi et al., 2012) have contributed—since WWII onwards—to removing the discussion on military affairs from the public debate. Only recently has the political science literature begun to focus on the topic, analysing elements such as the characteristics of the Italian military and strategic culture (Ignazi et al., 2012; Rosa, 2014; Ruffa, 2014), national public opinion attitudes towards the use of military force (Olmastroni 2014; Angelucci & Isernia, 2020), narratives employed by Italian political elites during military crises (Olmastroni, 2014), the roles of leaders, parties, and parliaments (Coticchia & Moro, 2020; Vignoli, 2022), the function of non-state actors in missions (Irrera 2019), Italy’s contribution to European humanitarian aid policy and civil protection (Attinà, 2015), and the drivers behind Italy’s military transformation (Coticchia & Moro, 2015). However, despite these efforts, the debate remains limited. This is true at the academic as well as the political level: national institutions have not devoted sufficient time and resources to assess the results of past operations. Even parliamentary debates do not have detailed evaluations of interventions; issues, shortcomings, and successes are rarely considered, and formal assessments of lessons learned are conspicuously absent. In sum, after more than thirty years of military interventions abroad, Italy still suffers the absence of a broader academic and strategic reflection on defence, particularly concerning the lessons learned over these years (Mahnken, 2020).

This lack of attention is paradoxical, given the significant transformation in Italy's defense policy over the past decade. After years of engagement in the ‘war on terror’, Italy shifted its focus to the ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’ (Dentice & Donelli, 2021), marked by military missions and economic activities in a region stretching from Northern Africa to the Horn of Africa. Additionally, after the war in Ukraine, Europe became the primary theatre of deployment for Italian forces, with nearly 3,000 units in Eastern Europe, becoming the top contributor after the United States to NATO activities in the area (Coticchia & Mazziotti di Celso, 2024). Italy has also expanded its presence in the Indo-Pacific, deploying naval units as part of its aircraft carrier group (Mazziotti di Celso, 2024). These changes are significant, and the causes that have driven them still require a comprehensive study.

Why did Italy send its troops abroad? More specifically, under what conditions does Italy deploy military forces abroad? While the literature has attempted to investigate the drivers that led Italy to its military activism (Carati & Locatelli, 2017; Rosa et al., 2020), the findings are still inconclusive and controversial. We know why, in certain cases, Italy has contributed to international operations and how it did so, but we still lack a clear general understanding of why Italy has pursued this policy over the years. We don’t have an overarching theoretical framework that explains why Italy has sometimes contributed in one way rather than another, or why, in some instances, it has chosen not to contribute at all, despite strong domestic or international pressure.

This article seeks to fill this gap. On the one hand, it systematizes and clarifies the literature on the drivers of Italy's FMD policy, identifying those that need further research. To that end, the manuscript examines the past thirty years of Italy’s operational engagements to evaluate the primary drivers of its FMD policy, assessing the impact of interactions between domestic actors, international drivers, and operational contexts. On the other hand, it aims to propose potential causal mechanisms that identify the conditions under which Italian leaders decide to deploy troops abroad. To achieve this, the article builds on the extant literature’s findings and attempts to inductively develop mechanisms that can be assessed in future studies.

In this way, the article provides two important contributions. First, it systematizes the literature on the drivers of Italy’s FMD policy, outlining a research agenda that can help generate a more comprehensive theoretical framework to explain its general features from 1989 to the present. Second, the article also contributes to the literature on overseas operations and peacekeeping by offering causal mechanisms that explain troop deployments abroad in the case of middle powers.

The manuscript is structured into three sections. The first part illustrates how researchers have studied FMD policy and introduces the framework that drives our literature review. The second section provides a review of the independent variables identified by researchers to explain FMD policy decisions. Finally, the third part builds on the two previous sections to advance potential mechanisms that identify under what conditions Italian leaders decide to deploy troops abroad. The conclusion summarizes the main findings, paving the way for further research.

# The scholarly debate on Italian defence policy

## Perspectives of analysis

For Italy, the end of the Cold War coincided with the initiation of a defence policy marked by robust interventionism: from 1990 to 2020, Italy deployed its military forces in a total of 132 missions across various continents, from Asia to Africa to Latin America (Vignoli & Coticchia, 2022, p. 448). The military operations conducted by Italy abroad differ significantly in terms of geographical location, nature of the tasks assigned to the deployed contingent, and institutional framework of reference—predominantly NATO, UN, and EU. Based on these three key elements, it is possible to schematically divide the course of Italian operations into three main phases. In the first period, from 1991 to 2001, except for the operation in Somalia in 1993, Italy deployed units mainly in the Balkans, especially in Albania, Bosnia, and Kosovo, under UN and NATO frameworks. In the second phase, from 2001 to 2015, Italy participated in the American ‘war on terror’, deploying thousands of men in Asia, particularly Afghanistan and Iraq[[1]](#footnote-2). In the third phase, from 2015 to the present, Italy prioritised the ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’, deploying troops mainly in Africa and the Middle East. After the war in Ukraine, Rome enhanced its military presence in Eastern Europe, especially within the NATO framework.

After years of limited attention, the scholarly debate on Italian missions abroad has recently grown. Before looking at the analyses that specifically identify the drivers of military activism, we can distinguish three main *general perspectives* through which the literature has addressed the new post-bipolar Italian foreign and defence policy issue.

First, scholars have focused on the interaction between levels of analysis and defence policy decisions. Both Brighi (2013) and Isernia and Longo (2017) reviewed the different approaches that investigate the dynamic interplay between domestic politics and international factors (Putnam, 1988), emphasizing the ‘externalisation of internal constraints’ (Pasquino, 1974; Panebianco, 1997). The balance between domestic pressures and external constraints is crucial here. Recent studies have increasingly studied the impact of domestic politics on foreign and defence policy. Domestic features and dynamics have been interpreted as vital to understanding decisions to address external demands (Panebianco 1997; Carbone 2007). In line with the ‘domestic turn’ in IR (Kaarbo, 2015), scholars focused primarily on how parties, parliaments, and coalitions affected foreign and defence policy-making in Italy (D’Amore, 2001; Veerbeck & Zaslove, 2015; Coticchia & Davidson, 2018; Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020; Vignoli, 2022). Greater attention has been devoted to leadership and personality in the study of Italian foreign policy: from the dominant role played by Berlusconi (Diodato & Niglia, 2018) to domestically-focused outsiders as Renzi (Coticchia & Davidson, 2019). Finally, recent research has examined the (limited) impact exerted in foreign policy by populist actors in government (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020; Curini & Vignoli, 2021).

From a second perspective of analysis, the literature has investigated especially the level of continuity (and the lack thereof) of the post-Cold War Italian foreign and defence policy. By looking at how authors have scrutinized the different approaches adopted by centre-left and centre-right coalitions, three main viewpoints emerge.[[2]](#footnote-3) First, for some scholars, the alternation of centre-right and centre-left governments brought discontinuity (Andreatta, 2008). For instance, Brighi (2007, 2013) illustrated the supposed ‘policy of the pendulum,’ where Italy fluctuated between different degrees of Europeanism (especially the centre-left cabinets) and Atlanticism (mainly Berlusconi’s executives). She distinguished between the ‘conservative/nationalist approach’ (based on Atlanticism, bilateralism, and some form of Euroscepticism) and the ‘international/democratic approach’ (which relies on ‘active multilateralism’, ‘euro-enthusiasm’, and some form of criticism towards Atlanticism). Second, others—who mainly focus on the role played by international constraints—reported a substantial continuity in Italian foreign and defence policy, considering change only in terms of rhetoric and symbolic policies (Aliboni, 2003; Walston, 2007; Croci, 2008; Ratti, 2012; Croci & Valigi, 2013). Accordingly, different policy paradigms are just ‘discourses’ rather than the substance of policies. Finally, some authors—while recognising differences between the centre-left and centre-right coalition in foreign policy—have highlighted a considerable bipartisan consensus on defence, especially regarding missions abroad and procurement (Ignazi et al., 2012; Coticchia & Davidson, 2018; Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020).

From a third perspective of analysis, authors reflected also on ‘forgotten’ concepts in the literature. For instance, from the 1990s onwards, renewed attention was devoted to traditional notions of IR, such as ‘geopolitics’ and ‘national interest’, focusing on the constant traits of Italian foreign policy (Santoro, 1991). More recently, scholars have begun to conceptualize defense policy as a form of public policy, aiming to connect it with literature—such as that on policy change—that has largely remained disconnected (Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2024).

Within these three perspectives, and beyond such specific topics, there is a scholarly debate that—generally relying on IR literature—has specifically identified the *drivers* of Italian missions abroad. Some authors have examined particular operations, testing alternative hypotheses on the reasons behind the intervention. Less frequently, other scholars have advanced a broader framework of analysis to interpret or explain the post-Cold War Italian defence. The next sections focus precisely on such literature.

## A two-level game?

This paper focuses on the decisions to deploy troops abroad and aims to elucidate the decision-making process, identifying drivers and mechanisms by which Italian defence policy choices, discourses and behaviours are made. Before examining the scholarly debate on drivers of Italian FMD policy, we should focus on the different *levels* of analysis: international, domestic, and individual. Indeed, the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature, and especially the research that investigated the complex interaction among different (international and domestic) factors along the ‘two-level game’ (Putnam, 1988), is instrumental in evaluating drivers of defence policy. Rosenau (2008) argues that identifying policy outcomes is often more intuitive than tracing the processes leading to them. Carlsnaes (2008) suggests looking at the foreign policy decision-making process and its actions by examining the structural (e.g., international constraints, institutional settings), dispositional (e.g., perceptions and values), and intentional (choices and preferences) dimensions.

Broadly defined, structure(s) refers to the overarching and enduring elements of the international system that shape the behaviour and interactions of states and other actors. The importance of the structural level in shaping policies is well highlighted in IR theory; from Thucydides to Morgenthau and to more modern scholars, the belief that structures alone can determine states’ behaviour is a core feature of realist thinking. Neoliberal authors, departing from realists’ narrow definition of structure as a power distribution, also contend that the systemic level affects states' choices through both power- and nonpower-related incentives (Nye, 1988). Equally, constructivist scholars place a great deal of attention on the interplay between agents and structures (Adler, 2008), although they contend that structure has no existence or causal powers if considered apart from processes (Wendt, 1992). Furthermore, the constructivist approach also sheds light on the role of ideational structures codified in formal rules and norms that agents are socialised into following (Flockhart, 2008).

Adopting different approaches, rational choice, and historical and normative institutionalist perspectives, seek to study the role of domestic factors in determining policy outcomes, devoting specific attention to institutions (Jönsson & Tallberg, 2001). For instance, historical institutionalism sheds light on how, starting from similar conditions, a wide range of social outcomes is possible and why particular courses of action, once introduced, can be difficult to reverse (Pierson, 2000). In the same vein, normative institutionalism reminds us that existing institutions tend to structure the field of vision of those contemplating change (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

Finally, we ought not forget that individual human beings make the decisions and carry out policy decisions (Kelman, 1970). Individuals’ contribution to foreign policies and international politics consequently yields significant explanatory power. For instance, recent findings show that interpersonal relations play an essential role in conducting and thus understanding interstate relations (Heimann & Kampf, 2021). In general, a large body of literature has departed from rational choice decision-making to introduce cognitive approaches focusing on aspects such as analogical reasoning, heuristic processes, cognitive consistency, and individual biases (Robinson, 2008) that affect decision-making. Therefore, we cannot discard the role of (at least) specific individuals who might have actively contributed to shaping policy outcomes.

On the whole, we can categorise extant literature on the drivers of Italian defence policy within the two-level game logic, reporting how the scholars have interpreted the vital interplay between domestic and international factors. Therefore, international constraints (such as the structure of the international system, its pressures and threats, alliances, and membership in regional or international organisations), domestic drivers (including institutional settings, coalition governments, ideological preferences, public opinion, collective domestic interests, and the corporative interests of the armed forces), and individual factors, deserve detailed examination.

# Drivers of Foreign Military Deployment

The Italian case appears puzzling. Despite Italy's significant ‘pacifist tradition’ and reluctance to invest money in defence, its foreign intervention policy is one of the most active in Europe. Why? To answer this question, this manuscript ‘systematises’ the scholarly debate, distinguishing among drivers at (the above-mentioned) different levels of analysis.

## The international level

Research has devoted primary attention to the international dimension. Italy's positioning in the regional and global system determines the emergence of a set of structural (material and non-material) incentives that prompt the country to deploy the military. Existing scholarship on Italian FMDs identifies three main variables at international level: threats, alliances, and (global) values and norms.

According to a realist perspective, Italy sent its military abroad to confront threats to national security. Carlo Santoro explained the increasing Italian military activism abroad from the late 1970s, attributing it to Italy's reaction to a changing international context that increasingly threatened its regional interests (1991). Santoro argued that Italy's military policy shifted due to the oil crisis and subsequent global economic-financial crisis, highlighting new tensions and instability in areas beyond the traditional Cold War focus.[[3]](#footnote-4) Although this hypothesis lost some traction with the end of the Cold War, it has remained important in the debate over Italian military operations abroad in North Africa and the Sahel (Coralluzzo, 2012). For instance, in Libya, crucial strategic interests have often been viewed as fundamental (Croci & Valigi, 2013). Scholars focused on explaining Italy’s ‘strategic reorientation’ towards the ‘Enlarged Mediterranean’ agree that among the factors underpinning this decision was Italy’s realisation that new perceived threats had emerged in the area (terrorism, illegal migration, energy scarcity, etc.), especially after the Libya war in 2011 (Coticchia & Mazziotti di Celso 2024).

Another widely recognised constant of Italian foreign policy is its alliance-based approach to security. Scholars emphasised the vital role played by international alliances (mainly focusing on the US) and multilateral frameworks. According to Santoro, since its existence as a nation-state, Italy has prioritised the systematic protection of its vital interests by often relying on a more potent ally. Because of its geographical position, ‘Italy has always sought protection through an asymmetrical alliance, laying the groundwork for an unequal relationship that would sooner or later prove unsatisfactory’ (Santoro, 1991, p. 82). Since the end of World War II, the United States has been a critical ally for Italy, primarily through NATO. Consequently, Italy has deemed the alliance with the U.S. more crucial than other countries. For this reason, Italy has always found it extremely important to support American initiatives, especially in multinational frameworks.

As neoclassical theory posits, the value placed on the alliance affects a government's decision to provide or refuse support (Cladi & Webber, 2011; Davidson, 2011a; Rosa et al., 2020). Anticipating future benefits from the alliance leads states to provide military support when requested by a valued ally. States that value their relationship with an ally are more inclined to contribute to maintaining and strengthening the alliance, expecting their support to encourage the ally to continue the relationship. Conversely, if a government places a low value on an alliance, it has little incentive to make sacrifices for its ally and cares less if the larger ally reacts negatively to a lack of support by weakening or ending the alliance (Davidson, 2011b). In line with these arguments, Italy should back American military initiatives. With the end of domestic bipolar constraints (which had been partially modified already in the 1980s, as revealed by the intervention in Lebanon), Italy constantly supported American efforts. For example, Bennet et al. (1994) found that alliance dependence has significantly influenced Italy's decision to support U.S. interventions abroad, such as in the Gulf War in 1991. More broadly, studies indicate that pressures from allies and multilateral frameworks, such as the UN and EU, significantly influence Italy's post-bipolar defense strategy (Monteleone, 2019). After the end of the Cold War, a broad consensus emerged that military engagement would enhance Italy’s prestige in international relations (Davidson, 2011; Romero, 2016; Carati & Locatelli, 2017;). These authors argue that Italy pursued prestige to gain recognition on the international stage, using multilateral peace operations as a rational strategy to demonstrate its reliability as a member of the international community (Carati & Locatelli, 2017). In conformity with this view, political actors see military involvement in regional crises as a means to affirm national credibility and reliability abroad. Here, in line with a neoclassical realist perspective, the main drivers attain the anarchic features of the international system, yet domestic factors represent vital intervening variables.

Many authors agree that Italy's proactive FMD policy stems from its consistent support for multilateralism and multilateral engagements, driven by both systemic and normative factors (Ratti, 2012). Systemically, Italy’s structural weakness and vulnerable strategic position necessitate multilateral cooperation. Normatively, there is a genuine belief in the benefits of transnational and supranational cooperation. This support for multilateralism has shaped Italy’s foreign policy both during and after the Cold War, leading to frequent military deployments abroad. This approach is not a new aspect of its foreign policy. What has changed since the end of the East-West division is the scale and scope of Italy’s participation in peacekeeping operations. Although they substantially concur with this argument, Carati and Locatelli present a slightly different perspective, suggesting that the notion of followership can explain Italy's proactive military operations abroad (FMD) policy: Italy actively participates in multilateral military operations to avoid an ancillary international role (Carati & Locatelli, 2017).

Finally, several scholars have emphasised the role of international values and global norms (Ignazi et al. 2012; Ruffa, 2016). From a constructivist perspective, the cultural interpretation of norms developed at global level influenced Italian defence policy, promoting an active role in humanitarian crises (Abbondanza, 2020). Italian soldiers have undertaken manifold humanitarian missions – especially within UN and EU frameworks, such as operations after environmental disasters, from Southeast Asia to the Caribbean.

## The domestic level

In addition to structural factors, scholars have identified several domestic policy-related factors that significantly influence the policy of military intervention abroad. For neoclassical realists, these factors act as *intervening* rather than independent variables. In other words, while they can hardly determine a country’s foreign policy alone, these domestic aspects can play a pivotal role in shaping its features.[[4]](#footnote-5) On the contrary, from other theoretical perspectives, domestic drivers explain political decisions.

Compared to systemic factors, domestic (and mainly institutional) drivers have been neglected in the literature for years. In the case of Italy’s FMD after World War II, the party system, as well as institutional constraints, have been seldom considered as the crucial variables. Indeed, Italian governments responded *differently* to systemic incentives derived from the country’s position in the international system. Researchers have occasionally examined the connections between domestic political debates and foreign and defence policies (Carbone, 2007; Caffarena & Gabusi, 2017; Coticchia & Davidson, 2018) or the impact of electoral politics on decision-making, such as the timing of the intervention in Iraq in 2003 (Davidson, 2011a). However, the recent trend in international relations and foreign policy analysis, often referred to as the ‘domestic turn' (Kaarbo, 2015), has not been widely adopted in the Italian scholarly discourse on defence policy (except D’Amore 2001). Still, variables such as elite perceptions, the distribution of political power and government instability influence Italy’s FMD policy. After all, a widely accepted argument in the Italian IR community is that a defining feature of Italian foreign policy has consistently been its subordination to the logics of domestic politics. In fact, Italian governments often treat foreign policy as an extension of domestic politics, a realm in which they aim to create political distinctions between themselves (Cladi & Webber, 2011). Thus, neglecting the institutional variables appears unwarranted, as a brief review of the (scarce) literature on the subject reveals interesting patterns.

Some authors argue that, occasionally, decisions to intervene were driven by the government's own interests, based on a liberal perspective (Cladi & Webber, 2011). The liberal intergovernmental approach posits that government interests are the primary drivers of a state's intervention. This approach suggests that states use international institutions to further their own interests, necessitating an investigation into the origins of these interests. In liberalism, interests are shaped by the governing bodies and should reflect the societies they represent. Governments may follow a foreign policy not to maximise national power but to maintain their hold on power. Cladi and Locatelli (2019), for instance, argued that Italy's decision to participate in the peacekeeping operation in Lebanon (UNIFIL II) was influenced by the interests of Romano Prodi's government. Contributing to UNIFIL II allowed the government to meet the expectations raised during the electoral campaign. During his campaign, Prodi emphasised enhancing the European Union's international role and strengthening multilateral institutions (particularly the UN). The conflict in Lebanon offered a dual opportunity: to intervene through the United Nations and to differentiate from the previous, allegedly disastrous, Iraq intervention led by the Berlusconi government. More broadly, the dynamics between government and opposition are crucial in explaining party support for specific operations (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020), revealing a significant ‘instrumentality of the votes’, which changes primarily based on the parties' current positions.

The features of the political system is another significant variable influencing FMD policy. Santoro (1991), for instance, points out that the primary condition enabling the start of FMD policy was the internal stability achieved through the new state of relations between the governing majority and the opposition regarding foreign policy. Without the reconciliation between the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and the majority parties, this policy would never have been possible: the left would have staunchly opposed it (on this point see also Panebianco 1997).

Equally, the *nature* of the political parties also seems to matter. Coticchia and Vignoli (2020) highlighted that examining the voting behaviour of Italian parties on military operations in the new century confirms the persistence of a bipartisan consensus on such operations despite the contentious debates surrounding the Iraq case. This analysis also demonstrates that the Italian case supports the curvilinear relationship model between partisanship and foreign policy, as outlined by Wagner et al. (2017). This model shows an increase in support from the left to the centre-right, followed by a decline towards the radical right. Recent studies (Ceccorulli et al., 2023) investigated also the—limited—impact of populist governments on Italian defence policy.

It is worth noticing how the connection between this recent attention on parties and the (broader) debate on Italian strategic culture has been paradoxically limited. The scholarly research on Italian foreign policy clearly shows that immaterial factors play an important role in the structural (Foradori, 2007; Ignazi et al., 2012; Brighi, 2013), institutional (Andreatta, 2008; Coticchia & Moro, 2020) and individual (Caffarena & Gabusi, 2017; Diodato & Niglia, 2018) levels. Authors have focused on the role played by strategic culture in shaping defence policy decisions, especially in the post-2001 era (Pirani, 2010; Ignazi et al., 2012). Rosa (2014) talks about Italy's ‘accommodationist strategic culture’. As summarized by Coticchia et al.: ‘Authors have examined the lens through which post-Cold War Italian leaders have perceived defence policy issues, stressing the persistence of multilateralism, peace and humanitarianism as main values of Italian strategic culture’ (2023, 57). Despite the significant transformation of Italian defence after 1989, ‘the employment of the military instrument would be a by-product of the sedimentation within the national strategic culture of global norms and values related to ‘humanitarian interventions’ that Italy has shared and elevated as a potential determinant of foreign interventions’ (Ceccorulli & Coticchia, 2015). Thus, notwithstanding its military activism, Italy maintained a strategic culture based on peace, cosmopolitanism, multilateralism, and humanitarianism. Such culture has been instrumental in developing a bipartisan ‘peace narrative’ that allowed all parties to support military operations that have often attracted criticism from public opinion (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2018). Relatedly, beyond existing anti-militarism and pacifism, the overall reluctance by Italian citizens to support combat military operations, as well the opposition towards the enhancement of military expenditures, represent constant trends that clearly constraints – even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine –Italian leaders in the field of defense (Battistelli et al 2012; IAI-Laps 2022).

Strategic culture and political institutions, such as public opinion, parties, parliaments, and governments, have not been the only factors capable of influencing Italian FMD policy. The military itself played an important role. Depending on the theoretical perspectives adopted, several scholars have proposed different hypotheses to illustrate how and why the armed forces influenced FMD policy. In the early 1990s, this debate was dominated by civil-military scholars, many of whom were from the armed forces (Luigi Caligaris, Carlo Jean, Giuseppe Caforio). These studies showed that the post-Cold War transformation of the Italian armed forces from a large territorial army into a small projectable force also responded to organisational concerns (Caligaris, 1998). Like many other European countries, Italian senior officers feared that the declining perception of external threats among Italians would result in losing influence, prestige, and military resources (Caforio, 2009). Within this context, expanding the role of the armed forces to international peacekeeping – as well as in the domestic arena – appeared as a convenient solution for the military: international missions provided the armed forces with a new source of legitimacy with which to attract recruit and obtain resources (Caligaris, 1998; Caforio, 2014). Hypotheses grounded on civil-military relations theory contributed significantly to the early debate on Italian FMD policy. However, in the following years, civil-military relations did not find much fortune in the Italian scholarly debate; as a consequence, most of the hypotheses and insights developed by civil-military scholars in the early 1990s were not further elaborated. Research carried out in the early 2000s provided some insights on the issue: Battistelli, for example, found that the prospect of being engaged in international missions and receiving increased compensation during the deployed period figured among the highest motivations leading Italian citizens to join the military (Battistelli, 1997). This finding somehow suggested a strong relationship between organisational issues such as recruitment and retention and international missions. However, to date, no scholarly work has delved explicitly into these issues. More recently, some scholars have tried to ‘bring the military back’ in analysing Italian FMD policy drivers. Coticchia and Moro (2020), for example, have emphasised how the armed forces’ operational experiences have played a role in shaping Italy’s approach toward international military deployments, as these experiences favoured the modernisation process in the military, influencing doctrine and procurement, thus making it easier for the government to deploy (Coticchia et al., 2023). Still, much work is to be done concerning the issue of how the organisational interests of the armed forces have affected the decision-making process over FMD policy after the initial transformation of the armed forces in the early 1990s.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Strictly connected to the issue of civilian control of the armed forces is the role played by the military industry. Political scientists focused on civilian control of the armed forces are well aware of the extremely relevant influence that defence companies may have in shaping military policy, including FMD policy. However, for several reasons (among which transparency issues) Italian scholars have not devoted much attention to this issue. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some Italian scholars, have tried to analyze the role of the ‘military industrial complex’ in Italy, but without providing rigorous results—allegedly because of the Italian MoD’s lack of transparency (De Benedetti 1971). Still, there are sounds reasons to believe that Italian military industry plays a role in crafting Italian’ FMD policy. For example, recent studies by Italian scholars focusing on Asia indicate that a significant factor behind Italy’s recent deployments in the Indo-Pacific is linked to the strategic interests of Fincantieri, a prominent naval shipyard seeking business opportunities in the region (Dell’Era and Pugliese 2024).

Finally, at domestic level, scholars have also focused on the role of leaders, primarily investigating Berlusconi’s foreign and defense policy. The academic discourse was notably active on the specific issue of the supposed shift in Italian defense policy under Berlusconi's government concerning multilateralism (Ignazi 2004; Brighi 2007; Croci 2008; Walston 2007). Berlusconi’s decision to support the US-led mission in Iraq, along with his numerous bilateral relationships, was a key point of contention. As observed, Iraq marked a pivotal moment in foreign policy-making as it necessitated an unprecedented balance between solidarity with the US and with key European allies like Germany and France. This discussion led to further reflections on new influences behind Italian post-Cold War defense policy. On one side, largely due to Berlusconi’s personal activism abroad, several scholars began to focus on the role of leaders in shaping Italian defense policy (Ignazi 2004, Diodato and Niglia 2018). On the other side, the perceived shift in foreign and defense policy was analyzed through the lens of 'foreign policy paradigms', which Brighi (2013) argues act as mediating factors between domestic and international spheres. Values and norms are here relevant, from the perspective of specific beliefs of leaders.[[6]](#footnote-7) Relatedly, Caffarena and Gabusi (2017) address the debate on Italian FP change and continuity looking at political elites’ national role conceptions and how they are linked to operational ideas.[[7]](#footnote-8) However, aside from the figure of Berlusconi, there is a lack of scientific analyses focused on leaders and Foreign Military Deployment policy. And this is because studies on FMD policy have actually shown that, beyond the rhetoric, various political leaders have demonstrated substantial continuity over time, including populist leaders (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020; Coticchia, 2021).

On the whole, the attention of domestic actors as drivers of Italian defense has been limited, despite recent analyses on the role of NGOs (Irrera 2019), bureaucracy and diplomats. There is also a notable gap in the literature concerning the role of advisors, counselors, and individual Members of Parliament (MPs) in shaping defense policy. While the focus has been primarily on the influence of prominent leaders like Berlusconi, the impact of these other key actors in the decision-making process remains underexplored. This omission leaves an incomplete understanding of the broader dynamics and influences that shape Italian defense policy.

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| **Level of analysis** | **Variables** | **Selected Refererences** |
| International Level | Threats | *Santoro 1991; Croci & Valigi, 2013; Ceccorulli & Coticchia, 2015* |
| Alliances (NATO) and Status-seeking | *Santoro, 1991; Davidson, 2011a, 2011b; Carati & Locatelli, 2017* |
| Commitment to international norms and values | *Ratti, 2012; Abbondanza, 2020* |
| Domestic Level | Government and parties | *Cladi & Webber, 2011; Cladi & Locatelli 2019; Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020; Coticchia 2021, Ceccorulli et al., 2023* |
| Strategic culture | *Pirani, 2010; Ignazi et al., 2012; Rosa, 2014; Coticchia et al. 2023;* |
| Civilian control of the armed forces | *Coticchia & Moro 2020;* |
| Civil-Military Relations | *Caligaris, 1998; Caforio 2009, 2014; Battistelli, 1997* |
| Public Opinion | *Battistelli, 2003; Isernia, 1996* |
| Military industry influence | */* |
| Individual Level | Leaders’ personal traits | *Ignazi 2004, Diodato & Niglia 2018; Coticchia & Davidson 2019* |

Table 1: Studies on the drivers of Italy's FMD policy.

# Under what conditions Italy intervenes

The analysis of the state of the art (see Tab.1) allows to identify the key-drivers of Italian FMD policy, from different theoretical perspectives, and at different level of analysis. The review has helped to illustrate how external pressures cannot be interpreted in a determinist way. Consequently, domestic factors are crucial to understand how Italian decision makers assess the balance between internal and external constraints before deploying soldiers in operations. However, the analysis of the literature *does not* clearly explain how these factors influence FMD policy. In other words, it does not openly elucidate the causal mechanisms that connect these factors to the decision-making process behind FMD policy.

When we say causal mechanisms, we refer to models of interaction among individuals that generate particular social outcomes (Gambetta 1998, 102). For Hedström and Ylikoski (2010), we can open up the black box by understanding the whole chain of mechanisms, which consist of entities, with their properties and activities.[[8]](#footnote-9) Specifying a causal mechanism is ‘a highly speculative affair’ (Grring 2010, 1505), thus the mechanism scheme ‘must be made both explicit and detailed’ (Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010, 10).

The aim of this section is to advance potential causal mechanisms that have led Italian governments to deploy armed forces abroad after 1989. The generalization of these mechanisms is confined to cases that share specific conditions: middle powers characterized by a pacifist public opinion—embracing values of peace, humanitarianism, and multilateralism—and that feature frequent elections at the regional, national, and EU levels, making ballot-related pressions a constant.

Within a two-level game, Italian leaders have a so-called ‘dual responsibility’ (Payne 2023, 13), towards external pressures and domestic constraints. As a middle power strongly embedded in the Western security architecture, Italy is ‘required’ to provide its military contribitution when allies and multilateral organizations ask for support to contrast specific threats or guarantee peace, stability, and human rights abroad. In that case, we should mainly look at the types of international pressures and at the level of coherence between the military intervention and the ‘pacifist and multilateral’ norms and narratives shared by Italian public opinion (Battistelli 2003; Ignazi et al 2012; Catanzaro and Coticchia 2018). If there is coherence between the pressure from allies and ‘national’ norms and narratives (e.g., multilateral and humanitarian missions), domestic factors are irrelevant. Rather, if such coherence is scarce, or (eventually) if there are no international pressures to intervene, domestic factors become crucial, especially to shape the mission and its features. In case of a clash between international pressures and domestic considerations, we need to look at *who* asks for Italian contribution (US-led NATO or other allies, multilateral fora). If no requests come from abroad, we should examine in detail where and how pressures to intervene come from a wide range of domestic actors (leaders, armed forces, industry, NGOs, etc.).

The manuscript identifies four main mechanisms. We label them as: ‘*Full Commitment’*; ‘*Reluctant Followership’* (which can be further disaggregated in ‘*Dampening*’ and ‘*Refuse*’ as low-level mechanisms), ‘*Helping abroad’* and ‘*Under the Radar*’.

## Full commitment

When there is coherence between the type of intervention requested and the national norms and narratives, it is likely that the country will respond with full commitment. In such cases, there are *no* controversial debates, but rather strong bipartisan support, leading to the deployment of units and assets in line with the demands of international actors. This alignment between external requests and domestic values creates a smooth decision-making process, allowing for a unified national response. In the case of Italy, this is particularly true for ‘traditional’ peacekeeping missions or operations conducted within multilateral frameworks (UN, EU) that do not require combat activities.

Observable implications can include evidence of international requests as well as full support by Italian leaders for a multilateral and humanitarian intervention, which is strongly aligned with international law. Furthermore, we should expect to see a high degree of perceived coherence between the characteristics of the operation and the domestic (bipartisan) strategic narrative. This coherence helps ensure broad political and public backing, flattening the decision-making process and facilitating Italy’s active involvement in such missions.

## Reluctant Followership (from Dampening to Refusal)

Such a mechanism describes a scenario where international actors require Italy to make a military contribution for a mission that is hardly coherent with national norms and narratives. Here the *type* of international actor becomes relevant to illustrate the kind of reluctant followership adopted by Italian governments. Approving an intervention that is clearly far from shared national norms – and thus it will be reasonably opposed by public opinion – means significant political costs for the Italian governments. How can such costs be assessed by leaders, balancing domestic and international constraints?

To answer the question, we break down ‘*Reluctant Followership*’intotwo ‘ancillary mechanisms’ (Gambetta 1998, 106).

First, if the pressure is made by the main ally (i.e., Washington), within a US-led NATO or multinational framework, the degree of constraints for a middle power such as Italy could be perceived as so high that the governments should address the requests by allies, despite public opposition.[[9]](#footnote-10) Yet, *dampening* (Payne 2023) the national contribution would allow to reduce the political costs of commitment. If this mechanism holds, we will observe the (paradoxical) persistence of peace and humanitarian narratives being used to downplay all the combat aspects of the missions, along with tight restrictions on caveats and rules of engagement on the ground. Numerous combat missions, from Iraq to Afghanistan, which have been described as 'peace operations' and have included significant limitations on the use of force, clearly illustrate this mechanism.

Second, if the demands of an Italian military engagement in combat operations come from other international actors (e.g., single allies, the EU, etc.), these international constraints could not be perceived as sufficiently high to balance the domestic costs the governments should pay to provide such contribution, in front of a reluctant – or even hostile - public opinion.[[10]](#footnote-11) Therefore, Italian leaders are likely to *refuse* to send troops abroad.[[11]](#footnote-12) Here, we would expect to observe a refusal to contributing and evidence of relevant domestic political opposition to a military mission abroad, without US-led NATO pressure for having Italian boots on the ground. This mechanism allows to expose the (sporadic but present) cases when Italy *did not provide* its military support.[[12]](#footnote-13)

In the (rare) case of the absence of international pressures, we can identify two other mechanisms.

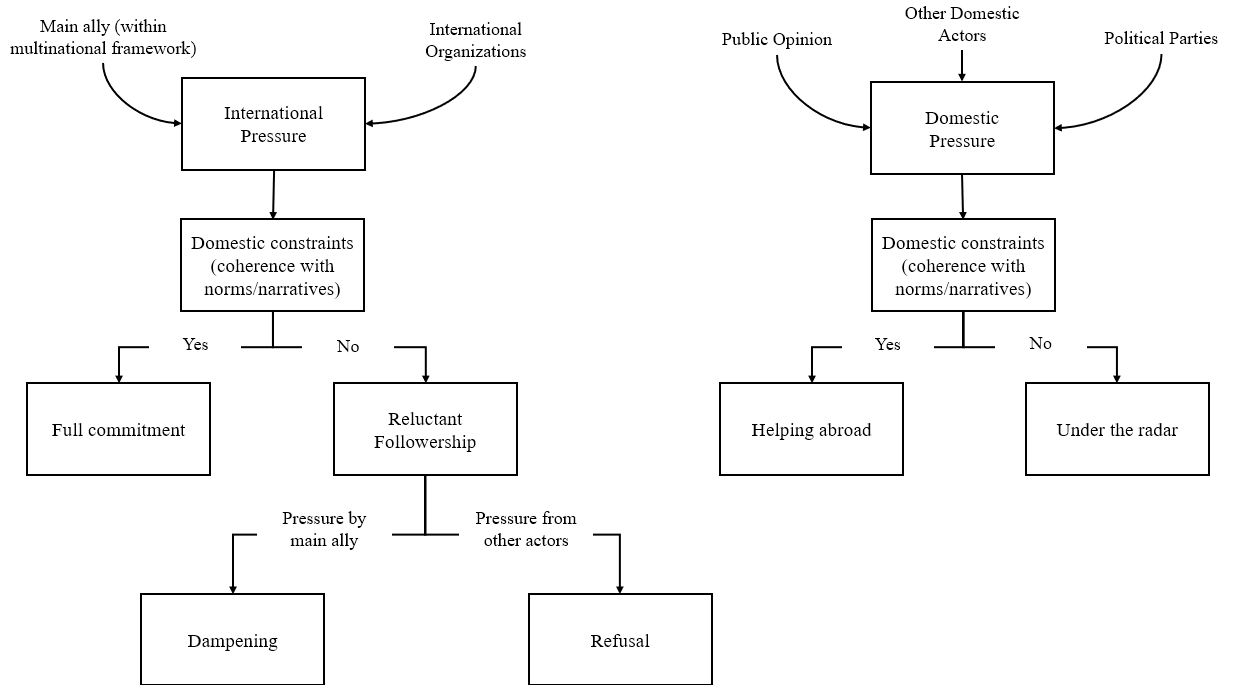
## Helping abroad

This mechanism refers to a context where Italian armed forces are deployed abroad in humanitarian national operations *despite* the absence of international pressures. Here, in case of nonexistent external demands (also by multilateral fora), parties and public opinion share leaders’ concerns, pushing the government to send troops abroad in national humanitarian interventions aimed to provide aid beyond borders, which are coherent with domestic norms and narratives.

We can observe all these components of the mechanism ‘*Helping Abroad’*, looking especially at a high level of bipartisan and public consensus, as well as at the features of national humanitarian interventions, which can also be advocatedby members of civil society (NGOs, associations, etc.). Unilateral missions undertaken after environmental crises, as well as maritime operations to search and rescue (e.g. Mare Nostrum) show this mechanism.

## Under the radar

Finally, where international pressures – and also merely humanitarian considerations – are lacking, leaders can approve demanding unilateral missions only when (multidimensional) threat perceptions appear vital for Italy. Still, interventions can be set out ‘*under the radar*’, such as with special forces or through security force assistance operations, to avoid public scrutiny. Thus, we would expect domestic military and economic actors to play a significant role in advocating for limited national operations, both from a military perspective and in terms of timespan, considering costs and sustainability. Recent operations with Special Forces in the Sahel (e.g., Takuba) seem to properly illustrate this mechanism.



Clearly, as explained, the role of the military industry and the armed forces within this process is not well understood. For instance, what happens when the pressure to initiate overseas operations comes from the defense industry or the military? What kind of deployment takes place? When does this pressure become sufficient to influence political decisions? These research questions require further studies to be properly addressed.[[13]](#footnote-14)

# Conclusions

Italy is one of the countries with the most active Foreign Military Deployments (FMD) policy in the West. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has deployed tens of thousands of troops across various continents in operations of widely different natures. However, the study of the drivers and outcomes of these operations (as well as its lessons learnt) is limited.

In the first part, this article critically reviewed the literature on the drivers of Italy's FMD policy, identifying the main factors behind this policy. The review reveals that some important factors have been overlooked, particularly the role of the armed forces and the military industry in the decision-making process regarding foreign operations. In the second part, we have sought to inductively develop the causal mechanisms that have shaped this policy. We have identified several mechanisms to illustrate how the drivers identified by the literature might influence the FMD policy. The balance between domestic and international constraints is crucial to understand why – and in which way – Italian leaders send troops abroad.

The article makes an important contribution to the literature on overseas operations and peacekeeping. In addition to identifying the drivers behind military operations in one of the most active countries in overseas missions—particularly peacekeeping and peacebuilding—this study has developed several mechanisms that future research can test to better understand how and why middle powers deploy troops abroad. Moreover, the article provides a significant contribution also to the literature on Italy FMD policy. On one hand, the article has systematized and organized the literature on the drivers of FMD policy. On the other, it has provided a research agenda aimed at developing a broader theoretical framework to explain Italy's FMD policy over the past 30 years. This agenda focuses both on variables that have received little attention, such as the armed forces and the military industry, and on the mechanisms that link these variables to FMD policy decisions.

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1. Within this period, after 2011, the number Italian troops declined significantly for some years, as consequences of several factors (the financial crisis, the negative consequences of manifold operations, etc.). Then, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the figure of deployed soldiers enhanced again. See Coticchia et al (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For a review on this point: Brighi (2013); Croci & Valigi (2013); Isernia & Longo (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Starting in those years, Italy initiated its first foreign military actions: Navy units to rescue Vietnamese boat people in 1978, the 1980 political-military protection agreement for Malta's neutrality, deploying troops to UNIFIL in Lebanon, a significant peacekeeping mission to Beirut between 1982 and 1984, and to the Sinai, sending mine-hunters to the Red Sea in 1985, the Girasole patrol operation in the Sicily Channel from 1986-1987, deploying a naval squadron to protect convoys in the Persian Gulf from 1987-1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Due to the middle power status of the country, the vast majority of analysis highlights the prominence of international constraints to explain *why* Italy provide a military contribution. However, without considering the (electoral, cultural, and institutional) constraints attained at the domestic level, it is almost impossible to explain *how* Italy intervened with armed forces abroad. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Such research agenda inevitably requires, among other things, a sound assessment of the Italian military’s ability to influence the political process, which in turn requires a more comprehensive analysis of the Italian system of civilian control of the armed forces. Research on this issue is lacking. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Limited research has been conducted in line with leadership-trait analysis in the case of Italy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. On Italian defense and national role conception see the research, among others, by Perini (2021) and Caffarena and Gabusi (2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. ‘This emphasis on detailing mechanisms implies that explanations should refer to individuals, their relationships, and their actions’ Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, 24). For Gambetta, ‘it is not just a matter of piling mechanisms on top of each other […] Mechanisms interact with one another forming concatenations of mechanism’ (1998, 105). According to Gerring, ‘the specification of a causal mechanism is closely allied with an appreciation of causal reasoning in the assessment of X’s relationship to Y’ (2010, 1502). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. The ‘international’ constraints derive by the requests posed by the US within a NATO or multinational framework but also by a reasonably significant threat perception, from a ‘Western security perspective’, that generally matches a demand of military commitment from US/NATO. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Along with a reluctant public opinion, in case of majority coalitions, also radical junior parties, which are generally more skeptical on military missions (Curini & Vignoli 2021), could affect the calculation of the governments. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. In theory, also threat perceptions could play here a role. Yet, as said, in case of vital threat perceptions that required a tough combat-like answer, we can presume that US-NATO would have required a contribution (thus shifting to the dampening mechanism). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Within this context, two prominent examples are worth noticing. For instance, Italy refused to provide a military contribution asked by France, both in Mali (2013) and in Syria (2014). Another important example consists in Italy’s reluctant approach to assume the leadership of an EU-led military mission in Libya aimed at supporting the GNA’s reconstructing effort after the civil war. Marcuzzi’s (2020) account of the Italian decision-making process over the issue illustrated how concerns over the reaction of the public opinion played a crucial role in driving Renzi, the prime Minister, to renounce engaging Italy in a operation on the ground. A third example concerns Italy’s approach towards the idea of deploying a military force in Sudan. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Apart from empirical tracing the existence of the mechanisms, research could also assess if the recent novelties in the Italian party system, with the stunning success of populist (especially radical right) parties, would have partially modified the established national humanitarian and multilateral narratives and norms. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)