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Title: “The Way We Were”: Continuity and Change in Italian Political Culture

Abstract: *Italian security policy literature reveals, usually implicitly rather than explicitly, two distinct strains of analysis. One set of explanations, rooted in realist theory, views Italian foreign policy behaviour by reference to its power position. A second set of arguments, rooted in institutionalism, assumes that policymakers are ultimately influenced by domestic institutional factors in deciding foreign policy issues. The purpose of this article is to offer a theoretical contribution to the ongoing debate on continuity and change in Italian foreign policy. While neorealist and institutionalist theories have been widely used to explain the development of Italian international behaviour, neither approach has yet provided a full explanation of Italian security policy since the end of the Cold War. In contrast to these theories, I argue that Italy has built its foreign policy on the basis of cultural considerations involving conflicting strategies of action.*

After decades of consensus among all major Italian political and societal forces on Italy’s role and position in the international realm, by the late 1990s, Italian foreign policy has started to display unexpected signs of independence and assertion. These signs have been generated by a reaction to an intertwined set of international factors, such as the “Bush Revolution” in US foreign policy, and domestic factors, such as the rise in power of Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister for the second time in 2001 (Ginsborg, 2004; Pistelli and Fiore, 2004; Cassini, 2007). This unexpected departure from established patterns of Italian foreign-policy behaviour has triggered a lively debate over future policy directions within the foreign policy analysis community, mostly centered on establishing patterns of continuity and change in Italian foreign-policy in the last fifteen years (Wolff, 2002; Brighi, 2006; Mahncke, 2006; Romano, 2006; Brighi, 2007; Croci, 2007; Brighi, 2007; Quaglia, 2007).

Although scholars who have studied Italian security policy have mostly focused their attention to substantive foreign policy issues (Aliboni and Greco, 1996: 44; Lucarelli and Menotti, 2002: 115), a closer reading of the literature reveals, usually implicitly rather than explicitly, two distinct strains of analysis of the security issue. One set of explanations, rooted in realist theory, views Italian foreign policy behaviour by reference to its power position. According to this approach, the dynamics of the international system forced Italy during the Cold War to play a minor role in international affairs and to rely on international alliances (such as NATO) for the protection of the national territory (Kogan, 1963; Pasquino, 1974; Di Nolfo, 1979; Hoffmann, 1977). On the contrary, international dynamics called on the Italian government in the aftermath of the Cold War to develop a more active foreign policy (Dassù, 1990: 300). This renewed interest in foreign policy in Italy was dictated by two not-mutually exclusive factors: first, the need to equip Italy with the instruments required to take advantage of the opportunities

in the new international system; second, the need to pursue a more active foreign policy in order to cope with the challenges brought on by the new system (Ratti, 2004; Watson, 2007).

A second set of arguments, rooted in institutionalism, assumes that policymakers are ultimately influenced by domestic institutional factors in deciding foreign policy issues. For institutionalists, foreign policy has been historically instrumental to domestic politics, mostly considered “a source of legitimization for internal use rather than as a means to attain specific goals in the international arena” (Cotta, 2002: 157). The political turmoil that swept away the old political nomenclature in the early 1990s, the on-going process of radical political reforms, and the emergence of new political formations in need for international and domestic recognition have only perpetuated this state of affairs (Daniels, 2003; Morisi, 2006; Davidson, 2008). Yet, Italy did not embark on power politics, and the fulfillment of its international obligations was dramatically limited by its chaotic domestic political situation. On the contrary, Italy has shown a certain level of continuity in its foreign relations since the end of the Cold War (Croci, 2005; Missiroli, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to offer a theoretical contribution to the ongoing debate on continuity and change in Italian foreign policy. While neorealist and institutionalist theories have been widely used to explain the development of Italian international behaviour, neither approach has yet provided a full explanation of Italian security policy since the end of the Cold War. In contrast to these theories, I argue that Italy has built its foreign policy on the basis of cultural considerations involving conflicting strategies of action. This article is divided into five sections. The first section describes the existing theory of security culture and highlights its limitations. The section suggests a different approach to explain Italian security policy. The third and fourth sections analyze the nature of Italian strategic culture and Italian foreign behaviour in five major conflicts, in which Italy has played a relevant role: Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Security Culture Theory as a Practice

The contribution made by cultural theorists to the study of strategy is relevant. It has provided theoretical foundations to explain continuity in German foreign policy following the end of the Cold War (Duffield, 1999). It has been applied to understand the American turn in foreign policy in the early 2000s (Monten, 2005; Dueck, 2005). Finally, it has been exported to non-Western countries to elucidate nuclear strategies (Scobell, 2002; Khan, 2005). The strategic culture concept was first introduced by Jack Snyder in 1977 to interpret and explain Soviet nuclear strategy. The American scholar described it as a cultural or ideational milieu that limits behavioural choices regarding the efficacy of the military force or any form of political action in interstate political affairs (Snyder, 1977). Since then, several scholars have borrowed, developed, and integrated the concept of strategic culture pioneered by Snyder. However, only in the 1990s does strategic culture establish itself as one of the leading theories in International Relations (IR), thanks to a group of scholars who developed culturally bound state behaviour to explain change and continuity in strategic policies (Johnston, 1995a; Kier, 1997; Berger, 1998; Duffield, 1998). The work of these scholars, labelled by Alastair Johnston as the “third generation” to differentiate them from earlier cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s, cannot be neatly subsumed under one school (Johnston, 2005b: 19). Nevertheless, most of them share several important tenets. To begin with, culture is “a property of collectives rather than of individuals” (Duffield, 1998: 23).

Next, it is “transmitted from one generation to the next through mechanisms of socialization” (Berger, 1998: 3). Finally, culture is “a broad label” that “refers to both a set of evaluative standards (such as norms and values) and set of cognitive standards (such as rules and models) that define what actors exist in a social system, how they operate, and how they relate to each other” (Katzenstein, 1996b: 5-6). The concept of strategic culture employed in this paper builds on the premises of the latter, but it advances the notion that culture cannot be reduced to a system of signs and symbols. Rather, it should be considered a practice (Sewell, 2005: 161-162).

Practice theory describes culture as resulting from the combination of two elements: practice, which is the ways social actors engage each other in action, and discourse that represents the system in which signs acquire meaning and value only when they are interpreted in relation to each other (Swidler, 2001a: 74-75). However, practice cannot be reduced to the mere analysis of political action. Practice is not a series of routine activities (Wagennar and Cook, 2003: 165) or the sum of individuals who share the same habits. Rather, it is the action of independent actors, “linked by a profound mutual susceptibility, who constantly modify their habituated individual responses as they interact with others, in order to sustain a shared practice” (Barnes, 2001: 24). Although actors may adopt different solutions to sustain a shared practice, these solutions are culturally delimited rather than infinite (Swidler, 2001b: 83-86). From this point of view, Ann Swidler provides a powerful image in describing culture’s action when she defines culture as a “tool kit” that allows policymakers to construct different strategies of action. Because all cultures “contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action”, and individuals cannot “build up a sequence of actions piece by piece, striving with each act to maximize a given outcome”, when a policymaker is faced by a challenge will turn to the line of action “for which one already has the cultural equipment”, instead of developing an elaborate and systematic plan of action (Swidler, 1986: 275-277). From these considerations, three elements emerge. First, practice needs to be understood as a term that stresses contingency (Doty, 1997: 376; Wagennar and Cook, 2003: 145). Individuals “negotiate the world (both social and physical) by *acting* upon it, or more accurately, interacting with it” (Wagennar and Cook, 2003: 149). Second, cultural continuity and stability can be claimed even in the case of changing ideas because “what endures is *the way action is organized*, not its ends” (Swidler, 1986: 276). Finally, because culture is understood as a dynamic interplay between discourse and practice (Neumann, 2002), individual responses employed to sustain a shared practice may in turn produce unplanned, unintended, and unwanted by-products.

This study offers a model of culture/foreign policy interaction based on Swidler’s bipolar formulation of cultural influence. The American scholar distinguishes between settled and unsettled periods. In settled periods (social continuity), “culture is intimately integrated with action; it is here that we are tempted to see values as organizing and anchoring patterns of action, [...] since culture and structural circumstances seem to reinforce each other” (Swidler, 1986: 278). During this phase, it is difficult to differentiate culture from action because both of them reinforce each other. In contrast, the dynamic vision of culture forcefully manifests itself in unsettled periods, when culture is seen as a facilitator in making new lines of action possible. In moments of social rupture, culture appears not as a constraining factor composed by a homogenous set of values and beliefs but as a fragmented entity formed by a variegated number of lines of action in competition (Swidler, 1986: 279). During periods of social unrest when cultural ends seem to crumble, ideologies, as “explicitly, articulated, highly organized meaning

systems” (Swidler, 1986: 278), come forward and battle for dominance (Swidler, 2001b: 101). The result is not necessarily the emergence of a new culture, but the readjustment of the discourse to fit the new practice (Swidler, 1986: 279). In the Italian case, it was the latter.

Italian Strategic Culture: Pacifism and Pragmatism

In the Italian case, the strategic culture that emerged after 1945 was shaped by two intervening, distinctive, and not necessarily overlapping, factors: on one hand, Italian strategic culture has been characterized by the radical removal of concepts such as nation and national interest from the political discourse. On the other, it has always shown a widespread sense of political “opportunism” in foreign policy (Santoro, 1991: 77). In turn, each of the factors originated two distinctive strategies of action in relation to the use of military force in international affairs: rejection (pacifism) and the pragmatic use of the force (pragmatism).

Pacifists endorse military force only when it is used for defensive purposes. Pacifists do not believe in war as a way to achieve peace. However, their repugnance is not dictated by the rejection of the concept of war *per se*. Instead, it is mostly driven by ideological considerations, based on the assumption that any form of violence implies some form of power relation that must be rejected *tout court*. Historically, pacifism is mostly characterized by the radical removal of concepts such as nation and national interest from political discourse. The decline of the concept of nation can be ascribed to many factors. However, for a substantial number of scholars who have studied Italian political culture, the removal of the idea of nation in Italian political discourse is determined by the incapacity of contemporary Italian social and academic institutions to establish a collective historical memory (Rusconi, 1993a: 15; Pombeni, 1994: 773). However, the “taboo-isation” of the nation and national interest could not have rooted in Italy if it could have not found a receptive sub-cultural soil among the hegemonic major Italian political forces, the Christian Democrats and the Communists, in the postwar period (Panebianco, 1993: 902; Rusconi, 1993b: 896-897). Political parties, and more generally the political elite, played a pivotal role because they supported the removal of concepts such as nation and national interest from political discourse. Despite their ideological differences, the political forces that filled the vacuum left by the Fascist regime in Italy distrusted for the concept of national interest (Romano, 1992: 719). For both Catholics and Communists, the idea of the national interest conflicted respectively, with the universality of the Christian message and the unity of the working class (Galante, 1991: 151; Formigoni, 1996). Because of this odd and unintended ideological convergence between Communists and Catholics, a minimalist vision of the national interest became a constant factor in the development of Italian foreign policy following the end of WWII, ready to re-emerge at every turning point in Italian history. From the debate on the Italian adhesion to NATO in the late 1940s to thirdworldism in the 1960s and 1970s, the odd alliance between Communists and some sections of the Catholic electorate forced the Italian government to differentiate Italian positions from those of its allies from time to time (Formigoni, 1996: 304-305; Varsori, 1998: 168-169).

Unlike pacifists, pragmatists have little to say about the ideational dimension of the use of force, but pay more attention to the instrumental aspect of it. They see in the use of force an acceptable means of Italian foreign policy, but this use is not reduced to defence purposes. Pragmatists believe that state behaviour and international outcomes vary mostly based on the distribution of state preferences rather than state power. Thus, Italy may collaborate with other

states not because of the existence of imbalances of power but for the possibility to earn a return in exchange for collaboration. In security policy, Italian governments have “constantly followed a *do ut des* logic” in the relationship with Italy’s allies, in particular within multilateral international organizations (Del Piero, 2004: 549). Unlike in Germany, where the sense of shame for the atrocities committed during WWII brought German societal groups to embrace Western values and institutions as a whole, in Italy the embrace of the same values and institutions became not an end in itself but a tool to achieve political gains both at the national and international level. The experience of the war against fascism fought by the Resistance and the lack of an Italian Nürnberg (Battini, 2004) allowed the political elite to detach itself from the Fascist regime and to regard the diminished relevance of Italy in the post-WWII era at the international level as an unfortunate situation determined by contextual factors, rather than as the just punishment for Italian foreign policy during the conflict (Focardi and Klinkhammer, 2006).

During the Cold War, Italy was able to marry pacifism and pragmatism in the neatlantic experience. The neologism “*neatlantismo*”, coined by Giuseppe Pella in 1957, was supposed to describe a new relationship among the members of the Atlantic community. Created by Giovanni Gronchi, the President of the Republic, with Amintore Fanfani, a leader of Christian Democracy (DC) and Enrico Mattei, the president of ENI, “*neatlantismo*” was aimed for Italy to develop autonomy in those areas like the Mediterranean, where Italian interests could play a direct role. In its operationalization, Italian foreign policy should have been characterized by a constant search for a geopolitical position that would have allowed Italy to be an active player in the international organizations in which it was a member, and, at the same time, to disengage the country from these same institutions when controversial issues occurred. Although as an historical occurrence neatlantism was short-lived, its premises survived the contingency of time (Giovagnoli, 2003: 96; Formigoni, 2003: 155).

Italian security policies during the Cold War developed around two major directions. On one hand, Italy made the most of its foreign policy decisions within highly multilateralized structures and used armed forces for narrowly defined self-defence purposes. Structural constraints ultimately relieved Italian governments from formulating independent and controversial military policies that could test the resilience of Italian security cultural values. On the other hand, the looseness of the Italian military participation in NATO, mostly limited to provide geo-strategic and logistical support, allowed Italian governments to develop “an ambiguous ‘semi-equidistant’ peaceful diplomacy” (Rimanelli, 1997: 795) that minimized confrontations with both blocs, enhanced the Italian role in the Mediterranean area, and avoided domestic tensions that could have jeopardized the equilibrium among domestic political forces (Panebianco, 1997: 237-240; Formigoni, 2003: 149).

By the end of the 1980s, however, the “neatlantic” paradigm had lost its relevance. The end of the Cold War proved to be a watershed for Italian security policy. During this period, Italy’s capacity to act in the sphere of security and foreign policy changed dramatically. The United States’ growing reluctance to carry the main burden of security provisions for its European allies and NATO’s changed nature from a self-defence military organization to an institution devoted to crisis management forced Italy to assume the major responsibility in conflict management (Reichard, 2006: 99-104). If the end of the Cold War offered Italy a freedom of action never before experienced, the clearing of the bipolar framework also challenged the same foundations of Italian security policy. As Piero Fassino pointed out, “Italy is

no longer just a consumer of security, it creates security too” (quoted in Walston, 2007: 95). While a self-defence perception of the role of the armed forces characterized Italian security culture during the Cold War, by the end of the 1990s, the scope of the Italian military had changed enormously, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, making Italian missions more “militarized” and prone to be engaged in international missions. As a result of its military contribution to the UN peacekeeping operations in Somalia (UNOSOM II) and the NATO-led operations in Bosnia (IFOR) and Kosovo (KFOR), Italy raised the stakes of its direct participation in multilateral military efforts. This new focus on the need to participate in military operations reflects a new discourse on security that reconciled pacifism and pragmatism on the use and purpose of the military.

Italian Security Policy: From Bosnia to Lebanon

Italy’s new security discourse in the post-Cold War era developed in three steps. First, new demands in security provisions triggered a period of social transformation that unsettled the security formula that characterized Italy during the Cold War. Pivotal to this change was the Italian experience in the Bosnian conflict, which brought a reappraisal of the role of the military. The break-up of Yugoslavia indicated the limits of unarmed diplomacy in managing the crises of the new era and protecting innocent civilian lives, and it increased the legitimacy of those solutions that included the use of force as an indispensable means to bring about peace in the Balkan region. Different practices of security emerged as a result of an ideological clash between pacifists and pragmatists. On one hand, the political solution endorsed by the Amato and Ciampi governments supported a resolution to end the crisis that rejected any possible Italian military involvement in the region. The Italian contribution to the conflict was limited to Italian participation in Western European Union (WEU) humanitarian missions as well as support in WEU-NATO arms embargo missions against the former Yugoslavia in the Adriatic Sea (Bellucci, 1997: 201). Both Italian governments seemed uninterested in playing an active role in the crisis, in particular when the involvement would have meant Italian participation in military operations on the ground. If the government made belligerent statements, these were more the result of impromptu reactions to distinct international events than of an overall Italian strategy in the region (Bonvicini, 1996: 100). On the other hand, the Berlusconi government endorsed a different strategy, one that advanced a utilitarian approach to the conflict in terms of possible geopolitical gains for Italy in the Balkan region. Under Berlusconi’s leadership, the main goal became to give Italy greater visibility (*La Repubblica.it*, June 22, 1994). The Berlusconi government had two major goals. First, it wanted to increase Italian influence within the international community. Since its first days in power, the new government showed resentment toward the members of the Contact Group for having excluded Italy from the peace talks in Yugoslavia, despite the fact that Italy had allowed the use of 14 bases on Italian territory to the UN and NATO for their missions in Bosnia (Bellucci, 1998: 117). Second, the government intended to take advantage of the political turmoil in the former Yugoslavia to renegotiate the relations between Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia. Although the Berlusconi government was not the only Italian government that dealt with this issue, it was the first one that decided to make a priority of it, by threatening to veto Slovenia’s and Croatia’s applications to the EU if both countries had not allowed Italians to re-acquire their old properties in Istria. The polarization of the debate between pragmatists and pacifists was to be detrimental for the overall Italian position

in the conflict. The impasse characterizing Italian security policy during the crisis only had the effect of detaching the country from its European counterparts and isolating the country diplomatically.

In a second phase, structural opportunities determined which strategy of action would have survived and which would have withered and died. Two historical situations played a major role in the militarization of Italian security. First, NATO evolved from a war-fighting, defensive alliance to a force for peacekeeping and conciliation. NATO's evolution was influential in redefining Italian strategic discourse on two accounts. On one hand, it helped to increase the legitimacy of armed forces among the Italian public thanks to NATO's new focus on multilateral military missions legitimized by the United Nations and aimed to bring peace and stability to troubled areas (Maniscalco, 2006: 607-608). On the other hand, it forced Italian governments to realize that Italy could not prescind from the military if it wanted to play a major role in the alliance. Memories of the failed attempt to bypass the French and British veto against the Italian participation to the Contact Group in September 1995, and the mild support received by its NATO allies during the Albanian crisis in 1997, instilled in the Italian political elite the fear that Italy's interests in NATO, such as the Southern Flank, the European role in NATO, and Russia's future role in the Euro-Atlantic security system, would never have been addressed if Italy had not raised its profile in the alliance (Menotti, 2001: 93-94). The second historical occurrence was the election of a series of center-left coalitions between 1996 and 2001. In April 1996, national elections led to the victory of a center-left coalition (the Olive Tree) under the leadership of Romano Prodi. Prodi's government became the second longest to stay in power before he narrowly lost a vote of confidence in October 1998. Subsequently, a new government was formed by the Democratic Party of the Left leader and former communist Massimo D'Alema. The Communist component was source of both anxieties and opportunities for the government: it put pressure on the D'Alema government in foreign policy because it forced the new government to prove to its allies that Italy was going to be a liable partner despite the Communist leadership (D'Alema, 1999: 3). At the same time, it laid the foundations for a renewed dialogue between different interpretations of security because it compelled traditional pacifist political formations, now in power, to reconsider their antiwar positions as a result of their new institutional role.

In a third phase, the winning line of action took the lead in forging consensus. In this phase, culture is casually significant both because it constrains the strategies of action that policymakers can construct, and because available cultural resources allow policymakers to initiate and cement such strategies. With the 1999 *Operation Allied Force* over Kosovo, Italy crossed the line between peacekeeping and peace enforcement. However, if a militarization of Italian foreign policy occurred, this turn was not the expression of a new culture that idealized the military. On the contrary, the need to address the military in the context of international affairs became an opportunity for Italy to redefine its operationalization within the traditional boundaries of Italian security culture. Throughout the Kosovo crisis, Italian strategy was to combine a peacekeeping operation aimed to stop Serbian violence on the Albanian population with the negotiation of a political solution that both the Serbian government and Albanian authorities would have accepted (D'Alema, 1999: 39). In his speech in the Chamber of Deputies on 26 March, D'Alema constructed the discourse on the Italian military participation to NATO's operation in Kosovo on two major themes. The first component of the discursive defence was to counter criticism by articulating concern for the responsibility to protect civilians, and support

Italian troops in war scenarios. The central claim was that the withdrawal of Italian military support would have been detrimental for both the local population and Italian national security. The Italian mission was to be considered not an act of war against Serbia but a humanitarian action meant to stop severe human-rights violations. The second component of the discursive defence was linked to the Italian membership to NATO and Italy's loyalty to the military organization (*La Repubblica.it*, 26 March, 1999). D'Alema's justifications for Italy's participation to the military operation in Kosovo were crucial for his government on two accounts. First, it eroded the moral legitimacy of pacifism and reinforced the military position among those political forces within the governmental majority, such as the Democrats of the Left that shared a pragmatic approach to international affairs (Bellucci *et al.*, 2000: 162-163). Second, the emphasis of the government on the humanitarian aspect of the intervention allowed the government to circumvent the legal restriction set by the Italian Constitution. In the face of criticism coming from those who accused the executive to violate art. 11 of Italian Constitution, which affirms the rejection to war if not for defensive purposes, D'Alema repeatedly pointed out how the same article legitimized military intervention as a result of decisions taken within multilateralized military organizations (Carlassare, 2000: 167), and how the constitution tolerated military operations grounded on moral principles and higher laws (Carlassare, 2000: 169).

Italy's support to NATO's military mission in Kosovo represented a moment of both change and continuity in Italian security policy: change because the vote on the military operation cast by all major Italian political forces marked the achievement of a new consensus on security; continuity because the new consensus on the use of the military was operationalized within the boundaries established by Italian strategic culture. The implementation of the new line of action adopted by the Italian government focused on humanitarian intervention and international responsibility in fact presented many features of the past security strategy. Pragmatist and pacifist claims echoed throughout the conflict, producing dynamics that resembled the "neatlantic" paradigm characterizing Italian security policy during the Cold War. First, the Italian government adopted a series of measures to minimize Italian military involvement in the conflict. On 26 March, on the very same day in which Italy pledged its commitment to the NATO air campaign, the parliament passed a motion that called for a suspension of bombing, for the resumption of negotiations, and for Italian forces to take a "defensive posture" (*La Repubblica.it*, 26 March, 1999). The Italian position was reconfirmed on 28 May by Italian Foreign Minister, Lamberto Dini, when he warned NATO partners that Italy would have to dissociate itself from a possible NATO-led land invasion in Kosovo (Clark, 2001: 130). Second, on the diplomatic front, Italy worked for an alternative solution to the use of military force by calling an increasing number of international actors, such as Russia, China, the European Union and the United Nations, to play active roles in the decision-making process (*La Repubblica.it*, 19 May, 1999) as a way to carve out an independent role for itself in the crisis (Croce, 2006: 166).

The Kosovo War had a lasting effect on Italian security policy because it defined both the limits and possibilities of the new Italian willingness to engage in international crisis management. The new discourse on security based on humanitarian intervention and partnership developed by the D'Alema government established a new approach on the use of the military, which was formalized with the publication of the 2002 White Paper on defence. The new post-Cold War Italian military strategy, outlined in the document, reflects striking changes from its

formulation during the Cold War in the way national security is defined and under which conditions the employment of conventional force is acceptable. First, the 2002 White Paper recognizes how the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the terrorist threat after 9/11 have changed the meaning of national security from a narrow definition of the defence of the national territory to a pro-active engagement in military operations that would prevent such attacks. Second, it expands the right to employ force in all those situations in which its use may help to safeguard the international stability and the respect of the international law (*Libro Bianco*, 2002). This process that brought to a new convergence of intents was far from being smooth. First, there was opposition to the new synthesis. In few occasions, such as during the ‘Carnival crisis’ in February 2007, extreme parties attempted to obstruct the new development. Second, the unintended and unwanted by-product of the strategic steps adopted in the 2002 White Paper allowed subsequent governments to legitimize Italian military participations in conflicts profoundly different. Nevertheless, the impact of these drawbacks was contained. If controversy emerged in the political debate, such as in the case of the conflict in Iraq, the point of contention was not related to the objective that Italy was trying to achieve. Rather, Italians debated the merits of the war.

Italian Security Policy: From Afghanistan to Lebanon

Crises in the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, and Lebanon demanded Italy’s attention in the years after the Kosovo War, and Italian troops were sent to a plethora of conflicts different in nature and objectives. Between 6,000 and 10,000 Italian soldiers were permanently engaged in crises around the globe, and Italy contributed special operations forces to operations such as *Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan and *Antica Babilonia* in Iraq. Despite the controversies and debates that followed each deployment, the line of conduct adopted by Italian governments in conflict zones in the post-9/11 era suggests the existence of a new practice of military engagement shared across party lines.

From a discursive point of view, both the Berlusconi and Prodi governments drew on the D’Alema’s concept of humanitarian responsibility to legitimize Italian military missions. To begin with, the synthesis of antithetic concepts such as war and peace in the formula “peace missions” worked as a “cultural mediation”: it allowed Italian elite to build consensus around military initiatives by tempering the negative connotations of the former by highlighting the noble goals of the latter (Goglia *et al.*, 2006: 21). Thus, the word “war” was purposely omitted by both the House of Freedoms and the Olive Tree in their resolutions presented in both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies to support the deployment of Italian troops in Afghanistan in 2001 (*Corriere della Sera*, 8 November 2001). Similarly, Berlusconi appealed to the opposition for its support in voting to finance the Italian mission in Iraq in 2005 by re-enforcing that Italy was not a participant in the war but that Italian troops were in the country only for the purpose of rebuilding Iraq (*Repubblica.it*, 15 February 2005). Finally, Prodi appeased Italians by claiming that the Italian participation in the UN mission in Lebanon was going to be just “a peace mission” (*Repubblica.it*, 18 August 2006). For the Prodi government in particular, responsibility became a testing ground to assess its accountability at international level despite the presence of extreme left-wing parties in the government coalition. As a result, for example, while Prodi was reassuring allies and supporters that he would call for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq, he also repeated that it would not happen abruptly, but “in a softer way” in agreement with the Iraqi

government (*International Herald Tribune*, May 19, 2006). Moreover, humanitarian responsibility provided an additional tool to balance European and Atlantic interests. By claiming the humanitarian nature of its missions, Italy was able to manoeuvre between the interests of NATO, the United States, and its European partners, while maintaining an overall domestic support despite the political rhetoric (Croci, 2005: 69)

From an operational point of view, Italian governments moulded military initiatives on a very restricted set of criteria. First, Italian troops were deployed in post-conflict scenarios. Second, Italian armed forces were mostly employed in covering humanitarian tasks, including among the others, convoy escort, infrastructure rebuilding, policing, monitoring the cessation of hostilities, and ensuring humanitarian access to civilian populations. Finally, Italy was able to mitigate the rules of engagement in the conflicts in which it was present by introducing national caveats that would have decreased the likelihood of clashes with the enemy. In Afghanistan, for example, only under extreme circumstances and by approval of the defence minister, Italy can operate outside of its assigned areas. This factor has so far prevented Italian troops from being deployed to the South of Afghanistan where the British are involved in violent fights with the Taliban (Gaiani, 2008). Although this behaviour has profoundly upset Italian allies from time to time, Italian governments have been consistent in extending the same caveats to the missions in Iraq and Lebanon.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War represented a moment of political rupture in terms of foreign policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave Italians more freedom of action. However, it also forced Italy to redefine its international role. In this respect, starting with the Bosnian war, conflicts in the post-Cold War era have become examples of not only the new kinds of problems Italy will be called to face, but also of its new responsibilities. In view of the systemic changes experienced by Italy and by applying Swidler's model, evidence suggest that, while changes in Italian security policy occurred, they did not necessarily become the expression of a new strategic culture. Although attempts by various actors to respond to the new circumstances with the available tools stretched the boundaries of strategic culture, they have neither generated nor reflected a rupture in strategic culture. One might, in fact, see evidence of culture's power to constrain security strategy precisely in the acts of reinterpretation of key political actors, as they find their responses to novel surroundings affected by the need to connect in some fashion with traditional terms and understandings, and to maintain a degree of consistency with established cultural lines even as they are compelled to innovate. This is, in fact, one of the most valuable features of this article: it offers snapshots of strategic culture under substantial pressure, eliciting passionate debate at the elite level and providing an opportunity to increase the attempts to reconcile traditional cultural approaches with novel circumstances, to re-establish (malleable and conflictive) consensus or to fail in the attempts. This article thus reveals culture in process.

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