

SUMMER 2019

ITALY, MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE

EVENT REPORT



Cover image credits: [CC/Flickr – Pennsylvania National Guard](#)

Friends of Europe's Peace, Security and Defence Programme is supported by the United States European Command (EUCOM). Our work is firmly anchored in our expertise in a range of fields, including energy and climate change, geopolitics, international development, migration and health. We seek a holistic approach to European, transatlantic and global security policies. Security considerations are, in turn, mainstreamed into these areas of expertise, enriching the debate by encouraging experts to think outside their comfort zones.

In association with:



With the support of



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union



CAREFULLY NAVIGATING A SEA OF SECURITY TROUBLES

The Mediterranean region faces serious security challenges and threats, compounded by civil wars in Libya and Syria. What's the future of European defence in this strategically crucial region? Can Italy, a European bridgehead to it, play a larger role in EU and NATO security policies and action? These questions were debated on 25 June 2019 at the Brussels launch of the report 'Molto Agitato – Italy and Mediterranean security', a joint publication of Friends of Europe and the Italian Institute of International Affairs (IAI). Four distinguished panellists concluded that Italy, despite recent friction with other EU countries and a political lurch towards populism, is still a strong and reliable partner for security and defence.

"Friends of Europe believes in European defence in a broader transatlantic context and we look at what Brussels can do to help it. But it's true that the continent's defence and security still mainly depend on its nations' capabilities, resources and political will," said debate moderator **Jamie Shea**, formerly at NATO and now a Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe.

Shea described this latest report, the fifth in a series looking at key countries' roles in European security and defence, as a "fair and balanced assessment" of Italy's role as a stabilising force on Europe's southern flank. On the other hand, there are big questions over whether European strategic cultures in the Mediterranean – in fields like military equipment, interoperability, priorities and threat perception – are harmonising or diverging.

TURBULENT TIMES

"As my title suggests, the Mediterranean in general and Italy, now run by two populist parties, are stormy places," said the report's author **Paul Taylor**, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe and Contributing Editor for Politico. His introduction outlined major problems in this region, such as growing power rivalries (US, Russia, China and others flexing their muscles) plus the frailty of states like Sudan, Algeria and Libya over the last decade. This frailty – often made worse by longer term threats that include radicalisation, terrorism, climate change, demographics, and water shortages – has led to a surge in the number of migrants and refugees heading to Europe.

"The Mediterranean in general and Italy, now run by two populist parties, are stormy places"

Paul Taylor

Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe and
Contributing Editor for Politico

“We see good engagement and continuity more than change in Italian defence and foreign policy”

Alessandro Marrone

Head of Defence Programme at the IAI

Many policies/initiatives of NATO and the EU, the latter's including the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and European Neighbourhood Policy, have notably failed in the Mediterranean. Taylor also noted how the EU short-sightedly continues to rely on 'local strongmen' in countries like Turkey to keep a lid on migration. Instead, he suggested, the EU should look at ways to increase legal migration to the bloc, while reshaping its policies to be more open to the Mediterranean countries.

“Italy is in the front line for many of these challenges and has sought EU and NATO help with them, but the country has become more marginalised in the EU,” added Taylor. Reasons for this include the 2018 change in Italy's government and increasingly nationalist rhetoric, leading to arguments with France and Germany as well as Brussels. Although an early proponent of enhanced EU defence cooperation, Italy has also felt excluded from military cooperation initiatives with EU partners.

Taylor had recommendations for boosting Italy's defence role, influence and contribution in the EU and NATO. These include military reforms, more joint forces coordination and procurement, as well as rationalisation of the nation's three defence budgets.

ITALY'S INDEPENDENT STREAK

Due to an anti-migrant stance and anger at its European partners for not playing their part in accepting migrants, in 2018 Italy controversially ceased naval search-and-rescue operations – which had assisted 600,000 migrants over four years – under the EU maritime Operation Sophia. So how can Italy, with a more 'go-it-alone' approach, be better understood and more influential in Mediterranean defence and security? And, tied to this, how can the EU better exploit Italy's potential in those fields?

Frustration and inconsistency often characterise Italy's behaviour in European security within the EU and NATO, admitted **Antonio Missiroli**, Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges at NATO. He explained that Italy often feels frustrated with other European countries' lack of ambition in defence and security, as well as Italy's sidelining from multilateral agreements. In his view, this frustration was partly to blame for the nation's shift toward populism. Italy has also been inconsistent, for instance, on European relations with Turkey. However, added Missiroli, there can be no questioning the country's constructive engagement in European defence and security – especially in international peacekeeping missions since the 1980s.

This viewpoint was confirmed by **Alessandro Marrone**, Head of Defence Programme at the IAI. “We see good engagement and continuity more than change in Italian defence and foreign policy,”

he said. As an example, for NATO and EU defence, the country led or took part in two-thirds (21 of 34) of the EU's PESCO (Permanent European Structured Cooperation) projects. While Italy typically has a low profile in peacekeeping operations in North Africa, it is engaged in Niger, a notorious hub for migration. Italy also helped draft the EU Regulation on the European Defence Fund.

"Italy is broadly more stable and reliable than it seems, though this is hard to understand for outsiders because the nation does a poor job internationally communicating its work," added Marrone.

Further Italian weaknesses were highlighted during the debate, such as a limited naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and above all the government's lack of focus on foreign policy. But if we ignore the populist rhetoric, argued Taylor, the country is still engaged in 40 international missions. Moreover, Italy's more humanitarian approach to defence and security – sometimes called 'difesa all'Italiana' – is a unique combination of military and civilian outreach. This Italian-style defence has worked well in Lebanon and Afghanistan and could be a good model for other countries.

THE LIBYA CONUNDRUM

Libya has its own sub-section in the report, underlining the country's significance for Italy and Europe. **Mary Fitzgerald**, Libya Analyst, award-winning journalist and European Young Leader, said the EU must talk to Libyans about migration and people smuggling, because this is souring relations between the two sides. She also warned against simply believing that Italy and Libya are 'partners' or that Libya is Italy's 'backyard', because Libyans' perspective of their northern neighbour stems from a painful colonial past. Her recent interviews, in light of the events since 2011, revealed how "Libyans feel as if they have never been less in charge of their destiny."

Fitzgerald also underlined how the progress of EU and other international missions in Libya has stopped, since the latest outbreak of conflict there in April 2019. "This matters for Europe, not least due to the risks of increased migration out of Libya. We need a collective EU response and not short-term solutions that fuel the country's instability," she warned. An audience member remarked that the EU and NATO can collaborate in Libya, but only when the situation there improves.

Panellists underlined the friction over Libya between France and Italy, driven partly by their competing oil companies and support for different Libyan factions. "This competition is a poor man's proxy war," noted Ambassador **Stefano Stefanini**, Permanent Representative of Italy to NATO (2007-2010) and non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council of the United States. He urged France and Italy to reconcile their strategic, economic and migration interests and better cooperate with Libya or, in the words of the report, to forge

"We need a collective EU response and not short-term solutions that fuel the country's instability"

Mary Fitzgerald

Libya Analyst, award-winning journalist and European Young Leader



Jamie Shea, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe and Former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges at NATO (2010-2018)



Antonio Missiroli, Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges at NATO



Alessandro Marrone, Head of Defence Programme at Istituto Affari Internazionali



Mary Fitzgerald, Libya Analyst, Award-Winning Journalist and European Young Leader





Paul Taylor, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe



Ambassador Stefano Stefanini, Permanent Representative of Italy to NATO (2007-2010) and non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council of the United States



“Let’s put the Mediterranean at the centre of cooperation”

Stefano Stefanini

Permanent Representative of Italy to NATO (2007-2010) and non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council of the United States

a ‘Franco-Italian grand bargain’. This would also pave the way for a more coherent European and NATO strategy towards North Africa and the Mediterranean basin. Moreover, there was optimism during the debate about the possibility of further Franco-Italian defence or industrial collaboration, despite the recent cancellation of certain deals.

MEDITERRANEAN-CENTRIC COOPERATION

On a broader scale, debate participants called for the EU (including Italy) and NATO to cooperate better on defence and security across the Mediterranean. “Let’s put the Mediterranean at the centre of cooperation,” exclaimed Stefanini. In line with the report, he also called for a new NATO-EU division of labour in the region. This might involve the EU leading efforts with its soft power tools, in areas like development assistance, trade and economic relations; NATO would focus on capacity-building and engagement. An audience member revealed how NATO maritime training was delivered recently to Libyan coastguards at a centre in Crete.

Attention was also drawn to the fact that medium powers like Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are calling the shots in the region, so Europeans must step up their own game. Fitzgerald added: “In Libya, the EU has the tools to help. If it doesn’t, Europeans will pay more than these other powers for today’s bad situation.”

In his concluding remarks, Shea called for Italy, its EU partners and NATO to take more responsibility in the Mediterranean region. This will enable them to mitigate defence and security risks and work together better for regional stability.



Friends of Europe

Connect. Debate. Change.

+32 2 893 98 20

info@friendsofeurope.org

friendsofeurope.org

Friends of Europe is a leading think-tank that connects people, stimulates debate and triggers change to create a more inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking Europe.