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Introduction

“We thought we left behind the phase in which the army was there to perform its Constitutional duty, that is the protection of the State, and that we could turn it into something similar to a Civil Protection 4.0.” (L’Unità, 2023). With this statement, the Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto admitted that, during the past decades, European countries largely neglected their armed forces, as their approach to defence and security rested on the wrong assumption that conventional, large-scale wars only belonged in history books. The devastation brought by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine heavily challenged this assumption, prompting many European countries to change course and strengthen their armed forces to guarantee national security. Despite working under the radar, Italy is among these countries, as it initiated a comprehensive strengthening and modernisation programme of its military. Therefore, this paper aims to illustrate and evaluate this modernisation programme. It begins by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian armed forces, providing an overview of the steps the Italian government has taken to address their main issues. Finally, it offers some recommendations to further improve their readiness and effectiveness.

I. Current Strengths and Weaknesses of the Italian Armed Forces

All the branches of the Italian Armed Forces (Land Forces, Navy and Air Force) have two identified common problems: insufficient funding and lack of personnel. While Italy’s military expenditures have been growing in the past few years, they are still inadequate to meet the needs of the armed forces and remain well below NATO’s required threshold of 2% of GDP (Coticchia & Moro, 2023). For instance, Italy’s expenditures amounted to an estimated of €30 billion in 2023 as opposed to €28 billion in 2021, which are both around 1,5% of the country’s GDP (SIPRI, 2023; Ministero della Difesa, 2023). According to several reports, a far too large share of these resources is spent on personnel, while the remaining part dedicated to training, investment, procurement and maintenance of weapons systems is considered insufficient (Mazziotti Di Celso, 2021).

Ironically, despite dedicating a large amount of funding to personnel, manpower remains a critical issue. In 1990, the Italian Armed Forces could count on 385.000 men; however after the end of compulsory military service and the economic struggles of the second decade of the 2000s, this number stabilised around 160.000 units (Mazziotti Di Celso, 2021). Last year, the Chief of Defence Staff Giuseppe Cavo Dragone claimed that this number was insufficient to adequately defend the country and that even if it reached the psychological threshold of 170.000 men, it would be barely enough to survive (Bianco, 2024). On top of that, the Italian

armed forces suffer from low generational turnout and high average age, which is now around 38 years (Mazziotti Di Celso, 2021; Coticchia & Moro, 2023).

Out of the three branches of the Italian Armed Forces, the Land Forces are the ones that find themselves in the most critical situation (L'Unità, 2023). In addition to insufficient personnel and funding, the Land Forces face severe challenges in terms of volume and readiness of equipment, especially in terms of the heavy, tracked component (De Rosa, 2024). For instance, out of the old 200 Ariete tanks, only half of them would be operational in case of need (De Rosa, 2024). Artillery shells and air defence are two other critical assets in short supply to the Italian Land Forces (De Rosa, 2024). Italy does not invest much in the procurement of shells and has a weak production capacity. In fact, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Italy possessed only 5 SAMP-T air defence systems, which could never offer adequate protection against Russian or Iranian-level missile campaigns (De Rosa, 2024)

However, the Italian armed forces still have some strong features. Thanks to the numerous international peacekeeping missions Italy took part in during the last few decades, Italian soldiers gained much-needed experience on the battlefield (Coticchia & Moro, 2023). The Navy and the Air Force are in much better shape than the Land Forces as they are both equipped with modern and powerful weapon systems (L'Unità, 2023). In the case of the Italian Navy, it is worth mentioning the European Multi-Mission Frigate (FREMM), the Cavour Aircraft Carrier and the LHD Trieste, which is also capable of carrying aircraft. These systems contribute to making the Italian Navy a Blue Water Navy, a concept that identifies those few navies capable of operating globally (Lariosa, 2024). The Italian Air Force is equipped with Eurofighter Typhoon and F35 fighter jets, making it one of Europe's most advanced Air Forces. Nevertheless, even the Navy and the Air Force struggle with funding and personnel issues and their capabilities are constrained by the lack of certain munitions, above all long-range missiles (De Rosa, 2024).

The next section will describe what steps Italy has been taking to tackle these issues and modernise its armed forces in the face of heightened instability in Eastern Europe.

II. The Modernisation of The Italian Army

In light of the structural issues of the Italian Armed Forces as well as the ongoing conflict in Eastern Europe, Italy has made a number of relevant decisions in favour of the modernisation of its military.

2.1. Funding and Personnel

As far as funding is concerned, according to the Italian Ministry of Defence (MoD) Defence Planning Document 2023-2025, the integrated budget for defence is set to constantly increase each year and reach €31 billion by 2025 (Ministero della Difesa, 2023). A more detailed analysis of the Document reveals that personnel expenditures have been constant since 2022 and are set to remain so until 2025, whereas “Esercizio” (which includes training, procurement and maintenance) and Investment expenditures spiked in 2023 but decreased in 2024. While Esercizio expenditures are programmed to slightly decrease again in 2025, more resources are destined for investment in the same year (Ministero della Difesa, 2023). In any case, the total defence expenditures increase will not be enough to meet the 2% NATO threshold, which Italy claims it will reach in 2028 (Kington, 2024).

Regarding personnel, the Italian Minister of Defence Guido Crosetto has outlined a strategy to provide the armed forces with 10.000 more units while also creating an “auxiliary reserve” inspired by the Israeli, Swiss and US models made up of personnel from the civil sector or with military experience (Battaglia, 2023; L'Unità, 2023). This strategy would contribute to addressing both the lack of personnel and the high average age affecting the armed forces.

2.2 Land forces

As mentioned before, the Italian Land Forces not only have personnel issues but also need massive equipment investments. After a failed effort to acquire 125 modern German-made Leopard 2A8 (Hill, 2024a), Italy decided to purchase around 200 Panther tanks and 350 Lynx Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFV) from the German company Rheinmetall (Bisht, 2024). Much like the Ariete tanks, the ageing Italian IFVs Dardo needs replacement. Therefore, so the Italian MoD intends to launch the Army Armoured Combat System (A2CS) programme, which aims at acquiring over 1000 IFVs through partnerships with other country's defence industries (Infodifesa, 2024). Among the possible candidates would be again Rheinmetall's Lynx, KNDS' Boxer and the BAE System's CV90 (Infodifesa, 2024). Italy also plans to strengthen its artillery forces by acquiring up to 21 M142 HIMARS, which are multiple rocket launcher platforms that have been extremely effective against Russian forces in Ukraine during the first months of the invasion (Felstead, 2023).

Furthermore, Italy has expressed its intention to participate in the Franco-German Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) project, which aims at creating a complex system of armoured vehicles and supporting platforms for future ground supremacy (Dean, 2023). Thanks to the partnership with Rheinmetall, Italy has a good chance to join the project and further modernise its land forces (Botter, 2024).

2.3. Air Force

The modernisation of the Italian Armed Forces concerns the Air Force as well. Italy is set to expand and modernise its fleet by acquiring 25 more F35 jets, increasing the total number of F35 aircraft in use from 90 to 115 (Kington, 2024). The 25 new F35 jets are divided into 15 F35A for the Italian Air Force and 10 F35B to be split between the Air Force and the Navy (Kington, 2024). In addition, Italy is also planning to buy 24 new Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jets to replace some of the ageing Eurofighter and Tornado jets (Amante & Segreti, 2024). Finally, Italy participates in the Global Air Combat Programme (GCAP) along with the UK and Japan. This collaborative project aims to create an advanced sixth-generation aircraft meant to replace the Eurofighter Typhoon in the future (Martin, 2024). Similarly to the Land Forces procurement projects, the expansion of the Italian Air Force seems to be part of a wider strategy aimed at increasing the country's military conventional capabilities through the purchase of new and technologically advanced equipment in order to be better prepared for a scenario in which not only the quality of the weapons employed but also their quantity is essential to ensure the success of military operations.

2.4. Naval Forces

Due to its strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, the Italian Navy plays a crucial role in advancing the country's interests and security. Some resources have also been destined for the Italian Navy, as it is possible to verify in the Defence Planning Document 2023-2025 of the Ministry of Defence. Significant focus has been devoted to the underwater dimension, with the acquisition of new underwater UAVs meant to that will deal with the recovery and neutralisation of mines and explosives (Peruzzi, 2023). Moreover, the Italian MoD recognises Italy's deficit in deep strike capabilities, and it is considering acquiring systems already used by other countries for its short-term needs, such as the French Missile de Croisière Naval (MdCN) (Peruzzi, 2023).

In addition, Italy decided to join the UK-French Future Cruise and Anti-ship Weapon programme, aimed at developing a new cruise and anti-ship missile to replace the ones in the three countries' arsenals (Peruzzi, 2023). Finally, Italy is enlarging its current fleet by ordering two additional FREMM EVO, a more technologically advanced version of the standard FREMM (Hill, 2024b). Increasing the dimension and capability of the Italian Navy is particularly urgent given the emergence of potential competitor in the Mediterranean Sea, above all North African States like Egypt and Algeria, which are also currently expanding their navies (Borsari, 2022).

III. Recommendations

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Italy has taken concrete steps to address the deficiencies of its armed forces. While many initiatives seem promising, there are other strategies that Italy could implement to improve its military. For instance, while more and more resources are being destined for the armed forces, their allocation is still inefficient as there is a persistent imbalance between personnel expenditures and training, procurement, maintenance and investments. Thus, Italy should consider studying the model of other European militaries, such as the British or the French militaries, which have larger armed forces but spend a lower percentage of their resources on personnel than Italy (Mazziotti Di Celso, 2021).

Regarding military equipment, Italy has assigned considerable resources to the procurement of modern and powerful military gear, with particular attention to the land forces. While this development is undoubtedly positive, Italy should consider implementing lessons from Ukraine's frontline, where advanced small FPV drones have proven particularly effective against traditional systems such as tanks, artillery and IFVs (Milasauskas & Jaškūnas, 2024). Moreover, Italy's lack of ammunition remains a critical problem that currently is not seriously addressed. Creating a large reserve of cheap and advanced FPV drones might partially offset this problem, as the example of Ukraine demonstrates (LB.ua, 2024). A similar strategy can be implemented for the Navy. Ukraine has successfully employed various types of new naval drones against Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and subsequently, the integration of similar platforms in the Italian Navy would allow it to maintain a technological edge against potential opponents in the Mediterranean and beyond (Hertl, 2024). Italy should take an active role in developing these platforms in Europe by cooperating with other European countries, including Ukraine.

Finally, Italy's proactive participation in European collaborative projects such as the MGCS, the GCAP and the European Long Strike Approach (ELSA), aiming at enhancing the conventional land-based long-range strike capabilities of the participant states, is surely welcomed. However, France, Germany and Spain are currently working together on the Future Combat Aircraft System (FCAS), which, similarly to the GCAP, aims to create a sixth-generation aircraft accompanied by supporting systems (Vogel, 2021). The presence of two parallel projects risks creating unnecessary duplication and competition, so Italy should consider encouraging the merger of the two (Dubois, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper explored and analysed Italy's Armed Forces modernisation programme after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has addressed how funding, personnel and, in the case of the Land Forces, lack of adequate equipment represent structural problems in the Italian military. In the same manner, it has also illustrated the steps Italy has taken to address these issues, which include higher defence spending, the potential creation of an auxiliary reserve and the procurement of a considerable amount of modern military equipment. Indeed, these measures will ensure that the Italian armed forces will be better prepared to defend the national borders while contributing to NATO's collective defence.

Nevertheless, the paper has identified areas in which further improvement is recommended. For instance, a more efficient allocation of military expenditures in favour of equipment procurement and maintenance is still required. In addition, Italy should implement lessons from Ukraine's frontline and integrate modern weapons systems like FPV and naval drones into its arsenal. Finally, Italy should encourage further collaboration on European common military projects and the eventual merger of those parallel ones that risk creating unhealthy competition, such as the FCAS and GCAP. By implementing these suggestions, Italy could further improve the quality and readiness of its armed forces and be better prepared to overcome future security challenges.

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